New Approaches to the History of Ideas in the Late Chosŏn period

JUNG, Ok-ja*

I.

The current historical studies of the Chosŏn Period (1392-1910) can be deemed to be on the right track. In the periodization of Korean history, Chosŏn, distinguished as "early modern," is placed between medieval and modern. The founding of Chosŏn is now recognized as a step toward progress, no more devaluated as "perpetuation of a stagnant society despite the change in dynasties." It is also generally accepted that sadaebu, the new literati-officials of late Koryŏ period, initiated a dynastic change to construct a more advanced society.

Nonetheless, it may take considerable time and efforts to retrieve Chosŏn history from the distortions wrought by the Japanese colonial historiography which had been generally accepted till recently. First of all, Japanese imperialist historians had divided Chosŏn history into two, drawing the line at Japanese invasion of 1592-1598 (Imjin waeran) and Manchurian invasion of 1636 (Pyŏngja horan). Then they had defined the late Chosŏn as a society collapsing and crumbling in consequence of the wars. Although war may be an important factor in changing the course of history, it is time to overcome these colonial distortions in which external events and factors become sole determinants in the periodization of our history.

It is moreover unhistorical to lump 250 years of the late Chosŏn period to continuing process of disintegration. The average duration of Chinese dynasties was about 200 years. The mere fact that Chosŏn dynasty continued for 500 years requires an elucidation of its characteristic strengths. Even from the generalized

* Associate Professor of Korean History, Seoul National University
schema of the rise and fall of nations, a decline of almost 250 years is an unhistorical hypothesis without precedent in world history.

There is an alternative view which divides Chosŏn history into three periods: early (15th c.), middle (16th & 17th c.), and late (18th & 19th c.). This periodization focuses on the emergence of sarim, Neo-Confucian literati, and on their activities in the 16th and 17th centuries. By studying the “literati purges” (sahwa) of the 16th century and the clique politics of the 17th century en bloc, this theory offers a positive interpretation of factional strife. It explains that clique politics was a sound party system that kept the balance of power, making different cliques form coalition governments on the principle of check and balance.

First suggested in the 1970’s, this theory contributed to subverting colonial distortions which had persisted in characterizing late Chosŏn society as a bloody field of factionalism, based on collective egoism of interest groups linked by blood ties, territorial or academic affinities.

But this theory raises some problems that should not be overlooked. First, its periodization is problematic since no clear historical changes mark off the middle period. It highlights the emergence of the Neo-Confucian literati and their activities, especially the Yŏngnam(Kyŏngsang province) School during the reign of Sŏngjong. But this demarcation is unjustifiable because Chosŏn was founded by Neo-Confucian literati who made Neo-Confucianism her national philosophy and governing ideology. The scholars who devoted themselves to studies in “the Hall of Worthies (Chiphyŏnjŏn)” in Sejong’s time were also Neo-Confucian literati and can be understood basically as sarim. The fact that the “six martyred ministers” (sa yukshin) could offer their lives to oppose Sejo’s usurpation testify to the acclimatization of Neo-Confucianism.

Second, their conception of sarim is unclear even though they define the period as ‘the Age of Neo-Confucian literati.’ Above all, their attempt to define Neo-Confucian literati in terms of social and economic category of class is problematic. Chosŏn was a Confucian nation by principle and example. According to Confucian principle of sugi ch’’un, “cultivating oneself and governing others,” the stage of devoting oneself to self-cultivation and academic study is called sugi and the stage of governing people is called ch’iun. Since only a man who went through the process of thorough moral and academic self-cultivation can be called sa, and only the scholars who went through this process could be worthy enough to govern people and become officials (daebu), the government officials of Chosŏn were basically scholar-bureaucrats (sadaebu). The plural of sa, sarim is a collective pronoun for scholars of such moral and academic distinction. Of course there were great sarim
clans, but even they were characterized by their academic features. Some Neo-
Confucian literati distinguished themselves by their moral and academic excellence
beyond the limit of their status in the late 16th century to form powerful clans in the
17th century. On the other hand, there also existed Neo-Confucian literati who
came from the clans of meritorious elite Thus the primary qualification for a Neo-
Confucian literati was not class but scholarly attainments in Neo-Confucianism
which he adopted as the principle of life. It was accordingly natural that the number
of Neo-Confucian literati increased as time passed, so much so that they could be
found all over the country by the reign of Sŏnjo(late 16th century). The exclusive
emphasis on the Yongnam School, with the genealogy of Chŏng Mong-ju and Kim
Chong-jik and their teachings centering on Tot'ongnon, pursue a one-sided
understanding of Neo-Confucian literati.

