

## EINSTEIN AND THEORY OF RELATIVITY IN KOREA DURING THE 1920S

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### Abstract

I discuss the public understanding of Albert Einstein and the theory of relativity in Korea during the period of Japanese Colonization, particularly in the 1920s. He and his theory were popular subjects both in journalism and in public lectures. In 1921 Einstein first appeared in Korean journalism with his visit to the U.S.A. to campaign for the establishment of Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Since his visit to Japan in 1922, Einstein was frequently reported in Korean journalism, 58 times by *The Dong-a Daily* and 37 times by *The Chosen Ilbo* before his death in 1955. Chosŏn Education Association invited Einstein to Korea for promoting the Movement for Establishing Civil University, but in vain. A series of public lectures on the theory of relativity were held. Ch'oe Yun-Sik, a Korean mathematical physics student at Tokyo Imperial University, gave several public lectures on the theory of relativity in 1923. Those lectures were a part of the movement for Reconstruction (*Gaejo*) during the 1920s. In summary, Einstein and his theory of relativity were well known in Korea, and this was related with Korea's cultural movement and independence movement against the Japanese Colonization Government.

**Keywords:** Public understanding of science, Einstein, Theory of Relativity, Korea under Japanese Colonization, Chosŏn Education Association, the Movement for Establishing Civil University, Ch'oe Yun-Sik, Culture Movement.

### 1. Introduction

A special lecture was held in Seoul on July 17, 1923. The place was Ch'ondoist Church, built on February of 1921, and the title was "Einstein's Principle of Relativity." The speaker was Ch'oe Yun-Sik, a student of the Department of Science, Tokyo Imperial University. It is said that "he attended the lectures of the corresponding authorities, including Einstein himself, and has been studying this topic for a long time, enough for this special lecture on 'Einstein's Principle of Relativity', which is called the revolution in the academic world of physics" (*The Dong-a Daily*, July 16, 1923).

Although nowadays Albert Einstein and his theory of relativity are famous all over the world, it is not well known if this was also the case for Korea under the Japanese Colonization in the 1920s.

What was the motivation of the scientific lectures in Korea during the 1920s? What was the meaning of Einstein and his theory to the Koreans under the Japanese Colonization in the 1920s? What was the impact of the name Einstein to the later Korean scientific culture?

In reply to these questions, I will begin in the next section with the lecture tours of the Association of Korean Students Abroad in Tokyo which began in 1920, emphasizing the lectures by Ch'oe Yun-Sik. Then I will try to explain the background of Ch'oe's lectures by exploring the newspapers of those days. In conclusion, I will discuss the implication of Einstein and the theory of relativity for the Korea under the Japanese Colonization.\*

### 2. Lecture Tours of the Association of Korean Students Abroad in Tokyo

#### 2.1 AKSAT and Lecture Tours

The Association of Korean Students Abroad in Tokyo (**abbr. AKSAT**) was founded in 1913 as a union of the regional groups of Korean students studying in Tokyo, Japan. In fact, the March 1 Independence Movement was preceded by the February 8 Declaration of Independence by AKSAT in 1919.

It was July of 1920 when AKSAT began the lecture tours in Korea under the Japanese Colonization (usually called Chosŏn at that time). The team, comprised of 18 lecturers, was to have delivered lectures at 32 cities in 25 days starting July 10. This event was financially supported by *The Dong-a Daily*. The plan was very systematic. All the members returned to Korea on July 8. The first lecture was held at Pusan on July 10, and was followed by a series of lectures leading to the principal lecture in Seoul on July 18. After the lecture in Seoul, they were going to divide into three teams – western, northern and southeastern part – and continue the lecture tour until August 4. However, the lecture at

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\* Throughout this paper I used the McCune-Reischauer Romanization system for the transliteration of proper names in Korean. The Revised Romanization system, which is the official transliteration system in Korea since 2000, uses no breves and apostrophes. The vowels with breve can be changed by the substitution: ö → eo, ü → eu, etc.

Dansōngsa, Seoul, which gathered more than thousand attendees, was coercively dismissed by the Japanese police owing to the presumable violation of the Security Law. However, Kim Chun-Yōn, the director of the lecture tour team, emphasized at his first lecture that the purpose of the lecture tour is “not a political movement but a cultural movement” (*The Dong-a Daily*, July 11, 1920). This voice was also echoed in *The Dong-a Daily*, the supporter of the event: “This is pure Culture Movement, intending to gather the ears of our fellow countrymen to the cry of ‘We must cultivate our power in order to keep abreast of times’” (*The Dong-a Daily*, July 19, 1920).



