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

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Conclusion

The current study is an attempt to identify a core characteristic of Korean political thinking of the present time, specifically its historical development until it reached the initial stage of the present form. The democratic and republican political ideal of modern Korea was formed in this historical process as the result of the long-term process of continuity and change of Korean political thinking. Contrary to previous studies in Korean political science academia, which located the origin of the democratic and republican age of Korean history at the time of Korea's liberation from colonial rule, this study traced this origin back to the late nineteenth century, particularly the reformist intellectuals' political thinking that took form as they sought to accommodate the changing times. More importantly, this study has asserted that the democratic and constitutional/republican elements that the reformists held were not simply new ideas based on modern Western political ideas, but were built on an aspect of Confucian political ideas that showed familiarity with those Western ideas. In this context, this study opened with an analysis of two core aspects of Confucian political ideas in Chosŏn, and traced this down to the reformists of the 1880s and '90s. What we found is that the reformists' worldview and core political thinking lay the foundation of the 'modern politics' of Korea.

Although previous studies had noticed the conflation of Confucian and modern ideas in the reformists' thinking, little attention was paid to how Confucian political ideas affected the reformists' reconstruction of political thinking. This study conceptualised two connected but diverse elements of Confucian political thinking as 'political necessity' and 'an ethical ideal'. In terms of worldview, the former had a close affinity with a rational, practical, and

empirical way of seeing the world, while the latter related to a normative or ethical view of the world. From a long-term historical perspective, the first great momentum of intellectual change occurred in the late eighteenth century, as reformist Confucians began paying serious attention to practical matters instead of focusing on the metaphysical debates of Zhu Xi's philosophy. This intellectual turn was largely inherited by the reformists of the late nineteenth century. The late nineteenth-century reformists' worldview was an extension of the eighteenth-century reformist Confucians' basic premises of seeing the world.

The late nineteenth-century reformists treated the two elements of Confucian political thinking differently. They relied on the political necessity ideas, especially *minbon* ideas, in reconstructing new political thinking. Chapter Three demonstrated how they employed relevant passages of classical Confucian texts related to political necessity in order to justify their ideas on commerce and industrial development. Chapter Five developed the liberal and democratic model of government on the basis of the Confucian *minbon* ideas of governance. Chapter Six showed how democratic ideas of legitimacy were developed in reference to the Confucian *minbon* ideas. In this way, most of the ideas that the reformists re-elucidated and employed for their purpose of the reconstruction of political thinking were those of political necessity. Except for moderate reformists like Yu Kilchun, the ethical ideal that had run as a core in Confucian thought was scarcely invoked. The ethical ideas largely retreated to private ethics, while in the public domain new values centred on rights, influenced by modern Western political thinking, replaced the Confucian values.

This pattern of continuity and discontinuity was not different in the reformists' way of seeing the world. *Sirhak* scholars' more rational, practical, empirical, and positivist view reflected the retrieval of the political necessity ideas of Confucian political thought. The late

nineteenth-century reformists largely inherited this worldview, and invigorated the factual, empirical, and realist side of the world. On the other hand, the Confucian ethical world, which was in balance with the factual world in *Sirhak* scholars, lost its viability within the reformists' way of seeing the world, with the exception of moderates such as Yu Kilchun.

This factually tilted view of the world had some positive effects. Above all, the reformists could grasp that the dominant wind on the globe was blowing toward *pugang* (wealth and power). As a standard for evaluating the world, *pugang* led them to study societal features of wealthy and strong countries. They appreciated the value of liberty for its contribution to wealth and power in Western countries. The reformists associated the parliamentary system as a contributing factor with the West's wealth and power. However, their factual way of seeing the world had a cost. Disconnected from the long-standing values and norms, the reformists perceived civilisation on the basis of material and practical criteria, such as convenience, efficiency, and systematisation. While understanding civilisation with these criteria, they were easily led to adopt the four stages model of civilisation development and regarded their own civilisation as a backward one. This view of civilisation engendered a self-deprecating psychology in some reformists.

From what we have discussed, we can discern two implications on the study of Korean political thinking. Firstly, the series of major intellectual trends in the history of Korean political thinking since the Chosŏn dynasty – that is, Neo-Confucianism, *Sirhak*, and *Kaehwa sasang* – are continuous. Previous studies failed to clarify the continuity and discontinuity between these idea systems, as they did not have a relevant conceptual tool to analyse the changes. What we have found in this study is that the late nineteenth-century reformists grounded their new political thinking in an aspect of Confucian political ideas. We

have argued that their reconstruction of political thinking toward the democratic and constitutional/republican forms was to a great extent stimulated by their political traditions. The Confucian *minbon* ideas and related political practices in Chosŏn were inherited by the reformists, albeit in an altered fashion. As is demonstrated in theoretical studies on tradition, one cannot accept an entirely novel thought without a medium of familiar ones. In this regard, the *minbon* ideas functioned as the medium between Confucian political thinking and the reformists' democratic and constitutional/republican reconstruction of political thinking.

Secondly, the negative side of the reformists' thinking is closely linked to the positive side as two different sides of the same coin. From a long-term view of Korean political thinking, the ideas of the late nineteenth-century reformists form a mainstream of its development, as the intellectual changes since late Chosŏn favoured the political necessity ideas over ethical ideals. This inclination began with *Sirhak* scholars and was strengthened by the reformists of the late nineteenth century. The decline of the Confucian ethical ideal was a long-term trend that started in the eighteenth century and was inherited by the reformists' sceptical view on traditional normative values. This intellectual proclivity was formed in line with the calling of the times, for the social system based on the Confucian ethical ideal had been increasingly called into question since the late eighteenth century. So, from a long-term perspective, the late nineteenth-century reformists' distrust of traditional culture and customs based on Confucian ethical ideals was an integral part of the development of Confucian political thinking in Chosŏn Korea. Yet the legitimate reflection tipped over into a downcast attitude under the vehement pressure of modernisation in the late nineteenth century. The self-negating psychology was therefore a consequence of the momentous and drastic impact toward modern transformation in the midst of the imperialist world order.

This study has conceptualised the two core components of Confucian political thought with general terms of the history of political thought. While this conceptual framework is helpful in redressing the previous focus on ethical philosophy as the key of Confucian political thought, it has not fully succeeded in registering the ideas of political necessity in a concrete and comprehensive way. Besides the well-known core ideas, such as *minbon*, the respect for public opinion, and institutional checks and balances in Chosŏn politics, more ideas and practices should be searched for through classical texts and primary historical sources in order for this conceptual framework to be established as a meaningful perspective. This task is to be conducted in following research.