Two Aspects of Practical Learning
(Shirhak; 實學)
— Hong Tae-yong's case —

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1. Two Facets of Shirhak: Inheritance of the Neo-Confucian Tradition and the Pursuit of Modernity

The title is intended to present that two seemingly contradicting aspects — the Neo-Confucian, traditional or pre-modern aspect and the post-Neo-Confucian, modern aspect — coexist under the term "Practical Learning." In other words, the very concept of Practical Learning is inhering the Neo-Confucianism of Chosŏn Dynasty on the one hand, and deviating from it on the other hand.

Such a duality of Practical Learning that stands in the middle of the continuity and the discontinuity of the intellectual tradition of Chosŏn creates much confusion in the recent studies on Practical Learning. Since the Liberation of Korea, the studies on Practical Learning have been an attempt to find the historical legitimacy or identity of present Korea that pursues modernization and industri-

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alization Ch'ŏn Kwan-u, a pioneer of the studies on Practical Learning, considered it as what provided the basis for assimilating the western modern values, and characterized it as liberal, scientific, and realistic. Ch'ŏn's the three-practicality theory of Practical Learning as practical fact, practical proof and practical utility, activated the disputes over the concept of Practical Learning in a full scale. For the disputes got started with Han U-gŭn's criticism on the three-practicality theory, who instead defined Practical Learning as the learning of the national administration and economic regulation, while examining such learning in modern China.1

Afterwards, with the invigoration of the socio-economic studies of Korean history in the 1960's which sought for the germ of Capitalism, Practical Learning was defined as the social theory that lead social changes of late Chosŏn This trend is reflected in several studies on Practical Learning: Kim Yong-sŏp's discussion of its modernity in his "Concerning the Recent Studies on Practical Learning." Ch'ŏn Kwan-u's definition of it has renewed Neo-Confucianism in terms of its modern and nationalistic consciousness in his "Reconsidering the Concept of Practical Learning of Late Chosŏn," Yi U-sŏng's definition of it as the learning of 'the national administration and economic regulation,' 'enhancing social welfare by promoting practical utility' and 'seeking truth in practical matters' in his "Prolegomena to a Study on Practical Learning", and Kim Yong-ho's discussion of its rise under the subject of "The Germ of Modern Thoughts," to name a few.

1. This point is well summarized in Yi Ul-ho's Sharihak-Kaen'yŏn̄ Biha (Disputes over the Concept of Practical Learning)
Based on researches in the socio-economic history of Korea, these studies on Practical Learning did not explain how the established Neo-Confucian world view had changed. As a result of reflection on this problem, a discussion on the relation between Neo-Confucianism and Practical Learning came to arise in the late 1970's. So Yun Sa-sun characterized the interpretive view on the canons of Practical Learning as Anti-Zhuxian, and defined Practical Learning as a sort of qi-centricism in Neo-Confucian tradition in his "The Characteristic of Practical Learning on the Interpretation of Canons" and "The Philosophical Characteristic of Practical Learning," respectively. Also, Yi Ül-ho defined Practical Learning as post-Neo-Confucianism his "The Philosophical Aspect of Practical Learning." Such disputes over the concept of Practical Learning seemed to arrive at an agreement that it was a new intellectual trend of late Chosŏn, against Neo-Confucianism, and for modern characters such as practical utility and practical proof.

However, as the concept of Practical Learning became vaguer and broader along with many studies on it in various fields, it came to characterize most scholars of late Chosŏn, even to the extent of Yi I (pen-named Yulgok) who was a representative Neo-Confucian, thereby obscuring its distinction from Neo-Confucianism. In face of such vagueness of the concept of Practical Learning, Chŏng Ku-bok proposed a broad definition of it as 'a new academic trend of late Chosŏn to break from the pre-modern convention,' while Chi Tu-hwan insisted limiting it to the Northern School that emphasized commerce and industry and advocated the adoption of the scholarship of Qing. Furthermore, Baker diagnosed the source of this confusion as the method of emphasizing the normative function of
Practical Learning adopted by those researchers, and for the sake of its correct understanding, he insisted the descriptive function of Practical Learning as a trend in the intellectual history of late Chosŏn, instead. In fact, even Ch'ŏn Kwan-u knew that Practical Learning was deeply rooted in the Confucian world view and could not be called modern, although he argued that it sowed the seed of indigenous modernization and thereby unified modernization and Korean tradition.

What, then, is the reason of seeking the germ of modern spirit in Practical Learning which is doubtful even of the actual existence as a school because of its many-sidedness and its extension over one and half century? Via the Thought of Hong Tae-yong, I believe, we can illuminate the various aspects of Shirhak. And we can make clear the relation between traditional Neo-Confucianism and Shirhak.

