



Modernity and the Emergence of Korean Philosophy

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Lecture Contents 1 (Course Contents)

1 The Meaning of Philosophy

Philosophy is the exploration of wisdom, encouraging deeper reflection on concepts like language and existence. Engaging with fundamental problems is what leads to philosophical inquiries about the nature of humanity and the world. Certain philosophical questions persist over time and across cultural contexts—which are known as perennial questions. Diverse philosophical traditions are important insofar that they approach these recurring questions on universal aspects of humanity in unique ways rooted in different historical and cultural conditions. Modern Korean philosophy reinterpreted itself as it integrated several Western philosophical concepts while retaining a distinct identity. Neo-Confucianism has long been a key philosophy in shaping Korean philosophy, particularly due to its focus on the relationship between humanity and heaven. Different cultures imagine philosophers in different ways: some as indecisive abstract thinkers, others as wise and cultivated individuals. In Korea, philosophers are often seen as those who sincerely embody their ideas—practical thinkers who face the complexities of life directly. A genuinely respected Korean philosopher is not merely someone who articulates ideas, an armchair philosopher, but also someone who sincerely embodies and realizes those ideas.

Hegel's lectures from 1822 to 1830 focus on the concept of world history as a process of self-actualization of the world spirit. Hegel classified the histories of India and China as pre-history due to their perceived lack of advancement in the direction of human freedom. Mankind's long quest for fundamental questions did not only emerge in ancient Greece or was only recognized by Western Europeans; however, Western European intellectuals defined philosophy as universal and defined their history of thought, written in their own languages, as the philosophy of world history. The declaration of the completion of the world spirit implies a declaration of the universality of philosophy. This Eurocentric view shaped global academic categories for a long time, but progressively philosophy came to denote a universal human quest for fundamental truths that has been approached in various cultural contexts with various techniques.

In East Asia, the term philosophy adapted to local languages with a meaning similar to wise study, as opposed to directly calquing the word's Greek etymology. This implies that East Asian intellectuals did not consider philosophy as something foreign but rather a fundamental quest that was already being pursued locally—recognizing parallels with their own traditions. In Korea, the term philosophy not only refers to the Western approach and the Western intellectual tradition, but also to the traditional and historic Korean modes of confronting the fundamental questions of humanities. It implies effort and change to become a better person by harmonizing intellect and emotion, rather than mere intellectual inquiry, something that echoes the Confucian ideals of self-cultivation. There is often debate about the distinction between philosophy and religion in East Asia, partly because traditional East Asian intellectual exploration did not neatly separate the two. Modern Western scholars often view East Asian traditions as more religious than philosophical, which then influences how they are categorized within academia. In East Asia, there is a trend to explore these traditions, such as Confucianism and Buddhism, as philosophical traditions. During the late 1980s, there was a surge of enthusiasm in Korea for philosophizing in the here and now, where critical reviews and reconstructions of previous knowledge were encouraged. This helped the process of blending tradition and modernity.

1.1 Comparative Concepts and Incommensurability

The concept of incommensurability refers to the lack of shared criteria between philosophical systems. It has been argued that rival systems of thought—such as Western and Chinese—can be internally coherent yet mutually untranslatable because each has their own internal standards for interpretation and justification. One way to study this is through concept clusters: the network of associated ideas around a central term. Although cultures may share overarching words such as “morality,” the underlying conceptual ecosystems that give meaning to such words can differ profoundly. These deeper ecosystems shape how moral questions are framed, what counts as moral reasoning, and what the goals of moral life are understood to be. It may be true that all human cultures exhibit some concern with regulating human conduct, guiding interpersonal relations, and evaluating right from wrong; however, the structure, substance, and conceptual anchors of morality can vary dramatically depending on the culture. For example, the typical English moral concepts include terms like freedom and human rights, whereas Confucianism includes terms such as benevolence and righteousness, which shows a clear split in philosophical perspective. This difference in moral frameworks can make it challenging to find common ground for comparison, because it shapes not only methods of reasoning but also goals, priorities, and assumptions about human nature. This challenges the assumption that all cultures speak of morality in a comparable or interchangeable way. For example, when a Western philosophy discusses the concept of moral responsibility, the key presuppositions are an autonomous agent who is capable of choosing between options and can be held accountable due to free will. When a Confucian thinker, on the other hand, evaluates moral cultivation, the presuppositions might involve fulfilling one’s relational roles, aligning oneself with cosmic order, embodying ritualized virtues, and moral transformation through practice rather than choice. Both systems talk about being moral, but the conceptual architecture behind this phrase differs. From this, one wonders: is the morality pursued by these traditions really the same?

