

How Physical Laws Were Understood in Mid-19th Century East Asia: A Comparative Study of Choe Han-gi and Nishi Amane

Sungkhun KIM*

Abstract

This article analyzes the work of two Neo-Confucianists, Choe Han-gi (1803–1877) and Nishi Amane (1829–1897), who endeavored to construct the metaphysical ground of modern scientific knowledge in Korea and Japan during the mid-19th century. The influx of Western scientific knowledge into East Asia triggered a reinterpretation of Neo-Confucianism, which had been the main body of traditional knowledge. Nishi and Choe designed the philosophical underpinning that allowed acceptance of modern Western scientific knowledge. This involved division of the *ri* (理, principle) of Neo-Confucianism into two different concepts, the laws of the physical world and those of the human world. Choe's and Nishi's concepts of the laws of the physical world were clearly similar to the laws of nature of modern Western science. Although Nishi and Choe found a way to reinterpret Neo-Confucianism and to construct the metaphysical ground for acceptance of modern Western science, by dividing *ri*, the significance is that they tried to reconnect the laws of the physical world with those of the human world. This study will attempt to demonstrate various prototypes for the metaphysical ground of modern scientific knowledge existed in mid-19th century East Asia.

Key words: Nishi Amane, Choe Han-gi, the laws of the physical world, the laws of the human world, Neo-Confucianism

1. Introduction

The Opium War (1840) was the historical turning point that drastically caused a vast change in East Asia. After the war, Western influences began to impact East Asian thinking in many fields, including politics, economics, culture, science, and philosophy. At the same time, East Asian countries were forced to modernize quickly in order to survive the overwhelming pressure of Western power. This article analyzes the contributions of two Neo-Confucianists, Choe Han-gi 崔漢綺 (1803–1877) and Nishi Amane 西周 (1829–1897), who endeavored to construct the metaphysical ground of modern scientific knowledge in Korea and Japan during the mid-19th century.

Maruyama Masao, the noted historian of Japanese political thought, identified the prototype of Japanese modern scientific knowledge in the thoughts of Fukuzawa Yukichi

* Office for History of Science and Technology, 543 Stephens Hall, #2350, University of California, Berkeley, CA94720–2350, USA.