Figure 1. Lecture tour of AKSAT (Source: *The Donga Daily*, July 18, 1921)

Then, was it really a pure cultural movement? What did it mean by ‘pure’? Wasn’t it related to the then political issues? In reply to these questions, let us check the titles of the lectures. They include: “Development of Culture and Freedom of Speech,” “Living and Reconstruction,” “On the Cause of Present Economic Panic,” “Mission of Youth in the Era of Reconstruction,” “The New Era and Our Urgent Tasks,” “Problem of Customs between Korea and Japan” etc. This shows that some of the lecturers were interested in the current political affairs. For instance, there was hot debate concerning the abolishment of the customs between Colonial Korea and Japan at that time. Japanese bourgeois capitalists had demanded abrogate the barrier of the customs in order to make inroads into Korea. The unscreened pouring of Japanese corporations into Korea would destroy the budding of Korea’s own capitals. In fact, the Imperial Japanese Government abolished the customs in August, 1920. In this regards, the very first lecture tour team, consisting of Korean students who were studying in Japan, could hardly avoid the current political issues. Rather, we can say that the difference between the political movement and the cultural movement was sometimes indistinguishable.

Nine years after the Coercive Occupation by the Japanese Colonization in 1910 was harsh on Korean people. The year 1919 witnessed the nation-wide revolutionary movement of Korean people demanding the Independence of Korea. This is called the March 1 Independence Movement. More than two million people participated in this uprising movement, and at least 7,500 were killed (according to an announcement of the Japanese Government). After the severe resistance of Korean people, the Colonial Governor Hasekawa was replaced with Saito Makoto in August, 1919. Saito endorsed the so-called “Cultural Politics” instead of Hasekawa’s “By the Bayonet.” One of the results was permission of the freedom of speech. New newspapers were founded one by one in that year and afterwards. Among them we see *The Dong-a Daily* and *The Chosen Ilbo*. Intellectuals in groups started their literary coterie magazines. Many youth associations were organized all over the country. Hence, the Culture Movement became active in the 1920s.

The two theoretical pillars of the Culture Movement were the Cultivation-of-Capability discourse and the Reconstruction discourse. The Cultivation-of-Capability discourse, flourishing in the 1910’s, criticized both the socialist groups who emphasized the social revolution, and the nationalist groups who stressed the priority of political means. Here the capability was meant to be economical, and hence economical thoughts were accentuated. On the other hand, the Reconstruction discourse requested the reform both in individual and in social aspects. The Reconstruction advocates gave emphasis to building a new civilization. *The Dong-a Daily*, the supporter of the AKSAT lecture tour, apparently promoted both discourses with more weight on the Reconstruction.

In 1921 the second lecture tour of AKSAT was successfully carried out in 26 cities from July 16 to August 18. Kim Jong-Pil, the first speaker, emphasized at the lecture in Seoul that they “never intended to discuss politics or current affairs but only to propagate the belief in culture with moderate attitude.” This was the official viewpoint of the lecture tour team and was repeated in the evaluating remarks:

It is true that our nation is left behind the current state of affairs and endured to manage meaningless life. But we should not continue such an unreasonable and unfair life. In that sense this self-awakening movement for enthusiastic life has also begun in our society. (*The Dong-a Daily*, August 18, 1921)

The titles of the lectures include: “Meaning of Culture Movement,” “Inside of Cultural Life,” “Ethical Status of Concept of Responsibility,” “Vice of Early Marriage and Future Matters of Society,” and “Life and Reconstruction.” Many of them explicitly included the words ‘culture’ or ‘reconstruction’ and were restricted to the “moderate belief in culture.”

The second lecture tour was so successful that many similar lecture tours began to be organized by other institutions. The lecture tour became an important mainstream of the social youth movement beyond the training schools or the evening classes for laymen. New lecture tour teams included (1) religious organizations, such as Ch’ondoist Youth Association, Association of Kobe Western School Theological Students, Association of Tokyo Buddhist Students Abroad, Association of Chosŏn Buddhist Students, (2) regional organizations, such as Lecture Tour Team of Yangsan Youths, Lecture Tour Team of Haenam Students, Hampyŏng Youths Association, and (3) educational institutions, such as Seoul Medical College. However, the lectures of these organizations were mostly about enlightenment and religion.

## 2.2 Ch’oe Yun-Sik’s Lecture

The third lecture tour, with six members divided into two teams, began on July 7, 1923. The first team, comprised of Han Chae-Kyŏm, Yi Chŏng-Kŭn and Yi Yŏ-Sŏng, began their lectures in Taegu. The members of the second team were Han Wi-Kŏn, Kim Yŏng-Sik and Ch’oe Yun-Sik. As mentioned in the previous section, Ch’oe Yun-Sik’s lecture was entitled “Einstein’s Principle of Relativity.” His lecture would be noticeable, when compared to other lectures, such as “Sociological Study of Our Current Society,” “Realization of True Ego and Economical Barrier,” “Scholarly Examination of Capitalism and Socialism,” or “Keynotes of Culture Movement.” Ch’oe’s lecture drew an audience of more than two hundred, which consisted mainly of school students and school-teachers.