In spite of their cultural closeness, Korea and China also differ conceptually. For instance, in Korean, learning is 공부, which comes from the Sinitic term 工夫. In Chinese, however, learning is often said as 讀書 and in Japanese it is 勉強. The term 勉強, which in Chinese means forced to do, shows that in Japanese, hard work is conceptualized as the basic meaning of study. The Korean term, 工夫, has 工, to work, and 夫, to master. Thus, 工夫 conveys the idea of working to master or doing work to learn. 공부 thus conceptualizes that studying is not only about acquiring knowledge, but also about the hard work and dedication involved in mastering a subject. Linguistic differences between Chinese and Korean may have been one of the key reasons why the ways to interpret philosophy between China and Korea are so different—they have essentially different ways of clustering concepts and conceptualizing ideas.

1.2 The Formation of Korean Philosophy

Korean philosophy as a distinct, discrete discipline, started to appear when Buddhism in Korea began to intertwine with indigenous belief and Confucian thought, resulting in unique characteristics. That being said, the first prominent genealogy of Korean philosophers appeared in the turbulent period of transition from late 고려 to early 조선 (14th century). These initial scholars were Confucian intellectuals who proposed ideas emphasizing human capacity, self-cultivation, cosmic order, and divine providence. The writings of this first lineage were primarily in 한문, which influenced the

conceptualization of Korean thought at the time. Although Confucianism was the dominant academic tradition of this period, Buddhism and indigenous thought both deeply influenced intellectual life. For example, 추석 (秋夕), the practice of honoring ancestors in Korea, blends Confucian ancestral rites with much older indigenous harvest traditions. Records of 추석 festival go back to 2000 years ago, long before Confucianism was officially accepted in a mainstream manner in Korea. This is evidence of an enduring synthesis of ideas in the Peninsula. The 조선 Dynasty, which upheld Confucianism as state ideology for 500 years, solidified the prominence of Neo-Confucianism. During political turmoil at the end of 고려, Korean scholars turned away from existing Buddhist-oriented intellectual frameworks and embraced the new hermeneutics of 朱子 (주자). Intellectuals of the time were dissatisfied with Confucian interpretations previous to the ones put forward by 朱子 and were disappointed with the stagnation of Buddhism, which had been the state religion of Korea and had lost some of its intellectual vitality at the time. Thus, they engaged eagerly with the novel version of Confucianism pioneered by 朱子.

朱子 synthesized elements of Buddhism and Daoism, which challenged earlier Confucian orthodoxy. Korean scholars enthusiastically engaged with 朱子's work, since they found it useful in their quest for answers to long-standing intellectual questions. There are many reasons why Korean scholars favored 朱子 so, but one of the major ones is that they were devoted to the thesis that human nature aligns with the heavens. This notion was latent in Korea long before Neo-Confucianism was introduced, the proposition that all human beings are born with the capability to embody the divine principles of heaven within themselves. It promised intellectuals that salvation was possible through self-cultivation in a more sustainable and effective way than believing that an almighty God might save you.

2 퇴계, 율곡, and the Maturation of Korean Confucian Thought

Two foundational figures of Korean Neo-Confucianism are 이황 (李滉), better known as 퇴계, and 이이 (李瑀), better known as 율곡. These two scholars were considered giants of Korean philosophy because many generations later, scholars still kept on building their own ideas and arguments based on the interpretations put forward by these two thinkers. 퇴계 and 율곡 are often analyzed as two complementary opposites, since the former's philosophical focus was 리, principle, while the latter's was 기, material force. 퇴계 was known for having a contemplative and introspective approach to philosophy, whereas 율곡 was a practical and reform-oriented scholar-statesman.