2. Hong Tae-yong’s Question and his Standpoint

Unfathomable human mind, leaving no trace,
In its tranquillity manifests intelligence.
On myriad changes, by going upon whose clues,
It could afford to clarify even the most subtle.
Confucius bequeathed a great teaching,
Zhuxi gave commentaries on it.
Worldly Confucian literati, neglecting their due cause,
Painstakingly labor just on wordings.
Digging through old pages all their lives,
What a bookworm they really are!
Who manages to regulate the sky?
The earth is suspended in the void.
When qi accumulates [to the center] as spokes of a wheel converge to the hub,
Myriad things [on the earth] are made, hung upside down [since the earth is round].
Upside and down have no definite stand,
Far away and near differentiate opinions.
Outside the sea, how could there be no land?
But if just beheld, only surges are visible.
Old man from the west has true knowledge,
But the blind and deaf are astonished and suspicious in vain.

Setting sun sinks into the western sea,
Bright moon rises from the eastern ridge.
The moon is originally dark,
But white in the void, reflecting the sun.
It is round and bright like a mirror all the time,
But as for human beings, it seems to wane and wax.
Its parts and whole follow an unchangeable law,
Its thinning and eclipses are no disaster.
There are few who know such laws,
Since narrow views are of just those sitting in a well.
(the rest omitted)…²

The above-quoted poem was sent by Hong Tae-yong (1731-1783) to Lu Fei, a scholar of Hang Zhou, and it reveals to us diverse features of the author. Although most thinkers of the traditional age appear many-sided to us who are living in an age of specialization, Hong Tae-yong does so especially, with his seemingly inconsistent or even contradictory ideas together. A passing look over the above poem

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² Tamhu visualization, Naejip, vol. 3, poetry, "Kiyakgoemhi"(寄陸鴻飲鶴)
brings us his multiple aspects as a Neo-Confucian who seeks the proper cause of Confucian literati, a scholar of Northern Learning who advocates 'enhancing social welfare by promoting practical utility,' a scientist who adheres to the heliocentric theory, and a poet who appreciates nature while playing a lute, all at the same time. Moreover, this poem shows that despite such an apparent contradiction of the scientific and the Neo-Confucian mind, Hong Tae-yong did not suffer any contradiction in himself. In order to characterize Hong Tae-yong's philosophy, therefore, both aspects of him must be considered at the same time: Hong Tae-yong as a Neo-Confucian scholar as well as a scientist and an advocate of Northern Learning. His philosophy has both similarity and difference with the theories of qi by Kim Si-süp, Sō Kyōng-dōk, and Im Sōng-ju in Neo-Confucian tradition of the Chosŏn Dynasty. The similarity is the conceptual scheme centered on the general concept of qi, while the difference is the goal pursued with such scheme or particular contents of the concept of qi. Viewed from the similarity and inheritance, Hong Tae-yong is a Neo-Confucian scholar, while viewed from the difference, he is a post-Neo-Confucian and an advocate of Northern Learning.

Hong Tae-yong has generally been associated with the school of Practical Learning — more specifically, the school of Northern Learning — together with Pak Chi-wŏn (1737-1805), Yi Tŏng-mu (1741-1793), Pak Che-ga (1750-1805), and Yu Tŏk-kong (1749-1807).³

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³ Some major works on this concern may be listed as follows:
Hong I-süp (洪以燮), Chosŏn Kwahaksa (朝鮮科學史), Ch'ŏnguimsa, 1946.
Ch'ŏn Kwan-u (千寬宇), "Hong Tae-yong-o Sirihakssang" Mullhadas haktbo vol 6, 1958.
Kang Chae-č'ŏn (姜在鎮), Chosŏn ch'ongch'ang-e okeun buleakchŏnhak, "近代朝鮮 理解思想", 日本評
Therefore, his philosophy has been understood in terms of its modernity, and researches on his thoughts have been focused on his personal relations with other scholars of Northern Learning, introduction of culture and institutions of the Qing dynasty, theory of social and economic reorganization, and accommodation of western scientific ideas. As an initiative of Northern Learning, his thought has been acknowledged on the one hand as the learning for 'enhancing social welfare by promoting practical utility' in which the socio-economical interests of the scholars of Practical Learning in general were projected. On the other hand, its connection with the new nationalism or the enlightenment movement afterwards have been acknowledged, on the ground that his world view, expanded through his accommodation of western sciences and new knowledge of the world, overcame the traditional Sinocentric discrimination in favor of Chinese civilization against barbarism. These studies fairly expose the historical significance of Northern Learning. As is the case for any study on Practical Learning, however, they are also subject to the
criticism that by overstressing the modern and post-Zhuxian character of Hong Tae-yong’s thought, they neglected its relation to the developing process of the established Neo-Confucianism in Chosŏn. This criticism is directed to the unexamined attitude of such researches that tend to explain the formative process of Northern Learning as motivated simply by external factors like the introduction of the culture and scholarship of the Qing Dynasty.5

