Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

# The modern transformation of Korean political thinking : revisiting the political ideas of the Late-Nineteenth-Century Reformists

Kim, C.Y.

**Citation**
Kim, C. Y. (2019, November 14). *The modern transformation of Korean political thinking : revisiting the political ideas of the Late-Nineteenth-Century Reformists*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/80325

| | |
|---|---|
| Version: | Publisher's Version |
| License: | Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden |
| Downloaded from: | https://hdl.handle.net/1887/80325 |

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page

Universiteit Leiden

Leiden University Repository

The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/80325 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author**: Kim, C.Y.
**Title**: The modern transformation of Korean political thinking : revisiting the political ideas of the Late-Nineteenth-Century Reformists
**Issue Date**: 2019-11-14

## Chapter Five

## The Reconstruction of Political Thinking 1:

## Re-conceptualisation of Government and Desirable Governmental Systems

In this chapter, we will examine the reformist intellectuals' ideas of government and desirable governmental systems to understand their reconstruction of political thinking. The decline of the Confucian ethical ideal gradually undermined the foundation of Confucian monarchy in Chosŏn and the traditional legitimacy of governance. As a consequence, the need to re-establish the monarchy upon the ground of the post-Confucian social condition arose as a pivotal task for the reformists to address in the late nineteenth century. From the 1880s, the reformists began to unveil novel ideas about the purpose and role of government, which went in tandem with their championing of constitutional monarchy as an alternative to the existing absolute Confucian monarchy. The reformists' redefinition of government and desirable governmental systems put forth in the 1880s and '90s spoke to an important political orientation of contemporary Korea that was formulated outside a Confucian-defined social framework. However, their novel view of government and desirable governmental systems were posed on the basis of an aspect of the Confucian ideas of governance, particularly *minbon* ideas. In this chapter I will highlight this point.

Examining the reformists' political thinking, previous studies have mainly put the focus on their understanding of the concept of 'the state' (*kukka*, 國家), not the re-conceptualisation of 'government' (*chŏngbu*, 政府). In his study on the reformists' adoption

of the concept of 'sovereignty' (*chukwŏn*, 主權) in the 1880s, Kim Hyŏnch'ŏl argued that the transmission of *Wanguo gongfa* (1864) into Korea brought about the spread of the concept of the sovereign state.[313] Developing Kim's study, Kim Sŏngbae focused on the reception of "modern" concepts of the state and surveyed them over an extended period of time. His main argument was that the initial adoption of the concept of "the sovereign state" was extended to "the nation state" in the 1880s and '90s and, after 1905, to "the statist, organic concept of the state."[314] These researchers mainly examined the adoption of the Western concepts of the state and regarded the reception of the Western concepts as a development in the notion of the state.

However, the researchers hardly heeded the legacy of the Confucian ideas of governance and their effects on the reformists, or the likelihood that the Confucian ideas had been merged with the reformists' new definition of the state. They simply surveyed the vocabulary indicating the state, such as *kuk* (國), *pang* (邦), and *kukka* (國家), in both Chinese and Korean sources in an attempt to explain the shift in the meaning of the state. In this regard, Kyung Moon Hwang's study is pronounced. Analysing the conceptual shift of the state (*kukka*) in the enlightenment period (1896–1910), he established that, in addition to the traditional notion of the state being the ruling authority, the first and foremost view was "a liberal, collectivist view of state," including the people and the land as core components of

---

[313] Kim Hyŏnch'ŏl, "Kaehwagi man'guk kongpŏb ŭi chŏllae wa sŏgu kŭndae chukwŏn kukka ŭi insik: 1880 nyŏndae kaehwap'a ŭi chukwŏn kaenyŏm ŭl chungsim ŭro" [The Transmission of *Wanguo gongfa* in the Enlightenment Period and the Adoption of the Modern Western Sovereign State: with a Focus on the Reformists' Reception of the Concept of Sovereignty], *Chŏngsin munhwa yŏn'gu* 28 (1) (2005), pp. 127–52.

[314] Kim Sŏngbae, "Han'guk ŭi kŭndae kukka kaenyŏm hyŏngsŏng sa yŏn'gu: kaehwagi rŭl chungsim ŭro" [A Study of the Formation of the Modern Concept of State in Korea: with a Focus on the Opening up/Enlightenment Period], *Kukje chŏngch'i nonch'ong* 52 (5), 2012, pp. 7–35.

the state. This conception was later augmented by the German-style, statist view of the state after 1905, when Korea fell to being a protectorate of Japan. Expounding this expansion of the concept of the state, Kyung Moon Hwang did not miss a Confucian influence on the adoption of the liberal, collectivist view of the state and argued for their compatibility.[315] His concentration on the concept of the state (*kukka*), however, failed to notice that a significant change in Korean political thinking took place in the 1880s and '90s over the concept of government (*chŏngbu*). His stress on the state forced him to focus on the period between 1905 and 1910 rather than on the 1880s and '90s, but the liberal and democratic view of government, similar to the liberal, collectivist view of the state, had already flourished in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. His focus on the concept of the state led him to delve into the period after 1905.

The studies on desirable governmental systems show little dissension. Through the studies of Shin Yong-ha, Cho Tonggŏl, Yun Taewŏn, and Park Ch'ansŭng, it has now been clarified that constitutional monarchy, the dominant alternative system in the 1880s and '90s, gradually gave way to the republican system in the wake of the country's falling to a protectorate status (1905) of imperialist Japan and King Kojong's forced abdication (1907).[316] Following Shin Yong-ha's claim, it is widely accepted that *Sinminhoe* (新民會,

---

[315] Kyung Moon Hwang, "Country or State? Reconceptualizing *Kukka* in the Korean Enlightenment Period," *Korean Studies* 24 (2000), pp. 1–24.

[316] Shin Yong-ha, "19segi han'guk ŭi kŭndae kukka hyŏngsŏng munje wa ip'hŏn konghwaguk surip undong" [Modern State-Building in Korea in the Nineteenth Century and the Movements for a Constitutional Regime] in *Han'guk kŭndae sahoesa yŏn'gu* (Seoul: Iljisa, 1987) pp. 9–96; Cho Tonggŏl, "Imsi chŏngbu surip ŭl wihan 1917 yŏn ŭi 'Taedong tankyŏl sŏn'ŏn'" ["The 1917 Pronouncement for Great Unity" for the Foundation of the Interim Government], *Han'gukhak nonch'ong* 9 (1987), pp. 123–70; Yun Taewŏn, "Hanmal Ilche ch'ogi chŏngch'eron ŭi non'ŭi kwajŏng kwa minchu konghwaje ŭi suyong" [Discussions of a Proper Governmental System in the Last Years of Taehan and the Early Years of the Colonial Period and the Adoption of the Democratic Republican System], *Chungguk hyŏndaesa yŏn'gu* 12 (2001), pp. 53–72; Pak Ch'ansŭng, "Han'guk ŭi

1907) was the first association to indicate a preference for a republican system. Korean intellectuals' interest in the republican system was further encouraged by witnessing the republican revolution in China in 1911. And, as Cho Tonggŏl has established, the independence movement activists' Pronouncement for Great Unity (大同團結宣言) in 1917 affirmed allegiance to the way to the republican system, until this was finally set as the governmental system of liberated Korea by the Provisional Government based in Shanghai in 1919. In relation to these long-term analyses, Chŏng Yonghwa focused on the 1880s to see the context in which the reformist intellectuals championed constitutional monarchy as a desirable system.[317]

All these studies traced the development of preferred governmental systems proposed by Korean reformists, but did not engage with the key elements of these preferred governmental systems. From the early 1880s, the reformist intellectuals paid attention to both 'constitutionalism' (specifically, the division of power and rule of law) and 'parliamentarianism' as pivotal components of an ideal governmental system, and strived to establish these two principles into political institutions through national reforms. From the perspective of the development of these two principles, the 1880s and '90s were not the period in which a regime change failed as researchers have commonly understood so, but one that gradually marched towards a constitutional system.

---

kŭndae kukka kŏnsŏl undong kwa konghwaje" [The Modern State-Building Movements in Korea and Republicanism], *Yŏksa hakbo* 200 (2008), pp. 305–343; and Pak Ch'ansŭng, *Taehanminguk ŭn minchu konghwaguk ida* [Great Republic of Korea is a Democratic Republic] (Seoul: Tolbaegae, 2013).