The third Summer Lectures of the Association of Students in Tokyo were held at the Ch’ondoist Church, Kyŏng-Un Dong, Seoul as announced. Mr. Ch’oe Yun-Sik will also deliver a special lecture on Einstein’s Principle of Relativity again at the Ch’ondoist Church on 4 o’clock today. *As is well known, this Principle of Relativity is essentially so difficult that even the brain of the expert cannot understand it.* It would be impractical for Chosŏn people, to whom science is still infantile. Therefore they decided to have a special lecture rather than regular lecture. The speaker will discard the professional color thoroughly and try to make laymen understand the lecture by employing a popular tone. He is now enrolled in the Department of Science, Tokyo Imperial University. In particular it is said that *he attended the lectures on this Principle of Relativity delivered by many authorities several times, including Mr. Einstein himself*, and hence he is expert at it. (*The Dong-a Daily*, July 17, 1923. Emphases added.)

Note that the speaker had attended Einstein’s lecture and those of other authorities. As I will discuss later, Ch’oe Yun-Sik stayed in Japan (in Hiroshima and Tokyo) between 1918 and 1926. Einstein visited Japan from November 17 to December 29, 1922 and delivered lectures in Tokyo till December 3. Probably Ch’oe had attended those lectures. Also according to this report, it was well known in the 1920s, that the Principle of Relativity was so difficult that even the expert cannot fully understand it. One may ask, in what way the difficulty of Einstein’s theory was recognized among people around that time. Let me save this question for later discussion and for now turn to the response of the audience.

We reported that Mr. Ch’oe Yun-Sik, one of the Lecture Tour Team of the Association of Students, would deliver a special lecture on the theory of relativity. In the evening on the 17<sup>th</sup> the lecture began at Ch’ondoist Church at 8 o’clock p.m., while the other two speakers delivered lectures in Inchŏn at the same time. Owing to the characteristic of the subject matter, only two hundred or so audience members gathered. Most are high school students or technical college students. Also, some high school teachers attended the lecture. The three-hour-long lecture was full of mathematical formulae from the beginning to the end. It was said that one who has mathematical knowledge would have felt few difficulties. But most of them did their best to understand with difficulty. However, the students, major part of the audience, assiduously took notes to the end of the lecture, which gave a deep impression to those who saw and listened to the lecture. (*The Dong-a Daily*, July 19, 1923)

It is apparent that the interest in this special lecture was huge, although the level of the audiences’ understanding on the theory was rather low. What made these people attracted to such difficult scientific topics? Why did so many students gather and listen to the lecture? One of the answers might be found from the passion for acquiring new knowledge. Before the turn of the century, new knowledge including science was taught by the Western missionaries or newly-educated Korean intellectuals. This led to the reformation in the system of education of Imperial Korean (*Daehanjekuk*, meaning ‘The Great Han Empire’). With the Coercive Occupation by Imperial Japan, however, the system of education of Korea was fundamentally changed. There were no universities at all, and the most advanced institution was *technical college*, similar to then German *Hochschule*. The curriculum of technical college consisted of practical courses without any subjects related to advanced science. One can easily imagine that students from high school or technical college would be enthusiastic for the new knowledge taught by the 24-year-old lecturer who was studying in Japan. Indeed those lectures of AKSAT were related to the *Movement for Establishing Civil University* against the education policy of Japanese Colonization Government, which I will discuss in detail later. It is not clear whether Ch’oe Yun-Sik’s lecture in science was directly connected to the enthusiasm for the Reconstruction discourse

of *The Dong-a Daily* and the other members of the AKSAT lecture tour team. Nonetheless, it is true that Ch'oe Yun-Sik would not be in opposition to the main spirit of the lecture tour.

Ch'oe Yun-Sik already won applause from more than 300 attendees for his lecture entitled "From Newton to Einstein" in Masan on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July. A similar lecture at Suwŏn on July 14 gave an opportunity for the approximate 500 attendees "to be deeply moved." He lectured again in Sariwŏn on July 21<sup>st</sup> with the title of "Absolute and Relative." After he came back to Korea in March, 1926, he continued to deliver lectures on similar topics. For instance, he lectured "From Newton to Einstein" at a science symposium, hosted by the Corea Industrial Association in Japan, at Jongro Central YMCA on July 22, 1927, and "Mathematical View of Nature" at Ch'ŏndoism Memorial Hall on February 8, 1929.

### 2.3 Other Lectures

The Ch'oe Yun-Sik's lectures, however, were not the only events of such kind. There were five more lectures on the theory of relativity by that time. For instance, the Student Association of Hadong Public School hosted a lecture on August 17, 1922. It was reported that "Kang U-Sŏk delivered a passionate speech entitled 'The Extremity of Thinking and Einstein's Theory of Relativity' ... and gave great insights to the four hundred attendees" (*The Dong-a Daily*, August 30, 1922). The speaker Kang, from Hadong in Kyŏngnam Province, organized Hyŏl-Sŏng-Dan in September of 1919, while he taught at Kwang-Lim School in Ch'inju. He was put in prison twice for the matter, and he kept devoting himself to raising national consciousness while working at the Hadong branch of *The Dong-a Daily*. From his previous experiences, we could hardly see any close association between Kang and "Einstein's Theory of Relativity." Presumably he might have an opportunity to read Na Kyŏng-Sŏk's column, about which we will see more in the later section of this paper, while he work with *The Dong-a Daily*. Note that this lecture preceded Ch'oe Yun-Sik's one.

