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# Intellectual Itinerary of Choi Ik-han in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Korea and Formation of the Modern Knowledge Subject

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## I. Introduction

Choi Ik-han [崔益翰] (1897-?), a socialist and scholar of Korean studies in early modern Korea, is not well researched in the field of Korean studies despite his great *Silhak* [實學: Practical Learning] text called *Silhakpa and Jung Da-san* [*The Silhak School and Jung Da-san*]. Lack of research and data materials on Choi<sup>1</sup> is mainly due to his socialist critiques and his eventual defection to North Korea. It is thanks to the hard work of recent researchers that Choi's life and intellectual achievements have become clearer.<sup>2</sup> Choi studied traditional Sinology and Korean literature written in Chinese ideograms from his late teens to early twenties as a disciple of Myeonwoo Kwak Jong-seok [侁宇 郭鍾錫] (1846-1919), who was a Confucian scholar in the late Joseon Dynasty. He was active as a socialist while studying in Japan for about three years and had to spend almost ten years in jail due to his socialist activities after his return to Korea. He thereafter studied Korean studies in the late 1930s. He

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1. Choi's works before and up to the early 1920s have yet to be fully discovered and researched. His works thereafter were found in socialist magazines in the 1920s and in newspapers such as the *Dong-A Ilbo* and the *Joseon Ilbo* in the mid-1930s. After defecting to North Korea, he wrote and published *Silhakpa and Jung Da-san* along with a few papers, and these are now available in South Korea. Kim Jin-kyun and Han Young-kyu researched and published a list of Choi's works, and Song Chan-seop has recently published part of a series entitled *Choi Ik-han Jeonjip* [*The Complete Works of Choi Ik-han*].
  2. These are the studies of Im Hyung-tak, Kim Jin-kyun, and Park Hong-sik on Choi. Earlier studies on Choi are not noted in this paper because Kim's study has already cited them thoroughly.

defected to North Korea after Korea was liberated from Japan and published his remarkable book, *Silhakpa and Jung Da-san* in the mid-1950s, which shows that traditional cultural topics were the ongoing subject of his research after his defection to North Korea.

How to locate and define intellectual legacies of medieval Korea in the modern world was a fundamental problem for many intellectuals of the time. I argue that the way Choi had dealt with the problem was much more elaborate than those of Kim Tae-joon and Hong Gi-moon who have received much scholarly attention despite their socialism. Kim Jin-kyun and Han Young-kyu have studied Choi as a writer and student of traditional Chinese classics. Their study reveals Choi's views on tradition as well as his characteristics as a modern classic writer. Kim suggests that Choi's perspective on the classics of the Joseon Dynasty developed as he encountered socialist ideology. Kim also says that Choi's socialistic point of view enabled him to broaden his perspective, pointing to both the positive significance and the negative attributes of the classics. Han emphasized Choi's position as a modern Chinese classic writer-poet based on his *mansi* [挽詩: funeral ode]. In particular, Han developed an interesting view on Choi's scholarly interchanges and development from the 1910s to the 1920s (which have previously been neglected) based on *Garam Ilgi* [*Garam's Diary*] written by Lee Byung-ki (1891-1968), a famous Korean poet and scholar of Korean literature, as the Diary contains some details on Choi's path of life from his coming up to Seoul in the early 1920s until his going to Tokyo (Han, "Choi Ik-han" 117).

These studies show that Choi was a writer of Chinese poetry who mastered Chinese classics and participated in Daejonggyo [大倥教: The Religion of the Divine Progenitor], interacting with mainstream culture figures like Lee Byung-ki as well as introducing new ideas to Korea in the 1920s to the 1930s. He can therefore be considered a crucial figure denoting the process of forming a new intellectual world of scholars who had traditional knowledge symbolized by Chinese learning but were experiencing a new outside world of knowledge. A particularly interesting point is that in the 1930s, his intellectual itinerary was explained as "expulsion," "defection," and "rebirth." In *MLgae Inmul Insangi* [ML系 人物 印象記: *The Impression of Korean Communist Party People*] (1931), Ahan Byung-ju [安炳珠] used the term "expulsion" to refer to the fact that he couldn't study Chinese classics anymore in a Confucian school and "defection" to criticize his "impure" ideology as a socialist in Japan. These exaggerated and extreme terms have led me to question whether people

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might have presented too simple and direct an understanding of intellectual journeys in transitional periods of civilization, of which Choi is no exception.

In the era in which Choi lived, East and West collided in their imbalanced dominance relations, capitalism clashed with nationalism or Christianity, and socialism had begun its own ideological competition. It is hard to explain the forces propelling the individual path of an intellectual who lived in such a complex time. In some sense, such an explanatory attempt itself might be inappropriate, as it is a product of modern ideology. However, keeping such criticism in mind, I attempt to explain Choi's intellectual inflection points by following his statements and activities to illuminate this passage in the formation of modern intelligence leading and generating new knowledge in a period of social reform. The issue of translation as a way of accepting and generating new modern knowledge will also be covered.<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to study aspects of his translation or to reconstruct his specific consciousness as a translator because few of his translated works remain. Evoking his translation as the foundation of Choi's socialist activities and Korean studies, I will briefly discuss the value of translation in the composition of modern knowledge systems in early 20th century East Asia through Choi's case.

## II. Choi's Intellectual Path and Inflection Points

### 1) The Pursuit of Traditional Studies and “Rejecting Zhuxi [朱熹]”

The primary fact in Choi Ik-han's intellectual genealogy is that he was a disciple of Myeonwoo Kwak Jong-seok, a representative Confucian scholar in the late Joseon Dynasty. Choi spent his teenage years studying traditional culture and literature. Han Young-kyu (2012) verifies that Choi had already shown a strong interest in Chinese literature in his teenage years under his teacher, Myeonwoo. Their academic discussion and friendship can be partly identified in the poems and letters of *Myeonwoojip* [侁字集: *The Collected Works of Myeonwoo*]. From this segment of his life, we can identify Choi's first major inflection point, which enables one to understand better the meaning

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3. Choi's translation activities have hardly been mentioned so far. His translation work includes socialist works such as Marxist dialectics, Western texts such as Madame Curie's biography, and the classical Chinese writing of the Joseon period.

of Choi's "traditional Chinese classics" and the moment of his entering into a new field of thinking in Seoul as a provincial traditional scholar.

It is important to note that Choi Ik-han while studying under Myeonwoo had different and conflicting opinions on the theories of Neo-Confucianism from Ganjae Jeon Woo [艮齋 田愚], who was a representative Confucian scholar along with Myeonwoo in the late Joseon Dynasty. This resulted in the negative judgment of Yulim [儒林], the traditional scholar society, on young Choi as the one who rejects Zhuxi [朱熹] (1130-1200) and follows Yangming Learning [陽明學], the philosophical school based on the ideas of the Neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming. The critique that his following Yangming Learning expressed his anti-Zhuxi tendency was not a groundless criticism, judging from the academic genealogy and ideological flexibility of the Myeonwoo School.<sup>4</sup> This critique led Choi to change his original plan to learn traditional studies and leave his mentor, Myeonwoo. Choi's direct statement on this decision has not been identified yet, but it can be inferred from a few letters that Myeonwoo wrote and from the papers written by a student of Ganjae criticizing Choi's argument.

