

Nimology: Posthumanism in Modern Korea

Sunghwan Jo (Wonkwang University)

1. What is Nim(님)?

In this paper I will trace a native Korean tradition of posthumanism, which I term *Nimology* in English, 님학(Nimhak) in Korean. Korean 님(Nim) is similar to *sama*(様) in Japanese in that it is an honorific noun suffix that a speaker adds to the end of a person's name or title as a sign of respect, like "parents-*nim*," "teacher-*nim*," "Bong Joon-ho-*nim*." Moreover, Nim can be used with thing as a sign of respect, like "Sun-*nim*," "Moon-*nim*" in the fairy tale.

But Nim is different from Japanese "sama" in that it can be used alone as a noun, like "March for the Nim"(님을 위한 행진곡), title of a song for who died fighting for Korean democratic right in the 1980.

In this song, Nim means "a person who I miss," and thus translated into "the beloved" in English. Interestingly, nowadays Korean young people begin to address an anonymous person as *Nim* on the Internet chat, like "*Nim*, nice to meet you!" In this case, *Nim* is used to represent an honor and respect to anonymous person.

The character 님(*Nim*) first appeared in the book written in the 15th century when Korean character Hangul was invented, so we can guess *Nim* was used in verbal language before Hangul. But it is in the late 19th century when *Nim* first appeared in the philosophical context. In 1860, Choe Je-u founded an indigenous Korean religion Donghak(Eastern Learning), and suggested a new concept of man "All men have Hanul-*nim* within his body." Here, "Hanul" corresponds to Tien(天) in Chinese, Heaven in English, so "Hanul-*nim*" means Heavenly person or divine being like God. Thus in Choe Je-u's Donghak, all men are divine beings regardless of their class, species, gender, race, and age. With this new concept of men, he liberated his own two female slaves, and made one as an adopted daughter, another as a daughter-in-law.

After Choe Jae-u was executed for heresy in 1864, Choe Si-hyeong became a second leader of Donghak, and spread its organization on a national scale and extended its philosophy to other-than-human beings. In 1894, 30 years after Choe Ja-u's death, Donghak Peasants fought against Japanese army to protect their own country and family. It was a first genocide by Japanese army in East Asia, but Donghak Peasants' slogan was "Don't kill anything alive." The reason why they are not willing to injure any sentient being is that Choe Si-hyeong extended the scope of divineness from men to things, and claimed that all beings are "Hanul-*nim*," in other words all beings are divine whether they are sentient or not.

2. All beings are *Nim*

The first principle of Choe Si-hyeong's posthumanism is that "Heaven and Earth are our parents(天地父母, Cheonji Bumoo)." Here, Heaven and Earth refer to the entire universe, including Earth, the sun, and the moon. So, in his philosophy the concept of parents is expanded from human parents to non-human parents. The reason for this is because he thinks that all human beings are born and raised by Heaven and Earth. It is not only biological parents that raise humans but also the whole of nature. Therefore, we have two kinds of parents: one is human parents, the other is nature parents. Between these two sets of parents, the latter is more fundamental.

The concept paired with "Heaven and Earth parents" is "All things are siblings"(萬物同胞, Manmul Dongpo), which is the logical consequence of "Heaven and Earth are parents." If all beings are the children of Heaven and Earth, they are no less than brothers and sisters from the same parents. Thus he preaches about his creative concept of "Respect for things(敬物, Kyongmul)," claiming that all non-sentient beings, including stones, trees, and the sky, should be considered as a "Hanul-*nim*," divine beings.

Interestingly, 30 years later after Choe Si-hyeong was executed for treason in 1898, Yi Don-hwa, a Donghak thinker succeeding Choe Si-hyeong, mentioned ‘nim’ while explaining the meaning of ‘Respect for things(敬物, Kyongmul)’ in his *Philosophy of New Man*(新人哲學, *Sin'in Cholhak*, 1931).

There was once a Buddhist priest who always used the honorific term ‘nim’ to refer to every piece of food and natural product he consumed. The reason for this was, “The human body cannot be raised apart from nature, and nature has the status of adoptive parents to human.” In fact, nature and human cannot be separated at any moment, and ... nature is the primogenitor that gave birth to humans. ... Westerners think as if there were a gap between nature and human that hinders their connection with each other, which leads to the idea that human are isolated from nature. However, this is the same mistaken idea as to think that flowers and flower buds originate from different principles. We should never fall into this kind of error.¹

3. Nims are interconnected

In fact, Yi Donhwa's criticism is based on Choe Si-hyeong's view of human and nature, which claims to the interdependence of human and nature(天人相與, Chon'in Sangyo). He explains about the act of eating food as a transformation and exchange of Hanuls(Heavens).

Human relies on food as the basis for one's birth and growth, and Hanul(Heaven) relies on human to reveal the greatness and harmony of all creation brought by Hanul. Our

¹ Yi Don-hwa, *Sin'in Cholhak*, Seoul: Cheondogyo Jungang Chongbu, 1968, p.204.

breathing, moving, acting, wearing and eating are all thanks to the power of creation of Hanul-*nim*. We cannot leave the mechanism in which Hanul and human are cooperative(天人相與之機, Ch'onin Sangyo Jigi).²

“All things are Hanul and all matters are Hanul.” Once this logic is taken, there is no relationship that does not follow the way of ‘**Hanul eats Hanul.**’ ... Hanul achieves transformation of vitality(氣化, Kihwa) in homogeneous things through mutual aid, and it lets in transformation of vitality in heterogeneous things through the principle of ‘**Hanul eats Hanul**’ in order to nurture the entirety of Hanul. Therefore, on the one hand, Hanul fosters all species and things through **homogeneous transformation of vitality**; on the other hand, it promotes solidarity in the growth and development of all species and things through **heterogeneous transformation of vitality**.³

Here, Ch'oe Si-hyong says that in order to maintain human life, we have no choice but to rely on food. And from the perspective of universe, natural phenomena like lions eating rabbits and humans eating meat are all the process of transformation of vitality to nurture the whole world. This is why all beings like animals and plants are called ‘Hanul,’ a divine being. Thus he suggests of ‘thing-honoring ethics’ where all things are honored.

Choi Si-heong's ontology resonates with "new animism" by Irving Hallowell or Graham Harvey in that it treats all beings as persons, like rock-person, tree-person. And Donghak can be seen as an ‘Earth-

² Choi Si-heoung, “Ch’önjibumo(天地父母)” in *Haewol Sinsabopsol*. Yi Gyusöng, *Ch’oe Si-hyong üi Ch’olhak*, Seoul: Ehwa Womans University Press, p.134.

³ Choe Si-hyeong, “Hanul eats Hanul(以天食天, Ich'on Sikch'on)” in *Haewol Sinsabopsol*. Yi Gyusöng, *Ch’oe Si-hyong üi Ch’olhak*, Seoul: Ehwa Womans University Press, p.196.

honoring religion,' drawing on the expression "*Earth-honoring faith*" (2012) by Larry Rasmussen, because in his philosophy the Earth is regarded as a gracious being like parents nurturing all beings. As early as in the 19th century, Choi Si-hyeong has shown us the way how we treat other-than-human beings in the era of Anthropocene.