2.1 퇴계이황

One of 퇴계's major contributions is the concept of 리발 (理發), the activation of 리. This term has been continuously defended or rebutted by intellectuals, making it a unique theme of Korean Confucianism. 리발 is used to explain how moral emotions, 사단, originate. 퇴계 argued that 사단 arise from pure 리, so when they appear, 리 itself is issued. Because 리 is inherently good, 사단 are morally pure, spontaneous, and untainted. This was often illustrated with the phrase 理先氣後. 칠정, according to 퇴계, do not arise from pure principle but rather from 기—기발 (氣發). This doctrine was essential in the position held by 퇴계 during 사칠논쟁, since it defines that the ontological origins of 사단 and 칠정 are different. Thus, the psychological process of their activation is different and moral cultivation requires reverence, calm self-examination, nurturing 사

단, and regulating 칠정

퇴계 also proposed that the concept of 경 (敬) is the core of self-cultivation. 경 itself was defined as focused attentiveness, moral seriousness, and the purification of one's desires. 퇴계 stressed that, in order to align 기 with 리, one needs constant mindfulness, quiet introspection, sincerity, and awareness of the mind's moral potential. 경 is often described as holding something precious so it is not dropped, emphasizing one must keep a careful posture of mind, standing alone and being watchful, meaning one must keep 경 even when alone, a clear mirror polished every day, meaning one must dismiss distraction and inappropriate desires, and the upright center that does not lean, highlighting the need for steadiness and balance.

2.2 율곡이이

율곡 proposed frameworks alternative to the ones put forward by 퇴계. One of the most relevant of them is that of 리기묘합 (理氣妙合), the subtle union of 리 and 기. 리기묘합 aimed to confront the belief put forward by intellectuals like 퇴계 saying that 리 and 기 are clearly distinct in both origin and activation. 율곡's central idea was that wherever there is 리, 기 is present and wherever 기 is, 리 is expressed; they are two in name but not two in function. He proposed that the harmony between the two is ontologically inseparable, functionally interactive, and psychologically simultaneous. Thus, no human emotion or moral action is purely one or the other—rather, they are always a combination of both in different concentrations. The implication of 리기묘합 is that humans must cultivate balanced, responsive judgement as opposed to overly rigid moral introspection. Thus, practitioners must learn to respond properly to the situations that arise instead of just tracing the metaphysical origin of emotions.

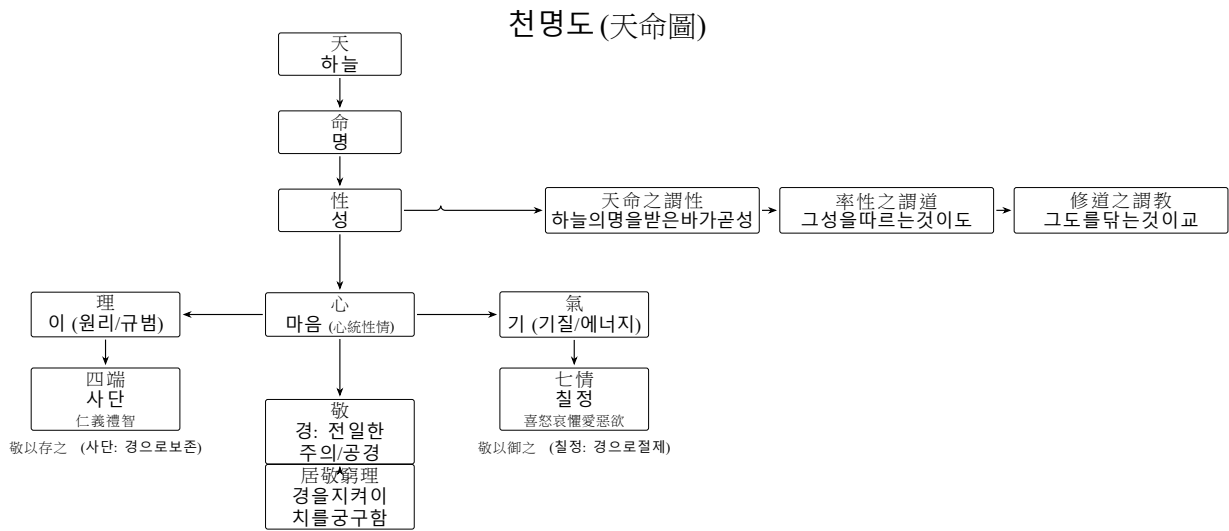
Another important concept proposed by 율곡 was that of 칠포사 (七包四), a direct response to 퇴계's position in 사칠논쟁. 칠포사 explains that every emotion we feel, 칠정, already include moral possibilities. Thus, 칠정 and 사단 are not ontologically separate from one another; rather, 칠정 form the psychological totality and 사단 the moral functions within that whole. Thus, when 칠정 follow 리, they become 사단.