Myeonwoo and Ganjae were prominent scholars who formed two leading schools in Confucian society in the late Joseon period. These two schools had distinct and contrasting views on reality perception and intellectual ideas.<sup>5</sup> The most well-known of their oppositions came about in discussions of the

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4. The Myeonwoo School was ideologically aware of various viewpoints that existed at that time, such as the ideologies of scholars of the Giho School [畿湖學派: a school grounded in the Gyeonggi and Chungcheong regions during the Joseon Dynasty], of Yangming Learning, and of Western thought. It is compared with the Ganjae School, which immersed itself in the study of Confucian classics while out of power, following the conservative principle that keeping to Confucian teachings in confusing situations was important.
  5. The Ganjae School inherited the academic genealogy of Lee Yi and Song Si-yul, with a base in the Honam region. They had confidence in the authentic Confucians of the Joseon period and made their mission one of protecting the Neo-Confucianism of Zhuxi exhaustively. The Myeonwoo School formed an academic genealogy of Lee Hwang and Lee Jin-sang, rooted in the Youngnam region. They highly valued the practicality of Confucianism to make energetic effort on domestic challenges, and they tried to reform Joseon, putting forward a "Paris Petition."

mind, *sim* [心]. The Ganjae School stated that “The mind makes *qi* [心即氣]” based on Zhuxi’s theory of *li* [理: the principle of all things] and *qi* [氣: an active principle forming part of any living thing]. The prerequisite of this theory is that the human mind should be under the control of *sung* [性: human nature] because the mind is easily muddled by desire. Here emerges the metaphor that *sung* is the mentor and sovereign, but the human mind is the student and servant, which was an indisputable and incontrovertible doctrine. In contrast, the Myeonwoo School claimed that “The human mind is *li* [心即理],” meaning that the human mind itself can control all awareness and practices. This claim was asserted by Hanjoo Lee Jin-sang [寒洲 李震相] (1818-86), who received the scholastic mantle of Lee Hwang [李滉] and established the Myeonwoo School. This led to Hanjoo’s being criticized as following the heretical theory of Yangming Learning.

There was a good chance that Choi Ik-han had confronted the academic world of Hanjoo through reading materials and oral statements. Choi was studying under Myeonwoo when Myeonwoo proofread *Hanjoojip* [寒洲集: *The Collected Works of Hanjoo*] (1895). The pupils probably read it. Choi used Hanjoo’s theory when he suggested “The mind makes li” theory to Ganjae. He sent a voluminous letter that contained his opinion about Neo-Confucianism to Ganjae after returning from meeting him on an island in Buan, Jeollabuk-do in 1917. His passion for learning in his late teens probably provoked a long journey to visit Ganjae.<sup>6</sup> However, his meeting with Ganjae caused “quite a stir throughout the Yulim society” (Han, “Choi Ik-han” 115), because his discussion with Ganjae caused him to be regarded as a rebellious youth who adhered to the heresy of Yangming Learning and whom one should never be modeled after. Ganjae himself expressed this opinion in his letters to his followers, and the following year, in 1918, Kwon Soon-myung [權純明] (1891-1974), a disciple of Ganjae, wrote “Choi Ik-han Sang Ganong Seobyeon [崔益翰上良翁書辨: Argument on Choi Ik-han’s Letter to Senior Ganjae]” (hereafter “Argument”)<sup>7</sup> to criticize Choi’s argument clause by clause. In this “Argument,” the questions posed by Choi can be identified even though they were abridged

6. Many scholars met Ganjae and learned from him, so he became a significant influence when they studied at that time.

7. This writing is in the 8<sup>th</sup> volume, which is an assortment of miscellaneous writings, of Yangjaejip [陽齋集], a poetry and prose books of Kwon Soon-myung.

and indirectly quoted by Kwon Soon-myung.

Kwon's challenging passage against Choi Ik-han argues that people who regard the mind as *li*, the first principle of all things, are those who regards the mind as a master, and Kwon calls them as *simjong* [心宗]. The first paragraph of "Argument" concludes that Choi's reasoning "did not follow the right way in which *sung* (human nature) is a mentor and the mind is a student [非性師心弟之正案]," that is the authentic teaching that "*sung* is *li*, the mind is *gi*." Kwon also criticized Choi as a heretic because Choi followed Buddhism and Yangming Learning in his interpretation of the mind. He argued Choi's claiming of the mind being *li* while regarding the mind as a bright and numinous thing in accordance with Buddhism and Yangming Learning was a trick to avoid criticism (Kwon 201, 206). Choi's argument against this criticism was as firm as that of Kwon, arguing that it was insubstantial to emphasize *li* without its accompanying with any sympathy.

The affair developed into a heated discussion between the School of Myeonwoo and Ganjae beyond the old classicist Yulim Kwon and the young scholar Choi Ik-han, as several strongly suspected that Myeonwoo was behind Choi. However, the fact that Myeonwoo had tried to dissuade Choi from meeting and arguing with Ganjae from the beginning is revealed in the letters Myeonwoo sent to his pupils at that time. In the letter, he indirectly tried to dissuade Choi who wanted to go to Ganjae and discuss the right and wrong with him, suggesting that Ganjae was a great scholar of the time with greatest learning, literature, and fidelity. He also said it would be wrong to discuss the right and wrong with the other when one had no firm theory of one's own because such an attempt would drive oneself to be prejudiced and give a distorted influence on posterity. He implied euphemistically that discussion with Senior Ganjae was beyond his capability (Kwak 352). This experience with Myeonwoo and Ganjae who, despite their differences, shared Confucianism, had a huge impact on Choi who had been pursuing scholarly studies on Chinese classics. The decisive criticism of Ganjae toward Choi was that Choi's argument "distrusted genealogies of Confucianism starting from Confucius [孔子] to Mencius [孟子] to Two Cheng [二程] and to Zhuxi," and "accorded with Yangming Learning, Lu Sang-san [陸象山] and Wang Su-in [王守仁], therefore was significantly against authentic Confucian theory" (Jeon 61).

This scholarly discussion had resulted in Choi Ik-han's leaving Myeonwoo. This is verified in the letter Myeonwoo sent in 1917 to Kang Yoon-keuk,

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who studied with Choi under Myeonwoo. Myeonwoo's basic premise was that even though "the ethos of dissatisfaction with Zhuxi had started from Lu Sang-san and was vigorous up through the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it could not coexist because of its harming Confucianism" (Kwak 354). However, he admitted that even Zhuxi could not encompass everything in science and reality, so Zhuxi might wait for the dialectical logic of future generations, and therefore, "it is wrong to call one a sinner when one criticized Zhuxi's theory once" (Ibid.). Myeonwoo subsequently told Kang that Choi had changed his original plan to stay with him and left with his fellow scholar Kim Hwang. Myeonwoo's statements imply that Choi was regarded as a person who committed the sin of rejecting Zhuxi, which led Choi to abandon his school of learning.

These letters clearly show Choi Ik-han's ideological confusion at the end of his Chinese classics period under Myeonwoo. Choi seemed to be unsupported by Myeonwoo when he was criticized and attacked by Ganjae School. He seemed to be accused of "rejecting Zhuxi" even by his fellow students. The expression "being expelled from Confucianism" in Ahan Byung-ju's *MLgae Inmul Insangi* shows Choi's reputation at that period. Choi left his first intellectual world, Yulim of Youngnam Province, branded as a "heretic who adhered to Yangming Learning." Yet, this does not mean that he had severed himself from the traditional world symbolized by Chinese classics.