About the academic affiliation of Hong Tae-yong and Pak Chi-wŏn, however, it is generally said that they were at the core of Noron (the Pro-Elder faction) which dominated the intellectual society of Chosŏn in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and inherited the Neo-Confucianism of the Yulgok school. That is, they had a background different from that of the earlier scholars of Practical Learning, who belonged to the Southerners faction. From the seventeenth century, with Song Si-yŏl (pen-named 'U-am)'s succession to the Yulgok school as its legitimate heir, the general atmosphere of the Yulgok school or Noron could be summarized into two points. Firstly, its indulgence in disputes over the ceremonial codes or the original nature and the

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5. Studies on Northern Learning by Yu Pong-hak and Cho Tong-il are noted for this kind of reflection. There are some works in which Hong is supposed to have succeeded former Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism:

Kim Tae-jun, Hong Tae-yong-kwa Kŭ-ša Sidae, Iljisa, 1982.
Yu Pong-hak, "Pukhaksasang-ŭi Hyŏngsŏng-kwa Kŏ Sŏnggyŏk" Han’guksaron 8, Seoul Nat’l univ., 1982
Yi Chi-hyang, "Hong Tae-yong-ŭi Kyŏnghakkwan", Chŏn Ok-hwan kmyŏn nonmu, 1978
Ryu In-hu, "Hong Tae-yong Ch’ŏrahak-ŭi Chaemsik", Tongbanghakch’u 73, 1991.12.
Ch'ŏng In-bo, "Tansŏngch'ŏk" (湛軒書序), Tansŏngch'ŏk, 1939
Kim Yong-dŏk, op cit.
mind/heart, as a result of absolutizing Zhuxi and the Zhuxi school. Secondly, its development of the proposals of northern conquest and moral obligation to the Ming court, both of which based on the anti-Qing feelings, into the exclusive discrimination in favor of Chinese civilization against barbarism, and the Chosŏn version of Sinocentricism — that is, the thesis that Chosŏn is the preserver of Chinese civilization at the time of its destruction in the mainland China, therefore Chosŏn is the center of the world. Considering such intellectual heritage of Hong Tae-yong, where could it be found, the turning-point of his revolutionary development of Northern Learning, which is completely new to his background?

The first possible answer to this question is that Hong Tae-yong's thought, though seemingly contradictory with the established Neo-Confucian doctrines of his time, is closely related to them in terms of its infrastructure. In other words, the thesis of the identity of the nature of man and things, which is suggested by Nakron (the school of Seoul area), had a potential for a new theory of things. And by reinforcing it, Hong Tae-yong could arrive at a new thesis of the equality of man and things, from which a fresh viewpoint on nature and man could follow. Certainly such explanations6 that take a serious view of the inner connection of Nakron (the school of Seoul area) and Northern Learning are fascinating. However, with a purely intrinsic momentum of development, it is not convincing enough to explain the reason why Hong Tae-yong came to arrive at a worldview so radically different from the others of the same philosophical origin. Here we can raise a question if Hong's philosophical system

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6. See above mentioned articles by Cho and Yu.
is subsumed to or departing from Neo-Confucianism, or else a compromise between the Neo-Confucian and the western thoughts. Regarding this question, an explication of his philosophy through its comparison with Zhuanzi’s relativistic epistemology is noteworthy. Clearly it is one of major characteristics of Hong Tae-yong’s thought to relativize the concepts that had been absolutized in the established Neo-Confucian doctrines. Also, such relativization through new interpretations of Zhuxian doctrine with the help of a new scholarship, Western Learning, characterizes the Neo-Confucianism of the late Chosŏn period as much as the absolutization of the Zhuxian doctrine under a dogmatic academic tradition does. So one may say that Hong Tae-yong’s thought reflects an aspect of Neo-Confucianism of Chosŏn that was at the phase of overcoming an established world view in the course of its internal development. However, it is hard to explain the contradictory aspect of his philosophy that belongs to the central line of Nakron (the school of Seoul area) and simultaneously departs from the Neo-Confucian world view, exclusively by the internal momentum theory.

The second hypothesis, that can throw more light on the momentum of Hong Tae-yong’s revolutionary shift in terms of world views, is that he came to acquire a new world view under the influence of the new scholarship which began to be introduced through China, and joined the world view with the existing thesis of the identity of man and things. This explanation of his philosophy will reverse the former one that Hong Tae-yong established his thesis.

7. Song Yong-bae, "Hong Tae-yong-ti Sangdaechwajok Sayu-wa Pyonyeok-ti Noli," Han'gukch'ulp'o 74, 1994.
of the equality of man and things on the basis of the thesis of the identity of the nature of man and things, and therefrom unfolded a fresh theory of things or scientific investigations. This paper will adopt the second hypothesis in explaining his theory of qi. Under this hypothesis, it is still questionable how a man at the core of Noron (the Pro-Elder faction) could come into contact with western sciences and become influenced by them. In order to answer this question, the first half of the following will be given to the examination of Hong Tae-yong’s family and academic background which enabled him to have contact with the western sciences before his trip to Beijing. In the latter half, the sort of transformation that he brought to the existing discourses on li and qi will be examined. The upshot of this paper, therefore, is an elucidation of Hong Tae-yong’s philosophy, which focuses on the stimulations by external factors. Although the stimulations are extrinsic, they could be oriented to a conjunction of the foreign elements and the traditional scheme, in that they were not limited to Hong Tae-yong’s personal experience but faced by Neo-Confucians of Chosŏn in general. That is to say, as is the case for any form of Practical Learning, a traditional aspect of inheriting Neo-Confucianism and a modern trend against medieval traditions are mixed in Hong Tae-yong’s philosophy.