[317] Chŏng Yonghwa, "Chosŏn esŏŭi ip'hŏn minjujuŭi kwan'nyŏm ŭi suyong: 1880 nyŏndae rŭl chungsim ŭro" [The Acceptance of Constitutional Democracy in Chosŏn: with a Focus on the 1880s], *Han'guk chŏngch'i hakhoebo* 32 (2), (1998), pp. 105–124.

This chapter deals with these two themes, i.e., the re-conceptualisation of government and desirable governmental systems, one by one. A significant point to consider is the effects of the Confucian political necessity ideas (specifically, *minbon* ideas) on the reformists' novel ideas of government. Interestingly, it is identified that the reformists adopted the new ideas of government through the medium of the Confucian *minbon* ideas. In this chapter, we will first examine Chŏng Yakyong's understanding of governance, as his reconstruction of governance provides an example of the connection between Confucian ideas and the democratic view of governance.

## 1. The Reconstruction of Governance in the Case of Chŏng Yakyong

Confucianism provided standards for a number of areas of traditional Korean people's life. One of the areas deeply affected by Confucian teachings was governance. Yet the Confucian teaching on governance was not a single entity. One side of the teaching was mainly presented in classical Confucian texts, such as *Shujing* and *Mencius*, which taught an ontological deontology to the rulers by inculcating the idea that the common people are the foundation of the state so that all government measures should be taken for the sake of the people. A number of similar ideas in classical texts that belong to this category originated from ancient Chinese people's historical experiences. On the other hand, Confucianism furnished another resource for governance, through which the distinction between the high and the low and the ruling and the ruled was legitimised (正名, 分義); accordingly, people's different portion of rights and initiatives was justified. This side of Confucian ideas of governance helped to sustain the hierarchically divided, government-led society, while

contributing to the stability of Chosŏn's stratified social system. These two contrasting aspects of the Confucian ideas of governance are evident in the annals of the Chosŏn dynasty, *Sillok* (實錄). Generally, when the state was at peace, the latter idea was emphasised and the king's authority and the state's patriarchal role were pronounced, with the king often likened to a parent and common people to bare children (赤子). However, at a time of crisis, the former idea invariably recurred and predominated the royal court dialogue. Therefore, the Confucian theoretical bases supporting Chosŏn's monarchic rule were dual-sided: they obviously had a domineering aspect over the ruled, but, at the same time, furnished a self-restraining and self-corrective aspect on the part of the ruling.

The Confucian scholar who put emphasis on the latter aspect and reconceptualised governance before the late nineteenth century was Chŏng Yakyong (1762–1836). Chŏng's reconstructive thinking of governance reflects the historical context of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Chosŏn, in which the Confucian *ethical* worldview was waning. In his essays on the original form of governance, he problematised the premises of contemporary monarchic rule of Chosŏn and suggested an alternative model of governance. As noted above, in his research on the concept of the state (*kukka*) in Chosŏn, Kyung Moon Hwang found that in late Chosŏn *kukka* was mainly understood as "the central government." Since he concentrated on *kukka*, however, he missed the fact that a significant transformation in the idea of governance had already been made by Chŏng Yakyong.[318] Chŏng's reconstruction of governance is exhibited in his two essays, *T'angnon* (蕩論, On King T'ang)

[318] Kyung Moon Hwang, "Country or State? Reconceptualizing *Kukka* in the Korean Enlightenment Period," pp. 7–8.

and *Wŏnmok* (原牧, Original Governor), where he posed fundamental questions on governance.[319]

In *T'angnon* he traced the origins of governorship back to ancient times and asserted that all chief positions, such as village chief, county chief, local lords (諸侯), and emperor (天子), were "selected" (推) by people. If they were selected, claimed Chŏng, they should step down from their positions when their performance proved to be poor and thus those who selected them were in disharmony. Yet the chiefs demoted from their positions returned to their former status. Chŏng cited examples from history, where figures such as Dan Zhu (丹朱), Shang Jun (商均), Qizi (杞子), and Songgong (宋公) – all descendants or brothers of former emperors in ancient China – retained their original title of lord (侯) even after their family had lost the emperorship in their own generation. Analysing ancient governorship historically, he noted that, only after the Zhou dynasty (周) was overthrown by the Chin dynasty (秦), the previous royal family could no longer maintain their original title of lordship. He thus argued that the political practices of the feudal system in pre-Chin China were different from those in post-Chin era, contending that in the pre-Chin era rulers could be ousted if their performance was poor. In this regard, he argued in conclusion that T'ang's banishment of the tyrant king Jie (桀) of Xia (夏) was not a usurpation of the king as a subject but the application of customary practices of his time. With this logic, he refuted some scholars' view that T'ang was the first subject who betrayed his king. Chŏng added political imagination to historical facts and put forth a novel vision of governance to the contemporary dynastic kingship in Chosŏn.

[319] Chŏng Yakyong, "Wŏnmok," *Kukyŏk Tasan simunjip* vol. 5, trans. by Minjok munhwa ch'ujinhoe (Seoul: Sol, 1996), pp. 15–17; "T'angron," *Kukyŏk Tasan simunjip* 5, pp. 127–29.

Chŏng's quest for the original form of governorship was unfolded in more concrete terms in the essay *Wŏnmok*. He began his essay with a taunting question as to whether governors (牧民者) exist for the common people (百姓) or the people exist for governors. In order to draw out an answer to this question, he again traced the original formation of governorship back to ancient times and saw the creation of chief positions at each level of administration as the consequence of the need to resolve conflicts. When people had disputes over an issue at a village level, they could resolve it after hearing an old man's wise judgement. Thus, they selected him as the chief of the village (里正). Likewise, when the people of several villages could not resolve a conflict between them, they could hear a reasonable solution from a virtuous old man. So they selected him as the chief of the villages (黨正). In this way, the positions of county chiefs, provincial chiefs, local lords, and an emperor came to exist. In this original administrative system, according to Chŏng, due to the bottom-up selection system, laws were initiated from chiefs at the village level and reached up to the level of emperor. So, in the original form, governors served the interests of the people. But the old system collapsed and was replaced by the current top-down system, as a strong man took the emperorship by force and appointed local governors at each level at his will. As a consequence, laws were formed from above for the benefit of the ruler and descended to the lower administrative levels. The contemporary governing system in which the common people seemed to exist for the sake of governors arose from this context. Chŏng's intention was, of course, to criticise that system and to demonstrate that that governing system was a degenerate form of the original one. He was able to have this novel vision of governance, since he investigated classical texts that furnished him with ancient political practices in pre-Chin China. Finding historical traces through the classical texts, he

realised that the dynastic kingship of his time was simply a regime formed in a certain historical context. Since he comprehended the existence of a different model of governance, he was able to relativise the existing idea of governance.[320]

## 2. The Reformists' Re-conceptualisation of Government

In his study, Kyung Moon Hwang argued that the concept of the state in Chosŏn, which was mainly understood as the dynastic government or at times as the monarchy itself, shifted in the late nineteenth century by the enlightenment reformists. The reformists reformulated the state as a collective entity including not only the monarch and government but also the people and land. He noted that the liberal, collectivist view of the state was seen in the newspapers of the late 1890s, but full-blown ideas of that view of the state were exhibited in the publications after 1905.[321] Hwang's interest lies in the concept of the state, but if we turn our sight to government (*chŏngbu*), then we can see that, already from the 1880s, the reformist intellectuals avidly re-conceptualised it in a liberal and democratic fashion, which corresponds to the liberal, people-centred, collectivist view of the state that Hwang referred to. Among the reformists' works published in the 1880s and '90s, those of Pak Yŏnghyo and

---

[320] In his book *Mingyi daifanglu* (明夷待訪錄, 1663), Huang Zongxi (1610–1695), the Chinese scholar who lived in late Ming and early Qing, addressed the original prince (原君) as the first subject, in which he highlighted the customs and institutions of governance in ancient China and contrasted them with degenerate forms afterwards. Considering that Huang's ideas and style are quite similar to Chŏng Yakyong's in *T'angnon* and *Wŏnmok*, it is reasonable to surmise that Chŏng read Huang's book and received insights from it. Yet, in comparison with Huang's essay, Chŏng's exposition is more concrete and rich. See Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince* (Huang Tsung-hsi's *Ming-i-tai-fang-lu*) (Columbia University Press, 1993).