As an intellectual, 율곡 was practical and reform oriented. He authored many writings on the topic of practical statecraft, on issues like administrative reform, realistic policy-making, effective education, disaster-prevention policy, and economic strategies. This outlook on life directly influenced his positions on Neo-Confucianism and Korean philosophy as a whole.

2.3 Diagrams and Cosmic Models

During 조선, Confucian scholars used diagrams and imagery to express metaphysical deep concepts. A famous example is 천명도 (天命圖), a cosmological diagram that illustrated the relationship and overlap between heaven and humans. Diagrams from this era usually incorporate concepts that helped represent a deeper understanding of existence, such as 음양 and 오행. The figure below this paragraph provides a sample of what one such diagram might look like.

Neo-Confucianism became the state doctrine of 조선 and thus acquired a lot of prestige and influence through many areas of society like governance, social ethics, and education. Within this new status quo, diagrams became a popular means to teach the concepts of Neo-Confucianism in a visual and direct way. Neo-Confucian thought is extremely systematic, proposing relationships between



cosmology, psychology, and self-cultivation. With diagrams, scholars were able to represent them as structured and interconnected systems.

A very influential diagram was the 太極圖 (태극도). It first appeared in 宋 drawn by scholar 周敦頤. Master 朱子 recognized the importance of the diagram designed by 周敦頤 and thus it gained mainstream legitimacy in Neo-Confucian scholarly circles. This diagram was intended to represent the entire process of cosmic generation. First, the absolute, 無極, followed by the first polarity, 太極. Emerging from 太極, there is 陰陽 and 五行 as further differentiation of cosmic forces. Lastly, there is 萬物 representing all beings and phenomena. 周敦頤 linked the cosmology represented in his diagram to the ideal Confucian sage, arguing that it is essential to understand cosmic processes in order to achieve self-cultivation, since this latter act is a result of alignment with the cosmic order. Although 太極圖 originated in China, it became a foundational cosmological and pedagogical model in Korea, which went on to influence the diagram-making from scholars in the Peninsula. One can argue that the rich corpus of 조선 diagrams, covering all sorts of things from the process of moral cultivation, human emotions, and statecraft, was the direct result of the prestige and authority of 太極圖 as a metaphysical model.