## 2) Exploration in Intrinsic Things of Joseon: Yangming Learning and Daejonggyo

Then, what opinion did Choi Ik-han have about the Yangming Learning? We might look into the meaning of Yangming Learning for intellectuals in the early 20th century, especially for those with whom Choi interacted personally. The people who interacted with Choi and had interested in Yangming Learning were Seokjeon Hwang Won [石田 黄瑗] (1870-1944), Changkang Kim Taek-yung [滄江 金澤榮] (1850-1927), Nankock Lee Gun-bang [蘭谷 李建芳] (1861-1939), and Ochon Seol Tae-hee [梧村 薛泰熙] (1875-1940). Immediate communion and interaction with them can be identified through Choi's poetry and prose or records.<sup>8</sup> Most of the relationships with

8. Lee Gun-bang was a teacher of Weedang [爲堂] Jung In-bo, a nationalist Joseon studies researcher, and a cousin of Lee Gun-chang. Hwang Won was a brother of Maechon [梅泉] Hwang Hyun and resided in Gurye, where he

them were built after he had left Kwak and went to Seoul. They maintained that Yangming Learning could enable Joseon to escape its difficulties, and they participated in such Korean religious activities such as Daejonggyo and Buddhism.

Hwang Won was a brother of Maechon Hwang Hyun and resided in Gurye, Jeollanam-do, where he “spread Yangming Learning.” Kim Jin-kyun ascertained that the time Choi and Hwang met was about 1917, when Choi Ik-han was traveling to study at Hwaeomsa in Gurye, Jeollanam-do (Kim, “Choi Ik-han” 124–25). The interaction between them continued for about 20 years.<sup>9</sup> Hwang Won also introduced Choi to Kim Taek-young. Even though he was judged as “not a pure Yangming Learning scholar,” he showed interest in Yangming Learning, partly consenting to Wang Yangming and writing *Gobon Daehak Sajeon* [古本大學私箋: *Personal Writings on Great Learning*]. In other words, he at least did not consider Zhuxi and Yangming Learning as an incompatible match. Lee Gun-bang was considered to have inherited the genealogy of Yangming Learning, emphasizing that Yangming Learning is more “clear, simple, and corresponding to human emotions.” Seol Tae-hee was relatively strong in theorizing the old and new views and demonstrated profound convictions about Yangming Learning. He will be discussed in more detail in the Daejonggyo section below.

Choi Nam-seon [崔南善], Jang Ji-yeon [張志淵], and Song Jin-woo [宋鎭禹] also shared Yangming Learning and Daejonggyo with Choi Ik-han in broader relationship networks. They socialized with Choi when he began to share friendships and intellectually commune with Garam Lee Byung-ki in Seoul. Choi Nam-seon proposed Yangming Learning, in “Wanghak Jechange Daehayeo [王學提唱에 對하여: On the Proposal of Yangming Learning]” of the magazine *Sonyeon* [少年: *The Boys*] in 1911, as “the easiest way to the right path for most people,” not as an attempt to rebuild ideologically Yangming Learning itself. As a first step, “Wang Yangming Silgi [王陽明實紀: Biography of Wang Yangming]” written by Park Eun-sik [朴殷植] who thought himself as an heir of Wang Yangming was published in *Sonyeon*. Jang, the author of *Jeseon Eugyo Yeunwon* [朝鮮儒教淵源: *The Root of Joseon Confucianism*] (1922),

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spread Yangming Learning.

9. Choi wrote a congratulatory poem for Hwang’s 70th birthday and celebrated his longevity, but he also expressed his unresolvable concerns in facing the changing reality over the previous hundred years.

is a figure who “made room for Yangming Learning in Korean Confucian history” by including *Junseuplok* [傳習錄: *Quotations from Wang Yangming*] of Wang Yangming in the second volume of his book. Although his interest and favor in Yangming Learning was not evident, he “certainly appreciated the achievements of the Yangming Learning scholars of the late Joseon Dynasty including Jung Jae-du when watching and banding scholars’ ideas was becoming extreme” (Geum 217). Finally, Song Jin-woo, a journalist, contributed to the spread of Yangming Learning and supported the serial Yangming Learning publications of Seol Tae-hee and Jung In-boo when he was a chief editor and head of the *Dong-A Ilbo* [*Dong-A Daily News*] (Ibid. 243). Jung said that “It is Park Eun-sik who advocated Joseon Yangming, Lee Gun-bang who built up the banner of Joseon Yangming and Song Jin-woo who was credited with promulgating it” (Ibid.).

Yangming Learning had been dubbed as “heretical theory” in the realm of ideas in Joseon and had never occupied a mainstream position as Choi Ik-han faced criticism as a heretic for following Yangming Learning. Then, under what circumstances could Yangming Learning emerge as a new prospect in the national sphere? Some “practical” scholars suggested that Zhuzi Studies could not explain the rapidly changing reality wholly, like in *Dap Gang Yungeuk* [答姜允克: *Answers to Gang Yungeuk*] (1917) which Kwak wrote to his disciples. Even though it is hard to say how much they rightly understood Yangming itself when they formed their ideological system, Yangming Learning was considered to be “concise and appropriate,” to possess a “thorough awareness of the human subject,” and to be “able to respond appropriately to the changing times,” compared to the esoteric Neo-Confucianism (Song, “The Acceptance” 22–24). Yangming Learning was a theoretical indicator in which scholars attempted to find the possibility to reform and civilize colonized Joseon “as soon as possible.” The enlightening and reformatory powers of Yangming Learning in China and Japan also influenced Korean scholars. Park Eun-sik, the so-called “advocate of Yangming Learning,” demonstrated this context clearly by showing envy and admiration at the fact that Japan “reached complete civilization by accomplishing greatly both the philosophy of East Asia, the modern Yangming Learning, and the material civilization of the West” (qtd. in Geum 207).<sup>10</sup> It was a common perception that figures who

10. For further details, please see “Jaeyeoilbon Choelhaksa Yangmyeonghoi Jugan Donggyeongies [再與日本哲學士陽明學會主幹東敬治書: The Second Letter

led the Meiji Restoration in Japan were promising Yangming scholars (Yoshida 24).<sup>11</sup> In fact, Confucianism also always emphasized practices. Nevertheless, Yangming Learning at that time achieved its reputation as practical for two reasons. One is that Yangming Learning emphasized “uniting knowledge and conduct.” The other is that Wang Su-in, who succeeded Lu Sang-san, was recognized as a figure who had lived a practical life as a soldier, government official, and Confucian scholar in Japan (Yoshida 35). Another advantage of Yangming Learning at the time is that its theory placed the human mind at the center of learning and practice, trusting in its goodness.