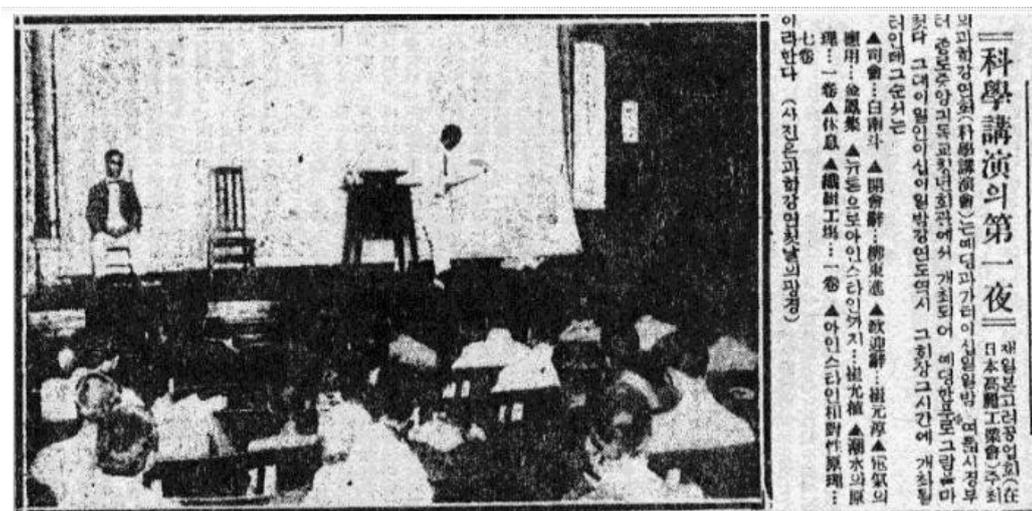


Figure 2. Science symposium on July 22, 1927 (Source: *The Dong-a Daily*)

On October 31, 1925, "Lecture on the Issues of Science" was held by 'Student Association of Science Research.' Entitled "On the Theory of Relativity," the lecture featured a speaker named Ahn Il-Yŏng. Ahn, a middle-school teacher, began his career thanks to the recommendation of Ch'oe Kyu-Dong. Their nicknames, *Geometry Ahn* and *Algebra Ch'oe* respectively, might tell us that they both taught mathematics. They could have been in the audience's seats for the Ch'oe Yun-Sik's lecture of July 17, 1923 in Ch'ŏndoist Church at Kyŏng-Un Dong, considering the fact that "middle school teachers were a part of participants" for the event.

Another lecture, sponsored by the Publishing Labor Association in Seoul, followed on April 14, 1929. Yi Chŏng-Sŏb, who had studied in France for seven years, spoke on the "Issue of Theory of Relativity." In his lecture, Yi mentioned that he would not forget "the moment, in France, when he witnessed a fourteen-year old boy discussed Einstein's theory of relativity while walking with an umbrella through the wind" (*Byŏl-Gŏn-Gon*, Vol. 37, 1931, p.128). Yi Chŏng-Sŏb was active in publishing his articles in such journals and magazines as *Dong-Kwang* ('Eastern Light'), *Byŏl-Gŏn-Gon* ('Special Heaven and Earth'), and *Sam-Ch'ŏn-Ri* ('Whole Korean Territory'). Based on what he wrote for the magazines, we may conclude that he studied cultural issues and international politics. For instance, he wrote an article entitled "National Science Lecture (1): Barbarians and Ideas of Number" in the second issue of *Sam-Ch'ŏn-Ri*, published in September 1929. Very little is known about the details of his lecture, but it would basically be about something similar to his published articles: escaping from the state of barbarianism by means of scientific thinking.

All these three lectures had something in common: the speakers were neither researchers nor specialists of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. This is why the lectures by Ch'oe Yun-Sik, who was studying in the College of Science at the Tokyo Imperial University and attended several academic events including Einstein's lecture, were remarkable among several similar lectures. The only comparable event to Ch'oe's lecture was the Hŭng-Nam academic lecture held on July 28, 1931. Doh Sang-Rok, lecturer of Tokyo Imperial University, spoke under the title "On the Theory of Relativity" for the lecture. Also Ima Shinmei (Kŭm Jin-Myŏng), a Japanese Ph.D., delivered a lecture of "Einstein's

Theory of Relativity” at Bon-Chǒng-Kūm-Hong-Kwan in Gongchū of Ch’ung-Nam Province on April 30, 1923. The attendees for the lecture, reportedly, were three hundred Japanese and three hundred Koreans.

So far, I’ve been discussing the lectures on Einstein’s theory, but Einstein and his Theory of Relativity were rather familiar topics in newspapers and magazines of that time, which I will be talking about in the next section.