Third, the term clique politics is in itself ambiguous, and the theory of clique
politics with its ideals set in the reign of Injo, raises problems of periodization. Even
though both Kihae yesong of 1659 and Kabun yesong of 1674 (the disputes over the
mourning rites to be observed by Hyojong’s mother, the Queen Dowager Cho) are
included under that category, the term does not quite explain the intense factional
strifes that went on for more than half a century, up to 1730’s when Yŏngjo adopted
the policy of impartiality(t’angp’yŏngch’ae).

Fourth, their explication of the steering principle of clique politics in terms of
check and balance of power is again problematic. It is a matter of course that power
struggle is a general phenomenon among political groups. One should, however,
make a subtle distinction between politics in general and clique politics in which
Neo-Confucian literati tried to realize their political ideal; the different political
creeds and policies among cliques arose from their different opinions in scholarly
matters Academic distinctions were already at the bottom of factional strifes
developed in the 17th century, since Westerners(Sŏn) and Southerners(Namin), the
two main cliques, respectively carried on the thoughts of Yi I(Yulgok) and Yi
Hwang(T’oege) The theory of clique politics limits itself by the simple logic of
power, which, in turn, is analogous to the theory of factional strife deriving from the
colonial historiography

II.

It seems that the tripartite division of Chosŏn history raises more problem than it
can solve, especially when focused on the history of ideas. In this context, Chosŏn
history should be divided into two, and the crucial turning point is the accession of
Injo that follows Kwanghaegun’s dethronement in 1623. The nucleus that founded Chosŏn was the new literati who, in place of corrupt Buddhism of late Koryŏ, accepted Neo-Confucianism as their spiritual mainstay. They envisaged a society in which Neo-Confucianism was its national doctrine and governing principle. It was a society governed by scholar-bureaucrats who had the will and vocation to realize their learning in actual politics. Hence Chosŏn was basically a nation administered by scholars whose ideal was to build a civilized nation.

Throughout the 15th century when Chosŏn was in the process of being established, many merit subjects were created on seven occasions. They constituted meritorious elites in a span of three generations, approximately, a century; at the end of 15th century, during the reign of Sŏngjong, they consolidated their power and established themselves as aristocratic class. Considering the ideals Chosŏn dynasty pursued, it was inevitable that Neo-Confucian literati emerge as the opposing party critical of this established power.

In the early Chosŏn period when institutions and laws were being fixed into order, sayanghak (a kind of rhetoric) was more important for its practical use than the study of speculative and theoretical Neo-Confucianism. Writing ability based on rhetorics was also indispensable for establishing diplomatic relations. The scholarship of meritorious elites, the established power, was founded on sajanghak, whereas the literati who appeared in the central government as the new political force were scholars that esteemed above all deep learning in Neo-Confucianism.

In the 16th century, the old and new forces clashed, and this in the end brought about a series of political convulsions known as the "literati purges." The political line that the emerging Neo-Confucian literati took was too idealistic in the current of realpolitik. Due to their radicalism, the neo-Confucian literati failed to give themselves enough time to win the sympathy of intellectuals in general and were executed or exiled in the four literati purges, Muo sahwa(1498), Kupcha sahwa (1504), Kimyo sahwa(1519), and Úlsa sahwa(1545). When the literati who rose and fell in one generation retired to the countryside, they devoted their energies to scholarly inquiry and to education of younger generation; toward the end of 16th century, they thoroughly digested and assimilated the imported Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucianism and formed two distinct schools, the Yongnam School and the Kihoe School.

Since the generalized life pattern of sarim was to become scholar-bureaucrats, each school turned into a political party with its own political line. Toward the end of the 16th century, the Kihoe School which consisted largely of the disciples of Yi I, formed the party of the Westerners, whereas the Yongnam School composed of the
followers of Yi Hwang formed that of the Easterners. As these two political parties originated respectively from different academic disciplines, politics bore close relationship to scholarship, different political lines being formed according to different philosophical creeds. Like the two sides of a coin, the history of ideas and the political history were inseparably related to each other.