3. Hong Tae-yong’s Inheritance of Neo-Confucianism and Other Academic Traditions

Hong Tae-yong’s academic career is far more diversified than that of any common Neo-Confucian of his time. His extensive learning,
despite his background at the core of the tradition, insinuates that he must have had questions that could not be solved within the frame of the established ideology. His attitude toward existing disciplines is presented in his comments on the Zhuxi school, the Yangming school, Buddhism, Taoism, Western Learning, and the like.

Above all, Hong Tae-yong considered himself as a Zhuxian scholar, deeply involved in Noron (the Pro-Elder faction) school which had been established by Song Si-yŏl, but at the same time kept a critical tenor on Zhuxi and Song Si-yŏl. His acknowledgment of Zhuxi’s authority is found sporadically in his anthology. For instance, he answered to King Ch’ŏngjo who criticized Hu Anding for his revising the anthology of two Cheng masters, "since Zhuzhi’s definite opinion [on two Chens] exists, gaining or losing of it [the anthology-revising work] is out of the question." Also, he cherished the memory of Song Si-yŏl whose scholarship and personality he came to know through his master Kim Wŏn-haeng. In consequence, he showed a deep interest in revising Song’s anthology and held the office at Hwayang Sŏwŏn which enshrined the spirit tablet of Song Si-yŏl alone.

However, Hong Tae-yong did not inherit the traditions of Zhuxi and Song Si-yŏl without criticism. His doubts and interpretations different from Zhuxi’s are presented in *Sohak-munbyŏn* (Questioning on Elementary Learning), *Karye-munbŭi* (Questioning on Family Rituals), *Samkyŏng-munbyŏn* (Questioning on Three Canons), and *Sasŏ-munbyŏn* (Questioning on Four Books). In *Maengja-munbŭi* (Questioning on

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Mengzi), he criticized Song Si-yŏl’s interpretation on the section of ‘vast, flood-like qi,’ insisting that Song was prone to identifying li with qi. He once was severely criticized by Kim Wŏn-haeng when he raised doubts as to the legitimacy of Song Si-yŏl’s position in the conflicts between Noron (the Pro-Elder faction) and Soron (the Pro-Younger faction). Furthermore, among Neo-Confucian scholars of Chosŏn, he thought highest of Yi I (pen-named Yulgok) and Yu Hyŏng-won (pen-named Pan’gye) while paying respect to Cho Hŏn (pen-named Chungbong) and Yi Chi-ham (pen-named Tojŏng), because their scholarship is not merely bound to the abstract discourse on the nature of mind/heart but is oriented to concrete interests on how to govern people, which is embodied in Practical Learning. What Hong Tae-yong criticized most bitterly is the dispute over ritual codes which was corrupting the intellectual society of his time. He pointed out the ritual learning as a model field where Confucianism had lost its original meaning, insisting that such practical and empirical learnings as those of almanac, arithmetic, agriculture or ordnance were more valuable than those of ritual codes and the like.

Toward the Yangming school, Buddhism, and Taoism that had been rejected as heretical at that time, Hong Tae-yong assumed a positive and generous attitude, in contrast to his generally critical stance on the degenerative academic atmosphere of his time. He recognized a partial truth in the teachings of Zhuangzi or Yangming.

saying that they had not intentionally become heretic but only gone extreme in correcting the corruptions of their own time.\textsuperscript{15} Hong Tae-yong seems to have had a considerable understanding as well as an interest in Yangming's teaching\textsuperscript{16} and Buddhism.\textsuperscript{17} He appreciated the value of the Laozi school as a political theory, and Buddhism as a self-cultivation methodology, as can be seen in the following poem of his:

\begin{quote}
[The teaching of] Nüng-ôm (Suramaga-sutra) cultivates the mind/heart

[The teaching of] Hwangjong solidates the life-substance
By centering on the watchfulness and cultivating vast, flood-like qi,
Our [Confucian] way possesses the fundamental originality.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

Again, it cannot be overlooked that his understanding of other disciplines is firmly rooted on Confucianism. In the above quoted poem, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are not evaluated on equal ground, since he places emphasis on the Confucian way. This point can be made more prominently at his attack on Taoism in terms of egoism: "Taoist hermits preserve their life-substance by doing nothing and having no desire to do something, but after myriad years return to nothing, with their bodies and life-substance all disappearing. [Viewed from such final result,] a distinction between a long duration and a short one makes no difference, as for flashes on

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\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., vol. 2, 17a and vol 1, 45a
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., Oeji, vol. 1 4a.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., vol. 2 44b, "令曰 楣坊亦見之乎？臣曰 楣嚴臨覺諸經 亦少時略覧．"
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., Naeji, vol 3, poetry.
flints or bubbles on waves. Therefore, they are as good as dying young. Considering the origin of their motivation, it [their Taoist doctrine] came out of self-interest, but ends up with no interest. Therefore, their idea was deft and clever, but in fact, is clumsy and foolish.  

