

## Confucian *Minbon*, Democracy and Righteous Governance:

### Korean Reformists' Reconstruction of Governance in the Late Nineteenth Century

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#### Abstract

Confucian Democracy theorists working in Comparative Philosophy and Political Theory have based their theories upon the view that Western (individualist) democracy is inharmonious with Confucian culture so that democratic ideals and institutions need to be accommodated to the Confucian culture. This view, however, has failed to consider both diversity within Confucian political thought and the development of Confucianism in recent history of East Asia. As a political theory, Confucianism has two contrasting elements within itself, and of the two, *minbon* thought functioned as the medium of the adoption of democracy, which is clear in the case of Korea. Moreover, in the late nineteenth-century setting, as the Confucian way of ruling was in disbelief, Korean reformists advocated modern public values for the public sphere, such as liberty, equality, individual rights, and rule of law, and traditional Confucian values based on Confucian ethics largely receded to the private sphere. Confucian Democracy theorists' stress on Confucian culture, still powerful in the public sphere, is at odds with the historical reality in Korea.

Keywords: Confucian democracy, *minbon* thought, origins of Korean democracy, Korean reformists' view of governance in the late nineteenth century

## Introduction

Can Confucian democracy as a discourse be discussed without reviews of the historical constitution of democracy in East Asia? Was liberal democracy, as Confucian Democracy theorists presume, abruptly transmitted to Confucian East Asia from the West so that it is inharmonious with Confucian culture in the region? This paper is concerned with redressing Confucian Democracy theorists' presuppositions by examining the initial adoption of democracy in Korea.<sup>1</sup> East Asian countries' encounter with democracy traces back to the mid and late nineteenth century in which reformists in those countries were eager to search for the secrets of Western wealth and power and thus investigated Western social and political systems. With new public values such as liberty, equality, individual rights, and rule of law advocated in this period, the reformists adopted democratic ideas and institutions such as division of powers, constitutional government, parliamentarianism, and the people's right to political participation.<sup>2</sup>

A critical question we should ask is how the reformists – particularly Korean reformists whom I address in this paper – who had grown up within Confucian culture could shift themselves so quickly toward democracy. The necessity to survive within imperialist international political conditions by

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<sup>1</sup> I use capital-letter 'Confucian Democracy' to indicate several comparative philosophers' and political theorists' reconstruction of Confucian-style democracy, distinguished from the generally used and more comprehensive term 'Confucian democracy'.

<sup>2</sup> This standpoint is based on the experience of Korea, yet the understanding of democracy and attempts to apply democratic elements to each country's governing system were not much different among Northeast Asian countries. China had difficulty in overcoming its centralized absolute monarchy, whereas Japan was relatively easy to shift its old regime to a modern-style government due to its traditional dual authority between *tenno* and *shogun*. Instead of a more democratic fashion, however, the Japanese ruling system took an elite-centered, oligarchic form. Conflicts between the traditional ruling class and modern reformists were more severe in Korea than its neighbors. The Japanese thinker Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), who made a meaningful contribution to transplanting democratic visions into Korea, and other reformists in East Asia, well understood the ideas and institutions of Western democracy. For China and Japan's political experiences after the coming of the West, see Immanuel C.Y. Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China* 6<sup>th</sup> edition (New York, 2000) and James L. McClain, *Japan: A Modern History* (New York, 2002). For Fukuzawa's understanding of democracy, see Fukuzawa Yukichi, *Seiyō jijo* [Conditions in the West] (Tokyo, 2004).

transforming the ruling system counted significantly, we should ponder how they could internalize the alien ideas and institutions as legitimate. Given the path dependency of humans' thinking in history, it is implausible that the short period of Western contact in the 1880s and 90s led them to that shift. In explaining this, two perspectives have competed in Korean academia. The majority view has found that the quick shift is concerned with the practical intellectual trend in the eighteenth century (*sirhak*) that Korean reformists of the late nineteenth century inherited. Due to that precedent intellectual foundation within Chosŏn (1392–1910), they argue that the reformists could adopt democracy quickly.<sup>3</sup> The minority view sees that new intellectual sources on Western countries introduced from China from the early 1860s played a key role in the reformists' apprehending of the contemporary world and their adoption of modern Western values including democracy.<sup>4</sup> These two views are complementary to each other, while their focuses are different. A point to keep in mind is the fact that, be it the eighteenth century or late nineteenth century, contemporary Korea was a heavily Confucian society. In this environment, could the reformists propose a democratic transformation of governance if democracy is entirely alien to Korean people and thus almost impossible to be accepted by them? It is difficult to think so. If such is the case, a proper line of reasoning we should follow is that within Confucian political ideas and practices exist certain elements compatible with democracy so that their calls for a democratic

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<sup>3</sup> The continuity thesis between *sirhak* and the late nineteenth-century reformists' ideas (*kaehwa sasang*) has been proposed by several historians including Kim Yŏngho, Kang Chae'ŏn, Yi Kwangnin, and Shin Yongha. Kim Yŏngho, 'Sirhak kwa kaehwa asang ui yon'gwan munje' [The Question of the Relatedness of *Sirhak* to *kaehwa sasang*], *Hanguksa yŏn'gu* 8 (1972), pp. 675–91; Kang Chae'ŏn, *Hanguk kŭndaesa yŏn'gu* [Studies of Modern History of Korea] (Seoul, 1982); Yi Kwangnin, *Han'guk kaehwa sasang yŏn'gu* [Studies of Reform Thoughts in Modern Korea] (Seoul, 1970); Shin Yongha, 'O Kyŏngsŏk ūi kaehwa sasang kwa kaehwa hwaltong' [O Kyŏngsŏk: His Ideas and Acts for the Opening up of Chosŏn], *Yŏksa hakpo* 107 (1985), pp. 107–87.