[321] Kyung Moon Hwang, "Country or State? Reconceptualizing *Kukka* in the Korean Enlightenment Period," 4–5.

Yu Kilchun, and *Tongnip sinmun*, register the redefinition of the concept of government. Let us first examine the case of Pak Yŏnghyo.

Pak's 1888 memorial to King Kojong aimed to convey the idea that Chosŏn was in a state of national crisis so that it was necessary to carry out urgent and comprehensive reforms. For this purpose, he divided the problems of the state into eight categories and analysed them, suggesting concrete reform measures to be carried out in each category. Importantly, in his memorial he posed a question regarding the *raison d'être* of a government three times. His question was raised in relation to the need to awaken the king to the urgency of national reforms. In this process, he needed to redefine the proper roles of a government. He asked: "what is the end of a government?" With regard to this question, his replies were slightly different according to contexts. At first, he answered that a government exists "to protect the people and preserve the state (保民護國)."[322] In order to vindicate the significance of protecting people's lives, he enumerated famous passages in classical texts including *Shujing* and *Mencius*, and historical anecdotes. Secondly, he asserted that the original intention (本志) that the people paid taxes and followed the authorities (出稅奉公) was because they wanted to "protect their bodies' and families' happiness and well-being (保身家之幸安)."[323] Finally, he argued that the original intention for which humans (人間) established a government was for the corroboration of their rights (通義), not for the sake of a king. Here, the rights of humans referred to the protection of their life, the seeking of liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Moreover, echoing Mencius, Pak adamantly stated that, if a government dislikes what people like and likes what people dislike, then the people (民) will overturn the

[322] Pak Yŏnghyo, "Pak Yŏnghyo ŭi kŏnbaeksŏ," 250.

[323] Pak Yŏnghyo, "Pak Yŏnghyo ŭi kŏnbaeksŏ," 264.

government and establish a new one.[324] Common to all the answers was that Pak found the *raison d'être* of government in the common people's interests. Since he upheld this view of government, it was not strange that he cited the Mencian dictum that 'a despotic ruler can be expelled from his throne.' With this idea of Pak, we can reasonably argue that Pak inherited the *necessity-based understanding of politics* within Confucianism as suggested in this thesis, specifically its *minbon* ideas. As Pak himself cited in his memorial, the famous passage in *Shujing*, "common people are the foundation of the state so that when the foundation is firm, the state can become stable," was a core reference point in reconstructing government. On the other hand, he did not mention the other side of Confucian ideas of governance – that is, rule as a way of maintaining the hierarchical social order; nor did he accept the king's predominant rights to state affairs and the different distribution of rights to people.

An important point to ponder is that Pak's understanding of government is not simply a reiteration of the Confucian *minbon* idea. As noted above, Pak cited the Mencian idea of the legitimate expulsion of a despotic ruler, but this idea had scarcely been quoted by Chosŏn Confucians because of its radicalness. His citation is thus extraordinary, and we can suppose that his adamant reference is based on a different notion of government. In this regard, we should heed his re-definition of government in the third reply, where he mentioned that "humans established a government" to substantiate their own rights. According to him, when a government trespasses against the people's rights, the people can overthrow and re-establish the government to protect their rights. This view of government is rather close to the government in the liberal and democratic political system, where the common people are the ultimate source of the legitimacy of governance and they themselves as political subjects can

[324] Pak Yŏnghyo, "Pak Yŏnghyo ŭi kŏnbaeksŏ," 288.

change the government. Thus, in Pak's redefinition of government, both the Confucian and the liberal/democratic view of government are intertwined without tension. The idea of *minbon* functioned as a medium of the adoption of the liberal and democratic view of government.

How, then, can this resemblance be explained? Roughly speaking, the liberal/democratic view of government represents the disintegration of the *ancien régimes* in modern Europe. In opposition to the values and practices of the *ancien régimes*, the enlightenment thinkers and the liberal thinkers of the nineteenth century reinvented humanistic values as universal ones. They relativised the traditional social and cultural presuppositions and re-conceptualised the notion of the state. Upon this basis, they envisaged a society in which all people would have universal rights. In this course, democracy, which had been one of the ancient Greek political systems, was re-invoked.[325] This reconstructive idea of the state based on the universal rights of equal humanity led to the liberal and democratic view of government placing the legitimacy of governance on the common people's will, which is similar in terms of the source of legitimacy to the *minbon* idea. Owing to this resemblance, Pak did not have any trouble in adopting the liberal/democratic view of government.

The moderate reformist Yu Kilchun's case is slightly different from Pak's understanding of government. As far as his main work *Sŏyu kyŏnmun* is concerned, he maintained the two aspects of governance of Confucianism. After the initial introduction of the origins of government by means of anthropological explanations in Chapter Five, he

[325] See John Dunn, *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005), ch.2.

stated the purpose of government in a quite deontological manner. According to him, whether a government is an inherited kingship or an elected presidential system, "the important task and grave role of a government is to encourage and preserve the bases of the common people's (人民) peaceful life and well-being."[326] A similar view is expressed in the same section of the chapter in a more manifest way: "The fundamental intention of establishing a government in a country is on behalf of the common people and the great aim that a king commands his government is also for the benefit of the people."[327] Insofar as Yu Kilchun puts the main goal of government in the preservation of the interests of the common people, he apparently inherited the Confucian *minbon* idea as Pak Yŏnghyo did. However, as a moderate, Yu did not go so far as the liberal/democratic view of government. In contrast to Pak, he maintained the predominance of king over government in managing the state. In the last part of the section, he expressed his frank opinion that, in order to prevent the crisis of collapse, state institutions should be reformed appropriately except for the king's supreme position and primal responsibility. He listed the core elements to be preserved: 1) a king should stand above the common people and have the rights to organise his government; 2) a king should have the sovereignty to maintain the state peacefully; 3) the common people should be loyal to the king and follow the government's commands.[328] He stated these points in an abstract and general manner, yet it is not difficult to grasp that he expressed his own political opinion, keeping the circumstances in Chosŏn in mind, especially the conditions after the 1884 *Kapsin coup d'état*.

---

[326] Yu Kilchun, *Sŏyu kyŏnmun*, 160.

[327] Yu Kilchun, *Sŏyu kyŏnmun*, 161.

[328] Ibid.

Yu's moderateness is more clearly displayed in his view of the common people in governance. Contrary to Pak, who provided the common people with the right to form a new government, Yu saw the common people in the traditional way: as the subjects of the king. According to him, the people revere and submit to a government because they want to receive graces and benefits from the government equally.[329] In Yu's ideas, therefore, the common people are still passive and do not hold autonomous political initiatives. What will happen, then, if the government betrays its original intention by veering from the right way? He replies that in that case the government would become a "harmful and useless entity."[330] Repeatedly, he argues that a government must keep in mind its original intention, while never mentioning the people's legitimate rights to create a new government. Given Yu's Confucian background, we can say that he maintained the two aspects of Confucian ideas of governance and, as a consequence, could not fully adopt a liberal and democratic view of government.[331] He thought that a government exists 'for the sake of the people,' but his upholding of the ethical ideal of Confucianism prevented him from having the idea of 'governing by the people.'

Pak Yŏnghyo's and Yu Kilchun's ideas of government were based on the temporal circumstances of the 1880s. After the state was opened up, these intellectuals visited Japan

---

[329] Ibid.

[330] "有害無益한 長物." Yu Kilchun, *Sŏyu kyŏnmun*, 161. This expression was originally used by Fukuzawa in his book *Seiyō jijō*, 130.

