

22 Ch'oe Han'gi: *Rectification of the Teachings and Doctrines of the World According to Heaven and Man* (1833)

Introduced and translated by Marion Eggert

Introduction

From about the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, Christianity was fiercely (though only intermittently) persecuted in Korea, but nonetheless spread clandestinely within the lower echelons of society. The first undercover Catholic missionaries, members of the Missions Etrangères de Paris, arrived in Seoul in 1837; that they managed to remain in the country and proselytise for two years, before being discovered and executed in 1839, demonstrates how much of a basis the new creed must already have had in the populace at large. Among the politically active literati elites, however, even mentioning Jesuit writings – which had created quite an intellectual stir earlier in the eighteenth century – could be dangerous.

In this situation, rife with religious (or worldview)^I conflict, Ch'oe Han'gi (1803–1877)^{II} published the book-length philosophical work from which the present text is taken. Ch'oe Han'gi hailed from a very wealthy family of, however, only semi-elite status (his father was a military official); this both forced and enabled him to remain outside the vortex of political life, and thus under the radar of the defenders of official orthodoxy. He was an avid reader, and had the means – at least until they ran out – to acquire the latest publications from Beijing. By the time he authored this text (1836), he was certainly well versed in Jesuit writings. Later, he adapted a number of scientific Chinese-language writings by Protestant missionaries into books of his own.^{III} But, even from this early work, it is obvious how information about and from the West helped to form his philosophical outlook, the foundations of which had already been laid by this time.

I Speaking of “religious conflict” begs the eternal question of how far Confucianism can be subsumed under “religion.” As can be seen from the text translated below, for Ch'oe Han'gi (just as for his compatriots), Confucianism fell into the same category as Christianity and Buddhism.

II Dates given for the time of his death vary. Here, I give the dates stated in the introduction to the latest edition of his complete works, Im Hyōngt'aek, ed., *Chūngbo Myōngnamnu ch'ongsō*, vol. 1 (Seoul: Taedong munhwa yōn'guwōn, 2002), 14.

III For more detail, see Marion Eggert, Eun-Jeung Lee, and Vladimir Tikhonov, *Intellectuals In Between: Koreans in a Changing World, 1850–1945* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2022), 17–20.

Marion Eggert, Ruhr University Bochum, Section of Korean Language and Culture, Department of East Asian Studies; Ruhr University Bochum, SFB 1475 “Metaphors of Religion”

Building on earlier Confucian philosophy of vital energy (*qi*, kor. *ki* 氣), such as that by Zhang Zai (1020–1077), Ch'oe Han'gi developed a vision of *kihwa* 氣化, the transformations of *qi*, as a globally relevant, evolutionary process, encompassing both the material and the spiritual world – a process which, by historical necessity, must result in a unified transcultural episteme, since it consisted of a self-revelation of pre-given and universally valid truth. For this unified “teaching” – conceived of as academic knowledge, but more importantly also as ethical doctrine – to be universally valid, all supernatural beliefs had to be eliminated. Ch'oe Han'gi thus can be said to have envisioned history as a process of secularisation, a veritable disenchantment of the world. This vision allowed for only one dimension of transcendence: that of the ‘transformations of *qi*,’ regarded as a continuous self-revelation of both the intrinsic patterns of the cosmos and the rational capacities of humankind.

In Ch'oe Han'gi's eyes, those parts of local traditions that are unconnected to truth claims – that is, the parts that might be termed sheer *customs* – can and will remain outside the pull of the unifying force of self-elucidating truth. Embedded in his conception of universal rationality and the eventually inescapable prevalence of evidence and convincing arguments is, therefore, a recognition of the emotional comfort and sense of belonging (possibly) provided by tradition. And yet, his vision of the future *consensus gentium* has its blind spot precisely in the unquestioned place he accords to his own tradition, as the source of an ethics that would naturally be accepted by all humankind, with Buddhism being allowed to contribute to the “unified teaching” only in theory, and the West only its natural science. However, to the extent that he became a post-Confucian in later years of his life, he explicitly distanced himself from Neo-Confucian legacies, and started to search for a more naturalistic grounding of his ethics as well.^{IV}