<sup>4</sup> Chang Insŏng, Chŏng Yonghwa, and Cho Kwang are advocates of this outlook. Chang Insŏng, 'Ch'eje haech'egi ūi kaehyŏk sasang' [The Reform Thoughts in the Era of the Collapse of the Old Regime], In Kang Kwangsik et al. *Chosŏn sidae kaehyŏk sasang yŏn'gu* (Sŏngnam, 1998), pp. 212–3; Chŏng Yonghwa, *Munmyŏng ūi chŏngch'i sasang: Yu Kilchun kwa kŭndae han'guk* [The Political Thought of Civilisation: Yu Kilchun and Modern Korea] (Seoul, 2004), pp. 135–9; Cho Kwang, 'Sirhak kwa kaehwa sasang ūi kwangye e taehan chaegŏmt'o' [Revisiting the Relationship between *sirhak* and *kaehwa sasang*], In *Chosŏn hugisa yŏn'gu ūi hyŏnhwang kwa kwaje*, Kang Man'gil (ed.) (Seoul, 2000), pp. 501–33.

reformation of government were not impractical and pointless. Then, which aspect of Confucianism is familiar with democracy?

### ***Two Aspects of Confucian Political Thought***

Chosŏn's official historical records *Sillok* (veritable records) exhibit a characteristic proclivity viewed from an intellectual historical perspective. An inclination to *practicality* and *ethical preoccupation* form a tension. This tendency is a reflection of the predominance of the ethically tilted Neo-Confucian philosophy *Sŏngnihak* (性理學, C. *Xinglixue*) in Chosŏn, yet this tension also mirrors two diverse intellectual predispositions within classical Confucian texts. The ancient Chinese history text that greatly affected the formation of Confucianism *Shujing* (書經, Book of History) and the analects of Confucius *Lunyu* (論語) represent two pristine and contrasting views of governance within Confucianism. The political needs-based view of governance in *Shujing* is contrasted to Confucius' ethical ideal-based view of governance.<sup>5</sup>

As a history text, *Shujing* presents distinctive historical facts concerning ancient sage kings and their thoughts, stressing an essence of governance repetitively, which is how to maintain a country for a long time without fall. The illumination of the legendary sage kings Yao and Shun's great achievements and their handing over of the throne to the virtuous not to their sons, the redressing of two tyrants' mis-governance by great founder-kings Tang and Wu, and political wisdoms of pre-eminent chancellor-advisors like Yi Yun and Zhougong, exemplifies the need to practice governing in *public spirit* to maintain a country for a long time. Political teachings in *Shujing* are roughly divided into two.

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<sup>5</sup> Using the conceptual framework of 'tension between political necessity and ethical ideal', I have analyzed the development of Confucian political thought in Chosŏn Korea. Choong-Yeol Kim, 'Chŏngch'i chŏk p'iryo wa yulli chŏk isang ūi kinjang: Chosŏn sidae yugyo chŏngch'i sasangsa rŭl wihan punsŏkt'ŭl ūi mosaek' [Tension between Political Necessity and an Ethical Ideal: A Search for an Analytical Framework for the History of Confucian Political Thinking in Chosŏn Korea], *Hanguk chŏngch'ihakhoebo* 54(4) (2020), pp. 167–91.

One is *minbon* (民本, people centrism, C. *minben*), which is needed for rulers to govern their countries safely and is to be practiced as rulers' external deeds. The other is rulers' humbleness and prudence as their attitude, which are to be accompanied by their acts.<sup>6</sup> This mental attitude, which is required for rulers to keep their countries from collapse, belongs to the category of political needs rather than moral norms for an ideal person. These two are balanced within *Shujing* and a virtuous king means a humble person despite his extraordinary achievements. *Shujing*'s distinctive point compared with *Lunyu* lies in *minbon* thought that defines rulers' prime role, which is to give practical benefits to the people. *Minbon* taught rulers to take care of the problems of their people, since the people's judgement on them is *de facto* the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*) that eventually determines the fate of their countries. This practically originated and public spirit-based teaching of *minbon* was inherited by Mencius and survived as a core teaching of Confucian political thought.

In history, however, hegemonic authority of Confucian thought was placed on Confucius' moral philosophy presented in *Lunyu*. The humble mental attitude in *Shujing*, which existed as a primitive form of ethical norms, developed into a moral philosophy by Confucius. Confucius employed existing concepts concerning morality and sophisticated them by adding philosophical meanings. For example, the core concepts in *Lunyu*, *ren* (仁, benevolence) and *junzi* (君子, gentleman), existed before Confucius, yet it was by Confucius that *ren* and *junzi* acquired philosophical meanings. Confucius's thought is that only ethically cultivated ruler can govern his country well. This view of governing reflects changed political environment in the *Chunqiu* era in which as the ancient feudal system destabilized, feudal lords competed against one another. To recover order and peace, Confucius relied on ancient moral concepts and sophisticated them. He taught that a person should cultivate one's inner morality and that society is to be organized organically with the principle of division of people according to their high-low social status and close-remote relationship. For Confucius, political problems were moral problems in nature.

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<sup>6</sup> The vocabulary indicating this side and commonly used in *Shujing* is 恭, 慎, 謙, 讓, and 敬.

After Confucius, therefore, ‘moral self-cultivation’ (*sugi*, 修己, C. *xiuji*) became a core concept of Confucian political thought.

Viewed in this context, *minbon* in *Shujing* and *sugi* in *Lunyu* form two contrasting pivots of Confucian political thought. Mencius tried to unite these two, but it was in an ethically tilted way, so that, for instance, in propounding the famous idea of legitimate dethronement of a tyrant (which models on ancient precedents), instead of public spirit of *minbon* as in *Shujing*, he found the warrant in the tyrant’s breach of moral obligation to benevolence and righteousness (*renyi*).<sup>7</sup> The two polar ideas share the same goal, the preservation of a country (if we interpret *sugi* politically), but their concrete aims and methods are starkly different. *Minbon* manifested itself in history as a practical and progressive idea stressing the masses’ concrete conditions of life, whereas *sugi* developed as a sophisticated metaphysical theory of ethics and in mid-Chosŏn operated as a dogmatism.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, *minbon* is familiar with democracy (*minju*), but *sugi*’s presuppositions are rather antithetical to it due to the division of people. Previous works pointed out *minbon*’s compatibility with democracy as follows: the masses as the holder of Heavenly Mandate are not far from democratic citizens who have sovereignty; *minbon* thought includes the idea that people’s opinions should be

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<sup>7</sup> Mengzi (孟子) Book 1B8.

