

# Beyond the Discourse of Practical Learning: Rethinking Chosŏn Intellectual History in a Broader Context

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This paper aims to provide an alternative approach to understanding the Chosŏn intellectual scene in long-term and transnational perspectives. Since the 1980s, the discourse of “*sirhak*” 實學 (practical learning) as a notable intellectual development in the late Chosŏn period has drawn severe criticism from a number of scholars in different fields, especially in regard to its lack of modern values. Nonetheless, the concept *per se* persists, because a lot of historians still conceive of the late Chosŏn period (especially the eighteenth century) as a crucial watershed in Korean history and continue to label its various scholarly currents as *sirhak*. In order to overcome this trend, this paper places emphasis on re-examining the notion of “rupture” embedded in the mainstream narrative of *sirhak*. It is true that the eighteenth-century Chosŏn intellectual scene—as a main temporal focus of *sirhak* studies—produced many scholarly achievements in close connection with its Qing counterpart. However, I argue that such patterns of intellectual development can also be detected prior to this period, based on Chosŏn’s close and constant contact with the (Chinese) empires, namely, Yuan and Ming. Ultimately, this study will conclude with a general assessment of how the cultural milestones, so to speak, of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing—in terms of cartography, essay-writing, encyclopedic studies, and so forth—influenced Chosŏn scholars’ liberal thinking and new modes of knowledge production.

**Keywords:** practical learning, empires in China, world maps, worldviews, ideological pluralism, encyclopedic studies.

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