4. Hong Tae-yong’s Academic Lineage and his Accomodation of Western Sciences

Hong Tae-yong’s family and academic background played an important role in determining the direction of his thought. His family penetrated into the core of Noron (the Pro-Elder faction), when Hong Chin-do, his forefather who was five generations prior to him and a maternal cousin of King Injo, rendered distinguished service to the coup d’etat in support of the king in 1623. According to custom of the time, it was natural for Hong Tae-yong to become a disciple of Kim Wŏn-haeng (pen-named Miho, 1702-1772) who was the head of Nakron (the school of Seoul area) and a son-in-law of his granduncle as well. So it is not difficult to see how Hong Tae-yong’s theories of li/qi, the original nature and the mind/heart came to take on the character of Nakron. But in order to uncover the condition that prepared his revolutionary shift from Neo-Confucianism to Northern Learning, a more detailed look into his academic background is imperative.

20. See Kim Tae-jun, Hong Tae-yong P’yŏngŏn, pp. 11-12.
21. Yu Pong-hak, op. cit., p. 73.
From the above table it should be noted that Hong Tae-yong is connected to Kim Ch’ang-hyŏp. The tradition of Nakron, originating from Kim Ch’ang-hyŏp, can be characterized by two points: the accommodationist understanding of T’oege ye while following Yulgok, and the thesis of the identity of the nature of man and things. Although he was at the core of Noron and had learned from Song Si-yŏl, Kim Ch’ang-hyŏp tried to compromise the theses of Yi Hwang (pen-named T’oege ye) and Yi I, unlike the direct disciples of Song Si-yŏl. Kim Ch’ang-hyŏp’s major interest was the distinction between intelligence and perception,23 and such orientation to the faculty of

mind, creating contention from antagonistic parties,24 was inherited thereafter. Kim Wŏn-haeng took over the thesis of the identity of the nature of man and things from his master Yi Chae. Hong Tae-yong’s position is formed by the influence of such tradition.

Apart from the atmosphere led by Kim Wŏn-haeng, Hong Tae-yong was interested in the numeric interpretation of the Yiijing and cosmology, presumably under the influence of Kim Sŏk-mun’s the numeric interpretation of the Yiijing.25 Kim Sŏk-mun (pen-named Taegok, 1658-1735) studied the Zhouyi and the previously-ignored forepart of Anthology of Neo-Confucianism, and established an outstanding theory on the numeric interpretation of the Yiijing. Kim Ch'ang-hyŏp encouraged this study, and Kim Wŏn-haeng went further in encouraging his disciples to research in this field.26 Hwang Yun-sŏk praised Kim Sŏk-mun highly, and discussed the significance of the numeric interpretation of the Yiijing. In addition, Kim Ch'ang-hyŏp’s line took an open attitude to studying Shao Yong or Zhang Zai, unlike Song Si-yŏl’s dogmatic line.27 Such positive attitude to the numeric interpretation of Yiijing of Kim Wŏn-haeng’s school may well have made a favorable environment for Hong Tae-yong’s studying it.

Thus Hong Tae-yong’s orientation to the natural sciences and cosmology was substantially influenced by the academic atmosphere in favor of the numeric interpretation of the Yiijing around him, and

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25. Yu Pong-hak, op. cit., pp. 74-75
27. Kim, Sŏk-mun, Yŏkhanapsaadoe, preface.
his natural philosophy was under the influence of Shao Yong or Zhang Zai. However, it cannot be overlooked that the very numeric interpretation of the Yijing emerged under the influence of the western cosmology which was introduced through China. In Yŏkhak-dohae (Analytic Diagrams on the Learning of Change) Kim Sŏk-nun explained how all entities came into being from taiji (the Ultimate) and argued that the earth is round. Reviewing this work with much praise, Hwang Yun-sŏk reported that this study synthesized such theories as Matheo Ricci's, and that not a few scholars were involved in this field.28 Western astronomy was introduced to the intellectual society of Chosŏn in full fledge in 1631, when Ch'ŏng Tu-wŏn brought from Ming a Chinese translation of western books on astronomy, calender-making and geography. And in the early eighteenth century, the heliocentric system of the universe of Tycho Brahe became the official view on the universe for Chosŏn Since many members of Hong Tae-yong's family served in the office for meteorological astronomical observation, it was rather easy for him to get the sources of up-to-date information.29 In short, western astronomy was raised as a hot issue at the time of Hong Tae-yong, and he was under a favorable circumstance to approach this new learning.30

Consequently, the numeric interpretation of the Yijing in which Hong Tae-yong got interested must be the accommodation of the traditional Neo-Confucian numeric interpretation of the Yijing and the western astronomy. One can surmise that because of such a

28 Hwang Yun-sŏk, op. cit., letter.
29 Kim Tae-jun, op. cit., p. 105.
30 Ibid
cosmological orientation of his as observed above, Hong Tae-yong came to ground his system of thought on the concept of qi (material force), and arrived at the conclusion that man and things are equal, in terms of the principle (li) that permeates every entity in the universe.