<sup>8</sup> Most previous studies have seen that the idea of *minbon* in *Shujing* and Confucius’ emphasis on benevolence in *Lunyu* is the same but with different names. I think this view is to be redressed. *Minbon* is the product of ‘political necessity’ to maintain the state over a long-term period, whereas Confucius’ benevolence rather reflects his ‘philosophical and ethical ideal’ and is not directly linked to the state’s sheer need to survive. Confucius’ teaching is rather that by transcending the desire of self-preservation of individual countries through morality are the peace and order of all countries achieved. For works that take the similarity position, see Kŭm Chang’ae, ‘Minbon yugyo ūi chaeinsik’ [A New Understanding of Confucian *Minbon*], *Yugyo sasang munhwa yŏn’gu* 1 (1986), pp. 53–74; Viren Murthy ‘The Democratic Potential of Confucian *Minbon* Thought’, *Asian Philosophy* 10(1) (2000), pp. 33–47; Yi Sangik, ‘Minju wa minbon ūi pigyo wa t’ongsŏp ūl wihan chŏngch’i ch’ŏlhak chŏk kŏmt’o’ [Political Philosophical Appraisals for the Comparison and Consilience between Democracy and *Minbon*], In *Minbon kwa minju ūi kaenyŏm chŏk t’ongsŏp*, Sin Chŏnggŭn et al. (Seoul, 2017), pp. 297–389; Yi Hyŏnsŏn, ‘Minjujuŭi e taehan minbon chŏk pip’an kwa pyŏnyong’ [*Minbon*’s Critique of Democracy and Its Transformation], In *Chedo chŏk t’ongsŏp kwa minbon ūi hyŏndaehwa*, Sin Chŏnggŭn et al. (Seoul, 2017), pp. 173–92.

incorporated into government policy, which indeed evolved into East Asian remonstrance agencies; and *minbon* implies government's accountability to the masses' welfare as well as their economic subsistence.<sup>9</sup> This similarity stems from the people-centeredness both concepts share in their basic premises. In history, Huang Zongxi (1610–1695), the Chinese scholar in the late Ming and early Qing period, and late Chosŏn's Chŏng Yagyong (1762–1836) could formulate quite democratic ideas by radicalizing *minbon* thought.<sup>10</sup> Late Chosŏn's intellectual trend toward practicality and in opposition to ethical dogmatism corresponds to Confucians' return to ancient texts and refocusing on the practical side of Confucianism. In the late nineteenth-century setting, Korean reformists made use of *minbon* in adopting Western democratic ideas and institutions; by contrast, they dismissed *sugi*-based Confucian ethics from the public realm, substituting Western public values for it.

### ***Review of Previous Studies***

As far as modern implications of Confucianism are concerned, its relationship with democracy is probably the most significant topic. Political scientists have paid great attention to democratization and its consolidation in Confucian East Asia, particularly upon the background of their remarkable economic growth under authoritarian regimes. Scholars working in the field of comparative philosophy and political theory have rediscovered the values of Confucianism as an alternative to the problematic rights-based liberal social model represented by the USA. These two groups of scholars, if different in

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<sup>9</sup> Yi Sangik, 'Minju wa minbon ūi pigyo wa t'ongsŏp', pp. 342–51.

<sup>10</sup> Huang and Chŏng shared the idea that in the original form of governance far back in the past, the masses selected their rulers themselves and that governors in every administrative dimension are to be dismissed when their performance turns out to be poor. This indicates that they thought contemporary absolute monarchy was not a normal and proper form of governance. Given this similarity, it looks like Chŏng referred to Huang's book; yet he enriched Huang's original view. Huang Zhongxi, *Mingi daifanglu* (明夷待訪錄), Trans. Wm. Theodore De Bary as *Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince* (New York, 1993); Chŏng Yagyong, 'T'angnon' [On King Tang] / 'Wŏnmok' [Original Governors], In *Kukyŏk tasan simunjip* 5, Ed. Minjok munhwa ch'ujinhoe (Seoul, 1986).

their approaches, share similar problems in that they have failed to ponder theoretical plurality within Confucian political thought and to pay adequate concerns with the recent history of East Asian countries.

It is commonly known that the comparative political scientist Samuel Huntington saw Confucianism and Islam as hostile beliefs to democracy. He characterized Confucian societies as follows: Confucian societies put ‘the group over the individual, authority over liberty, and responsibility over rights’ and ‘[h]armony and cooperation [are] preferred over disagreement and competition’.<sup>11</sup> This characterization is quite banal, and these anti-democratic characteristics are readily counter-argued by pro-democratic ones. As Francis Fukuyama has claimed, the examination system in Confucian East Asia has elements that encourage egalitarianism; the East Asian emphasis on education can buttress democratic institutions; and by comparison, Confucianism is tolerant to other belief systems. Moreover, according to Fukuyama, the very Confucian characteristics mentioned by Huntington are rather close to the characteristics of less-Confucian Japanese society than those of Chinese society.<sup>12</sup> And as the Chinese scholar Ying-shih Yü has put it, modern Chinese reformists who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Wang Tao, Kang Yu-wei, Sun Yat-sen, and Liang Qichao, discovered that the ideal governance in classical Confucian texts was being executed in contemporary Western democracies. Yü has located their approval of democracy in the Mencian tradition of Confucianism, which was transmitted to Huang Zhongxi.<sup>13</sup> Huntington’s incompatibility thesis, therefore, cannot endure this historical truth. *Minbon* thought in *Shujing* and *Mengzi* and corresponding practices in Confucian societies are compatible with democracy.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman and London, 1991), pp. 300–1.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Fukuyama, ‘Confucianism and Democracy’, *Journal of Democracy* 6(2) (1995), pp. 20–33.