### 3. Einstein and Korean Journalism

#### 3.1 Einstein Appears in Newspaper

The name ‘Einstein’ first appeared in a Korean public newspaper through a report on his visit to the U.S.A. for the campaigning of the establishment of Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Einstein, with Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952), visited the U.S.A. from April 1 to May 30, 1921. A telegram from Washington reported that “Dr. *Ainsutain* [sic] has Swiss nationality, invented the dogma of Relativity Principle, and teaches at University of Berlin in Germany” (*The Dong-a Daily*, May 19, 1921). It emphasized that both persons, Einstein and Weizmann, were Jews who lost their own mother country long ago. This kind of discourse was rather common during that time. For instance, one can read in an editorial of 1908 that “Jews were killed cruelly everywhere because they made their own mother country be lost.” (*Taekūkhakbo*, February 24, 1908) And “*Yaso* [sic, Jesus], born in Bethlehem”, who was already well-known through the spread of Christianity, is also a Jew. The New Year’s edition of *The Dong-a Daily* in 1922 introduced fourteen of the World’s most important figures using their pictures. Einstein was the sixth, following for instance, “Trotsky, commander-in-chief for the Red Army” and “Gandhi, a hope for all of India.” The caption read: “Mr. *Ayunstain* [sic], inventor of the Relativity Principle. A revolution is about to take place destroying the Newton’s theory on attraction” (*The Dong-a Daily*, January 1, 1922).

After this brief introduction of Einstein, his new theory also began gaining interest. Presumably the first report was the feature series written by Gong-Min (meaning literally ‘citizen’). The series consisted of seven articles on “Einstein’s Theory of Relativity.” Gong-Min was the nickname of Na Kyōngsōk (1890-?), a communist and reporter who graduated Kyōngki Technical College in 1914. For what reason did he write a series of articles on the theory of relativity?

Na Kyōngsōk’s seven articles consisted of five sections: (1) revolution in science (2) denial of the concept of ether (3) philosophical implication (4) the limit of speed, and (5) notion of time and space. In Na’s article Einstein was introduced as “a Jew whose people went adrift throughout the world for 2,000 years since the ruin of their country” and one of “Three Monsters of the World.” The article continues, “Albert Einstein invoked a great revolution in physics to overthrow the daydream of ‘the absolute’ from the past. If one does not know Einstein’s theory of relativity, he or she would not be called modernized. However, as Einstein himself talked bombastically, only a dozen people in the world understand his theory.” In fact, the articles were full of mistakes and revealed the author’s misunderstanding of the theory. For instance, he brought up the notion of vacuum in order to explain Einstein’s assertion that there is no ether: “One cannot imagine that ether exists even in a vacuum. Suppose that ether should exist. Is it always at rest or is it trembling sometimes? ... Since light rays always travel straight, ether cannot be trembling. Ether is neither at rest nor trembling. There cannot be such matters in the world. Light rays propagate without any medium. Hence Mr. *Ain* [sic] concluded the absence of ether.” (*The Dong-a Daily*, February 23-27, March 1, 3, 1922)

What did motivate Na to introduce Einstein even though he did not fully understand the theory of relativity? It seems that he envisioned Einstein as a revolutionary scientist, because he also put Lenin in his ‘Three Monsters in the World’. One can conclude that Na was interested more in Einstein’s revolutionary role as daydream-breaker than in his physics *per se*. Though Na Kyōngsōk’s articles were full of misunderstandings, and his intentions did not concern Einstein’s theory itself, it could still be this article that publicized the difficulty of Einstein’s theory of relativity. Remember that the report on Ch’oe Yun-Sik’s lecture in 1923 was talking about the notorious difficulty of the theory of relativity.

#### 3.2 CEA Invites Einstein

Korean intellectuals became closer to Einstein on the occasion of his visit to Japan in 1922. A Japanese magazine called *Kaizo* (meaning ‘reconstruction’) invited Einstein to Japan in 1921. The socialist review magazine was first published by Yamamoto Sanehiko in April of 1919. The fourth issue sold more than one million copies. Yamamoto decided to spend the sales profit for cultural enhancement. When he invited Bertrand Russell in July of 1921, Yamamoto asked him to recommend three persons for invitation next. Russell answered, “Einstein, Lenin, and no third.” Kuwaki Ayao (1878-1945) and Ishiwara Jun (1881-1947) helped bring about the invitation of Einstein. Kuwaki studied at Berlin University for two years since 1907 and visited Einstein in Bern on March 11, 1909. He was known as the first Asian whom Einstein met. Ishiwara was a pupil of Arnold Sommerfeld in Munich and was also advised by Max Planck in Berlin. He did collaborative work with Einstein in Zurich from April to July 1913. Murohushi Takanobu, a staff member of the Berlin branch of *Kaizo*, met Einstein to deliver Ishiwara’s letter and Yamamoto’s invitation. The latter requested that Einstein should deliver special lectures in Tokyo for three days, three hours per day and two-and-a-half-hour long general lectures in Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, Fukuoka, Sendai, and Sapporo (Ezawa 2005).

