

# My Historical Excursion: A Long Path to the “Ecological Turn”

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## 한글요약

유럽한국학회(AKSE)의 초청에 진심으로 감사드립니다. 지난 30년 동안 저는 유럽한국학회와 유럽의 새로운 역사연구 덕분에 새로운 학문적 경험을 많이 할 수 있었습니다.

세계 익숙한 민족주의 역사학의 전통에서 벗어나, 역사학의 “문화적 전환”을 경험할 수 있게 되어서 다행한 일이었습니다. 특히 “미시사”의 영향 아래 저는 한국 역사를 연구하게 되었습니다. 세월이 흐름에 따라, 그 점에 있어서도 상당한 변화가 일어났습니다. 어쩌면 동학의 제2대 교조 최시형의 ‘이천식천(以天食天)’이란 가르침에 부합되는 점이 있을지도 모르겠습니다. 저 나름으로는 역사학의 “생태적 전환”을 모색하게 되었다고 느낍니다. 이 강연에서는 위에 적은 두 가지 “전환”에 관하여 간단한 설명을 붙일 것입니다.

이것은 그저 평범하다 못해 부족하기만 한 한 학인(學人)의 개인적인 체험담입니다. 여러분의 귀중한 시간을 빼앗은 것이 아닐까, 삼가 두려운 마음입니다.

It is a great honor for me to give you a talk. I would like to thank the president and members of AKSE for inviting me to Prague. Keynote lectures are usually given by renowned scholars, but my case may be somewhat different. In the past twenty years, I have written several books on Korean history, but they cannot be considered meaningful works. I am merely an ordinary researcher, with nothing to emphasize in my academic career. However, I am obliged to say something special here; I had no choice. Therefore, I have decided to talk about a couple of things that have dominated my mind for a long time, in a somewhat exaggerated way.

## 1. Thanks to the AKSE

The AKSE has given me many opportunities and benefits in my academic life. In 1993, I attended my first AKSE conference in Berlin. At that time, I had just finished my doctoral dissertation on the social history of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) at the University of Tübingen. There, I gave a paper that drew from my dissertation; I still remember the lively discussion about the society and history of the Chosŏn dynasty

with Professor Fujiya Kawashima, who taught at Bowling Green State University in the United States. To my great regret, this American Japanese historian passed away years ago. What I would like to say is that I have met many excellent scholars from all over Europe and the United States through the AKSE; these meetings have led me to discover the potential of new research fields.

It is, I suppose, the very purpose of the AKSE to deepen friendships between its members and to give them academic stimuli. Because of my wonderful experiences at the Berlin meeting, I attended AKSE conferences in Prague (1995) and Stockholm (1997), as well as a workshop in Leiden (1995). Each time my monotonous paper was read, I still made new friends and colleagues. Since then, they have gone on to become leading figures in Korean studies in Europe; they are with us here today in this hall.

In 1999 I was awarded a professorship at Sogang University in Seoul and my departure from Europe was inevitable. It became difficult for me to attend your conferences at that point, but nonetheless my friendships with European scholars have continued to this day. As these friendships deepened, my academic attitudes and research methods gradually changed. I cannot imagine what my academic orientation would be like if I had not experienced European academic traditions through such outstanding scholars and their stimulating writings.

I recall the discussions about Korean history I had with Professor Martina Deuchler and others; they led me into the new worlds of postcolonial, comparative, and non-nationalistic historiography. I am also very thankful to many other European historians, including Professor Jürgen Schlumbohm and Professor Werner Rösener. They encouraged me to explore microhistory and European agricultural history and historical demography.

## **2. A “Cultural Turn” Based on My European Experiences**

I have learned two things from my European teachers and colleagues. First, they taught me how to discuss freely. The vibrant debate culture in Europe made a very deep impression on me. Second, due to my academic experience in Europe, I decided to discard my nationalistic attitude. The world has changed greatly since, so you probably

think this is not worth mentioning. But for me, it was a totally new, shocking experience.

Since the late 1980s, I have had a series of academic adventures in Europe: At first I was interested in historical demography and the Annales school. Such fields were relatively new in European academia at that time. A few years later, I intensely read books on social history written by adherents of the Bielefeld school. In their view, history is, above all, the history of society. Then I was attracted by their critics from historical anthropology, *Alltagsgeschichte*, or the history of everyday life, and microhistory. They primarily wanted to write the history of nameless people, that is, history from below.

The field of microhistory in particular has provided me with much academic inspiration. If I had never left Seoul, the above-mentioned academic experiences would have been impossible. Thus, I owe a lot to European traditions; my academic perspectives and research methods have been formed by them. Of course, that does not mean I have grown to be a successful researcher.

Around 1994, I clearly realized that modern Korean historiography was dominated by numerous myths created by nationalist historians. In their historical writings, readers encountered words of praise for a powerful central government and narratives centering on economic growth. This Korean phenomenon can be regarded as a legacy of modern historiography started by the German school of Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). German historians emphasized the rational characteristics of the nation-state; to my great regret they even played a pivotal role in the recent discussion over Korean history textbooks written by pro-government scholars. To the supporters of the textbooks in question, the nation-state is a divine, inviolable being.