<sup>13</sup> Ying-shih Yü, ‘Democracy, Human Rights and Confucian Culture’ (The Fifth Huang Hsing Foundation Hsueh Chun-tu Distinguished Lecture in Asian Studies), (St. Antony’s College Oxford, 2000), pp. 1–22.

<sup>14</sup> Singapore’s former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, famous for his advocacy of ‘Asian values’, shares the incompatibility thesis with Huntington in a different context though. He has emphasized ‘cultural differences’

Huntington's misjudgment partly lies in his failure to scrutinize the history of democracy in Confucian East Asia. To overlook the history of democracy in South Korea, the first efforts to reconstruct government in a democratic fashion were made in the 1890s, constitutional monarchy in content though, after the shock of Western powers. In this initial adoption of democracy, as we shall see shortly, the Confucian *minbon* tradition operated as a medium. The fall of Korea to a protectorate of imperialist Japan in 1905 and King Kojong's dethronement in 1907 simply added a republican government to Koreans' political imagination. After the establishment of a republic after colonial rule, confrontation between authoritarian regimes and democracy movement groups lasted for four decades until it finally resulted in institutional democratization from below in 1987. Democratic movement from the early 1960s was a continuance of the initial democratization in the 1890s in terms of the claim of righteous governance. Korean democratization in 1987 was the denouement of the long process of confrontation between (Confucian *minbon*-originated) righteous governance supporters (or democrats) and the inertia of authoritarian rule. Huntington has failed to understand this Confucianism-related history of democratization in Korea.<sup>15</sup>

The Confucian Democracy theory posed by comparative philosophers and political theorists is an extension of the famous liberalism-communitarianism debate in the 1990s; the theorists aimed to create an alternative democracy model in opposition to the American-style rights-based individualist

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between Western and East Asian societies as a way to justify Asian authoritarian rule, but Lee's standpoint of East Asian societies gave rise to strong criticisms. Taking an opposite side of Lee, the former South Korean president Kim Dae Jung has put stress on East Asia's rich traditions upholding democracy. Political scientist Yung-Myung Kim has sharply analyzed the limits of Lee's Asian-style democracy thesis on the basis of political economic and political cultural studies. Fareed Zakaria, 'Culture Is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew', *Foreign Affairs* 73(2) (1994), pp. 109–26; Kim Dae Jung, 'Is Culture Destiny?: The Myth of Asia's Anti-Democratic Values', *Foreign Affairs* 73 (6) (1994); Yung-Myung Kim, "'Asian-Style Democracy": A Critique from East Asia', *Asia Survey* 37(12) (1997), pp. 1119–34.

<sup>15</sup> In his book Yi Hwangjick illustrates Korean Confucians' significant role in national independence movement during the colonial period and their democratic movement during the 1960s. Yi Hwangjick, *Kunja tül ūi haengjin* [Procession of Confucian Gentlemen] (Seoul, 2019).

social model. Scholars such as David Hall and Roger Ames, Daniel Bell, and Sor-Hoon Tan found communitarian values in Confucian traditions and developed Confucian Democracy theories.<sup>16</sup> Predisposed by an alternative vision of democracy, their ideas were more normative than pragmatic. Political theorist Sungmoon Kim criticized this thick Communitarian version of Confucian Democracy theory, since it does not consider the already plural social conditions of East Asia. Taking the plural conditions seriously, he unfolded a more viable and pragmatic Confucian Democracy theory.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Taiwanese and mainland Chinese scholars reinstated their millennia-old Confucian traditions as an authentic national spirit and insisted that democracy of Western provenance should be harmonized with this Confucian cultural characteristics.<sup>18</sup>

The Confucian Democracy theory is a product of East Asians' gradual confidence in their traditions, as well as some Western scholars' discontent to the rights-based libertarian model of democracy. This theory, however, has faced significant criticisms mainly due to the proponents' failure to see the recent history of East Asian countries and their misinterpretation of current East Asian societies. Their Confucian Democracy theories are premised upon the view that East Asian societies are still heavily Confucian and that despite pluralistic social conditions, the Confucian culture is operating as basic habits of thinking. This presupposition is under challenge.

In his paper reviewing previous studies of Confucian Democracy theory, Shaun O'Dwyer has aptly pointed out the theorists' failure in handling the effects of modernization on Confucian East Asia.

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<sup>16</sup> David Hall and Roger Ames, *The Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China* (Chicago and Lasalle, 1999); Daniel Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton, 2006); \_\_\_\_\_, *China's New Confucianism* (Princeton, 2010); \_\_\_\_\_, *The China Model and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton, 2015); Sor-hoon Tan, *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (New York, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Sungmoon Kim, *Confucian Democracy in East Asia: Theory and Practice* (New York, 2014); \_\_\_\_\_, *Public Reason Confucianism: A Construction* (Cambridge, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Yingjie Guo, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China: The Search for National Identity under Reform* (London, 2003), ch.4.

According to O'Dwyer, East Asian societies, since the mid-nineteenth century, witnessed the disintegration of Confucian institutional bases, such as public service examinations, Confucian schools and academies, the monarchy system that upheld Confucianism, and traditional familial and clan structures.<sup>19</sup> One and a half century has passed from the time when East Asian countries began to distance themselves from their Confucian traditions. To add some more explanation with the case of Korea, as Confucianism receded, Christianity occupied people's spiritual life; the liberal and democratic model of government from the 1880s and then the German-style statist government in the 1930s were incorporated into Koreans' imagination of government<sup>20</sup>; and Socialism penetrated Koreans' minds from the 1920s. During this period, the traditional governing system of monarchy fell, and Koreans experienced foreign rule for thirty-six years. Socialist ideology worked as an iconoclasm and ideological conflicts eventually led to a civil war (1950–53). And from the 1960s, dizzily fast modernization under authoritarian regimes eroded existing social and cultural structures to a great extent. Given these transformations, it is not difficult to imagine how deep and complex effects these events left for Koreans.