This news became known to the colonial Ch’osŏn by a report on June 26, 1922. On November 11, the newspaper said that Einstein would arrive in the port of Kobe on the *Kitanomaru* on November 16. Even before Einstein’s arrival, the news on his winning of the Nobel Prize disclosed: “This year’s Nobel Prize will be given to the German scientist

Einstein. English Soedi [sic, Soddy] for the Chemistry Prize and Spanish Pene-ente [sic, Benavente] for the Literature Prize”. (In fact, the Nobel laureates of 1922 were Niels Bohr, Francis William Aston and Jacinto Benavente. Albert Einstein and Frederick Soddy were the Nobel-prize winners of 1921.)

Three days before this report, on November 10, one can see an interesting article in which the Chosŏn Education Association (**abbr. CEA**) invited Einstein to Korea:

On this occasion of the famous Jewish scholar Dr. Anisutain[sic]’s visit to Japan, the Chosŏn Education Association has made the decision to invite him to Chosŏn because it would be very helpful to our academic world to introduce this internationally renowned scholar. Today Kang In-Taek was dispatched to Tokyo as an ambassador to make contact with Einstein. (*The Dong-a Daily*, November 10, 1922)

At that time Kang In-Taek (1894-?) was working as the executive director of CEA after serving three years in prison for his participation in the March 1 Independence Movement against the Japanese Colonization. He was a member of the central executive committee of the Association for Realization of Civil University (**abbr. ARCU**). He was a member of the boards of the Renovation of Ch’ondoism, the Preparatory Committee for the Convention of National Youth Party, the Association for Relief of Famine, *Shinkanhoe*, and the Principal of Agricultural Vocational School of Kando. For what purpose did CEA send Kang to invite Einstein?



**Figure 3.** News on the invitation of Einstein to Korea  
(Source: *The Dong-a Daily*, November 10, 1922)

Han Kyu-Sŏl, Yi Sang-Chae and Yun Ch’i-So played leading roles in establishing CEA on June 20, 1920. CEA had the plan of operation as follows: (1) Reform of Education System, (2) Propagation of Education Thought, (3) Extension of Educational Institution, (4) Reform of Public Morals related to Education, (5) Establishment of Library and Publication of Periodicals, and (6) Honoring Meritorious Services in Education. Which among these would be closest to the primary motivation of inviting Einstein because “it would be very helpful to ... academic world”?

Recently D.K. Hong (2005) presented an interesting idea that Einstein was closely related to the Movement for Establishing Civil University. Einstein was first known for his campaign for establishing Hebrew University in Jerusalem. ARCU was founded on November 23, 1922. It was two weeks after Kang In-Taek was accredited as an ambassador for inviting Einstein. Later Kang played a very important role for ARCU. Hence Hong hinted that the report on Einstein would be one of the motivations of the movement for founding this university in Korea. But it was on February 3, 1922 that *The Dong-a Daily* ran an editorial which maintained that the civil university should be established in near future. This is the very beginning of the Movement for Establishing Civil University. This movement was originally rooted in the Movement for Compensating National Debt, begun in 1906 to redeem the national loan from Japan to avoid the impending coercive occupation by Japan, and in the attempt to raise the status of Pŏsŏng Technical College and Sung-Sil College to that of University. Thus we can conclude that the invitation of Einstein did not directly aim at the Movement for Establishing Civil University. Presumably CEA planned to invite Einstein in a hope to get support from him for that movement. But the movement came first, and Einstein could hardly be a motivation for the movement. Rather, Einstein might be helpful to the reform of public morals related to education.

Was Ch’oe Yun-Sik’s lecture a part of efforts related to the Movement for Establishing Civil University? My answer is yes. Above all, the financial sponsor of the lecture tour of AKSAT was *The Dong-a Daily*. The newspaper was enthusiastic for the Reconstruction Movement from the very beginning. Considering the titles of the three lecture tours of AKSAT, the lecturers were advocates of the Reconstruction Movement. They attempted to illustrate the way for reconstruction in both individual and social life. Ch’oe Yun-Sik’s lecture might not be an exception to others. It was,

however, the very editorial of *The Dong-a Daily* that raised the issue of establishing university after stagnation of the related efforts for years:

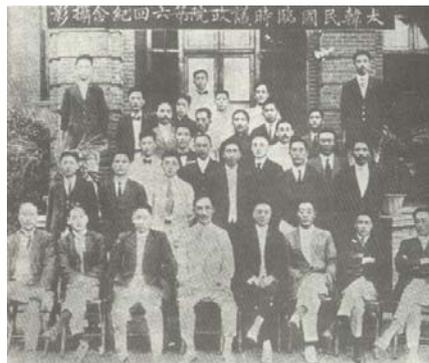
Independence of scholarship and learning is in the greatest relation to the dignity of nation and people's actual life. The political subordination could be overcome as time changes or world changes, and so could be the economical obedience. But the mental subordination in the scholarship is not the temporary surrender or subordination. It would deprive foundation of the nation forever and it would not be a mere formal, superficial restriction but confinement to the bone and core. (*The Dong-a Daily* February 3, 1922)

*The Dong-a Daily* emphasized the independence of the scholarship or learning and thus asserted the necessity of the establishment of the civil university. Here 'civil' meant not 'non-public' but 'opposite to the Japanese Government'. Hence it was indeed 'Korean University'. From a glimpse of Ch'oe's lectures on the theory of relativity, one would not notice the spirit of the "independence of the scholarship against the Japanese Colonization," nor the hope of many contemporary intellectuals for the Korean University. But I think that one of Ch'oe's motivations for choosing Einstein and his theory as the subject matter for this lecture tour was his belief in the independence of the learning and scholarship against Japanese imperialism.