[331] Another source of Yu's moderateness was Fukuzawa Yukichi's view in *Seiyō jijō*. Fukuzawa pointed out the possible problems that a country could have when it pursued a radical regime change. His view of regime change in *Seiyō jijō* was largely moderate and gradualist. Given that Yu himself adopted many ideas and pieces of information from Fukuzawa's books, and was taught by Fukuzawa when in his mid-20s (1881–1882), it seems reasonable to argue that Yu Kilchun was influenced by Fukuzawa's moderateness to a considerable extent. For Fukuzawa's moderate ideas on regime change, see *Seiyō jijō*, 134–39.

and the U.S. and witnessed a significant gap in material civilisation between Chosŏn and the outside world. And they came to see their Confucian civilisation and governing system from a relativist perspective. The decline of the Confucian tradition and the discrediting of the monarchic rule were accelerated in the wake of a series of political events in the mid-1890s, including the *Tonghak* peasants' uprising (1894), the Sino–Japanese War (1894–95), the Japanese-inspired *Kabo* reforms (1894–95), and King Kojong's escape to the Russian legation (1896). The sense of national crisis, that Chosŏn might lose its national sovereignty, swept across the minds of the reformist intellectuals. The only way to survive the country's imperialist neighbours was to initiate major national reforms, refurbishing state institutions and building new public culture and values.[332] It was in this temporal context that the civic enlightenment and political association, The Independence Club, set about its movement in 1896. Its enlightenment newspaper, *Tongnip sinmun*, was anti-traditional in character and its political ideas entailed a number of novel and radical elements.

*Tongnip sinmun* put forth plenty of reform ideas concerning a variety of areas of Korean people's lives, including the area of government. Overall, the conception of government suggested in the editorials of *Tongnip sinmun* was not much different from the ideas of Pak and Yu. As Pak and Yu's re-definition of government was grounded in an aspect of Confucian political ideas putting emphasis on the common people as the foundation of the state, this aspect of Confucian governance was echoed in the idea of government in *Tongnip sinmun*. For example, in the editorial of the 6 May 1899 issue, the editor stated that "after the common people existed, the state emerged, and after the state existed, a government was

[332] Not only Japan but also Qing China took imperialist policies toward Chosŏn from the early 1880s. This view is illustrated in Kirk W. Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Chosŏn Korea, 1850–1910* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008).

established." Here, it is meaningful that the common people were seen as the most important source comprising the state, and the weight of government came last. In the ensuing passage, echoing Chŏng Yakyong, the editor argued that government officialdom was originally arranged, because people needed a process to resolve disputes among themelves. Since the officials had to devote all their time to public service, the people supported them by paying taxes. The editor concluded: "the common people are the foundation of the state" (백성들은 나라의 근본). This explanation is not much different from the traditional Confucian *minbon* ideas putting the essential legitimacy of governance upon the benefits of the common people. The same view was exhibited in the editorial in the 20 May 1897 issue, in which the editor enumerated the roles of a government, such as stabilising the politics of the state, enforcing laws equally, maintaining trustful relations with foreign countries, building public hygiene and educational systems, and encouraging people to have occupations for subsistence. Then, the editor ascribed all these roles of government to the benefits of the common people.[333] This Confucian view of governance was still widely shared among Chosŏn's political elites in the late 1890s, so even King Kojong echoed the famous dictum in *Shujing* in his decree announced in the midst of the People's Mass Meeting in 1898, stating: "without the people, who could the king rely on?"[334]

A critical difference between *Tongnip sinmun* and the reformists in the 1880s is that the editors of *Tongnip sinmun* highlighted the common people as principal political actors in

[333] This re-conceptualisation of government in the newspaper was also related to the national circumstances in the late 1890s. After undergoing a series of turbulent political incidents, *Tongnip sinmun* and the Independence Club located the essential problems of Chosŏn in the king and his conservative retainers. They chastised the current government for the desperate situation of the state and asserted that the state is the people's state.

[334] *TS* 28 November 1898.

the state. As discussed, Pak Yŏnghyo asserted that the common people as the foundation of the state can overthrow a government when it runs counter to the people's general interests. Yet this view was rather stated as a deontological *principle* based on the idea in *Mencius*.[335] This contention, therefore, did not directly mean that the common people should oppose the government's actions and voice their opinions on national issues. On the contrary, the idea of the people in *Tongnip sinmun* was essentially *practical* and presented for concrete issues of the state of Chosŏn in the late 1890s. So the statement in the paper, that "people are the foundation of the state," in fact meant that the people have the right to participate in the real political process. In this regard, when the editors referred to the common people as political subjects, what they commonly attributed to the people was "*kwŏlli* (rights)" and "*chikmu* / *chikbun* (duties)." For instance, in the editorial in the 15 December 1898 issue, the editor deplored the fact that, for the last three thousand years, the government had claimed its own rights to national affairs so that *paeksŏng* (commoners) did not know about their own rights. He added that a way for contemporary Chosŏn, or Taehan (大韓, Great Korea),[336] to prosper forever would be to divide half the rights into the rights of the government and half those of the people. In a different editorial, the editor went further and sternly averred that, if a person, who is the foundation of the state, loses his rights and is oppressed by government officials but does not make any protest, then he will be "a weak and foolish man and be better to die as

[335] For the Mencian idea of the legitimate expulsion of a despotic ruler, see *Mencius*, Book 1B8.

[336] The official name of Chosŏn changed to 'Taehan' and the appellation of King Kojong was heightened to that of 'emperor' on 12 October 1897. Earlier in November 1895, the reformist Cabinet created the reign name, *kŏnyang* (建陽), which was revised to *kwangmu* (光武) in August 1897. These measures were an extension of the *Kabo* reformists' efforts to level up Chosŏn's international status as an independent state. In December 1894, they had already renamed Kojong's official title from *chusang chŏnha* (主上殿下) to *taekunju p'yeha* (大君主陛下), elevating it with a more respectful expression. On 10 May 1895, they held a ceremony to commemorate the day as the founding day of the state of Chosŏn. In certain contexts, I will use the term 'Taehan' instead of 'Chosŏn', but in order to prevent any confusion, I will continue to use the name 'King Kojong'.

early as possible."[337] In the ensuing passage, he located the reason why Korean people are persecuted by the officials in their lack of education and, as a result, their ignorance of their own rights.

Together with *kwŏlli*, the editors emphasised the people's *chikmu* or *chikbun*. This is clearly illustrated in the editorial in the 11 January 1898 issue, where the editor claimed that "a country's prosperity or collapse depends on whether the people of the country practice their duty (*chikbun*) or not." According to the editor, the duty of the people did not merely indicate that they should observe the commands of the government, but in the case that the government did not work for the sake of the people, making it work for the people was also the duty of the people. He then listed three duties of the people (or citizens): firstly, to stop the government when it harms the state; secondly, to obey the laws made by the government when they are beneficial for the state and people; finally, to act as a good citizen and to encourage all Koreans to become upright citizens. Such duties are the 'political' (or public) duties typically expected of the citizens in liberal and democratic societies. So, given the roles provided to the common people as a core element of the state, the notion of government in *Tongnip sinmun* no longer remained Confucian-based. The active political role that *Tongnip sinmun* demanded of every common citizen was closer to that in a liberal/democratic state. This difference of *Tongnip sinmun* from the reformists of the 1880s reflected the different temporal context of the late 1890s, when Chosŏn had experienced the grand *Kabo* reforms through which many of the traditional socio-cultural bases of the society were destroyed. Moreover, the two editors of the paper, Sŏ Chaep'il and Yun Ch'iho, who stayed in the U.S. for around ten years and absorbed modern Western political values at university,

[337] *TS* 6 May 1899.

spread the new idea of government. The liberally and democratically tilted view of government in *Tongnip sinmun* stemmed from this context.

Taken together, Confucian monarchy in Chosŏn had encountered an inner challenge already in the late eighteenth century, as the Neo-Confucian ethical ideal began to be destabilised from their earlier orthodox position, as seen in Chŏng Yakyong's case. The serious weakening of Chosŏn kings' authority and the appropriation of power by a couple of ruling *noron* families in the early and mid-nineteenth century were related with this critical intellectual transformation that had been taking place since the eighteenth century. It is meaningful to understand that the political idea that undermined the monarchic system was an aspect of Confucian political teaching. As the Neo-Confucian ethical dogmatism was eroded, the ideas based on political necessity re-emerged as the core of Confucian political ideas, together with Confucians' political imagination. In this context, the dictum in *Shujing*, that "the people are the foundation of the state," naturally became the motto of the understanding of government. This Confucian idea of *minbon* was readily grafted onto the liberal/democratic view of government as the late nineteenth-century reformists adopted that idea from the 1880s, thereby eventually paving the way for a constitutional and republican era in Korea.[338]

## 3. The Reformists' Understanding of Desirable Governmental Systems: Two Core Components

[338] Chŏng Yonghwa has remarked that the Confucian idea of *minbon* is different from *minchuchuŭi* (民主主義) or democratic ideas, but he does not elaborate on it. From my own vantage point, the two are compatible in that both put common people at the centre of legitimate governance. Chŏng Yonghwa, *Munmyŏng ŭi chŏngch'i sasang*, 265.