Due to this historical restriction on the Confucian society thesis, Confucian Democracy theorists, instead of current social realities of East Asia, have stressed 'Confucian culture' which they thought is still staunch in East Asia. A culturalist view, however, is a weak way of explaining social phenomena, since culture is a complex entity that can be interpreted differently from different angles. For example, as Yung-Myung Kim has aptly put it, in the early twentieth century many Korean intellectuals found the low development of Korea in Confucian culture, but recently, as is seen in the Confucian Capitalism

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<sup>19</sup> Shaun O'Dwyer, 'Confucian Democrats, Not Confucian Democracy', *Dao* 19 (2020), pp. 209–29. Also see O'Dwyer, *Confucianism's Prospects: A Reassessment* (New York, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Kyung Moon Hwang, 'Country or State? Reconceptualizing Kukka in the Korean Enlightenment Period', *Korean Studies* 24 (2000), pp. 1–24.

thesis, Korean economic success has been attributed to Confucian ethics.<sup>21</sup> Admitting that Confucian culture is still alive, there is little evidence that Confucianism is an influential worldview for Koreans.

Moreover, the Confucian Democracy theorists have failed to clarify whether the Confucian culture they mention is that in the public realm or the private realm. In the case of Korea, democracy and modern public values have replaced Confucian ethical values as central values in the public realm since the 1890s. So if they indicate public culture, it means they are misinterpreting current democracies in East Asia. Confucian culture has lost a dominant position in the public sphere. Even though they mean culture in the private sphere, Confucian culture cannot be said to be a dominant one anymore. To glimpse the cultures of current South Korea, the traditional extended family system greatly disintegrated. Along with the weakening of Confucian customs, elderly people, instead of relying on their adult children, are inclined to live independently. It is well known that Korean elderly people's poverty rate is ranked first among OECD countries.<sup>22</sup> The younger generations grow up within a variety of cultures (not different from Western youths), so their worldview is gradually getting split from their parent generations'. Young women's refusal to accept traditional obligations of marriage and childbirth has become a serious social problem not only in Korea but also in Japan and China. The real problem in East Asia is too fast social change for which East Asians are rapidly being estranged from their traditional cultures and customs. Living in a center of global economy, they are ready to abandon old customs and habits for their adaptation to changing global economic circumstances.

O'Dwyer's critique also embraces a reasonable doubt that the current Confucian legacy might be the heritage of the abuse of Confucianism by East Asian authoritarian regimes in the twentieth century.

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<sup>21</sup> Kim, "Asian-Style Democracy", pp. 1128–30.

<sup>22</sup> In 2018 Korean elderly people's poverty rate (43.4%) was way higher than the average poverty rate of the elderly in OECD countries (14.8%).  
[http://www.keri.org/web/www/news\\_02?p\\_p\\_id=EXT\\_BBS&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=0&p\\_p\\_state=normal&p\\_p\\_mode=view&\\_EXT\\_BBS\\_struts\\_action=%2Fext%2Fbbs%2Fview\\_message&\\_EXT\\_BBS\\_messageId=356132](http://www.keri.org/web/www/news_02?p_p_id=EXT_BBS&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&_EXT_BBS_struts_action=%2Fext%2Fbbs%2Fview_message&_EXT_BBS_messageId=356132).

Under the influence of the German-style Statist ideology, imperialist Japan employed Confucianism to unite Japanese people to its own ends. This ‘Statist Confucianism’ that identified Confucian filial piety with loyalty to the state served the imperialist government’s purpose of mobilizing its people. After the Second World War, this Statist Confucianism was distrusted in Japan, but authoritarian regimes in South Korea and Taiwan adopted this strategy to stabilize their own authoritarian rule.<sup>23</sup>

### *The Aim of the Present Study*

Initially, the communitarians’ proposal of Confucian Democracy had normative values; Sungmoon Kim’s pragmatic version, however, despite its consideration of social reality, exposed problems. He contends that while placed under plural social conditions, Korean cultural matrix is still staunchly Confucian. Upon this premise, he asserts that there is ‘systematic discord’ between liberal-democratic hardware and social-historical Confucian software. In another place, he insists that democratic values and principles are ‘culturally unfamiliar’ with Confucian social mores and habits in South Korea, so Confucian adaptation of democracy is needed.<sup>24</sup> These remarks are historically untenable, since when democratic values and institutions were adopted in Korea in the 1880s and 90s, there was little discord.

Sungmoon Kim’s argument of the problematic relationship of Confucianism with democracy is Confucian ethics’ relationship with democracy. Confucian ethics takes the division of people according to social positions and close/far relationships for granted and demands people to treat others as per these principles.<sup>25</sup> The premise of social hierarchy is at odds with the democratic principle of equal humanity,

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<sup>23</sup> O’Dwyer, ‘Confucian Democrats’, pp. 214–20.

<sup>24</sup> Kim, *Confucian Democracy in East Asia*, pp. 10, 207.

<sup>25</sup> For these two grounds of Confucian ethics (親親尊尊), see Yi Pongkyu, ‘Kyubōm ui kūngō rosō hyōl’yōn chōk yōndae wa sinbun ūi kubun e kwanhan kodae yuga ūi insik’ [Blood-lineage Solidarity as a Source of Norms and the Classification of Social Status in Ancient Confucianism], *T’aedong kojōn yōn’gu* 10 (1993), pp. 805–49.

and the close/far-based division of people has formed a peculiar connection culture (私情) in Korea. The notorious cronyism and nepotism in Korean society based on private connection culture are tied with this characteristic of Confucian ethics.<sup>26</sup> Part of Confucian ethics has, therefore, elements inharmonious with democracy. Korean reformists in the late nineteenth century well recognized this matter and abandoned Confucian ethics as public values, adopting modern Western values compatible with democracy, including liberty, equality, individual rights, and rule of law.