Choi Ik-han had already agonized over what the human mind is and its status and meaning in his arguments with Ganjae. He disputed that it was insubstantial to emphasize *li* which had neither sympathy nor annihilation, thus leaving behind various interactions and practical possibilities of the human mind. In this context, *li* had remote ideals to reach without the possibility of a human being’s self-improvement, and only mastering and learning “saints and wise men” was absolutely required to reach that ideal. However, Yangming Learning started from the possibility of “mastering one’s own mind and body for oneself, not relying on the theories of others” (Geum 207). These theories of Yangming Learning provoked the concept of a self-supporting Joseon nation, linked itself to the intrinsic spirit of practicality of Joseon, and attempted to share the nationalistic knowledge created in those

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to Higashi Keiji [東敬治], the Chief of Japan Society of Yangming Studies.” *Park Eun-sik Jeonjip* [*The Collected Works of Park Eun-sik*] (Seoul: Dankook University Press, 1975): “Yangming Learning made good use of Confucius and Mencius. You are also a scholar who made good use of Yangming. Most of the heroes of the Meiji Reformation are in the Yangming School, and the actual development of that utility is much better than China...We could promote civilization business completely, building up national power with Western materials and developing people’s morals within a philosophy of East Asia. So what kind of power is it?”

11. Higashi Keiji [東敬治], Japanese Society of Yangming Studies, to whom Park sent a letter, was one of the figures who guided the so-called “Fourth Campaign for Yangming Learning” in Japan. Yoshida Kouhei said in 2004 that if Western modernism helped Japan prosper, Yangming Learning is what evoked the “subjective consciousness” of the people who led to that prosperity.

practical activities. Yangming Learning at that time was a sort of shared resources for evoking a “nation.”

An important figure connected to these activities was Lee Byung-ki [李秉岐] (1891–1968), who was known as a poet and a scholar of Korean literature.<sup>12</sup> The personages who appeared in *Garam Ilgi* in the 1920s are Byun Young-lo [卞榮魯], Hong Myung-hee [洪命憲], his son Hong Gi-moon [洪起文] (1903–92), Moon Il-pyung [文一平] (1888–1936), Choi Nam-seon (1890–1957), Kwon Duk-gyo [權惠奎] (1890–1950), and so on. Interactions between the Choi Ik-han and Garam groups raised hopes of “recovering national sovereignty as sympathizing with Daejonggyo.” One specific direction of that sympathy was that they shared knowledge of Hanhak (Han, “Choi Ik-han” 121–22). This is quite an important point for understanding the intellectual trend of this time as well as for understanding Choi. To discover how they sympathized, what they shared, and what the meaning was in the cultural and intellectual context of that time in more detail, there is a need to move on to the next step. “Sovereignty recovery” was a dream of many contemporary intellectuals and the ultimate goal of their philosophies and practices. Thus, how their dreams received practical direction through the experience of new philosophy such as Daejonggyo needs to be more specific.

First, there is some evidence of their participation in no less a Buddhist society than Daejonggyo, which provokes the suspicion that their agenda was focused on the national level for exploring the spirit/culture of Joseon, rather than for the purpose of a particular religion, i.e., Daejonggyo. This point also forces us to recognize Choi Ik-han’s nationalism, which we have overlooked in our discussion of his “socialist” sympathies. Considering these points, we try to follow “their context” more specifically. These interchanges were regarded as a journey affecting each person and pulling together the future of the nation, rather than one-way from Garam to Choi, and from Daejonggyo to individuals.

First of all, we investigate nationalist religious activities, including Daejonggyo and the (Joseon) Buddhist Society. Daejonggyo, from the perspective of the intrinsic national spirit, was symbolized by “Hanbaenim [檀君: the founding father of the Korean nation],” which held to anti-foreign

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12. *Garam Ilgi* by Lee Byung-ki has been presented as offering details that verify Choi’s personal and intellectual interactions in the early 1920s through the more recent research of Han Young-kyu (2012).

spirit. Daejonggyo was criticized for not having been able to recognize the invasive purpose of Japan, because of their founding principle of separation of religion and state at the beginning. But as is generally known, Daejonggyo was suppressed more strongly than any other religion by Japan because the Japanese felt that it was a threat to their colonial rule. In fact, the activity of Daejonggyo was implemented by knowledge like the Kukhak [國學: National Culture Studies] culture movement and armed struggles for independence as well as religious movements (Yu 141-71). It is hard to say that the Kukhak movement derived from Daejonggyo, but it is clear that it triggered the nationwide Joseonhak research movement. As mentioned above, the first step to sympathize with Daejonggyo was recognition and research about the intrinsic aspects of Joseon as a nation.

Choi Ik-han collected, classified, passed around, copied, read, and lectured on old books of Joseon with Garam and with Kwon Duk-gyu, whom Choi met through Garam. Garam was renowned as a Korean verse poet and a scholar of classical literature, but he also was a famous bibliographer renowned for collecting, classifying, and keeping old books in the early 1920s (Lee, "A Study of Garam" 193-227). Kwon was also a prominent linguist and wrote editorials like "Park Yeonameui *Heosaengioeneul* Pyungham [Comments on *Heosaeng's Life* by Park Yeon-am]" in 1931. The Buddhist society played an important role because they not only offered libraries from which learners could borrow books describing the classics of Joseon, they provided religious roles as well. According to *Garam Ilgi*, from 1921 to 1924 in Buddhist society, they got and copied old books, such as *Samgang Haengsildo* [三綱行實圖: *The Three Bonds and the Morals in Human Relations*], *Iryun Haengsil* [二倫行實: *The Book about Confucian Ethics*], *Daedong Jiji* [大東地誌: *The Korean Geography Book*], *Hunmin Jungeum* [訓民正音: *The Proper Sounds for the Instruction of the People*], and *Jeondangsi* [全唐詩: *The Collection of Poems of the Dang Period in China*] (Lee, *Garam Ilgi* 154-55, 231). The experience of Daejonggyo provoked concern for the religious history of Joseon. Religious activities became the religious foundation of national movements, rather than individual ones, targeting the reform and liberation of Joseon, that is, the colonial Korea.

The explosion of Western/modern knowledge in the early modern period evoked knowledge of one's own people. They tried to discover new values by substituting old thoughts symbolized by Confucianism, which was connected to the effort of setting national indicators, reviving intrinsic symbols of Joseon,

such as Yangming Learning and Dangun [檀君] or Buddhism in the religious dimension (for example, Choongkwang of Daejonggyo). Choi Ik-han added a socialist aspect that had a strong nationalist color. He regarded the national prospect of socialism as important rather than socialism's own generation and development, which caused division within Korean socialism.

### **3) Ethnic Socialism: Competition between Ethnic Specificity and Universality**

#### **(1) “Back to Reality from the Kingdom of Ideology”: Conflicts in the Direction of Socialism**

Socialism arose as a historical development from the viewpoint of universality in world history. The emphasis on alliance and bond with the international proletarian class comes from the same ideology. To the intellectuals of Joseon under the rule of colonization, socialism was approached as a strong tool for national liberation. Therefore, the universal reach of socialism had to conform to nationalism to realize the needs of Joseon. What Choi Ik-han experienced as a socialist in Japan in the 1920s brought forth the issues of finding a foothold for socialism and catering to the specifics in the setting of Joseon.