The reformists' reconstruction of the notion of government was in line with their questioning of the existing ruling system and their conceiving of better governmental systems. Overall, in East Asia, dynastic rule had been the dominant ruling system for a long time. The dynastic system included considerable variations, such as the feudal system in pre-Chin China and the *bakufu* system in Japan, and the extent of a king or an emperor's power was different in relation to other ruling elites, subject to each country's historical context. Yet the dynastic model itself was never questioned. The monarchic tradition in East Asia faced a serious challenge in the wake of the Western impact and subsequent domestic socio-political transformations. In the case of Korea, the Confucian monarchy was challenged from the 1880s, as the reformist intellectuals recognised foreign countries' different ruling systems and began to categorise and compare various governing systems. Therefore, in this section we will review the governmental systems preferred by the reformists and analyse why they championed those systems. Specifically, we will focus on two core components of the desirable systems: constitutionalism and parliamentarianism. Ahead of these discussions, let us first survey briefly how the knowledge of different governmental systems came to be introduced into Korea.

As Kwŏn O'yŏng and An Oesun have shown, Western countries' governing systems were first considered by Ch'oe Han'gi in his book *Chigu chŏnyo* (地球典要, Summary of the works on the Earth, 1857).[339] This book, as the title indicates, was intended to introduce the

[339] Ch'oe Han'gi, *Chigu chŏnyo*, vol. 1–6. (I have referred to a digitalised version of the source through the website of the Seoul National University library.) In his study on Ch'oe's comprehension of Western institutions, Kwŏn O'yŏng has focused on epitomising Ch'oe's understanding of Western governmental systems without evaluation. On the other hand, An Oesun saw that Ch'oe's interest in the Western governmental systems, especially democracy, meant his reception of democracy as a

Earth as a planet and its countries in summary, by referring mainly to Wei Yuan's *Haiguo tuzhi* and Xu Jiyu's *Yinghuan zhilüe*, and other sources transmitted earlier. The book first explained the Earth as a planet and gave some scientific knowledge on the Earth. Then, from the second chapter (卷), it epitomised each region's and country's geography, human species, culture and customs, economy and industries, ruling system, law, and even language. Following Wei Yuan's example, Ch'oe also began with the countries on the eastern and southern sides of China, and then moved to India, the Middle Eastern countries, and European and American countries. Overall, his interest lay with Western countries rather than those of any other region, given that he devoted six and a half chapters (out of a total of nine chapters) to the countries on the European and American continents. He briefly introduced the ruling system of each country that he discussed. A case in point is his discussion of the parliamentary system of England (英吉利), with a particular focus on the interaction between the monarch and the two houses of parliament in the management of state affairs. In the case of the United States of America (米利堅), he highlighted the presidential system rather than its national congress; in particular, the way the president (總領) is elected and governance is concretely made. He specifically noted that under the American system governmental affairs were uncomplicated, the political process was swift, commands were well enforced, and laws were well observed.[340] Thus, for the first time among Chosŏn Confucians, Ch'oe showed a great deal of interest in the different governmental systems of foreign countries. However, his

valid form of government. See Kwŏn O'yŏng, "Ch'oe Han'gi ŭi sŏgu chedo e taehan insik" [Ch'oe Han'gi's understanding of Western Institutions], *Han'guk hakbo* 62 (1991), pp. 119–50; An Oesun, "Chosŏn esŏŭi minjujuŭi suyongnon ŭi ch'u'i: Ch'oe Han'gi esŏ tongnip hyŏphoe kkaji" [The Trends of the Acceptance of Democracy in Chosŏn: From Ch'oe Han'gi to the Independence Club], *Sahoe kwahak yŏn'gu* 9 (2000), pp. 38–65.

[340] Ch'oe Han'gi, *Chigu chŏnyo*, ch.10.

primary concern was on introducing individual countries' ruling systems, rather than on making a classification of governmental systems and evaluations on that basis. He stopped at recognising the dissimilar ruling systems of Western countries.

It was from the 1880s that Korean intellectuals began to appreciate the categorised governmental systems and commenced comparing and evaluating them. We can find the first instance of categorised governmental systems in the reports by government officials, who were secretly dispatched to Japan in 1881 (朝士視察團) to investigate Japan's governmental, military, educational, and various industrial reforms since the Meiji Restoration. According to Hŏ Tonghyŏn's comprehensive study, in their reports presented to King Kojong, the high officials Pak Chŏngyang and Min Chongmuk introduced current discussions in Japan over the issue of the shift in the governmental system, especially the main alternative 'constitutional monarchy'.[341] In particular, Min in his report introduced various governmental systems of foreign countries, categorising them into four types: the system in which a king and people rule together (君民共治, constitutional monarchy); absolute monarchy (專制政治); aristocratic rule; and republican government. He also noted that Japan was modelling itself on the English system by opting for a combination of a parliament with monarchic rule.

The government officials also discussed for the first time the principle of the 'division of power'. They described Japan's re-arranged governing system and bureaucracy through the lens of the division of power.[342] From the early 1880s, therefore, Chosŏn intellectuals began to comprehend foreign countries' different governing systems, classifying them into

[341] Hŏ Tonghyŏn, *Kŭndae hanil kwankyesa yŏn'gu*, ch. 4.

[342] Hŏ Tonghyŏn, *Kŭndae hanil kwankyesa yŏn'gu*, 100–8.

categories. In this context, in 1883, when King Kojong had a dialogue with the government official Hong Yŏngsik, who had just returned from his mission to the U.S., he already knew that in the U.S. the president was elected by the people and that its ruling system was democratic (民主制), and he showed great interest in concrete ways of managing the state at a democratic polity.[343]

After these initial introductions, more clear and concrete analyses of diverse governmental systems were made in *Hansŏng sunbo* (Oct. 1883–Oct. 1884), in which a number of articles examined foreign countries' central and local government systems. Besides brief descriptions of each country's governmental system within general introductions to individual countries, several articles directly focused on Western countries' ruling systems. For example, in an article entitled "the constitutional system in Europe and America" in the 30 January 1884 issue, the editor classified the governing systems of the countries in both continents into two: the system in which both monarch and the people rule together (君民同治) and the republican system (合衆共和); he highlighted that both were constitutional systems (立憲政體).[344] The article elaborated that the constitutional system stipulates a division of power into legislative, administrative, and judicial power. Next, it spelled out how each branch works and how each is part of a mutual system of checks and balances. At first glance, the editor rarely expressed his own evaluation of the governmental systems and simply depicted their institutional features in a descriptive manner. However, considering carefully the editor's attitude towards the governing systems, a clear preference

[343] Kim Wŏnmo (trans.), "Kyŏnmi sajŏl Hong Yŏngsik pokmyŏng mundapgi," 214–30.

[344] This article was written by an editor of the paper, not copied from a foreign paper. *Hansŏng sunbo,* "歐美立憲政體," 30 January 1884.

is detected in both the *constitutional* and the *parliamentarian* system. These two points were in fact the core ingredients of Western countries' governmental systems and the elements that the Korean reformists in the 1880s and '90s endeavoured to achieve through governmental reforms.[345]

In several articles, the editors showed their preference for constitutionalism; that is, the principle of the division of power and the management of state affairs governed by a constitution.[346] Their explanation of constitutionalism was aimed at the enlightenment of Korean readers at the time. As a result, the ideas are too basic and plain to elaborate on more. A more salient element that they preferred was parliamentarianism. An important point to consider regarding parliamentarianism is that they ascribed a country's "wealth and power" (富强) and "lenient governance" (寬政) to the existence of a parliament in a country. A case in point is the article "the European continent" (歐羅巴洲) in the 10 November 1883 issue, where the editor first divided governmental systems in European countries into three: the republican system as adopted by Switzerland and France; absolute monarchy as existed in Russia and Turkey; and constitutional monarchy (君民共治) as followed by the other countries. He then introduced the way in which people elected their representatives to parliament and the roles that parliament assumed, highlighting its positive effects. According

[345] In the rare study that paid attention to desirable governmental systems in *Hansŏng sunbo*, Chŏng Yonghwa saw that the paper's preferred system was "constitutional democratic polity" (입헌민주정치). However, he did not look into the core elements of this constitutional democratic polity and overlooked the fact that both constitutionalism and parliamentarianism penetrated almost all the reformists' ideas of desirable governmental models in the 1880s and '90s. Chŏng Yonghwa, "Chosŏn esŏŭi ip'hŏn minjujuŭi kwan'nyŏm ŭi suyong," 110.