This study examines the history of the initial introduction of democracy to Korea in the 1880s and 90s in order to testify to the harmonious relationship between Confucianism and democracy. For a long time, the relationship between Confucian *minbon* and democracy has mainly been discussed theoretically rather than historically.<sup>27</sup> Even when treated historically, it was limited to the cases of modern Chinese intellectuals by illuminating the compatibility of the concepts within their thought.<sup>28</sup> The close intertwining of the two in reconstructing a post-Confucian governing system has yet to be examined. Taking a historical approach, I aim to refute Confucian Democracy theorists' view that current democracy in East Asia introduced from the West is conflicting with Confucian cultural matrix. My alternative explanation is that East Asian Confucian traditions are not entirely hostile to democracy and rather that the *minbon* tradition provides amicable soil for democracy to be prosperous in those societies. If current democracy in East Asia is already *Confucian* democracy, its consolidation is not to

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<sup>26</sup> Not surprisingly, the reformist paper *Tongnip sinmun* (The Independence Newspaper, April 1896 to December 1899) repeatedly addressed this private connection (*sajǒng*) culture which, according to it, is a fatal social malady of contemporary Korea. Instead, the paper advocated 'fairness' (公平) as a new public value. *Tongnip sinmun* 27 May 1896; 14 July 1896.

<sup>27</sup> A recent volume on the relationship between Confucian *minbon* and democracy (*minzhu*) takes a theoretical standpoint. Shin Chǒnggūn et al, *Minbon kwa minju ūi kaenyǒm chǒk t'ongsǒp* [Conceptual Consilience between *Minbon* and Democracy] (Seoul, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> Chinese scholars have usually taken this method. Ying-shih Yü, 'Democracy, Human Rights and Confucian Culture'; Wang Juntao, 'Confucian Democrats in Chinese History', In *Confucianism For the Modern World*, Ed. Daniel Bell and Hahm Chaibong (New York, 2005), ch.3.

reconstruct it toward a Confucian fashion but sophisticate it in the current state by redressing its weaknesses.

As data to analyze, I mainly use the reformist Pak Yŏnghyo's (1861–1939) long memorial to King Kojong (r. 1864–1907) presented in 1888 and editorials of *Tongnip sinmun* that exhibit the reformist group Independence Club's (*Tongnip hyŏp'oe*, 1896–1898) political ideas and actions most vividly. These historical sources provide affluent proofs of the congenial relationship between Confucianism and democracy. First, I will examine the reformists' view of government in order to show the continuity between Confucian *minbon* and democracy. Next, I will analyze the reformists' adoption of parliamentarianism in terms of its consistency with the Confucian *minbon* tradition.

## **I . *Minbon* and Democratic Government**

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century when the traditional social system was disintegrating, the two traditions of Confucian political thought noted above were treated differently by Korean reformists. In building new public order, they adopted modern Western political values including democracy, and in this process, they appreciated and positively employed Confucian *minbon* thought, while brushing aside the ideal of moral politics based on *sugi*. Let us first see how Korean reformists used *minbon* to introduce democratic ideas.

### ***The Case of Pak Yŏnghyo***

A foremost reformist figure who adopted democratic ideas and who aimed to rebuild contemporary Korea into a modern state was Pak Yŏnghyo, a radical reformist who played a key role in the 1884 *Kapsin* coup and the 1894 *Kabo* reforms. His long memorial to King Kojong, which conveys his concrete vision of national reform and presented in 1888 when he was in exile in Japan, testifies to how

*minbon* thought and democracy are connected without conflict.<sup>29</sup> What is significant is that Pak illuminated only *minbon* among the two traditions of governance within Confucianism, which contrasts with the case of Yu Kilchun (1856–1914), who took a moderate path by holding the vision of moral politics based on the division of the ruler and the ruled, as well as *minbon*, in reconstructing the political order.<sup>30</sup>

Pak's democratic view of governance is well exhibited in his redefinition of 'government' (*chǒngbu*). In the memorial, Pak mentions the *raison d'être* of government three times. The first is obviously based on *minbon* thought and the last on democratic ideas. In the preamble of the memorial, he stated that the purpose of government is, 'to protect the people and preserve the state',<sup>31</sup> and in the third out of eight proposals for national reform (that is, making the national economy thrive), he said that the people pay taxes and respect the public authority, 'in order to protect their bodies' and families' happiness and well-being'.<sup>32</sup> In the eighth proposal, which is concerned with enhancing people's liberty, Pak wrote that, 'the original intention for which humans established government is for the sake of the corroboration of their rights, not for the sake of a king', and that the rights of humans include, 'protection of their life, the seeking of liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'.<sup>33</sup> Notably, these three

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<sup>29</sup> Pak Yǒnghyo, 'Chosǒnguk naejǒng e kwanhan Pak Yǒnghyo kǒnbaeksǒ' [Pak Yǒnghyo's Memorial Concerning the Domestic Affairs of Chosǒn], *Nippon gaiko bunsho* vol. 21 (Tokyo, 1952–1962), pp. 292–311.

<sup>30</sup> Yu Kilchun's case shows a quintessential character of moderates. In his main work *Sǒyu kyǒnmun*, Yu imagined the origins of government on the basis of the idea of *minbon* and acknowledged the supremacy of a republican government and constitutional monarchy. However, he argued for the maintenance of the traditional governing system by sticking to a king's absolute rights. His conservative view was not entirely caused by his Confucian moral ideal but rather his consideration of the temporal context of his time. That is, the national security problem led him to take a middle path between the two views of governance. Yu Kilchun, *Sǒyu kyǒnmun* [Observations on a Journey to the West], In *Yu Kilchun chǒnsǒ* 4 (Seoul: 1971).

<sup>31</sup> '夫政府之趣的者何也 保民護國是耳'. Pak, 'kǒnbaeksǒ', 294.

<sup>32</sup> '夫人民出稅奉公之本志 欲保身家之幸安也'. Pak, 'kǒnbaeksǒ', 300.

<sup>33</sup> '人間立政府之本旨 欲固此通義也 非爲帝王設者也' '其通義者 人之自保生命 求自由 希幸福是也

definitions of government do not cause friction with one another.