Choi Ik-han left for Tokyo, Japan in February of 1925 to study and came back in November of 1927. He studied at the Department of Politics and Economics in Waseda University, and later joined Ilwolhoi [日月會: Society of Joseon Students Studying in Tokyo, Japan] founded by An Gwang-cheon and Lee Yeong-seong. An Byeong-ju wrote about Choi's whereabouts in 1931 in his interesting piece entitled *MLgae Inmul Insangi*. The fact that this piece was a journal of impressions should be considered, but according to An Byeong-ju, Choi didn't fully focus on socialism when he entered Waseda University. He began intense Marxist studies only after he quit Waseda and later became an expert socialist theorist. These traits were described as a series of defections: pupil of Confucianism (expulsion), pupil of Oyoma Ikuo [大山郁夫] (1880-1955), and then a pupil of Fukumoto Kazuo [福本和夫] (1894-1983) (Lee, “Political Idea” 85-107). A brief understanding of these two Japanese figures would be helpful toward better understanding Choi's rationale. Japanese socialism experienced a change of pace in the 1920s. Oyoma Ikuo and Fukumoto Kazuo were at the front line of the change in direction. The “journal of impressions” above delineated these two people as Choi's teachers, but actually they dominated and led the entire socialist trend.

Oyoma Ikuo<sup>13</sup> was known as a “cultural chauvinist” (Gu 87) and led the “Taisho Democracy” movement in the early 20th century. Later on, however, he became aware of popular culture. He made a drastic change by criticizing the exploitation by the ruling class, and pursuing “democracy” for humanism, not “preoccupation to ideological uniformity” (Kim, “Yamakawa Hitoshi” 29–64; Lee, “Political Idea” 104). Fukumoto Kazuo also played an important role in influencing Choi. His ideology known as “Fukumotoism” has been noted as an important ideological factor in the foundation of Shinganhoe [新幹會: a Korean nationalist organization under Japanese colonial rule] in Joseon (Kim, “Yamakawa Hitoshi” 29–64). The Joseon Communist Party, to which Choi belonged, was especially rooted in the ideas of Fukumotoism in its sense of criticizing the Comintern.

Now we’ll take a closer look at Choi Ik-han’s moves in regards to socialism by focusing on the Ilwolhoi founded by international students from Joseon. Ilwolhoi mainly studied the ideologies of socialism and was partially responsible for introducing them. The group intended to spark change, along with influence a directional shift in Japan. Further details will be discussed in “Sasang Danchae Haechaeron [思想團體解體論: On Disbanding Ideological Groups]” written by Choi. *Sasang Undong* [思想運動: *Ideology Movement*] and *Ieron Tujaeng* [理論鬭爭: *Theoretical Fight*] were periodicals published by Ilwolhoi to reflect their change of course from ideological debates to theoretical ones. *Sasang Undong*, which was published earlier, contains the *Communist Manifesto*, as well as biographies of people like Lenin and newly translated terminology necessary to understanding socialism.

For Joseon’s intellectuals in the stage of ideological disputes, socialism was represented through Marxism. Marxism was “a theoretical and practical weapon to fight against Japanese imperialism representing Western capitalism and was used to recreate the colonized Joseon” (Hong 97). In this sense, socialism didn’t begin pursuing its own purposes, but rather started as an “ideology for national liberation” acquired within the process of philosophical exploration (Kim, “Yamakawa Hitoshi” 35). To Choi Ik-han, socialism was

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13. Oyoma Ikuo graduated from Waseda University and served as a professor there. He led democratic movements and opposed military drills. He formed the Labor Party and was elected as a member of the House of Representatives, but that brought him under political pressure, and he fled to America. When he came back, he served as a professor at Waseda University for a third time.

a solution to combat Joseon's nationalist problems. The question arose, then, how could socialism work within the context of the colonized Joseon? This question remained critical during many different stages in his adoption of socialism, not just in the midst of translating and reading its theories. That's because the acceptance of the ideology started from the intention of finding a theoretical weapon to explain the reality of Joseon and its surrounding issues, rather than understanding the importance of the socialist ideologies themselves. As we show further, socialism was experiencing its own problems and modifications.

While attempting to combine the left and the right groups, the members of Ilwolhoi, including Choi Ik-han and Ah Gwang-cheon, faced strong criticism in 1927 by the Comintern, charging that "while surrendering to Trotskism-Fukumotoism, they are showing the right opportunism toward the pro-Japanese under the rhetoric of the left" (qtd. in Lee, *A History* 215). In July of 1927, the Comintern defined the two major Japanese Communism streams, Yamakawaism [山川均主義] and Fukumotoism [福本主義]. In the meantime, the Comintern labeled Ilwolhoi as "Fukumotoism," which was defined as "sectarianism." The charge of sectarianism puts the world's socialistic groups in the middle and criticizes an attitude of emphasizing the nationalistic specialty or ethnic characteristics as cultism. Choi Ik-han and An Gwang-cheon's group put nationalistic unity at the forefront in order to liberate the colonized Joseon and disband varying ideological groups. Therefore, from the view of the Comintern, Fukumotoism had a different agenda and thus appeared ideologically incomplete and improper. This is one material reason why An Byeong-ju used the phrase "defection."

During these days, Choi Ik-han wrote "Sasang Danchae Haechaeron." The piece premised the era as a turning point and suggested the dissolution of ideological groups as the act of defining Joseon's specialty:

The act of disbanding ideological groups has a certain purpose in current-day Joseon. Therefore, the debate of judging the act's rightfulness is unparalleled in the history of movements from other countries. Everything is Joseon's specialty. It's the fruit of Joseon's reality. (Choi, "Sasang Danchae Haechaeron" 245, translated by the author)

Choi expressed that disbanding ideological groups was the most realistic

outcome of “Joseon’s specialty” which means being under the rule of colonization. When defining ideological groups, he quoted Gregory Zinoviev (1883–1936) and said that “the definition can change according to the social classes and worldviews” (Ibid. 246). According to his definition, ideological groups in Joseon were responsible for “conducting academic studies on one ideology and then spreading them.” It was one of the first ideological fights, and it preceded the public’s economic and political fights. However, he also expressed caution in interpreting Marxism and introducing the experiences of movements in advanced socialist nations while solely focusing on the intellectuals. The following marks the shift in Choi from studying and propagandizing the socialist ideology to actually adopting it. In the phrase “historical limit of ideological movements,” he elaborated the process of conflicts happening around the dissolution of ideological groups, and defined this process as a “special factionalism” in the history of Joseon. He said this factionalism “incapacitated the international relations” of Joseon’s socialist movements. In the process of declaring the dissolution of ideological groups to overcome factionalism, influence abroad was witnessed in the “objective realization of Japan’s directional switch.” In other words, he thought that, as a step of socialists’ revolution and the realization of the specialty of Joseon, where factionalism was rampant under the rule of colonization, “the movement should come out of the ideological kingdom and focus on reality” (Ibid. 251–52).

To “come out of the ideological kingdom and focus on reality” clearly shows Choi Ik-han’s aim at that time. In fact, when Choi published “Sasang Danchae Haechaeron” around the end of 1926, there were about 350 ideological groups throughout Joseon (Hong 92). Joseon was deluged with ideological groups. Against this state, the formation of Shinganhoi with the collaboration of the left and the right was a result of pushing the opportunities of ethnic coalition to its maximum so as to improve the reality of the colonized nation in an innovative way. When Shinganhoi was disbanded in the end, what Choi claimed was to overcome ideological conflict, as written in his “Sasang Danchae Haechaeron.” The research on Joseon based on its specialties and the active study of classics in the late 1930s had been the results of the above efforts. The way Choi’s socialism was applied to the study of Joseon and its contents should be discussed further in the future. Here, what needs to be clarified is the fact that Choi had followed the “steps of revolution” as he suggested. Choi’s suggestion of steps of uprising in “Sasang Danchae

Haechaeron<sup>14</sup> suggested the necessities of critical, practical and theoretical fights. He argued that overcoming the propaganda of socialist theories, criticizing and analyzing the movements in reality, and implementing new practices based on Joseon's special situation were required.