The Easterners was divided into two sub-factions—the Southerners were the disciples of Yi Hwang while the opposing Northerners were those of Cho Shik (Nammyŏng)—due to a split of opinion in the policies against the Westerners. In the year 1592, immediately after this division, Injin waeran broke out which in those days was literally a World War. Confronted with national emergency, all parties and factions united their efforts to securing foreign military aid and carried on the war with the support of guerrilla forces, the nucleus of which was the neo-Confucian literati who had retired to the countryside.

The seven year war transformed the political structure of Chosŏn. When the war broke out, there was surplus of both meritorious elites and Neo-Confucian literati. The latter took a very active part in the war against the Japanese, leading the guerrilla forces as well as bringing relief army from Ming by diplomatic means. So in the years following the war with Japan, they took the leadership in the political scene. On the other hand, the meritorious elites who failed to rise up to the occasion lost not only political power but also their economic base in the course of refilling the burnt land registers. Naturally they were weeded out after the war.

During the war, the Northerners advocated the war against the Japanese most forcefully and produced many guerrilla leaders who made marked military achievements. Accordingly when Kwanghaegun ascended the throne, they dominated the political scene and formed the government of the Great Northerners. It may be said that the Northerners also were Neo-Confucian literati in a wide sense; the Westerners and the Southerners who professed orthodox Neo-Confucianism, however, thought that their views were somewhat heretical and criticized the misgovernment of the Northerners. The Northerners received a fatal blow when Kwanghaegun committed outrageous breaches against Confucian morals; he deposed the Queen Dowager and killed his half brother.

Injo Restoration (1623) was a change of government in which the Westerners took the lead with the help of the Southerners. It was not a revolution of dynastic change, but a "restoration of order" (a return to just political order from Neo-Confucian point of view). This Neo-Confucian coup d'état deposed a king, but preserved the obligations of the lieges by choosing a successor from eligible princes in the royal family. Both Chungjong Restoration and Injo Restoration can be understood as
characteristic events of Chosŏn dynasty which adopted Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism as national ideology.

The Westerners who inherited the philosophical and political creeds of Yi I had been very emphatic about the necessity of a “Great Reform (kyŏngjang)” from the late 16th century. The very fact that they took the helm of state affairs foreshadowed the course of late Chosŏn society. Though the orthodox Neo-Confucian literati experienced a temporary setback because of Manchurian invasion (Pyŏngja horan) which broke out close on the heels of Injo Restoration, they retained power and reorganized the old order of Chosŏn society devastated by the wars. All the socio-economic policies which were shaped out hereafter reflect their political ideology. That is why I have argued that Injo Restoration is the crucial turning point in the bipartite division of Chosŏn history.

III.

On the international scene, Ming, Chosŏn, and Japan, the three countries involved in Imjin waeran, were considerably weakened. At this time the Jurchens grew in power in Manchuria and founded Later Jin, very soon, they were ambitious to make themselves the master of China by subduing Ming that had lost the authority of the “great nation.” They planned to carry out a preemptive attack against Chosŏn who formed an East-West alliance with Ming. Thus Later Jin, invaded Chosŏn in 1627 when Injo had been on the throne for only 4 years (Chŏngmyo horan). But this attempt to bring Chosŏn under their control being not entirely satisfactory, the Jurchens thereupon made a second large-scale aggression (Pyŏngja horan) in 1636, in the 14th year of Injo.

The Westerners and the Southerners, the Neo-Confucian fundamentalists, seized power and formed a coalition government by the drastic measure of “restoration.” But they were involved in another war before they could realize their ideals in political terms. At that time, the world for Chosŏn was northeast Asia the center of which was China. Being an agricultural society with a firm economic basis, Chosŏn took pride in being a civilized nation and set itself up for little China.

On the other hand, the Jurchens were an equestrian tribe who led a nomadic life. Their blitz tactics with maximum mobility made Chosŏn yield after a feeble resistance. According to Neo-Confucian concept of hwairon, a cultural concept that divides civilized human beings and beastly barbarians, the Jurchens were despised as barbarians that could hardly be deemed human. Chosŏn suffered national disgrace when the king, the symbol of the state, surrendered to the despised northern
barbarians at Samjŏndo. Thereafter the first objective of the late Chosŏn society was to overcome the shame of such utter degradation.