5. Hong Tae-yong's Theory of Li (principle) and Qi (material force)

Though generally known as an advocate of qi-monism or qi-centricism because of his inclination to natural sciences, Hong Tae-yong is no qi-monist in its proper sense like Yim Söm-ju. The criterion under which the distinction of qi-centricism and li-centricism is made is about the identity relation between the original nature and li, and the spontaneity of li. So it can only be found in a discourse on the original nature and the mind/heart. In cosmology, Neo-Confucians discuss origination and extinction in terms of qi, regardless of their focus either on li or on qi. Therefore, it is not the case that all who propose that every entity is based on qi are advocating qi-centricism or denying the existence of li. In this sense, Yim Söm-ju's theory is qi-monistic, since he criticized the established discourses on the original nature and the mind/heart such as Yulgok's thesis of the universality of li and particularity of qi, or Yi Chae's thesis of the identity of the nature of man and things, adopting Zhang Zai's qi-monism. In contrast, Hong Tae-yong succeeded to the established tradition, and pushed it further to the thesis of the equality of man and things. His remarks on li quoted
from his anthology will help clarify this point.

R1 "Li is li and not qi; qi is qi and not li. If qi exists there must be 
li, but when one mentions qi, only qi is designated."31

R2 "One who talks about li never fails to say that though formless, 
li exists. Having already said that its form does not exist, what 
is he saying that exists? Having already said that h exists, how 
could he say that something formless exist?"32

R3 "What is filling the universe is just qi and nothing else, while li 
is in it."33

R4 "Things are all identical in terms of identity, and all different in 
terms of difference So, li is what is identical in the universe, 
and qi is what is different."34

R5 "What is identical is li, and what is different is qi. Jade beads 
are very precious, while manure is very humble; this is qi. The 
reason why jade beads are precious and why manure is humble 
is ren and yi; this is li. Therefore, the li of jade beads is the li 
of manure, and the li of manure is the li of jade beads."35

R6 "Ren is li. Man has li of man, things have li of things. Li is ren 
and nothing else. If in heaven, it is called li; if in things, it is 
called the nature (xing); if in heaven, it is called Won; if in 
things, it is called Ren. In fact, it is one."36

R7 "li of plants is li of animals; li of animals is li of human beings; 
li of human beings is li of heaven. Li is just ren and yi and 
nothing else."37

R8 "So-called li is good if qi is good, and bad if qi is bad. This h 
has nothing to supervise but merely follows what qi does."38

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32. Ibid., 1a.
33. Ibid., 3b.
34. Ibid., 2b.
35 Ibid., 2a.
36. Ibid., 1b.
37. Ibid., 1b.
38 Ibid., 1a.
R9 "Today's literati never open their mouths without mentioning the goodness of the original nature. But how can we know that the so-called nature is good? Moreover, if the nature is li of a body and li has neither sound nor odor, then where can we attach these two words of 'good' and 'bad'?"[39]

Hong Tae-yong made these remarks on li mostly with regard to the problem of the original nature and the mind/heart, and without deviating from the fundamental scheme of Neo-Confucianism. In detail, the above quoted remark R1 reflects a traditional thesis that li and qi neither depart from nor get mixed with each other, and R2 a thesis on the formlessness of li, or its ontological dimension distinct from that of qi. R4, R5, and R7 show Hong's inheritance of Yulgok's thesis of the universality of li and particularity of qi and Nakron (the school of Seoul area)'s thesis of the identity of the nature of man and things. R5 and R6 are instances of identifying the original nature, li and ren, which consist the backbone of Neo-Confucianism. The context of R3 is cosmological and not about human nature or mind/heart, so it does not support characterizing Hong Tae-yong as a qi-centralist.