[346] For example, see *Hansŏng sunbo*, "歐羅巴洲" in 10 November 1883; "歐美立憲政體" in 30 January 1884; "譯民主與各國章程及公議堂解" in 7 February 1884; "條約諸國政體記略"(日本) in 19 September 1884; "條約諸國政體記略續稿"(彌利堅) in 29 September 1884; "條約諸國政體記略續稿"(英吉利) in 9 October 1884.

to the editor, a king or government cannot manage state affairs arbitrarily, because they are checked by parliament. Concretely speaking, tax collection and government expenditure were approved by parliament in the yearly budget. This prevented government officials from extorting illegal taxes and allowed the people not to worry about the government's activities. In this regard, the editor conclusively stated that: "it is not groundless to argue that the wealth and power of Western countries stem from parliament."[347] This view was reiterated in another article in a different issue, in which the editor located the origin of the wealth and power of Western countries in that government affairs were discussed in parliament so that all government activities aligned with public purposes and consequently the government and the common people were in harmony.[348]

On the other hand, an article addressing the democratic polity, its constitution, and parliament asserted that "countries that administer lenient rule" (寬政之國) in Western countries are those where parliament has great power and all kinds of people have the right to vote.[349] Before the article remarked on the lenient rule, it discussed the division of power and the role of parliament with the cases of Britain and the U.S., and mentioned that, in general, lenient rule was common in democracies. Specifically, it illuminated the features of the Western countries that administered lenient rule with three points: 1) both public and private schools enlighten the people; 2) newspapers report both the good and the bad of the government's rule so that the people's political consciousness is high; 3) the church and the state are divided and the former cannot intervene in national affairs. The article clarified that

---

[347] "此推之則泰西之富强出於民會云者不爲無據也". *Hansŏng sunbo*, 10 November 1883.

[348] *Hansŏng sunbo,* "在上不可不達民情論," 30 January 1884.

[349] *Hansŏng sunbo*, "譯民主與各國章程及公議堂解," 7 February 1884.

the content was sourced from a Western newspaper and that the editors simply translated it with the sole intention of delivering the information on democracy. However, the article was not merely a translation, in that all the Western countries mentioned in the article were treated as third parties and there was a narrator who led the meanings in a quite objective manner. This means that the editors had their own view that democracy is a good governmental form that makes a lenient rule, and that they actually conveyed this perspective to Korean readers. In this context, it is not strange that the editor concluded with the following sentences: "For the state not to hold total power is beneficial. To divide and share it with the people is proper."[350]

The editors of *Hansŏng sunbo* did not expound very clearly how parliament engenders wealth and power and lenient governance, yet we can comprehend that the parliamentary system guarantees the common people more scope to take part in government. Put differently, it furnishes an opportunity for the ruled to become the ruler through the election of their representatives, and the representatives uphold the interests of the ruled. This would be the way in which the editors thought that Western parliamentarianism actually embodied an institutional mechanism that forced a government to run the state for the interest of the people.[351]

---

[350] "且夫利之所在 其權不必全爲國家操之 散入民間與民共之可耳," Ibid.

[351] The Chinese reformist Zheng Guanying also located Western wealth and power and Japan's rise in the world in their shared governmental system, i.e., the constitutional system, while arguing that China should adopt constitutionalism for its own benefit. He saw the existence of a parliament as a pivotal element of constitutional government, arguing that, because of that institution, the government and its people could unite and no despotic rule or rebellion would arise. He suggested this idea in his early book *Yiyan* (易言) and reiterated it in *Shengshi weiyan* (盛世危言). See Zheng Guanying, *Sŏngsewiŏn*, 151–53.

The newspaper's focus on constitutionalism and parliamentarianism is related to the editors' factual and empirical observation of Western societies and their governmental systems. Not least, their attention to the division of power into three sectors would reflect the novelty of that system, as well as the editors' judgement that the division of power was a reasonable and efficient institutional format. However, as far as parliamentarianism was concerned, we can find the editor's interest in it with regard to their Confucian pre-understanding. As discussed in the previous section, the well-being of the common people as the *raison d'être* of governance was a time-honoured, central idea of Confucian political teachings. This *minbon* idea, however, did not indicate that the common people, or the ruled, had the right to take part in governance in any way. Nevertheless, from the vantage point of the newspaper editors, we can reasonably argue that the editors saw the Western parliamentary system as an advanced governing system that would realise the Confucian ideal of *minbon*. Indeed, by means of checking a ruler's arbitrary use of power and granting the ruled the right to voice their own opinions on national affairs, Western parliamentarianism aimed to protect the interests of the ruled, which was not that different from the aim of the Confucian *minbon* ideal. A significant difference was that in parliamentarianism the voluntary initiatives of the governed are emphasised, which is contrasted with the rulers' good will and dominant roles to look after their subjects in Confucian *minbon* ideas. The point is that the deep-rooted *minbon* ideas facilitated the reformists to adopt the value of parliament and drove them to institute it in their national reforms. Moderates, such as Yu Kilchun and Yun Ch'iho, fully appreciated its value, but did not like the idea of establishing it promptly and thus endowing commoners with the right to speak about national affairs. Their cautious and elitist standpoint made them hesitate to call for a rapid transformation of the governmental system into parliamentarianism.

Let us now move to the radical Pak Yŏnghyo's case regarding desirable governmental systems. The idea that a country's prosperity and strength were closely associated with its governmental system is reiterated in Pak. In his memorial to King Kojong, Pak mentioned the issue of governmental regime change twice in relation to the need to provide more liberty to the common people. At first, he asserted that, if a country really wanted to build wealth and power and stand equal to other countries, it should restrict a king's rights and give more liberty to common people and then let the people have duties to their country.[352] Here, to restrict a king's rights and furnish more rights to the people meant a regime change, and, in context, what Pak aimed for was a constitutional monarchy. Using generic terms, however, he did not explicitly indicate the case of Chosŏn. Moreover, Pak did not concretely explain how more rights being granted to the people could lead to national wealth and power.

Further down the memorial, Pak expressed his intention with somewhat more explanation. He stated there the same message that, if common people have the right to liberty and a king's power is limited, then the people and the state will be peaceful forever; on the contrary, if the people do not have liberty and a king's power is unlimited, then the state will decline. Here, he added a sentence explaining the reason: because "the governance of the state is not done in a systematised form (or fixed frame) and the ruler decides state affairs arbitrarily."[353] Pak's idea of the reason is still insufficient, but it tells us that when a

---

[352] Pak Yŏnghyo, "Pak Yŏnghyo ŭi kŏnbaeksŏ," 279–80. This idea was first put forward by Fukuzawa Yukichi in his book *Bunmeiron no Gairyaku*. Exemplifying the case of England, Fukuzawa argued that, by limiting the king's power and enhancing the people's rights, England could increase its national power and establish the kingship on a firm base. Fukuzawa Yukichi, *Bunmeiron no Gairyaku*, 53.