Within a span of forty years, Chosŏn which had prided herself on being a civilized nation was attacked by the Japanese in the south and by the Jurchens in the north. The ensuing military defeats threw her into extreme frustration and the aftermath was serious. In the mid and late 17th century, Chosŏn society made every possible effort to get over the devastation of both wars and restore injured national pride. Also it tried its best to reconstruct the collapsed economic base and reorganize its social institutions.

The Westerners and the Southerners who entered the political world in emergency were sallim (rustic literati) who had devoted themselves to studies in the countryside. Their coalition government tried to reconcile the realpolitik with the doctrines of Neo-Confucianism which was after all a kind of moral philosophy. Within the country, they emphasized the importance of yech'i, ruling according to morals and rituals; without, they planned to launch a northern expedition against the Jurchens. They strove and succeeded in obtaining national solidarity and consensus under these objectives. Ye ch'i was a concrete expression of the political ideals of "the way of the king" rule. In the 16th century, primary emphasis was given to self-cultivation (sugi), and accordingly, theories of temperament and individual ethics developed such as mshum doshm sŏl or sadan ch'ilhŏng sŏl; in the 17th century, a maturing of Neo-Confucian studies led to studies focusing on governing people (ch'i'in) and developed yeron, that is, theories of practical and social ethics. The ultimate purpose of yeron is an intense desire for social justice. The deluge of books authored by the Westerners and the Southerners in the 17 century deploy different theories of practical and social ethics and became the theoretical foundation of ye ch'i. In the two disputes on funeral rites (yesong) arising in the latter half of the 17th century, theories of yeron (practical and social ethics) became political issues. Moral rites were lifted from individual ethics to political principle, opening an era of ideological disputes over the right way to realize moral and ritualistic rule.

After its climax, however, yesong gradually degenerated to factional strifes, yielding many negative effects. In 1684 the Westerners split into the Old Doctrine (Noron) faction and the Young Doctrine (Soron) faction, according to their different attitudes toward the Southerners who were completely ousted from court after Kisa hwan'guk (1689) and Kapsul hwan'guk (1694).

After Ming, the symbol of China, had been overthrown, the barbarian Qing took possession of the mainland China. Chosŏn had also suffered a disgrace at Samjŏndo and was resolved to take revenge. Thus "the March against the North" was a
national policy in the 17th century Chosŏn. Based on the binary opposition between the civilized and the barbarians (hwairon), the northern expedition became a mere slogan as time went by, but it contributed to Chosŏn-centrism in place of China-centrism. It was an expression of national pride by claiming that it was now Chosŏn who upheld the legitimacy of Chinese culture. Placing its theoretical basis on chonchouron (Chou Legitimacy Theory), Chosŏn-centrism contributed to the advance of national culture which flowered between late 17th century and early 18th century.

The leading group of this cultural movement was the Westerners and their ideological basis was Neo-Confucianism which Chosŏn made its own. The Southerners who were out of power were looking for a new academic discipline, in contrast, the Old Doctrine faction of the Westerners was eager to realize the ideology of Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism in the belief that it was the new native discipline deriving from Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism.

IV.

The Southerners who had withdrawn from the political scene since the late 17th century can be divided into two groups: the Yŏngnam Southerners and the Kŭn'gi (Kyŏnggi province and its vicinities) Southerners. The former had lived in the Yŏngnam area as landlords for several generations, and, therefore, had a strong footing in the environ. The latter moved to Kwangju of Kyŏnggi province in the 17th century, employed as officials in the central government. The Yŏngnam Southerners cherished the honor of scholarship and inherited and developed the academic traditions of Yi Hwang. The Kŭn'gi Southerners had been actively involved in politics, but after Kapsul hwang'gyuk they were ousted even from the status of the opposition party and retired to the country. Some descendants of the Little Northerners who had participated in the government of the Great Northerners in the reign of Kwanghaegun became aligned to the Kŭn'gi Southerners.

Hŏ Mok (1595-1682), one of the Little Northerners, was a "rustic literati" who entered into politics in the late 17th century. As noted, the scholarly features of the Northerners were different from orthodox Neo-Confucianism. Hŏ Mok endeavored to break from Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism in favor of primitive Confucianism and established an old-fashioned school that lay stress on the Six Classics. In the early 18th century, Yi Ik (1681-1763) succeeded to the thoughts of Hŏ Mok and set up a critical academic discipline focusing on the rural conditions. This resulted in the formation of Physiocrat school.
This school not only pointed out the limitations of the existing studies, such as the ideational tendency of Neo-Confucianism and the petrification of ye hak (the study of rituals), but also made efforts to solve the practical problems of the countryside. They insisted on reform in the vital areas of land systems and local government structure, including the misrule of local officials. Their attention was focused on the realities of the countryside, which indeed was the basis of their life after their retirement from politics.