What distinguishes Hong Tae-yong theory of li from the existing Neo-Confucian tradition is where to place emphasis in understanding li. Three aspects can be pointed out of his concept of li. Firstly, as shown in R6 and R7, li and ren in his thought do not carry any moral implication, but are interpreted as the reason why everything is as it is. It means that he limited the meaning of li simply to a descriptive one, excluding its normative meaning of the reason why everything should be as it is supposed to be, which had been more

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39. Ibid., 1a.
emphasized traditionally. Secondly, as shown in R2, R8 and R9, he sharply distinguished the concept of li as principle from the concept of qi as existence, thereby denying the actual, supervising, and moral properties of li. Thirdly, in R6 and R7, he seems contradictory, in that he mentions li of man and li of things distinctly while insisting on their identity. But here his concepts of li and ren radically differ from the concepts in the thesis of the identity of the nature of man and things, in that the former lacks any definite content of morality which the latter has. Now li and ren are principles specifiable relative to each particular entity, making it possible for each entity to be as it is. Thus Hong Tae-yong transformed the Neo-Confucian concept of li to what is more similar to our present concept of rationality.40

As is the case for his concept of li, Hong Tae-yong’s concept of qi is the result of adopting the existing conceptual scheme and transforming the content of its meaning. In the Neo-Confucian world view, everything existent is the result of accumulating and scattering of qi, and qi is a continuous, indefinite, and automotive living thing, and all discriminations in the phenomenal world originates from the movement of qi. Inheriting this tradition, Hong Tae-yong thought that in such a dynamic process of movement and change of qi, things, man and the mind/heart are formed.

However, in discussing qi (material force), Hong Tae-yong’s focus is not only on its actual existence but more on the process of formation of the world and the outcome. Through his attempt to connect the metaphysics of qi and natural sciences, his concept of qi became more like our present concept of matter. The quotation below

40. Pak Sŏng-rae, op cit, p. 162
shows such a direction of his theory of qi.

What is filling the empty and silent universe is qi. It has neither inside nor outside, neither beginning nor ending. When qi accumulates, it consists in substance. Spread all over the empty space, qi turns around or stops, the result of which is the earth, the moon, the stars and the sun.41

Furthermore, Hong Tae-yong was against the traditional cosmogony that explains the process of world-formation with the five elements, water, fire, wood, metal and earth, which came into being out of yin and yang. Since he did not accept the actual existence of yin and yang, he came to deny the interdependent scheme of such elements and even the necessity of their being five.42 To Hong Tae-yong, theories of yin/yang and the five elements are an erroneous remnant of the age ignorant of astronomy. Instead, he proposed the 'layered' four-element theory that fire, water, and earth are fundamental elements, while air (qi) is the common ground of the rest. Presumably, Hong Tae-yong’s criticism of the five-element theory is influenced by the western four-element theory brought by Christian missionaries, but the layered structure of his suggestion results from his effort to join the traditional motif of qi and the western ideas. Therefore, his theory of qi can be appreciated as what overcomes the speculative aspects of the five-element theory and arrives at a more rational theory of matter.

41. Ibid., vol. 4, 19a. "太虛無清廓充塞者 氣也. 無內無外 無始無終, 積氣汪洋 凝聚成質,周布虛空,旋轉停住. 所謂地日月星也."
42. Ibid., p. 30.
6. Hong Tae-yong's View on Man and Things

Concerning the problem of the original nature and the mind/heart, Hong Tae-yong inherited the general frame of Yulgok's thesis of the universality of *li* and particularity of *qi*, and the Nakron (the school of Seoul area)'s thesis of the identity of the nature of man and things. However, unlike his master Kim Wŏn-haeng, Hong Tae-yong did not argue for the existence of original nature that is pure and common to all entities in order to establish the foundation of good. From the same position of Nakron, he arrives at the thesis of the equality of man and things, thereby practically denying the good of original nature. It is the result of his liberation of the concept of *ren* from the anthropocentric significance as moral principle, thereby making it a more universal, ontological principle.

In the previously quoted remarks R5, R6 and R7, he made the point that the concrete content of the omnipresent principle of *li* or *ren* in each particular thing is specifiable relatively to the thing. Also he commented that if seen from the human point of view, man is more precious than things, but if seen from the viewpoint of heaven, man and things are equal. The concept of man in his thought is no longer the most precious being among all entities or the only being that can embody the heavenly principle, as is for any Neo-Confucian. By seeing it from the viewpoint of heaven, he relativized or objectified the status of man in the universe. Thus his thesis of the

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43. *Mokpy*, vol. 10.
identity of the nature of man and things goes hand in hand with such relativization of anthropocentric concepts in Neo-Confucian metaphysics. In short, Hong Tae-yong could free himself of the traditional moral system and observe the morality itself and nature objectively, because of his concept of man viewed from the universe.

For Neo-Confucians the purpose of distinguishing man from things is to establish the foundation of human morality. So they explain that all differences come into being in the mind/heart which is at the level of qi (material force), while admitting the identity of the original nature of all entities, which is at the level of li (principle). Following Hong Tae-yong, then, where could the foundation of human morality be established, and the distinction between men or between man and things be made? Since he characterizes the concept of mind/heart as the pure crystallization of qi, such distinction can only made at a level lower than the original and pure state of mind/heart. So he answered that the distinction between man and animal or between the wise and the stupid came into being by the function of mind/heart, not at its essential state as pure qi.45