Two terms used in the text translated here need further explanation, since the translation terms may now sound less secular than was intended by Ch'oe Han'gi. First, “Heaven” in the term “Heaven and Man,” appearing in the title and the body of the text, should be understood as referring to nature at large. I have chosen the literal translation of this term to keep the reference to heaven, which also appears in Ch'oe's term for Christianity, intact. However, the compound “Heaven and Man” is frequently understood (and translated) as “nature and man,” and Ch'oe Han'gi is explicit about intending this meaning. For example, the very first piece of the book from which the present text is taken carries the title “The *Qi* of *ch'ŏn* and *in*” (天人之氣); the body of the text, however, expands “the *qi* of heaven” into the “*qi* of heaven and earth” and juxtaposes this against the “*qi* of man,” leaving no doubt about the naturalistic conception of “heaven.”

IV See the very well-argued article by Pek Unsok, “The Empiricist's Progress: Ch'oe Han'gi's Journey away from Confucianism,” *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture* 8 (2007): 231–61.

The term *sin'gi* 神氣, translated here as “spirit,” poses more difficulties. *Sin* is used here as a modifier for *qi* – that is, as an adjective – which easily induces a reading as “spiritual, numinous,” though it can also mean “intelligent.” As a noun, *sin* oscillates between “gods/spirits” and “mind.” Here, *sin'gi* or “intelligent *qi*” is to be understood as the expression of the epistemological, rather than purely ontological, quality that Ch'oe Han'gi affords to *qi*, as not just the material foundation, but also the self-revelatory impulse, of the world process. It has thus been translated with terminology as diverse as “spiritual configurative energy”^V and “cognitive systems.”^{VI} My choice of “spirit” is an attempt to grasp the cognitive aspect, while still pointing to the transhuman framework in which this cognition is understood to unravel itself. This should not distract from the secularist orientation of Ch'oe Han'gi's thought. Indeed, his own philosophical “journey away from Confucianism” followed the path of secularisation, as a result of increasing knowledge about other parts of the world, which he had outlined in this early text.

Bibliographical Information

Ch'oe Han'gi. “Ch'önha kyoböp ch'wi ch'önin i chiljǒng” [Rectification of the Teachings and Doctrines of the World According to Heaven and Man]. In *Sin'gi t'ong*. Peking, 1836; kw. 1, 14b–15b.

Page numbers given in square brackets refer to this edition.

Facsimile reprint in:

Im Hyöngt'aek, ed. *Chŭngbo Myöngnamnu ch'ongsö*, vol. 1. Seoul: Taedong munhwa yön'guwön, 2002; 19–20.

Translation by Marion Eggert

That which communicates itself without interpreters, even in remote countries, is the spirit (*sin'gi* 神氣); that which uses words and script to refine the various local customs are the teachings. The spirit needs to be expressed in teachings, so as to have a far-reaching impact^I and bring about great virtue. If the teachings are not based on

Note: Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to the material presented here, further permission may be required from the rights holder. © 2002 by Daedong Cultural Research Institute. All rights reserved.

V Chang Wonsuk, “Ch'oe Han'gi's Philosophy of Experience: New Names for Old Ways of Thinking,” *Philosophy East and West* 6272 (2012): 186–96.

VI Pek Unsok, “The Empiricist's Progress,” 240–41.