Their academic basis was the Six Classics of primitive Confucianism which were the records of culture and institutions in the age of the legendary Chinese emperors, Yao and Shun. In accordance with the political ideals of that age, they advocated that the root of a nation is its people and, therefore, concentrated on studying different systems of land which maintained people’s livelihood. This resulted in many treatises on land (ch’ollon), for example, Yu Hyŏng-won’s Kyunch’ollon (equalized field system), Yi Il’s Hanch’ollon (land limit system), Chŏng Yag-yong’s Yŏch’ollon (village land system). All of them were land reform theories following the model of Chŏngjŏnje (nine-field system), modified with due regards to the situations in Chosŏn.

The Physiocrat school of Kŭm’gi Southerners are also categorized as the school of kyŏngse ch’i’yon. Scholars under the tutelage of Yi Il can be divided into the Left and the Right. The Left includes Kwon Ch’ŏl-sin and his brother Kwon Il-sin, Yi Pyŏk, Yi Ka-hwan, Yi Stŏng-hun, and Chŏng Yag-yong and his brother, who showed interest in scientific technology of the West and then in Catholicism. The Right is the school of An Chŏng-bok who retained Confucianism.

The Physiocrat School originated from critical consciousness which grew with various attempts at self-recovery in the turmoil of thoughts and ideas in the late 17th century. Having been ousted from the political scene by the early 18th century, it was a critical discipline out of tune with the government; nonetheless, being basically a part of the governing class, it was reformative rather than revolutionary. The mainline of the so-called Sirhak (Practical Learning) consists in studying this particular school.

On the other side of the picture, Noron scholars, the representative of which is Song Shi-yŏl, led the 17th century Chosŏn society by persisting in the academic discipline of Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism and accomplished Chun’gyŏng Culture in the early 18th century. From the mid 18th century, however, even this conservative school made changes in their outlook. This was a transitional period in which the medieval agricultural Chosŏn society was turning into modern commercial/industrial society Confucianism, the national ideology of Chosŏn, provided a general and
rational philosophical system for the medieval agricultural society. But it could not provide a working principle of government as weltanschauung for the newly emerging modern society partly because of its corruptions and partly because of its limitations.

The studies of humanities that reached its apex with Yi Hwang and Yi I in the late 16th century developed into horak debate, an ideological dispute conducted within the Old Doctrine Faction in the early 18th century. Horon, supported by the scholars who devoted themselves to studies in Ch’ungch’ŏng province, argued that human nature is radically different from matter, which is in line with hwairon. The argument of Nangnon runs that human nature is material and was supported by the government officials of the Old Doctrine Faction who resided either in Seoul or its vicinities. Pukhak (Northern Learning) developed from the materialism of Nangnon.

The philosophical basis of Hong Tae-yong and Pak Chi-won who started the Pukhak movement in the mid 18th century was Nangnon, a branch of the Old Doctrine Faction. They were sons of governing officials and in the post of private attendants to delegates, they visited Qing and witnessed Qianlong Civilization. Now Qing was no longer northern barbarians; they employed Chinese scholars of the country south of Yanja River and published all the books in the Four National Libraries. In addition, they absorbed Western civilization introduced by missionaries and were in the midst of cultural renaissance.

The Pukhak School was already in the process of overcoming hwairon by Nangnon which equates man and matter; they felt the necessity of a new ideology the more as they were shocked into recognizing the achievement of Qianlong Civilization. By a century of isolation, Chosŏn succeeded in creating a national culture, but it was a far cry from the advanced cultural state of Qing civilization. As the sons of governing officials, they exposed the fictiveness of the national policy of northern expedition and proposed Pukhak to absorb the advanced civilization of Qing.

Since the scholars of Pukhak grew up in Seoul, being from the families of ruling Old Doctrine faction, they were more interested in urban than in rural problems. Their plan for reform, accordingly, was geared to trade and technological renovation with the objective of “enriching the country and strengthening its military power.” This school is designated as Mercantilist School. Pukhak of the late 18th century is designated as Iyong husaeug hakp’a, and when it matured as an academic discipline by the lead of Kim Chŏng-hŭi in the early 19th century it is called Shilsa kushi hakp’a.