## (2) The Outcome of the Korean Studies Balanced between Ethnic Specificity and Universality

Choi Ik-han came back to Joseon from Japan in November of 1927. He was arrested for a security-code violation in Seoul in 1928 and was sentenced to six years' imprisonment due to the third Korean Communist Party affair. While being transferred from prison to prison, he instigated the independence movement which resulted in his imprisonment being extended to nearly ten years, and the surveillance and suppression by the Japanese empire was fierce after Choi was released. After that, Choi's activities focus on national Koreanology and *Silhak* rather than his official/unofficial socialist movements (Song, "Choi Ik-han's" 286-87). Choi did not appear clearly a socialist theorist in the late 1930s. Just as in the 1920s, when he had shared a friendship with Lee Byung-ki, he seemed to be passionately focusing on exploring the history of Joseon from a nationalistic point of view. To understand his situation, we need to clarify the intellectual background of the 1930s. Korean studies in the 1930s consisted of self-reflection and secessionist points of view unlike in the 1920s, and became known as an era for "the revival of the classics." It's also the time when passion for Korean studies was strongest in the colonial period. During this period, Choi interacted with Lee Byung-ki, who was a fellow scholar from the 1920s, and met Lee Yeo-sung, who had joined him for Ilwolhoi and social movements from his time in Japan. He composed Chinese poems and *Sijo* [時調: Korean traditional poetic form written in Korean letters] as well as conducted a focused study on Joseon's classics and heritage, especially in 1938 and 1939.

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14. Ideological Movement A (=Consciousness Conflict)—Economic Conflict—Political Conflict

Ideological Movement B (Indifference, Fanciful. Study and propaganda about theories that found grounds for consciousness, economic and political disputes)

Theoretical Dispute (Intensified, Scientific. Criticism and analysis about consciousness, economic and political movements in reality)

Choi Ik-han argued that every intellectual activity should have an aim in “Dokseooui Mokjeokgwa Chuiemieui Gwangye [讀書之目的과 趣味의 關係: Reading with an Aim or for Hobbies]” posted in the *Dong-A Ilbo* in 1939. He defines the aim of reading as the trend of the time and class. He said no hobby is without an aim or intention, therefore a hobby is a servant of an aim. Even reading as a hobby needs a motivation and intention suitable for one’s social relation. For Choi, the trend of the time and one own social class is a standard in studying classics and tradition, and tradition is the one that can be summoned for a specific aim that fulfills the current one’s nationalistic/real necessities.

Such a definition of tradition appears clearly in his “Jeontong Tamgweui Hyeondaejeok Euimi [傳統探究의 現代의 意義: The Modern Significance of the Exploration of the Past],” posted in the *Dong-A Ilbo* from January 1 to 3 in 1938. This is well-analyzed in Kim Jin-kyun’s research (2008), so it’s not necessary to go into further detail in this article. The main point of Choi’s theory of tradition is that “tradition should be able to be reorganized for the necessity of the current times, namely clear purpose.” Tradition can be reconstituted on purpose for the necessity of the current times, but can’t have an authority. And it has to be diminished at a certain point of the historical development. This is the same logic as when Choi had proposed the dissolution of ideological groups for Joseon’s specialty and reality in 1927. It was not his goal to establish socialism as the “king” and create the “kingdom” for the ideology. Classics and traditions can’t also become “kings” or “idols” by themselves.

This principle was equally applied to the legacy of Chinese classics which represented the intellectual tradition of the Korean medieval times. Choi Ik-han studied *Heosaengjeon* [許生傳: *The Story of Heosaeng*], written by Yeon-am Park Ji-won, as a kind of historical research in the early 1920s and pursued Koreanology and *Silhak* studies in the 1930s. Its result is Choi’s major work, *Park Yeon-ameu Silhak Sasang* [朴燕巖의 實學思想: *Park Yeon-am’s Silhak Theory*] published in the 1950s. His tone was solemn when he explained the destiny of Joseon’s national literature though explaining Yeon-am’s achievement and limitation. An important issue involved in this problem is the relation between language and Joseon’s national authenticity. There is a dilemma in evaluating Joseon’s traditional intellectual assets written in Chinese ideograms. Hong Gi-mun [洪起文] and Kim Tae-jun [金太俊] tried to solve this problem by acknowledging that Yeon-am’s works were written in

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Chinese ideograms but realized something of Joseon. Using a dialectical view of history, they suggested that Chinese ideograms were foreign but part of the development of Joseon's literary history. Yet, their argument to place Yeon-am in a position that manifested Joseon's speciality is not convincing because he had used Chinese ideograms only.

Choi Ik-han addressed the problem of Chinese classics in the specific context of the cultural dynamics of Medieval East Asia, that is to say, the reality in which Park Ji-won found himself. In other words, Choi pointed out that "Chinese" in East Asia at that time was the *lingua franca* and the reality faced by Joseon's intellectuals, who had to compete within those contexts. Choi compared this issue with the Renaissance intellectuals who often wrote, not in their national language, but in Latin. This also meant that Joseon in the 18th century joined the "universal" path of world history that closed the medieval period and gave way to more modern philosophies. Choi, however, made one more step and predicted the ultimate future of the Chinese tradition. He quoted Lenin's critical notes about Russia's great literary figure, Tolstoy: "The ineffective and weak Russia described in Tolstoy's pieces belongs to the past, but his legacy belongs to the future. The strengths become a legacy of the future" ("Piece of Song Chan-seop" 153). To Choi, "Yeon-am" himself was the contemporary tradition in the past, but at the same time demonstrated future values within the present. Moreover, "Yeon-am" represented the self-contradiction and limits of Joseon, its people, and the history of its literature, which required resolution in the future.

It's worth mentioning to see how Choi Ik-han defined the relation between Joseon's literature and Chinese literature after he defected to North Korea. Based on the literary theories of Engels and Gorky, Choi discussed the specialty of Joseon's literature and the necessity of Chinese literature in the medieval period. The ground was, as mentioned for the case of Yeon-am, "the reality of the universal culture in Medieval East Asia." Chinese literature reflected the reality as it was. Choi quoted Engels: "reading Balzac teaches much more than any texts written by professional historians, economists or statisticians." He also quoted Gorky's literary theory which said that literature reflects the phases of the times and this reflection is a leading ideology of the society. Therefore, "Joseon's Chinese literature" itself represented the reality of medieval Joseon as it had been an undeniable and indispensable "actuality" (Choi, "Piece of Song Chan-seop" 11). By this logic, "Joseon's Chinese literature is not a collateral line or a child of Joseon's literature" (Ibid. 16).

Once again, even though Joseon's literature "took the form of 'Chinese,' each and every class of Joseon used it to express its class consciousness in detail," and that is an ideological propaganda. In dialectics, Chinese literature broke from the status of foreignness.