I ME: Literally: “to carry heavy burdens and travel far,” a phrase appearing in e.g. Mozi 1, “Befriending the Learned.”

the spirit, then one can talk oneself blue in the face without moving [p. 14b/15a] one's interlocutor. The degree to which [or: the way in which] the spirit penetrates can be large or small, all around or one-sided, and the teachings derived from the spirit are accordingly large or small in scale, all-encompassing or one-sided. That the world is in communication all around the globe started with Columbus, from the country of Portugal in the western corner of Europe, who in the years of the Hongzhi reign period (1488–1506) first circled the globe;^{II} this was an opening up of heaven and earth (*ch'ŏnji chi kaebyŏk* 天地之開闢).^{III} Ever since that time, trading ships travel everywhere; envoys and middlemen transmit [information]; precious and rare products, and comfortable and useful techniques are being disseminated far and wide. Those who transmit the information attach and further embellish their teachings and scriptures, whether of classical or of folk origin, so [the various teachings] all become well known to us [or: to each other]. Buddhism, with its upholding of emptiness, is not worth discussing. The teaching of reverence for heaven [i.e. Christianity] is good in name, but, in actuality, it wades into the strange and absurd. I do not know whether those who first propagated this teaching took [these absurdities] as their starting point, or whether the believers have arbitrarily expanded and exaggerated [the original teaching]. When, in full reverence and concentration, I try to fathom the affairs of the human world, I see that the situations of all the countries on the globe are now fully exposed; and when I summarise the whole story of the various teachings' inner depth or shallowness, and their degree of division into different schools, I see that the teachings changed under the influence of the customs of the various countries, and that they were again altered in the course of being interpreted by later generations. In the course of these [ongoing] transformations, [p. 15a/15b] there are ways to remove the empty and move towards the substantial, to shed the chaff and preserve the grain. If we chose from the various teachings that which conforms to the real needs of Heaven and Man (*ch'ŏn in* 天人) and eliminate all the mixed-in empty and weird elements, we will arrive at a teaching that can serve all people and all future generations. Rather than allowing customs to alter [such a] teaching, the teaching should transform the customs. This is not something that can forcibly be brought about by

II ME: Of course, the first to sail around the earth was Magellan, and Columbus was not Portuguese. I could not ascertain the source from which Ch'oe Han'gi took his information. According to Zhang Zhishan, "Columbus and China," *Monumenta Serica* 41 (1993): 177–87, the first mention of Columbus in a Chinese-language source was in the *Zhifang waiji* written by Giulio Aleni in 1623, who transliterated the name as Gelong (Zhang, 184–5). Zhang lists no further Chinese sources mentioning Columbus, prior to Lin Zexu's *Sizhou zhi* (1840), which – just like the later geographies – uses variants of Kelun(bo) for Columbus' name. Ch'oe Han'gi transliterates the name as Jianu 嘉奴 (kor. Kanu, which could represent the sound Ga-lu). He may have taken this from a Japanese source. While his writing of Columbus' name is consistent throughout the text, he uses a different name for Portugal in other instances (here: Bu-lu-ya, otherwise: Pu-tao-ya).

III ME: The term used here, *kaebyŏk*, derives from Chinese mythology, where it denotes the parting of heaven and earth effected by Pangu – i.e. the beginning of the world. Its meaning came to extend to less radical beginnings, incorporating the ideas of "developing," "breaking new ground."

human power. The process has to be such that boundaries are set according to those things in the spirit of Heaven and Man which cannot be opposed or transgressed, and that their logic is clearly spelled out, such that I just formulate in words what is in fact the guiding principle of all times, naturally followed by Heaven and Man. From Confucianism, the ethics of human relationships, humaneness, and propriety should be taken over, while [towards the Confucian views on] ghosts and spirits, and on bad and good omens, a discriminating attitude should be assumed. From the Western methods (*sōbōp* 西法), calendrical science, mathematics and physics should be taken over, while the weird elements and the [threat and promise of] suffering and bliss should be eliminated. Within Buddhism, emptiness and nothingness should be turned into substantiality and being. Thus, the three teachings will be turned into one, innovation will be achieved along the lines of tradition, resulting in a teaching that can truly be practised all over the world. Beyond that, [things like] clothing, food, or daily utensils can [continue to] conform to what is appropriate for each place. Language and etiquette belong to the realm of local institutions and cultural adornment; they need not be unified.