[353] "凡民有自由之權 而君權有定 則民國永安 然民無自由之權 而君權無限 則雖有暫時强盛之日 然不久而衰亡 此政治無定 而任意擅斷故也." Pak Yŏnghyo, "Pak Yŏnghyo ŭi kŏnbaeksŏ," 287.

country's governance is practised outside of a reasonable and systematised form and state affairs are handled arbitrarily, then the state becomes disorderly and in the end debilitated. This sentence is interpreted as Pak's view on his desirable governmental system. That is to say, what he argues is that, for the state to become wealthy and powerful, it is necessary to take the constitutional/parliamentarian system. In his memorial, Pak did not mention the need to create a constitution or a parliament promptly in order to build a constitutional system, but in the *Kabo* reforms (1894–1895) he was the very person who propelled the shift in regime change toward constitutional monarchy, by establishing independent legal courts and an embryonic parliament (*Chungch'uwŏn,* 中樞院, the privy council) for the first time in Korean history. While in his memorial Pak did not directly assert that a nationwide parliament (or national assembly) should be established in contemporary Chosŏn, he clarified his preference for parliamentarianism, especially in the local dimension. He argued that even in Chosŏn the tradition of deliberating on national issues together between the ruling and the ruled existed, and exemplified the real practice in local governments where magistrates consulted upright Confucian scholars in the regions (so-called *sallim* (山林) scholars) concerning public affairs. Then, reminding the king of *sallim* scholars' authority and their weight in deliberating national affairs in the past, he advised the king to develop this tradition further by improving it and thus making it function as a local congress (縣會).[354] This instance provides an example that Confucian political practices in Chosŏn, as well as Confucian political ideas, offer elements that could be developed into the parliamentarian system.

[354] Ibid.

A similar way of thinking is found in Yu Kilchun in a more concrete manner. In the section entitled "forms of government" in the fifth chapter of *Sŏyu kyŏnmun*, Yu first categorised governmental systems into five types: a system in which a king arbitrarily runs the state on the basis of his absolute power (君主의 擅斷하는 政體); a system in which a king commands (or 壓制政體 (an oppressive system)); an aristocracy; a system in which a king and people rule together (君民의 共治하는 政體); and a system in which people rule together (國人의 共和하는 政體).[355] He then classified countries in the world according to these categories, noting his observation that Asian countries mostly had the oppressive system, whereas European and American countries mainly belonged to the constitutional and the republican system respectively. He added his view that several countries on the European and American continents were one hundred times as wealthy and powerful as Asian countries, and found the reason for this in the "difference in governmental institutions and norms."[356] He thus inherited Korean reformists' vantage point since *Hansŏng sunbo* that a country's wealth and power are closely linked with the country's governmental system, and that good and bad governmental systems exist. In other words, in their value judgement of governmental systems, their factual, empirical, and utilitarian perspective of the world was functioning significantly.

Yu Kilchun then shifted his focus to the disparity between the system in which a king and the people rule together (constitutional monarchy) and the system in which a king commands (an oppressive system). He did not discuss the republican system independently,

[355] Yu Kilchun, *Sŏyu kyŏnmun*, 163–65.

[356] Yu Kilchun, *Sŏyu kyŏnmun*, 168.

since he thought that this system was not much different from constitutional monarchy except that it did not have a king. According to Yu, the system in which a king and the people rule together is characterised by the people's participation in politics through the election of their representatives to parliament and the representatives' checks on government. The representatives are supposed to assist a king's governance and preserve the common people's rights by superintending government ministers' activities and by discussing and deciding government laws and commands. Yu continued to argue that under this system the government likes to do what people like and hates to do what people hate, expressing his view through the famous passage in *Mencius*. Moreover, under this government, laws and commands are enforced in accordance with public opinion so that atrocious rules or draconian laws cannot be administered. This governmental system also breeds the people's progressive spirit and independent mind-set to the effect that they not only pursue their own independent life but also their country's independence and prosperity. This is why small countries in Europe, such as Switzerland and Denmark, can enjoy independence and prosperity.[357]

What is noteworthy is that Yu's perspective is quite similar to that of the advocacy of parliamentarianism in *Hansŏng sunbo*, which ascribed a *lenient rule* to the effects of parliament. Thus, we can drive our rational reasoning into the relationship between Yu's

[357] Interpreting Yu Kilchun as a Confucian, Tsukiashi Tatsuhiko argued that Yu accepted the Western constitutional system as a mechanism for finding "right virtues" (正德) – not "practical usefulness" (利用) and "people's welfare" (厚生) – in correspondence with his Confucian mind-set. Yet Yu himself made it clear that the reason why Western countries are a hundred times as wealthy and strong as those in Asia is because of the difference in government institutions and norms. This means that Yu saw the world in a factual, empirical, and utilitarian manner, and upheld the idea that the constitutional system is the best system for national wealth and power. Tsukiashi reads Yu too much on the basis of the Confucian thesis. Tsukiashi Tatsuhiko, "Chōsen kaika shisō no kōzō: Yu Kilchun Sŏyu kyŏnmun no bunmei ron teki riken kunshu sei ron."

view of parliament and the ideal Confucian governance based on the *minbon* ideas. As seen in Yu's citation of the passage in *Mencius*, his explanation of governance through parliament was not much different from the ideal governance in the Confucian political tradition. This perspective also explains why Korean reformists were not in defiance of the idea of parliamentarian rule. For Yu, Western parliamentarianism was an advanced form of the Confucian ideal governance based on *minbon*. We can thus posit a point of view that Yu's preference for parliamentarianism was encouraged by his preconception of the Confucian ideal governance.[358]

On the other hand, Yu Kilchun clearly expresses his disapproval of the oppressive system in which a king commands. According to him, under this system, government officials, who are mainly selected from an aristocratic class, are not very fair in dealing with state affairs, and common people are not very patriotic either. When a wise king and lenient officials assume government, the people receive benefits from the virtuous rule; yet when a tyrant and cunning men run the government, the people undergo all sorts of harms from their rule. As a consequence, under this system the people are dispirited and regard their own country just as outsiders', and they are deficient in an independent mind-set. So, describing the weaknesses of this governmental system to which Chosŏn belonged, he clearly

[358] In her study on the adoption of democratic ideas in Korea, An Oesun has also argued that both Confucianism and democratic ideas were not antagonistic. She claimed this idea by focusing on the reformists' employment of Confucian ideas in their championing of people's rights to political participation and resistance. According to her, the reformists, particularly Pak Yŏnghyo and Yu Kilchun, added "morality" to their understanding of liberty and, likewise, added "rule by virtue" to rule of law. While she has failed to see the difference between the radical Pak and the moderate Yu – which is related to her failure to distinguish the two contrasting aspects within Confucian political ideas – her study braces the continuity thesis between Confucian ideas and democratic ideas. An Oesun, "19 segi mal Chosŏn e itsŏsŏ minjujuŭi suyong ron ŭi chaegŏmt'o: tongsŏ sasang yunghap ŭi kwanjŏm esŏ" [Revisiting the Introduction of Democracy in Late Nineteenth-Century Chosŏn: From the Perspective of the Confluence of both Eastern and Western Thoughts], *Chŏngch'i sasang yŏn'gu* 4 (2001), pp. 27–53.

understood the limits of the oppressive system. Because of this difference between the governmental systems, he argued, big countries in Asia are insulted by small countries in Europe. He thus asked readers: "should we not consider this point seriously?"[359]

Hence, Yu Kilchun recognised the way in which the Constitutional system operates and understood the benefits of parliament. However, as a moderate, he did not like the idea of instituting a parliament into contemporary Chosŏn promptly. Regarding the reason, he stated that, "in a country where its common people lack in knowledge, providing them with the right to participate in politics must not be permitted."[360] That is to say, he meant that, when the common people were not ready to play a role in government, regime change toward commoners' taking part in managing the state would end up with national disorder. This constant dilemma within Yu Kilchun is closely linked with his maintenance of the two sides of Confucian political ideas, as well as his prudence in political transformation in contemporary Chosŏn.

If we define the 1880s as the period during which the core ideas of desirable governments were accepted by Korean reformists in a rather theoretical fashion, the next decade was the time when they endeavoured to adopt both constitutionalism and parliamentarianism into government institutions. What drove them toward this phase was a shift in the political environment from the middle of the decade, through which the king's absolute power and the government's previous authority declined to a great extent. The creation of the legal court system and the early parliamentary organ, *Chungch'uwŏn*, instituted through the *Kabo* reforms, was the first attempt at regime change toward a

[359] Yu Kilchun, *Sŏyu kyŏnmun*, 170–71.

[360] Yu Kilchun, *Sŏyu kyŏnmun*, 172.

constitutional monarchy.[361] Due to the political turmoil of those years, however, the first attempt to institute parliament was soon frustrated, but the legal courts survived political disturbances and lasted to the next conservative government, although their full, independent operation was not yet achieved.