As a historian, I have changed nothing in modern Korean historiography. I have absolutely no power to do that. Nonetheless, I have tried to pave the way for a new direction fighting against nationalist sentiments. My books on *Chōnggamnok*, or political divination during the Chosŏn dynasty, investigate the diversity of the political and religious activities of intellectuals. Most of them were commoners, who rejected the Neo-Confucian state ideology and dreamt of a new social order based mainly on the Maitreyan tradition. At the end of the nineteenth century, they eventually invented

Tonghak (Eastern Learning) and other new religions.

My research is not meaningful for mainstream scholars in Korea, but nevertheless, it is true that my writings are critiques of the established modern Korean historiography. It is very difficult for me to tolerate any myths about nationalism and economic growth. It can be safely said that my academic endeavors have been propelled by “the cultural turn” in two senses. First, I think that culture is the key to understanding the historical world. Culture is not just a partial social phenomenon, but something that is all about politics and the economy. Second, my view is shaped by the influence of European culture in the latter half of the twentieth century. I do not think that I am Eurocentric. It is my position to completely deny all kinds of ethnocentric and nationalist ways of thinking.

### **3. The “Ecological Turn” as Taught by Ch’oe Sihyŏng**

In my opinion, King Chŏngjo (r. 1776–1800) demonstrated very conservative tendencies. His policies had a few progressive aspects, but they mostly reflected old policies and were faithful to the traditions of Neo-Confucian ideology. The king was also very closed to foreign culture and tended to settle into old traditions rather than pursue new reforms. Therefore, I think it is difficult to appreciate his reign.

On the other hand, among the nameless intellectuals who were oppressed by King Chŏngjo, there were people who tended towards new political thoughts that certainly attract our attention. They had no place in the official records of the state; at the very least, they were branded as impostors. They, however, are central figures in my historical writings. For example, the intellectual Kang Ich’ŏn (1768–1801) was greatly influenced by Ming and Qing Chinese literary works and he gained a new “social imagination.” He denied the social class order that Neo-Confucian scholars believed to be universally valid. For him, the wisdom acquired from the experience of everyday life was more precious than stubborn Neo-Confucian ideology. He found the value of life in the dynamic lives of ordinary people who were devoted to their jobs. Kang read books prohibited by the king and eventually became a dissident. In my books, unknown intellectuals get more weight than the mighty king. From my point of view, Kang Ich’ŏn was a pioneer who tried to open a new world, and the beloved king was just a

conservative reactionary figure.

Today, mainstream historians in Korea appreciate the reign of Chǒngjo. They claim that he reformed late-Chosŏn dynasty society and effected a cultural revival. Such views reveal their lingering nationalist mind-set: they want to reinforce the national narrative of a great king whose endeavors helped develop the last Korean dynasty. But in my view, the kings and ministers were captives of Neo-Confucian ideology, and as a result Korean society became more and more troubled. When we look for new hope in this era, it can be found in nameless people such as Kang Ich'ŏn.

King Chǒngjo was a smart and enthusiastic person who loved learning, but I think he played a rather negative role in history. As confirmed in such an example, history does not progress linearly. There is another similar truth. Many people, especially mainstream Korean historians, believe that through industrialization and economic growth everyone can attain wealth and freedom. But the truth is just the opposite; as industry develops, wealth is concentrated in the hands of a small number of people and democracy is thus endangered. History has a lot of contingent elements, big and small, that are unknowable. There are many cases where historical results are not determined by reason and logic. Modern German novelist Stefan Zweig (1881–1942) knew this well when he argued that history is subject to coincidence and madness.

No matter how many concessions we make, Kang Ich'ŏn is just as important as his king. This recognition is based on the teachings of Tonghak (Eastern Learning). To be precise, in the philosophy of Ch'oe Sihyŏng (1827–1896), I learned the necessity of the “ecological turn.” In other words, all hierarchical relationships must be denied and all things respected. The teachings of Ch'oe are summarized as follows: Everything has an independent value but all things are interdependent. Human beings, heaven, and all things on earth have equally great value. Even the food that sustains our everyday life is worthy of the same honor as almighty heaven.

The “ecological turn” calls for a new historical narrative. This view, of course, is not far from my perception of microhistory, which focuses on history from below. Adopting this approach has further deepened my historical thinking. Of course, the fact that I am just an ordinary scholar with no influence has not changed.

I am happy to go my own way rather than trying to influence others. In that sense, it

may not be uncommon to think of myself as a Neo-Neo-Confucian scholar. Neo-Confucians believed that, according to the great teachings of Confucius (551–479 B.C.), study was for oneself, not for others. You should not be angry if they do not know you. You would be glad to see a friend from afar. Sometimes it can be fun to repeat what you have learned.

#### **4. Prospects**

Recently, Korean society has experienced an important event. The incompetent and corrupt president has been taken out of power by the people. Nonetheless, a wealth of learned and social elites still profess the authority of the president, and the elderly who boast of their historical experience still pledge allegiance to the president's father, the late dictator Park Chung Hee (1917–1979). However, many Korean people who love democracy thought differently. They wanted a new Korea, so they lit candles in Kwanghwamun every weekend. Eventually, the president was removed from office. This is cause for celebration.

I do not even know if it is the “time for the stars” that German novelist Zweig mentioned. It is time for someone to determine the fate of many people. But will everything be rationally decided according to the power of reason? I hope so, but I cannot promise you anything. Perhaps in the history that I have studied so far, similar things have reoccurred many times over. It is difficult to find a consistent direction in history. It would be false to insist that history is a process that expands freedom and equality. But what is true is that we are blessed with hope and that each of us writes his or her own historical narratives.