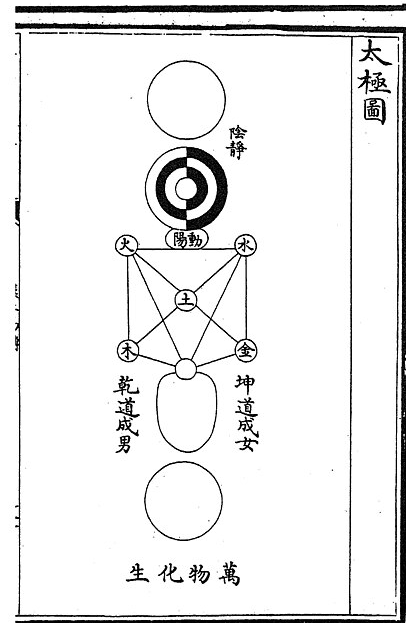


Figure 1: Image of a real 太極圖

3 성리학

성리학 (性理學), Korean Neo-Confucianism, developed from 朱子's thought but evolved in unique directions. 朱子 emphasized the gap between heavenly principle (天理) and human desires (人欲). For Chinese Neo-Confucians, moral cultivation required restraining selfish desires to maintain the purity of human nature, which alone aligns with 天理. Thus, 朱子's ideology focused heavily on guarding the mind from disturbances and maintaining moral clarity. Korean Neo-Confucian

scholars, on the other hand, foregrounded the continuity and immediate resonance between humans and Heaven, arguing that the two are one with no gaps. Instead of viewing 天理 and 人欲 as opposing forces, they tended to interpret them as harmonizable aspects of the same continuum. To them, moral clarity comes not from suppressing desire but from calming the mind so its inherent resonance with Heaven can be heard.

Because of this perspective, Korean scholars were drawn to 朱子's philosophy: it not only offered a conceptual analysis of nature and principle that resonated with them, but it spoke directly to the longstanding Korean spiritual orientation toward the unity of human and Heaven. As discussions in Korea deepened, scholars increasingly sought conceptual consistency regarding ideas like nature and principle. Yet they always questioned whether philosophical coherence could fully account for the complexity of actual human experience. This drive for practical applicability contributed to the diverse and flourishing debates characteristic of Korean Confucianism—debates that later lessons will explore.

A Glossary of Terms

Table 1: Key Terms in Korean Philosophy and Culture

Korean	Hanja	Transliteration	English Definition
철학	哲學	cheolhak	Philosophy; the study of wisdom and principles
도	道	do	The Way; principle, path, or cosmic order
한문	漢文	hanmun	Classical Chinese writing used in Korea
삼국시대	三國時代	samguk sidae	The Three Kingdoms Period of Korea
한자	漢字	hanja	Chinese characters used in Korean contexts
한글	—	hangeul	Native Korean alphabet created in the 15th century
선불교	禪佛教	seon bulgyo	Korean Zen Buddhism
공자	孔子	gongja	Confucius, the Chinese sage
노자	老子	noja	Laozi, Daoist philosopher
맹자	孟子	maengja	Mencius, Confucian philosopher
고려	高麗	goryeo	Goryeo dynasty; medieval Korean kingdom
조선	朝鮮	joseon	Joseon dynasty; early modern Korea
향찰	鄉札	hyangchal	Early Korean writing system using Chinese characters phonetically
구결	口訣	gugyeol	Annotation system aiding the reading of Chinese texts
이두	吏讀	idu	Mixed script system using Chinese characters for Korean grammar
삼재	三才	samjae	The Three Powers: Heaven, Earth, and Humanity
음양	陰陽	eumyang	Yin and Yang; complementary cosmic forces
오행	五行	ohaeng	Five Elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, water
마음	—	maeum	Mind-heart; emotional and moral center of a person
사칠논쟁	四七論爭	sachil nonjaeng	Debate on the Four Beginnings and Seven Emotions
사단	四端	sadan	Four moral sprouts: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom
칠정	七情	chiljeong	Seven emotions: joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, dislike, desire
리	理	ri	Principle; metaphysical pattern or moral order
기	氣	gi	Vital force; material energy through which principle manifests
퇴계	退溪	Toegye	Pen name of Yi Hwang, major Korean Neo-Confucian scholar
율곡	栗谷	Yulgok	Pen name of Yi I, influential Korean Neo-Confucian philosopher