The second attempt to form a parliament was made by the Independence Club, when it demanded to King Kojong that the government re-organise *Chungch'uwŏn* as a way to redress state problems in the midst of the Club-led street demonstrations in October 1898.[362] Under the pressure of the people's power on streets, King Kojong answered positively, and the first parliament in Korean history was launched in that year. What is meaningful is the shared grounds of the needs between the king and the Club to create a parliament as a place to form public opinion (*kongnon*). The king accepted the proposition in late October because he thought that the official opening of that body as a place to discuss national affairs would disband the demonstrations in central Seoul. Yet King Kojong's choice was not solely based on the strategic grounds. As shown in his announcement of the Five-Articles Decree (詔勅五條), he thought that the repeal of the old communication channels (especially, *samsa*) between the king and the subjects had caused the people's street demonstrations to rise up.[363]

---

[361] During the *Kabo* reforms, the reformists made a series of efforts to shift the existing Confucian monarchy to constitutional monarchy, by introducing both the constitutional (specifically, division of power) and parliamentarian elements. For these efforts made in the years between 1894 and '95, see Wang Hyŏnjong, *Han'guk kŭndae kukka ŭi hyŏngsŏng kwa kabo kaehyŏk* [Modern State Building in Korea and the *Kabo* Reforms] (Seoul: Yŏksabip'yŏngsa, 2003), ch. 6. The establishment of the first parliamentary organ, *Chungch'uwŏn*, and its development were studied by Yi Pangwŏn. See Yi Pangwŏn, *Hanmal chŏngch'i pyŏndong kwa chungch'uwŏn* [Political Transformation in the Era of Taehan cheguk and *Chungch'uwŏn*] (Seoul: Hye'an, 2007).

[362] See Chŏng Kyo, *Taehan kyenyŏnsa 3* [Last Years of Great Korea], trans. by Kim Uchŏl (Seoul: So'myŏng ch'ulp'an, 2004), pp. 200–6.

[363] *TS* 1 November 1898. In Chosŏn, there were some channels through which the king received reports about the circumstances of his subjects, including the three government agencies (*samsa* (三司:

That is to say, he perceived *Chungch'uwŏn* with regard to the old institution of communication in Chosŏn politics, which was based on the Confucian tradition of respect for public opinion. His decree, proclaimed on 26 June 1898, that he would follow "*kongnon*" (public opinion) in all his awards and punishments, was the reflection of the old political tradition of Confucian Chosŏn.[364]

On the part of the Club, the need to found *Chungch'uwŏn* was also linked with the call to form public opinion. As shown in the editorial of the 24 February 1898 issue of *Tongnip sinmun*, the exigency to frustrate the government's submission to a series of Russian demands of concessions at the time drove them to call for a government organ to form public opinion on those issues. They thought that the government's submission to Russian demands was possible, because there was no official body to express public opinion about national issues. With the re-instalment of *Chungch'uwŏn*, what they envisaged as a model was a Western parliament, which would make the government work more effectively in the division of labour and function in a more upright manner.[365] In calling for the founding of *Chungch'uwŏn*, the Club cited the ancient sage kings Yao and Shun's practices of listening to lower people and the passages in *Mencius* on a king's obligation to follow public opinion.

---

*Sahŏnbu* (司憲府), *Saganwŏn* (司諫院), and *Hongmun'gwan* (弘文館)) that assumed the role of giving "right opinions (直言)" to the king, secret inspectors' (*amhaeng'ŏsa* (暗行御史)) reports, and local magistrates' regular reports on the regions. In particular, *samsa* represented the role of informing the real conditions of the people and was thus understood as the core channel for the (indirect) communication between the king and the subjects. For the establishment of the *samsa* institution and its role in the Chosŏn government, see Ch'oe Sŭnghi, *Chosŏn ch'ogi ŏngwan ŏnron yŏn'gu* [Studies of the Government agencies of Communication and Their Practices in Early Chosŏn] (Seoul: Sŏul taehakgyo ch'ulp'anbu, 1976).

[364] Chŏng Kyo, *Taehan kyenyŏnsa 3*, 78–9.

[365] For the benefits of establishing a parliament on the part of the Club, see the editorial in *TS* 30 April 1898 issue and *Taehan Kyenyonsa* 3, 204. The concrete rules of discussion in the *Chungch'uwŏn* modelled itself on those of foreign parliaments.

The Confucian *minbon* ideas, therefore, furnished theoretical resources for Chosŏn's transition to a parliamentarian system.[366]

This chapter has examined the reformist intellectuals' reconstruction of government and the governmental systems that they wanted to put into practice, which were put forth after the decline of the Confucian ethical ideal. Here, I would like to epitomise the relationship between the Confucian *minbon* idea and the liberal/democratic idea of government. In the second section, we have discussed how the concept of government addressed in Pak Yŏnghyo, Yu Kilchun, and *Tongnip sinmun* was predicated on the Confucian idea of *minbon*. They saw that a government exists on behalf of the common people, which is a core idea in classical Confucian texts such as *Shujing* and *Mencius*. As we have seen in Pak Yŏnghyo and especially in *Tongnip sinmun*, this Confucian idea of government and the liberal and democratic view of government were not in discord. The Confucian *minbon* idea finding

[366] For the Club's references to classical Confucian texts and ancient anecdotes on the importance of communication, see the Club's memorials presented on 3 and 11 July 1898 in Chŏng Kyo, *Taehan kyenyŏnsa* 3, 80–3, 87–90.

Many researchers focused on the constitutional government as an alternative system in the 1880s and '90s and thought that, as the reformists failed to transform the absolute kingship, there was little advancement in regime change. However, this view is to be reconsidered. Albeit not ideally, legal courts began to operate from 1895 and *Chungch'uwŏn* was actually established in late 1898. So, the turn toward the constitutional and parliamentarian system was on track in the wake of the mid-1890s, which means that contemporary Korea was already exiting from the traditional absolute monarchy. Moreover, as Shin Yong-ha has argued, a radical group of the Independence Club envisaged the republican system as an alternative. (See Shin Yong-ha, "19segi han'guk ŭi kŭndae kukka hyŏngsŏng munje," 53–82 and *Tongnip hyŏphoe yŏn'gu*, 519–20.) This is not a meaningless episode, for this occasion accorded with the liberation of commoners and slaves from the traditional social status system, which was made officially through the *Kabo* reforms. These new *citizens* were instilled with the ideas of equality and popular sovereignty and mobilised by political associations like the Independence Club and the pro-Japanese association the *Ilchinhoe* (一進會) in later years. It is no coincidence that *Sinminhoe*, the reformists' organisation led by An Ch'angho in 1907, proposed a republican system, which was inherited more explicitly by the Pronouncement for Great Unity in 1917 and finally officialised on the constitution of the Provisional Korean Government in 1919.

ultimate political legitimacy in the benefits of the common people were consonant with the liberal and democratic idea of government based on the ideal of the people's government.

In the third section, we have examined how both constitutionalism and parliamentarianism were the core of the reformists' ideas of desirable governmental systems. Previous studies highlighted constitutional monarchy as a main alternative, with the manifestation of the historical context in which the reformists argued for it. However, it is the two core elements that we need to pay attention to, because these elements clearly present the reformists' political inclinations and intellectual connectivity. What we have found is, firstly, that the reformists came to heed both constitutionalism and parliamentarianism, because the countries that adopted these elements were more wealthy and powerful. By seeing the world more factually and empirically, they could come to have a new vision of politics. Secondly, we have seen that Western parliamentarianism was adopted on the basis of Confucian political ideas and institutional practices. The reformists regarded parliament as an institutionally developed form of the Confucian *minbon* ideas. Through the institution of parliament, they thought, the Confucian ideal governance could become a reality. 'Lenient rule' was possible in Western democracies, since they had parliament that consisted of lawmakers representing the people. This is the way in which the Korean reformists, as well as the Chinese reformist intellectuals in the late nineteenth century, understood the value of parliament. Due to the Confucian *minbon* idea, the Western notion of parliamentarianism was easily grafted onto Korean political institutions.

This Confucian influence is also shown in the reformists' understanding of political legitimacy. In the next chapter, we will see how they reconstructed new ideas of the legitimacy of rule in the late 1890s.