At first, it was a kind of movement, but in the early 19th century, it took the
motto of Qing’s bibliographical study of Chinese classics by heart—Seek truth in real matters; don’t believe anything without experience and experiment—and matured into an academic discipline. Kim Chŏng-hŭi’s teachings were also disseminated to the chungin class—the technocrats who could readily adapt themselves to commercial/industrial society; therefore, it is not surprising that they absorb Northern Learning and became the avant garde of the early Enlightenment movement. Kim Chŏng-hŭi’s students, from both sadaebu class and chungin class, formed a bridge between Northern Learning and Enlightenment Movement.

Both Northern Learning and Enlightenment Movement share the objective of “enriching the country and strengthening its military power.” The former’s model was Qing, but circumstances changed with time, so the latter’s model became the West and Japan who made apace with Western imperialism. So far Chosŏn felt easy with a world confined to northeast Asia with China at the center. But the West was steadily encroaching upon the East. Enlightenment movement was a necessary process in which Chosŏn included the West in her world view and became a part of the international order. In this rapidly changing scene, the intellectuals with knowledge of the world outside was the school of Pukhak. Pukhak was firmly based on Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism, but it was a progressive movement in its attempt to transcend the limitations of the old ideology. The young intellectuals of this school were of the Old Doctrine faction, the ruling party, so they could make their voice heard, and was eventually incorporated into Chŏngjo’s Kyujanggak (Palace Library). After gaining academic footing, it became the welfanschauung of the 19th century.

V.

The above is a short summary of changes in history of ideas in late Chosŏn period focusing on the relationship between Neo-Confucianism and Sirhak. Since Neo-Confucianism was not only the main current of Chosŏn’s philosophical thought but also its spiritual mainstay for 500 years, it is necessary that a thorough study with proper periodization should be undertaken. What is especially urgent is a study of its philosophical implications along with a historical analysis of its social function as the spirit of the age.

In addition, an explication of yeron which caused factional strife in the 17th century and of chonchouron which was the theoretical basis of Chosŏn-centrism will be a key to understanding late Chosŏn society. Taebodan, Mandongmyo, Chojongam have been criticized as symbolic examples of flunkeyism, but a study of chonchouron will lead to a historical interpretation of their functions and to
overcome colonial historicography. By delineating the substance of chonchouron, one will also better understand its relationship with the 19th century Ch’ŏksa wiŏng.

The studies of history of ideas in the late Chosŏn period have concentrated mainly on Sirhak. The studies of Sirhak were motivated by the national crisis between late 19th century and early 20th century. In the 1930s, under the Japanese imperial rule, Chosŏn studies were launched in earnest to retrospect and rediscover the spirit of Korea. At the time, Sirhak was regarded as a great reform movement that became the origin of modern thought by its positive response to historical events.

For more than 40 years after the Independence, historians have essayed positive revaluations of late Chosŏn period to rediscover and reaffirm national culture and its spiritual objective. An outstanding example of this is Capitalism in Embryo Theory suggested by social economic historians in the 1960s. Confronted with the necessity of demolishing colonial historiography, these historians established the theory as a critique of Identity Theory. Studies on Sirhak were accelerated as it was recognized as the new weltanschauung of the late Chosŏn history when the transition was made from a medieval agricultural society to modern commercial/industrial society, with the boosting of agricultural productivity and growth of commodity/currency economy, etc. As a result, vast amount of researches were done but a number of problems remain.

First, there is a problem with periodization. In tracing genealogies of similar ideas, some went way back to the late 16th century. If one traces back to the origin of a new idea, one can go on for ever. We will have a better understanding of Sirhak only when we view it as a historical phenomenon and confine it within a certain period.

Second, Sirhak was suggested as an alternative to Neo-Confucianism, but the latter was nonetheless the basis of the former. Accordingly, a dynamic study of Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism should precede studies of Sirhak which, in turn, should be illuminated as a counter theory to Neo-Confucianism. A lack of understanding of Neo-Confucianism, the national ideology of Chosŏn, led to the ambiguous definition of Sirhak.