In his first definition, to support his *minbon* view of government, Pak added passages of Confucian classics and a Chinese historical anecdote. He first referred to sage kings Tang and Wu, who dethroned the tyrants Jie and Zhou, and who founded new kingdoms, and asserted that because they won the heart of the people with their benevolence (愛民), the people did not hate the new rulers. With reference to these sage kings, Pak wished to deliver the message that government exists for the sake of the people, not for a king. Next, citing the famous sentence, ‘a king needs to be with the people’s happiness and pain’, in *Mengzi* and, ‘the people are the foundation of a country’ in *Shujing*, Pak stressed again the *minbon* view of governance. Although it is admitted that Pak’s understanding of *minbon* is the Mencian version of *minbon* that is compromised by Confucius’ moral philosophy, Pak restored the essential sense of *minbon* from ancient China by bringing back the masses into the center of governing.<sup>34</sup> This *minbon*-based view of government led to the second definition, in which he saw the forming of government as the people’s voluntary will for their vested interest, which can be related to a contractual model of government. Finally, in the third definition he used the liberal view of government expounded by the English thinker John Locke, together with the notion of the people’s right to resistance which Pak regarded as the people’s publicly righteous act (公義) and duty (職分). This liberal view of government was transmitted to Pak through the Japanese thinker Fukuzawa Yukichi, who treated The Declaration of the Independence of the USA in his book *Seiyo jijo*.<sup>35</sup> So we can see that in the same

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此他人之所不可如何也’. Pak, ‘kōnbaeksō’, 309.

<sup>34</sup> He also cited Yin Duo’s (尹鐸) anecdote in the *Chunqiu* era that Yin of the kingdom of Zhao (趙) safeguarded the fortress of Jinyang (晉陽) in the midst of the attacks of three neighboring countries. Pak stressed that because Yin won the heart of the people with benevolence, the people in the fortress did not rebel against him. Pak, ‘kōnbaeksō’, 295.

<sup>35</sup> Fukuzawa addressed the history of the USA in chapter two of the earlier edition (初編). Fukuzawa, *Seiyo jijo*.

memorial, both the *minbon* and the liberal and democratic view of government are posed as a coherent reply for the same question, and that there is a seamless unfolding of thought from *minbon* to democracy (*minzhu*), which is, I think, due to the sharedness of the two views with respect to ‘the people-centeredness’. Because of the commonness of this point as the fundamental source of the legitimacy of rule, Pak and many reformist intellectuals in contemporary East Asia paid attention to democracy and adopted it without difficulty.

### ***The Case of the Independence Club***

In the 1890s there was a significant development in the view of government toward the liberal and democratic side, particularly with the advent of the concept of the people’s ‘political rights’. The critical moment that caused this development is the Independence Club movement – a representative political movement heralded by the reformists in the late 1890s and specifically by Sö Chaep’il (1864–1951), Yun Ch’iho (1865–1945), and young reformers educated at mission schools – and vivid accounts of the Club’s thought and deeds were recorded in *Tongnip sinmun* (hereafter *TS*), which is the sister organization founded for the purpose of enlightening the common people. So, we need to analyze the editorials of *TS* in order to see the development of the view of government in the 1890s.

Pak Yönghyo’s presenting of the Lockean view of government, noted above, is meaningful, but we should acknowledge that his remarks that the people can overthrow a government to protect their general interests does not contain realistic aspirations.<sup>36</sup> The people in Pak’s third definition is a normative concept. However, the people in *TS* is close to the idea of citizens in a democratic polity holding real political rights. This concept of the people is particularly frequent in the editorials of *TS* written in the year 1898. For example, in the editorial in the 11 January 1898 issue, the editor’s assertion,

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<sup>36</sup> ‘故政府保其義 好民之所好 惡民之所惡 則得其威權 若反是 戾其義 惡民之所好 好民之所惡 則民必變革其政府 而新立之 以保其大旨’. Pak, ‘könbaeksö’, 309.

‘a country’s prosperity or collapse depends on whether the people of the country practice their duty [*chikbun*] or not’, is indicative of this usage. It is because the ‘duty’ of the people does not merely mean the observance of laws and rules set by the government, but rather making the government work for the sake of the people. As is stated in the same editorial, the sentiment, ‘to stop the government when it harms the country’, was regarded as the prime duty of the people, which is followed by a more traditional one, ‘to obey the laws enacted by the government when they are beneficial for the state and people’. This concept of duty is rather close to that given to citizens in the liberal and democratic polity.

A similar view was expressed in a memorial to the King presented during the People’s Mass Meeting (*Manmin kongdonghoe*) in October 1898 in which the members of the Club stated that when a government official carries out illegal acts and hurts the interests of the country, it is in ‘the rights of the subjects (*sinmin*)’ to voice their concerns against him and to impeach him. These kinds of rights are, apparently, political rights. This right of the people is graphically expressed by the first editor of *TS Sŏ Chaep’il* in his letter to the paper from the USA, in which he remarked that, ‘the owner of the state [the people]’ has become the slave of government officials in contemporary Korea, so in order to recover the ownership, the people must let the ‘servants [government officials] work for them’.<sup>37</sup> This drastic conversion of the traditional practice in Chosŏn represents the radicalness of the Club’s thought and the crucial turn of the understanding of governance from the Confucian to the liberal and democratic view. In the wake of the year 1898, therefore, Korean political thought experienced a momentous shift toward democracy.

According to the political rights to the common people was not a simple application of Western democratic ideas to contemporary Korea, which was taught to a couple of Club leaders who received their university education in the USA. Rather, the novel concept was obtained voluntarily in the process

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<sup>37</sup> *TS* 16 November 1898.

of the Club's political acts. From the year 1894, contemporary Korea was placed under national security threat because of its neighboring powers' direct confrontation on the peninsula, which transpired in the series of political events from 1894. The initial military confrontation between China and Japan in 1894 moved to the next bigger contest between Japan and Russia that caused the murder of Queen Min (1895) and King Kojong's escape to the Russian legation in Seoul (1896). In the interim peace from 1896, caused by Japan's retreat after the murder of Queen Min, the Independence Club began to intervene in the pro-Russian government and asked for national reform. All this process was driven by the perilous political circumstances from 1894, and the Club's intervention became more direct as Russia strengthened its engagement in Korean government from late 1897. The Club's involvement had politically dramatic effects because its unprecedented street rallies and mobilization of the commoners drove Russia to retreat from its earlier demands of concessions for the Korean government. This initial political success invigorated the Club in its intervention in domestic politics and it eventually evolved to the mass street demonstrations from September 1898. The Club adamantly criticized corrupt and incompetent government ministers and urged the King to reshuffle his government toward a reformist government for the sake of rapid modern change. The almost three-month-long street demonstrations in central Seoul gave Club members confidence in their cause and gradually led them to the idea that their political voice for the redress of the misled government was legitimate and those acts were indeed their 'duty'. So it is, above all, the pressing circumstances of a national security crisis that drove the Club to call for their rights to be voiced on national affairs.