### III. Formation of Modern Knowledge and Translation in Civilization Exchanges

When Choi Ik-han studied in Japan and accepted socialist theory for the first time to "study and spread" it, many of his related intellectual activities were related to "translation." In fact, the adoption history of Korean socialism is also referred to as "the history of translation" (Hong 57). The translation job was to read main socialist theorists like Marx and Lenin, specifically, to "read in [the native language] and translate them into [Korean] and then finally to re-read them." Most of the translated texts, however, went through second-hand translations: from Japanese texts into Korean (Park, "Socialism" 223). His "Marx Umulronjeok Byeonjeungbeopeui Gaeseol [맑스唯物論的辨證法의 概說: An Introduction to Marx's Materialistic Dialectics]," written in 1926, is presumed to be a translation. This article is an outcome produced from the prime task of "clearly understanding Marxist originals on how to adopt socialism" among the socialists of the time. Also, based on the steps of socialist movements, Choi's "Sasang Danchae Haechaeron" written in 1927 was to set out a logical argument of "totally dismantling current factional ideological groups to unify the movements." The piece itself wasn't a translation, but Engels and Zinoviev were quoted frequently. The quotations were second-hand translations from Japanese versions. "Retranslating Japanese pieces that had already adopted Western civilization"<sup>15</sup> shows "a path of the early 20th century Korea accepting the modern West through Japan." In this sense, a second-hand translation occurring within the civilization exchange of Korea has more significance than the typical retranslation of Japanese texts. It should be handled as a path in the era (Kim, "Civilization" 303-44).

There were various purposes for translating socialist texts, but the priority was to compete with the existing ideologies. The ideological competition forked into two directions. First, within socialism, there occurred an ideological

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15. They are mainly translations of English or German materials.

competition between Christian socialism and anarchist socialism (Hong 66). The second direction was to compare socialism with other ideologies so that socialism could clarify its identity through critical theoretical developments. In the case of “Sasang Undong,” published by a group that Choi joined, bourgeois and socialist evolutionary theories were compared. Lee Yeo-sung, one of the core members of “Sasang Undong,” translated and introduced in his presentation, “Sahojueui Gangjwa: Bourgeois Jinwharongwa Sahojueui Jinwharon [社會主義講座—부르조아의 進化論과 社會主義 進化論: Socialism Lecture: Evolutionary Theories of Bourgeoisie and Socialism],” that the Social Darwinist theory dominating “the survival of the fittest of world evolution” didn’t come from the “power of individuals,” as the bourgeoisie argued, but from “capital,” which is a socialist critique.<sup>16</sup> This precisely shows the different judgments in regard to reality. In other words, from a socialist point of view, reality is made by “an unwholesome and fragile (but rich) minority dominating a strong and wholesome (but poor) majority.” Here, “the survival of the fittest” loses its ground. Furthermore, the premise saying that survival of the fittest can’t be applied to human society appears in deeply divided conditions.

Even though there were not many pieces left, Choi was involved in translating Western texts. In 1939, Choi was planning to translate *The Biography of Madame Curie*, which was distributed as one of the “touching” and “encouraging books” for youth. *Dong-A Ilbo*’s preview section entitled “Curie Buinjeon [큐리-夫人傳: The Biography of Madame Curie]” said that “the translation of Madame Curie was to be published on the third page of the evening paper starting from the 17<sup>th</sup>,” which was only 5 days after the announcement. This implies that a section was assigned to Choi, who must already have completed a certain amount of the translation. Despite the announcement, the translation didn’t appear in the paper. Choi Gu-so who was Choi Ik-han’s nephew and his chronology said “the publication hadn’t succeeded due to Japan’s regulations, considering Choi Ik-han’s ideological tendencies” (Song, “Choi Ik-han’s” 271-98). The expression “ideological tendency” might have referred to his socialist ideology and work for independence movements. The advertisement for the publication allows us to assume the “ideological” issue.

16. According to Park Jong-rin (2007), this is *Socialism and Evolutionary Theory*, and the author was Anton Pannekoek. The translator for the Japanese version is Gye Ri-eon [堺利彦], and the title is パンネコツク.

The advertisement says that the reason for translating the biography of Madame Curie is because she had overcome unfortunate circumstances that other countries didn't experience and became a great person to make a worldly contribution. It evokes the history of Madame Curie's motherland, Poland, in the context of colonization by Czarist Russia and its becoming independent and how its history had awakened political consciousness in Madame Curie. Another factor related to the spread of the biography throughout East Asia is Madame Curie's life contains all the issues of being a citizen of a colonized country, emigrating from Poland to France and falling into the poor strata. The fact that Madame Curie acquired French citizenship with her marriage reflects the agony of a female scholar whose country was colonized by Russia. However, when Madame Curie's biography was translated into Japanese and spread in the society, the issues of a colonized person, an emigrant, and the related poverty were not considered. She was simply described as a person of "scientific greatness and public interest" who served to make a "contribution and service to her nation." Eva Curie as a "woman, oppressed and poor" repressed to be re-made as "a Japanese national dedicating to the nation" (Kim, "Different Objectivity" 153-54). The Japanese version of Madame Curie's biography in Joseon was not unlike those in Japan. Choi Ik-han's plan in the *Dong-A Ilbo* was to present Madame Curie not as French but as a Pole who had gone through the agony of lost sovereignty. The intellectuals of Joseon under Japan's colonization took the "reconstruction of Poland" in 1918 as a natural course in "the regional status and the history of Poland" (Kim, "Poland Heungmangsa" 60) and found the hope for Joseon's independence. Choi's translation project seemed to reveal what was eliminated and ignored in the Japanese version of Madame Curie and its significance in the context of the colonized Joseon. The common historical ground of colonization and the desire to overcome its reality and make a worldwide contribution provoked the translation project.

This type of translation didn't belong only to Choi Ik-han as many people translated in the fields of education, academia, literature, politics, and history in order to civilize and protect Joseon to achieve its independence from Japan. Those translations reveal the important fact that translations at the starting point of the modern civilization of Korea was not the one-sided adoption from the Western empires to the Eastern colonies, just as translation itself cannot be a one-sided project following the source text literally and blindly. Translation projects of Madame Curie imply that translation is much more

than a transformation “from the source to target text,” involving Joseon’s special context. Choi’s translation might not have been limited to the linguistic literal translation of the source text, that is, the Japanese version of Madame Curie. Such an attempt against Japan’s colonization might cause its cancellation. The first accomplished translation of Madam Curie after Choi was Lee Mu-yeong’s *Segieui Ddal: Curie Buineui Ilsaeng* [世紀의 딸, 퀴리 夫人의 一生: *The Life of Curie, The Daughter of the Century*] in 1940. This text had deliberately prevented the readers from having any empathy on the “colonization of Poland” because the translator was aware of Japan’s censorship (Kim, “Different Objectivity” 158).

What we find more extensively in the case of Choi Ik-han, is translation as a means of communication between different cultures and civilizations with different contexts. This is proved by the translated texts, which contracted or altered a considerable amount of the original text and made the translator’s editorial reworking take on more weight than the translation. The concept of Western-modern-oriented translation devalued Choi’s translated texts as incomplete and erroneous, damaging the dignified originals. However, this criticism is also incomplete, because it eliminated the context that the translation had to face within this era. In a strange or violent world itself, or in an attempt to find a certain positive vision, an indispensable refraction had to exist. Such refraction could become power for understanding and comprehension. Especially to a nationalistic socialist like Choi, such “refraction,” or so-called knowledge system, couldn’t be re-summoned in a national context, and therefore had no significance and was doomed for extinction. This is how Choi composed a new knowledge system: by making good use of a new exterior power and combining that with an inner tradition.