Third, chugiron has been applied to Sirhak as a frame of analysis, though it is problematic even as a category of Neo-Confucianism. Accordingly, there appear not only logical contradictions but also anachronisms, along with confusions in the genealogy of thinkers. Recently, studies in Sirhak are slackening. It is because the term has been employed too loosely: any scholar of late Chosŏn period who said anything new was defined as Sirhak scholar and was turned into a subject of
research. As a result, researches on Sirhak have accumulated but Sirhak as a term is not as yet defined clearly.

We are now at the point of reappraising the studies of Sirhak. If we assume that Sirhak was a necessary discipline for that particular period, it is necessary to remind ourselves that Sirhak of late Chosŏn period was a spirit of the age that coped with the transition from medieval agricultural society to modern commercial/industrial society. From this point of view, some argue that Pukhak is central to Sirhak since the Pukhak school showed interest in science and technology as well as capitalism and civil society.

As mentioned above, since the governing class of Chosŏn consisted of scholar-bureaucrats whose main area of study was Neo-Confucianism, one cannot make an in-depth study of its history of ideas without understanding their ideology and philosophy. Failing to do that, the overall structure of historical reconstruction cannot but be fragile.

VI.

Nonetheless, studies of Neo-Confucianism came belated first of all due to colonial historiography. Japanese imperialist historians who readily recognized Chosŏn’s cultural superiority submitted the interpretation of Chosŏn’s history to the principle of power. They interpreted factional strifes as bloody power struggle; in terms of social economic history they characterized Chosŏn’s emphasis on the virtues of frugality and abstinence as materialistic. Furthermore, they looked for the causes of historical change solely in external terms and composed the whole narrative of history with wars, introductions of foreign culture, and interventions of foreign power.

The analysis of history based on the logic of power, chiefly military, mirrors the very 19th century phenomenon of imperialism that engulfed the whole world.

Chosŏn was basically a country ruled by literati whose objective was refined culture and spiritual pursuit, especially, the late Chosŏn was minutely organized by Neo-Confucian moral philosophy. All these were negated or distorted by the alien world view of imperialist power principle.

At Kyujanggak Library of Seoul National University, there are vast amount of documents which confirm the cultural capacity and originality of the late Chosŏn period. It is quite clear that Japanese imperialist historians have wilfully overlooked the studies of history of ideas in this period.

The intellectuals under Japanese rule who found themselves to be a people
without a country fell into extreme despair and self-contempt; accordingly, they completely devaluated and then rejected both the refined culture created by the literatis and Neo-Confucianism, their ideology that ruled Choson for 500 years. These intellectuals, unlike the Japanese imperialist historians, did not do this on purpose, but extreme self-criticism led to self-negation.

The chungin class, who participated in Enlightenment Movement from 19th century on, became the leaders of Japanese drive modernization and criticized literati culture with which they had nothing to do. The demolition of traditional culture was further accelerated by the Japanese imperialists who deployed the policy of thorough annihilation of everything Korean; they turned Choson culture into an insubstantial weakling affair fit only to be despised.

Hence, the first research project for the late Choson history of ideas should be the thoroughly devaluated Neo-Confucianism. One should make haste to reevaluate it through proper periodization and dynamic studies of Sira hak should be conducted within the genealogy of Neo-Confucianism, that is, as a counter-theory of the ruling ideology.

Furthermore, researches should be made into the undercurrents of Yangming studies, Taoism, and Buddhism. Yangming studies was studied secretly in Soron families in the 18th century with the pretense of studying Neo-Confucianism; only in the late 19th century it broke out from Neo-Confucian confines and became Yangming studies proper and provided theoretical basis for Pak Un-shik’s Yugo gusinon. An understanding of Yangming studies will not only enrich the late Choson history of ideas but also provide an important link to historical studies of factional strifes.

Taoism was not so popular in Choson as it was in China; but complementing the mundane and realistic Confucianism, it melted into literature, art, and people’s life and became an important element in the cultural characteristics of late Choson. An in-depth study of Taoism will prove the cultural variety of late Choson.

It is generally assumed that Buddhism and geomancy was neglected by the governing class, but they survived to exert influence over our mental outlook even to this day. Buddhism declined in the period, but even in the royal family there were faithful followers, especially ladies, who built wish temples every where. It should also be noted that there were many interested in Buddhism among Sira hak scholar of Pukhak school or Enlightenment school in the 19th century. Above all, Buddhism as religion was influential, and many temples were built and renovated during the period.