### 3.3 Growing Interest in Einstein

Let us go back to November of 1922. Since Einstein's arrival in Japan, the news on Einstein followed day after day. The titles include: "Who is Einstein?", "Relativity First Lecture", "*A-Bak-Sa's* Recent Movements", "*A-Bak-Sa's* New Discovery", and "Principle of Relativity Confirmed". *A-Bak-Sa* (meaning literally 'Dr. A') was the friendly nickname for Einstein. Because most Koreans have their surname in single syllable, the Koreans in the 1920s would also prefer the single-syllable nickname for Einstein.

Hwang Jin-Nam introduced Einstein and his theory in detail. He wrote seven articles for *The Dong-a Daily* in 1922, while he was in Berlin. First four (dated from November 14 to 17) were on "Physical Principle of Relativity Theory" and the next three (dated from November 18 to 20) on "Who is Einstein?". Hwang, born in Ham-Hüng in 1896, "immigrated to Hawaii as a child to finish the elementary and high school, and continued to" study at University of California, Universität zu Berlin, and Université de Paris. A newspaper which was published in U.S.A. for Koreans reported: "Now he is a junior of University of California and is 21 years old. His intellectual quality, in essence, is outstanding and he is proficient at English. Hence each course was to him and he stood first in his class whenever he got examination" (*Sinhanminbo*, June 20, 1918). He became a member of the diplomatic committee for Korean Provisionary Government located in Shanghai (Figure 3). Hwang Jin-Nam first heard from a colleague in Zurich of "Einstein who was studying at the department of physics in Berlin" in 1917. He met Einstein in Berlin "on the memorial day of Science Academy of Prussia" on February of 1922. He "heard of Einstein's departure for East Asia and determined to make him and his theory of relativity known to Koreans." The reason why Hwang wrote several articles on Einstein and the theory of relativity was to encourage people's spirit of independence and not to be left behind other countries.



**Figure 4.** The closing of the 6th Korean Provisionary Congress in Shanghai on September 17, 1919. Far right of the first row is Hwang Jin-Nam. (Source: *Munhwa Ilbo*, 1995, 41)

Attention to Einstein did not cease even after he returned to Germany in the early 1923. He was frequently reported in Korean journalism, 58 times by *The Dong-a Daily* and 37 times by *The Chosen Ilbo* before the report on his death and whole life on April 20, 1955. The first report on Einstein by *The Chosen Ilbo* was the news that Einstein turned down the invitation of the CEA. The reports covered the story of a Jew doctor who lost his mother country and thus suffered from contempt, Einstein as a musician playing violin, Einstein's new unified field theory, Einstein's exile to U.S.A., Einstein as one of the 'Admirable Elders', making the death mask of Einstein, etc.

Intellectuals in Korea slowly began to understand Einstein and his theory of relativity. For instance, on June of 1927, an article titled "Einstein's Principle of Relativity: Fundamental Reconstruction of the Notion of Time, Space and Universal Attraction etc." appeared in *Dong-Kwang*. It was written by Yi, Kwang-Su (1892-?), a famous contemporary

writer. His article consisted of four sections: Absolute point of standard, liquidation of ether, new interpretation of attraction, and curvature of space. Yi's writing is very modern and precise for the scientific matters. It seems that he fully understood Einstein's theory. This is contrasted to the case of, say, Shin Tae-Ak's article, "Dialogue on New Physics: Discourse on Einstein's Rule [sic] of Relativity," published in *Sin-Saeng-Whal* in June, 1922. Shin Tae-Ak's writing mimicked a part of a writing "Re-written Physics" written by a Japanese scholar but his understanding on the theory is very shallow.

The title of the magazine *Kaizo*, which invited Einstein, means 'reconstruction' in Japanese. It is not a coincidence that the title of Yi Kwang-Su's article contained 'Reconstruction' (*Gaejo* in Korean). Yi was an advocate of the Reconstruction Movement during the 1920s. It seems that Yi Kwang-Su regarded the theory of relativity as a touchstone of the way of reconstruction. Five years later, *Dong-Kwang* showed an interesting "Book Recommendation for Lovers":

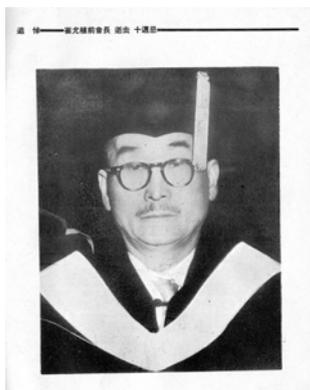
As for science, I recommend to read *Space, Time and Gravitation* written by Eddington. This book introduces Einstein's general theory of relativity. If you are familiar with mathematics, then you would enjoy it. If you are not familiar with advanced mathematics but want to know the outline of the theory of relativity, the best book would be *General and Special Theory of Relativity* written by Einstein himself. This book is written as understandable by any layman (*allgemeinverstaendlich*) [sic] but it is readable without basic algebra. Why do I recommend these books? Koreans have looked down on science and we Koreans should change this trend. Above all, we Koreans should not be left behind in the march of progress in the world. (*Dong-Kwang*, Vol. 39, November, 1932)