The appearance of distinctions and degrees implies the appearance of the bad or the evil, so the genealogy of evil goes hand in hand with the genealogy of distinction and difference.46 In Hong Tae-yong’s case, the essential state of mind/heart, if it is pure qi, can neither be different in each entity nor bad. Therefore, he argues that the evil appear at the latter stage of the genesis proceeding from makings of qi to makings of forms. Yet, the method of drawing a

45. Ibid., vol. 1
46. Ibid., vol 4, p 34
theory of cosmogony in finding the origin of evil leads us to his intention in this argument: the relativization of the moral concept. Once denying the moral implication of li, he must attribute both the good and the evil to qi, and therefore could not adopt the Neo-Confucian explanation model that the instance when qi interrupts li is evil. Since evil cannot come from a given quality of qi, it must come from somewhere in the process of movements of qi, or the making of forms. This genealogical explanation of evil implies that the distinction of man from things, the difference between men, and even the system of values are not essential and intrinsic but relative and historically constructed.

7. Concluding Remarks

Hong Tae-yong, a Neo-Confucian scholar of the Nakron tradition, was, at the same time a scientist, interested in western sciences transmitted through China to Chosŏn By and large, he has been categorized as a devoted successor of Nakron who was faithful to the doctrine of the identity/distinction of the nature of man and things, and thereby established a doctrine on the nature of mind that man and things are fundamentally same. In due course, as was popularly accepted, he came to be involved in the research on the nature of things.

In this work, the present writer, being doubtful as to the above mentioned views, has tried to suggest and demonstrate a hypothesis: As Hong Tae-yong was engrossed in natural sciences such as astronomy from a very early stage in his career, the positive spirit of western sciences must have rendered him to reform the speculative,
value-centered Neo-Confucian world view. This is the reason, I believe, why he approved of the doctrine on the nature of mind which negates the value system at the expense of the established value-centered doctrine.

In order to demonstrate this hypothesis, his disposition and background in the field of western sciences were introduced, and then the discourse on the nature of mind with reference to *li* and *qi* was also introduced and analyzed in detail. In his mind theory of *li* and *qi*, Hong Tae-yong seems to deny the universal moral value of *li* and *xing* in favor of the universality devoid of morality. It goes without saying that in accordance with *li*, *ren*, an attribute of the former, also falls within the sphere of relativism.

Hong's concept of *qi* is closer to the concept of matter than that of any other *qi*-philosopher. In particular, the 'layered' four-element theory that myriad things in the universe originated from the four elements, namely *qi*, fire, water, earth, which are traced back to the primary *qi*, characterizes his philosophy of *qi* symbolizing the incorporation of the traditional theory of *qi* and western scientific ideas. It is noteworthy, therefore, that his philosophy of *qi*, by getting rid of the value-oriented Confucian moralism, paved the way leading to the establishment of the modern world view.
<Abstract>

Two Aspects of Practical Learning

(Shirhak; 實學)

— Hong Tae-yong’s case —

Huh Nam-jin

The Article is intended to present that two seemingly contradicting aspects — the Neo-Confucian, traditional or pre-modern aspect and the post-Neo-Confucian, modern aspect — coexist under a term "Practical Learning". This duality of Practical Learning that stands in the middle of the continuity and the discontinuity of the intellectual tradition of Chosŏn creates much confusion in the recent studies on Practical Learning.

About such confusion, I believe, we can make clear the relation between traditional Neo-Confucianism and Shirhak via the Thought of Hong Tae-yong.

Hong Tae-yong, a Neo-Confucian scholar of Nakron tradition, was, at the same time as a scientist, interested in western sciences transmitted through China to Chosŏn. By and large, he has been categorized as a devoted successor of Nakron who was faithful to the doctrine of the identity/distinction of the nature of man and things, and thereby established a doctrine on the nature of mind that man and things are fundamentally same. In due course, as was popularly accepted, he came to be involved in the research on the nature of things.
In this work, the present writer has tried to suggest and demonstrate a hypothesis: As he was engrossed in natural sciences such as astronomy from very early stage in his career, the positive spirit of western sciences must have rendered him to reform the speculative, value-centered Neo-Confucian world view. This is the reason, I believe, why he approved the doctrine on the nature of mind which negates value system at the expense of the established value-centered doctrine.

In order to demonstrate this hypothesis, his disposition and background in the field of western sciences were introduced, and then the discourse on the nature of mind with reference to li and qi was also introduced and analyzed in detail. In his mind theory of li and qi, Hong Tae-yong seems to deny the universal moral value of li and xing in favor of the universality devoid of morality. It goes without saying that, in accordance with li, ren, an attribute of the former, also falls within the sphere of relativism.

Hong's concept of qi is closer to the concept of matter than that of any other qi-philosopher is. In particular, 'layered' four-element theory that myriad things in the universe are originated from the four elements, namely qi, fire, water, earth, which are traced back to the primary qi, characterizes his philosophy of qi symbolizing incorporation of traditional theory of qi and western scientific ideas. It is noteworthy, therefore, that his philosophy of qi, by getting rid of the value-oriented Confucian moralism, paved the way leading to the establishment of modern world view.