There were also imported Sohak (Western Learning), and in opposition, Tonghak.
(Eastern Learning) arose from the mass. Sŏhak should not be confined narrowly to defining it as an imperialist vanguard or a mere missionary affair. They should be conducted from the viewpoint of how Chosŏn reacted to and digested foreign ideas.

Tonghak thoughts are studied as a national religion which arose during the decline of Chosŏn society in the mid 19th century as well as an ideological basis of Kabo Peasants’ War in 1894. Tonghak should be studied further as one of the bases of arguments against anti-medievalism and anti-foreign forces. One should also note its power of organization that made insurrection in the national scale possible.

So far, I have suggested a number of directions for researches in history of ideas in late Chosŏn period which indeed is the traditional root of modern Korea. Studies in the history of ideas are closely related to our identity. It is also expected that one might find an objective in reestablishing our values in the confusion of modern world.

(Translated by Ryu, Myung-sook, Associate Professor of English, Seoul National University)

GLOSSARY

An Chŏng-bok 安鼎福
Chin’gyŏng 崔景
Chipyŏn’ŏn 集賢殿
Cho Shik (Nammyŏng) 曹植 (南溟)
Chojongam 朝宗殿
ch’ŏksa wŏng 施邪衛正
chŏllon 田論
Chŏng Mong-ju 鄭夢周
Chŏng Yag-yong 丁若镛
Chŏngjo 正祖
Chŏngmyo horan 丁卯胡亂
Chŏngŏnje 井田制
Chugiron 主氣論
Ch’ungch’ŏng 惠淸
chungin 中人
Chungjong 中宗
daebu 大夫
Tot’ong non 道統論
Hanchŏllon 限田論
Hŏ Mok 許穆
Hong Tae-yong 洪大容
horak debate 洞洛論爭
Horon 洞論
Hwaaron 華夷論
Hyojong 孝宗
Imjin waeraen 王辰倭亂
Injo 仁祖
Inshim doshim sŏl 人心道心說
Chonchouron 尊周論
Kabin yesong 甲寅禮訟
Kabo Peasants’ War 甲午農民戰爭
Kapcha sahwa 甲子士禍
Kapsul hwan’guk 甲戌換局
Kihae yesong 已亥禮訟
Kiho 畿湖
Kim Chŏng-hŭi 金正喜
Kim Chong-jik 金宗直
Kimyo sahwa 已卯士禍
Kisa hwan’guk 己已换局
Kün’gi 近畿
Kwanghaegun 光海君
Kwangju 廣州
Kwon Ch’ŏl-shin 權哲身
Kwon Il-shin 權日身
kyŏngjang 更張
kyŏngse ch’iyong 經世治用
Kyujanggak 奎章閣
Kyunch’ŏllon 均田論
Mandongmyo 萬東廟
Muo sahwa 戊午士禍
Nakron 洛論
Namin 南人
Noron 老論
Pak Chi-won 朴趾源
Pak Un-shik 朴殷植
Pukhak 北學
Pyŏngja horan 丙子胡亂
sa 士
sa yukshin 死六臣
sadaebu 士大夫
Sadan ch’iljŏngsŏl 四端七情說
sahwa 士禍
sajanghak 詞章學
sallim 山林
Samjŏndo 三田渡
sarim 士林
Sejo 世祖
Shilsa gushi hakp’a 實事求是學派
Sirhak 實學
sŏhak 西學
Sŏin 西人
Song Sh’-yŏl 宋時烈
Sŏnjong 成宗
Sŏnjo 宣祖
Soron 少論
sugi ch’un 修己治人
Taebodan 大報壇
t’angp’yŏngch’ack 蕃平策
Tonghak 東學
Ulsasa sahwa 乙巳士禍
yech’i 禮治
yehak 禮學
yeron 禮論
yesŏng 禮詠
Yi Hwang (T’oegye) 李滉（退溪）
Yi I (Yulgok) 李珥（栗谷）
Yi Ik 李翼
Yi Ka-hwan 李家煥
Yi Pyŏk 李鎔
Yi Sŏng-hun 李承薰
Iyong husaeng hakp’a 利用厚生學派
Yŏch’ŏllon 閔田論
Yŏngjo 英祖
Yu Hyŏng-won 柳馨遠
Yugyo gushimmon 儒教求新論