#### 4. Ch'oe Yun-Sik

Who was Ch'oe Yun-Sik? He was born in Sönch'ön of Northern Pyöng-an Province on November 28, 1899. He finished Kyöngsöng High School in 1917 and took the teacher training course for one more year. Then he went to Hiroshima, Japan to continue his study. In 1922 he graduated from the Department of Science I, Hiroshima Advanced Education College, and began his study at the Department of Mathematics in College of Science, Tokyo Imperial University. In his fifth year stay in Japan, he delivered lectures on "Einstein's Theory of Relativity." He graduated from Tokyo Imperial University in 1926. He started his carrier as a teacher at Whimun High School. He became a professor at Kyöngsöng Advanced Technical College in 1936 and at Kyöngsöng Mining College in 1940. Ch'oe Yun-Sik recalled those times:

In spring of 1926, I returned to my mother country after 8 year study in Japan. For the first five years I taught math and physics at several high schools. At that time, I endeavored to keep abreast with the currents by reading the journals such as *Japan Physico-Mathematics* or the textbooks such as *Course on Advanced Algebra*, published in Japan. Since 1931 I had taught advanced mathematics at several colleges: Yönhu Technical College, Kyöngsöng College, Mining Technical College as well as Kyöngsöng Advanced Technical College. (*Sacho*, September 1958)

When he was asked for his major philosophy of life, Ch'oe Yun-Sik replied that he had taken a serious view on science, thoughts and socio-culture. Though he was known as a mathematician, he was deeply interested in science and its cultural meanings.



**Figure 5.** Ch'oe Yun-Sik in his days of the dean of Seoul National University

In 1945, Korea won Independence from the Japanese Colonization. But the conflict between U.S.S.R. and U.S.A. aggravated the political confusion. Meanwhile Ch'oe Yun-Sik participated in the Chosön Academy, mainly led by Baek Nam-Un and Kim Yang-Ha. The Chosön Academy was composed of ten faculties: (1) Faculty of Science, (2) Faculty of Engineering, (3) Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry, (4) Faculty of Fisheries, (5) Faculty of Medicine, (6) Faculty of

Pharmacy, (7) Administrative Office for Technology, (8) Faculty of Economy and Laws, (9) Faculty of History and Philosophy, and (10) Faculty of Literature and Languages.

Ch'oe Yun-Sik became the president of Kyōngsōng Mining College in September of 1945, and the head of the department of mathematics of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences of Seoul National University next year. He founded the Korean Physico-Mathematics Society in October of 1946. Starting from 1948, he served as the Dean of College of Liberal Arts and Sciences of Seoul National University. In 1954 he became the president of the Korean Mathematical Society which was transformed from the Korean Physico-Mathematics Society. Ch'oe always regarded the establishing independent scholarly society as a main character of the independent government.

## 5. Conclusion

Why was Einstein famous to the Korean intellectuals under the Colonization Japan in the 1920s? One answer would be "because Einstein's Principle of Relativity gathered people's eyes since the First World War, but it became culminating through his visit to East Asia" (*Dong-Kwang*, Vol. 14, June, 1927). It regarded the celebrity of Einstein in Korea as a mere fad arising due to the fact that Einstein happened to visit Japan. Einstein became famous in Korea because he was already famous in the world. But that is very naïve viewpoint. This kind of view could not make clear the relation between the Movement for Establishing Civil University and the invitation of Einstein by the Chosōn Education Association. One should also note that Einstein was Jew and Jews lost their own country long time ago like Korea in 1910. Moreover, Einstein was a victim of oppression by the totalitarianism of Nazis. Hence the Korean intellectuals, under the coercive occupation by Imperial Japan, might have felt empathy with Einstein. However, this is also part of story, because his theory is missing.

More reasonable explanation of Einstein's reputation would be the contemporary Culture Movement. The Korean intellectuals in the 1920s were interested in Einstein and his theory because it belonged to the 'science as culture' and they felt social responsibility to keep abreast with current thoughts. Although Einstein's theory of relativity was seldom well understood and hardly discussed, it played an important role for maintaining the interest in the stuffs outside domestic area.

Above all, one can imagine that Ch'oe Yun-Sik's experience with the lecture on the theory of relativity, as a member of the lecture tour of AKSAT in his early twenties, would give him a great motivation and enthusiasm for science and culture, and this enabled him to found the Korean Physico-Mathematics Society. Maybe one of the greatest achievements of the introduction of Einstein and his theory to Koreans in the 1920s might be what Ch'oe Yun-Sik did as a teacher, researcher and educational administrator.

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