

Dr. Yung Sik Kim, Professor at the Department of Asian History, Seoul National University, delivered a lecture about the significance of China in the study of Korean history and science at the CKR Lecture Series on February 13, 2009.

*By Jessica Smith*

Throughout history, Koreans have not merely adopted ideas and techniques from the Chinese, but have modified them and adapted them to their own needs, Dr. Kim said. What he calls the “problem of China” is the significance, to Korean studies, of Chinese scientific ideas and technical artifacts, which can be found everywhere in traditional Korean science and technology.



From these observations he asks many questions, including:

- Should traditional Korean science be considered a part of Chinese science?
- Would it be reasonable for a historian of Korean science to neglect Chinese scientific ideas and technical artifacts and to study only what is uniquely Korean?
- How should the historian deal with the theories and practices that were exactly the same as those of China except for the fact of that they were discussed and carried out in Korea geographically?

Dr. Kim explains the dilemma: If the historian restricts himself to what is uniquely Korean, he will have to leave out much that is actually Korean, but not uniquely so. Conversely, if the historian includes all that took place in Korea, he will then have to deal with much that is not different from what was happening in China.



Dr. Kim said that the content of his talk is difficult for many of his Korean colleagues in Korea, but he feels it is an important issue for Korean studies. While his studies focus on the issue of Chinese dominance in Korean study in the context of science he believes it is relevant to other disciplines, such as history and philosophy.

Dr. Kim frames the discussion about Korean and Chinese study with a description of “the periphery” and “the centre,” where China, and particularly Beijing and the Jiangnan region at different times in history, form the centre, and other areas of East Asia

are the periphery. The centre is where developments, especially in the sciences, almost always take place first, and then filter out to the peripheries.

The Chinese center played the role of centre even in Korea's acceptance of Western science, according to Dr. Kim, and until well into 19c, Koreans relied almost entirely on the Chinese books for learning Western science and accepted it only because the Chinese had. Dr. Kim asks: Was it easier for Koreans

to accept the Western ideas, because they had been used to accepting Chinese ideas which were also foreign to them?

Dr. Kim also spoke about times throughout history Koreans have exerted concentrated efforts to find, study, develop, and establish what is uniquely their own. He offered examples in the fields of medicine, agriculture, astronomy and the arts, which were often focused on the difference between Korea and China in language, latitude, resources and climate.

Dr. Kim became aware of the problem while supervising the theses of graduate students who included the work of traditional Chinese scholars. He shared an anecdote about the defense of a graduate dissertation entitled, "Assimilating Jesuits' Geographical Knowledge in 17th and 18th Century Korea," which included a vast amount of Chinese literature. A disagreement broke out between a Korean history professor, who objected to the Chinese content in a study of Korean history, and a Chinese professor who supported it. Dr. Kim struck a compromise and the defense was approved, with a note changing the title to, "Assimilating Jesuits' Geographical Knowledge in the 17th and 18th Century Korea *and China*," which may have carried an implicit message that those writing dissertations in Korean history do not have to look into what was happening in China at, or before, the time of the event in Korea.