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Korean	Hanja	Transliteration	English Definition
호락논쟁 호	湖洛論爭 湖	horak nonjaeng ho	Ho–Rak Debate on human and animal nature “Ho”; refers to the Ho faction (Chungcheong region)
락	洛	rak	“Rak”; refers to the Rak faction (Seoul region)
성	性	seong	Nature; inherent moral-mind nature of beings
인물성동이	人物性同異	inmulseong dongi	Debate on whether human and animal natures are same or different
인의예지	仁義禮智	inui yeji	Four cardinal virtues: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom
미발	未發	mibal	“Not-yet-aroused”; pre-emotional state of the heart-mind
공부 우리	工夫 一	gongbu uri	Effort, cultivation, practical moral work “We”; relational self emphasizing collective identity
조선왕조실록 서학	朝鮮王朝實錄 西學	joseon wangjo sillok seohak	Annals of the Joseon Dynasty Western Learning; introduction of Catholic/Western thought
기자	箕子	gija	Legendary sage-king said to have come to Gojoseon
동이	東夷	dongi	Ancient Chinese term for peoples of the East
동국	東國	dongguk	“Eastern Country”; classical name for Korea
삼한	三韓	samhan	The Three Han federations of ancient Korea
고구려	高句麗	goguryeo	Goguryeo; powerful northern Korean kingdom
백제	百濟	baekje	Baekje; southwestern Korean kingdom
신라	新羅	silla	Silla; southeastern Korean kingdom
대한민국	大韓民國	daehan min-guk	Republic of Korea (South Korea)
대한	大韓	daehan	“Great Han”; national designation
한국	韓國	hanguk	Korea; modern national name
음독	音讀	eumdok	Sino-Korean reading (sound reading)
훈독	訓讀	hundok	Native-Korean meaning-based reading
곰나루	熊津	gomnaru	Old name for Ungjin/Gongju; literally “Bear Ford”
웅진	熊津	ungjin	Capital of Baekje during mid-period
설총	薛聰	Seolchong	Early Silla scholar associated with Idu
원효	元曉	Wonhyo	Silla Buddhist monk and philosopher
향가	鄉歌	hyangga	Native Silla poems written with hyangchal
진성여왕	眞聖女王	Jinseong yeowang	Queen Jinseong of Silla
단군	檀君	Dangun	Mythical founder of Korea
환웅	桓雄	Hwanung	Father of Dangun; heavenly prince
일연	一然	Iryeon	Monk who compiled the *Samguk Yusa*
삼국유사	三國遺事	samguk yusa	“Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms”; historical anthology

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Korean	Hanja	Transliteration	English Definition
삼국사기	三國史記	samguk sagi	“History of the Three Kingdoms” ; official chronicle
김부식	金富軾	Kim Busik	Compiler of the *Samguk Sagi*
음주가무	飲酒歌舞	eumju gamu	Drinking, singing, and dancing
천신무용	天神舞踊	cheonsin muyong	Heavenly-spirit ritual dance
탈춤	—	talchum	Mask dance performance
농악놀이	—	nongak nori	Farmers’ percussion performance
판소리	—	pansori	Korean narrative musical storytelling
태학	太學	taehak	National academy in early Korea
국학	國學	gukhak	National learning institution; study of national classics
공부	工夫	gongbu	Study; cultivation; disciplined effort
추석	秋夕	chuseok	Korean harvest festival in which ancestors are revered.
주자	朱子	juja	Zhu Xi (Master Zhu)
이황	李滉	Yi Hwang	Korean Neo-Confucian scholar (Toegye)
이이	李珥	Yi I	Korean Neo-Confucian scholar (Yulgok)
리발	理發	ribal	Emergence / manifestation of principle (li)
경	敬	gyeong	Reverence; attentive seriousness
리기묘합	理氣妙合	rigimyohap	The subtle harmony/unity of li and qi
칠포사	七包四	chilposa	“Seven contain four” doctrinal formula
천명도	天命圖	cheonmyeongdo	Diagram of Heavenly Mandate
성리학	性理學	seongnihak	Neo-Confucianism (School of Nature and Principle)
태극도	太極圖	taegeukdo	Taiji (Supreme Ultimate) diagram