This is also clearly confirmed in the way Choi Ik-han understood and translated traditions of Joseon. Choi’s Korean studies were focused primarily on 1938 and 1939 and were mostly conducted by the “translation” of Joseon’s classics. He conducted translations in two different ways. One was from Chinese to Hangul, and through these translations appeared the outcome of the Korean studies actively published in newspapers and magazines in the late 1930s. The other version was from Hangul to Chinese. “*Hansi Gokran* [漢詩 曲欄: The Collection of Joseon Poetry written in Chinese Ideograms]” and “*Sijo Yeokrye* [時調譯例: The Translation of *Sijo*],” which Choi published under his pen name Changhae in the *Dong-A Ilbo* in the late 1930s, were the translations of *Sijo* into Chinese poems. It was possible because he recognized

the tradition of Joseon's Chinese literature Soakbu [小樂府], which was the Chinese poem version of translations of common folk songs, and believed it to be valuable. "Yeoyoudangeonseoreul Dokham [與猶堂全書를 讀함: The Comprehension of Jeong Yak-yong's Works]," which represented the outcome of Choi's Korean studies in the 1930s, was based on translations of traditional texts written in Chinese.<sup>17</sup>

When attempting to adopt, comprehend, and apply a new ideology to reality, Choi Ik-han preceded with translation texts that contained new knowledge and reasoning. What's interesting and significant here is that "translating" a new world in a new phase led to the recognition and examination of oneself. To be more specific, the drastic adoption of modern Western ideologies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century motivated an attempt to understand the new world, one way or another. However, this was also accompanied by a drastic severance and a shocking change once the intellectuals of Joseon chose to awaken the tradition accumulated in themselves. The fact that Choi Nam-seon passionately excavated and classified Joseon's classics, and that the classic revival movement was strong in 1930s, can be understood in this sense. Choi's translations were also made in the contention between accepting/experiencing a new world and recognizing self-tradition. Through these attempts, Choi inserted the assets of "possibly disposable and deniable traditions" into the new modern knowledge system that he was facing so that he could acquire a vision of the future and a prospect on the system. As discussed in a further discussion, the way Choi understood the tradition—more specifically the asset of medieval Joseon literature written in Chinese and imparted a meaning to that clearly shows the way he composed a knowledge system in the ideological chaos of the colonized Joseon.

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17. "Yeoyoudangeonseoreul Dokham [The Comprehension of Jung Yak-yong's Works]," which Choi Ik-han published serially in the *Dong-A Ilbo* with 65 series, was a collection of his Korean studies and became the ancestor of "Silhakpawa Jung Dasan [Jung Dasan as a Silhak Scholar]," published in North Korea in 1955. These two pieces have a contextual correlation and will be dealt in a different writing about his Silhak studies.

## IV. Conclusion

Choi Ik-han was raised in the world of “old intellectuals” while learning traditional Eastern studies and became a “new intellectual” by adopting socialism and transferring it through Japan from the West. His intellectual path is described as the old learning—the new learning—the switch to socialism (Kim, “Choi Ik-han’s Criticism” 129). This path might seem clear but the meanings of “new” and “old” are not so simple from the inside. The old learning was focused on the fact that Choi was a pupil of Kwak Jong-seok, a Confucian scholar at the end of Joseon. What this thesis attempts to highlight is that Choi had a face-to-face confrontation with the strong Confucian world and, as a result, was accused of “apostasy” and “heresy.” However, the so-called heretical doctrines of Wang Yangming took center stage from the national prospect in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This paper has attempted to take a closer look at the prospect imposed on Choi. Later, the movement of ethnic religions, including Daejonggyo and Buddhism, stood out and Joseon’s traditional assets got attention. The so-called era of the new learning still derived from something old.

On this intellectual path, Choi Ik-han’s aspect as a socialist theorist had not revealed itself abundantly. Even when he “studied and propagandized” socialist theories, he revealed his personal opinions not frequently. What we could confirm precisely here was his nationalistic aspect. In other words, he put more stress on the likelihood of nationalistic unity to diminish ideological sections, rather than pursuing the purity and completion of socialism. In the era of socialism in the late 1920s, what stood out from Choi’s movements was the notion to unify the nation in an attempt to be free from colonization. To change the colonized reality, he desperately pursued a new way of “unifying” the nation. However, when the attempt was put down and isolated politically, the next step following the fight came as proposed in Choi’s “Sasang Danchae Haechaeron.” That is to say, an advanced academic path, also known as a theoretical fight, would need to occur and overcome the ideological fight. This needs to be discussed in further detail in continued research, but his study of Joseon in the late 1930s didn’t have a significant distinguishing point from a nationalistic study of Joseon, as pointed out by socialists.

What Choi Ik-han dreamed of as a socialist was not building an ideological kingdom based on international universality and an international bond, but rather by rebuilding Joseon based on Joseon’s own unique specialty. That’s

what his intellectual goal remained for the whole time. In the process, Choi transformed “disposed and deniable traditional” assets into a new modern intellectual system in order to secure prospects in the future within the academic system. In this case, tradition doesn't have an idolized authority but becomes an object that can be summoned for the “specific aim to fulfill the necessities of my (people's/reality's) current self.” Choi's intellectual moves clearly prove the dynamic and generating power that subdued the unilateral conveyance from the West to the East. They also demonstrate the sharp severance between the medieval period and the then modern times, which had been made in the process of forming a new type of knowledge of Korea within a civilization in transition.

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## Abstract

Choi Ik-han was an expert on almost all traditional and new reasoning systems that the intellectuals of the 1920–1930s colonized Joseon went through, or were passionate about. In particular, he is a clear example to show how an intellectual with knowledge of the past, symbolized in the form of Chinese ideograms, formed a new world of knowledge by experiencing a new outside world. This thesis focuses on such characteristics of Choi Ik-han to see his intellectual path and turning points in three dimensions so that we can discover the forming process of a modern body of knowledge and the dynamic possibility of the process. Moreover, this thesis suggests that translation was utilized as an important principle and practice so that a new knowledge base could be formed. This is what's commonly found in the translations of that era, including Choi Ik-han's. However, the act of translating (acceptance of culture) was not a unilateral and unconditional acceptance from Western empires, as the starting point of the modern civilization, to an Eastern colony. Such qualities were equally applied to Choi Ik-han's translation (comprehension) of the traditions within Joseon. In other words, Choi Ik-han transferred "disposed and deniable traditional" assets into the new modern intellectual system that he was facing so that he could secure prospects in the future in the system. In this case, tradition doesn't have an idolized authority but becomes an object that can be summoned in the specific aim to fulfill the necessities of my (people's/reality's) current self. His intellectual moves clearly prove the dynamic and generating power that overpowers the unilateral conveyance from the West to East, or any sharp severance between the medieval period and modern times, which have been made in the process of forming a new type of knowledge of Korea as a civilization in transition.

**Keywords:** Choi Ik-han, Neo-Confucianism, Yangming Learning, Daejong-gyo, nationalism, translation

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