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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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English summary

As Korea's recent history has seen drastic transformations, including modernisation following Western encroachment, colonisation by Japan, ideological strife and the division into two separate states, researchers have usually read the history of Korean political thinking since the nineteenth century as one of discontinuity. The transition from traditional Confucian political thinking to current democratic and republican political ideals has been regarded as a discrete process. Such an appraisal is based on the observation of historical contexts rather than on an examination of the theoretical elements of the idea systems. Combining the latter approach with the former, and specifically breaking down Confucian political ideas into two distinct elements, this study establishes a continuity between Confucian political thinking and democratic and republican ideas. It does so by rereading the political ideas of the late nineteenth-century reformists (Kaehwap'a), as their ideas were formulated during a transitional period between Confucian and modern political thinking. A predominant view on the reformists was that they abandoned traditions and went for all-out Westernisation. What is missed in such an appraisal is the compatibility of some elements in Confucian political thinking with modern political ideas. By adopting the customary ethics-centred view of Confucianism, such a reading overlooks the very political nature of Confucian ideas that are consonant with modern political ideas. This study embarks on a theoretical examination of Confucian political thinking through the application of a dichotomous perspective conceptualised as a tension between 'political necessity' and 'ethical ideal.' Through an analysis of various concepts used in the formulation of reformist thinking, this study argues that Confucian ideas on the political necessity spectrum functioned as a medium for the adoption of liberal and democratic political ideas. Moreover, this study shows that the adoption of a modern worldview in response to ideas of political necessity resulted in either a positive or a negative outlook on the world.