Nevertheless, we should consider the intellectual tradition of Chosŏn Korea that enabled the easy perception and obtainment of the political rights of the people. When the Club and the government were in serious confrontation over the Club's engagement in governmental affairs in October 1898, the references they made in their memorials are useful in capturing the traditional base of their call for political rights. We should pay heed to the frequent citations the Club used for the support of their argument during this period, which include: 1) the sage kings Yao and Shun's anecdotes on their efforts

to listen to the common people about national affairs by setting up logs for rebuke and asking even those who cut field grass,<sup>38</sup> 2) the famous sentence in *Shujing* representing *minbon*, ‘the people are the foundation of a country’,<sup>39</sup> 3) the sentence in *Shijing* (Classic of Poetry) that a parent-like king likes what the people like and dislikes what they dislike,<sup>40</sup> and 4) the sentence in *Mengzi* on the need to follow the people’s opinion in appointing government ministers, ‘a king should select a person when all people of the country speak of him as lenient’.<sup>41</sup> Common in these citations is their relatedness to the idea of *minbon*. We can presume that the Club members simply followed the traditional way of writing memorials by quoting the famous sentences from classical texts, but this interpretation is incorrect because the reality is the opposite. The memorials written by the Club members during the People’s Mass Meeting did not follow a traditional formula, for the Club employed ‘logical’ argument to validate their opinions and to argue for their political rightfulness, rather than citing Confucian texts and historical anecdotes. So, their use of the sentences in classical texts was exceptional, which means that they deliberately quoted those sentences for their purpose of making the King accept the political rights of the people.

More explicitly speaking, the Club used the first citation in the context of its need to counter-argue the King’s intention to curb the Club’s activity by formulating a new law regulating popular associations. Referring to the ancient sage kings’ anecdotes, they wished to check the King’s plan for restricting the people’s public gathering and public speech on the street, and the citation fit perfectly with their purpose. The rest conveying the idea of *minbon*, which were mainly used in their memorials

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<sup>38</sup> TS 27 October 1898; 21 November 1898.

<sup>39</sup> TS 12 October 1898; 21 November 1898.

<sup>40</sup> This sentence has been commonly used because it was cited in *Daxue* (Great Learning). TS 27 October 1898.

<sup>41</sup> TS 19 November 1898; 27 October 1898.

that impeached incompetent conservative ministers and refuted the traditional view of a king's exclusive rights of governance, excellently served their aim, too. Utilizing the well-known passages from classics, the Club could corroborate their call for the freedom of speech and their right to oppose the government. No wonder they defended their right to speech in a memorial by stating that their right is not brand new and is in accord with the teaching of the ancient sage kings.<sup>42</sup> So, they borrowed the authority of the classical texts to validate their argument and to weaken the radicalness of their political claims. Their novel vision of governing was rephrased in a familiar fashion by employing well-known Confucian passages. This rephrasing was possible because of the essential affinity between Confucian *minbon* thought and democratic ideas. In stepping over to democracy from their traditional *minbon* there was little conceptual conflict, while admitting that reformists and conservatives made an argument over that question, in particular the people's rights versus the king's exclusive right to govern.<sup>43</sup> In addition, it is notable that the Confucian moral view of governance, represented by the king's moral self-cultivation (修身), which had been commonplace in memorials in previous times, was never mentioned, which shows the reformists' intellectual disposition.

So, we can say that the obtainment of average Korean people's 'political rights', though engendered within the political circumstances in 1898, was an internal development from the Confucian tradition of *minbon*. In opposition to the widely shared view that the political rights of Korean people were formally provided with their emancipation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, we can pose a different view that political rights in Korea materialized in the wake of the year 1898.

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<sup>42</sup> *TS* 27 October 1898.

<sup>43</sup> Conservatives asserted that the king has exclusive rights to national affairs and the people's participation in government affairs is impertinent. The Club argued against this logic, insisting that the people's rights are not incompatible with the king's rights. For the Club's stance, see *TS* 25 October 1898.

## II. *Minbon* and Parliamentarianism

Another intellectual connectedness between Confucian *minbon* and democracy is identified in the reformists' acceptance of parliamentarianism as an institutional form that, they thought, contemporary Korea must set up in order to build a wealthy and powerful country and a lenient government. After Pak Yŏnghyo's initial proposal of a local-level parliament in his 1888 memorial for cooperative ruling of local areas, named *hyŏnhoe* (縣會), in the 1890s some significant initiatives for a national-level parliament were posed. These included: the suggestion by Ŏ Yunjung (1848–1896) that aimed to transform The Bureau for Affairs on the Military and the State (*Kunkuk kimuch'ŏ*) to parliament in order to divide governmental powers and thus to build a constitutional government in 1894; Pak Yŏnghyo's attempt as the minister of internal affairs to establish an operative parliament by transforming the government agency *Chungch'uwŏn* (中樞院, privy council) in 1895; and lastly, in 1898, the Independence Club's demand for setting in motion the *Chungch'uwŏn* as an acting parliamentary organ.<sup>44</sup> These series of occasions were above all concerned with the need to shift the traditional absolute monarchy to the constitutional system, which was the most crucial political agenda in contemporary Korea. Besides the goal of regime change, the reformists found the merits of parliament in that it contributes to national 'wealth and power' and 'lenient governance' (寬政), as clarified in *Hansŏng sunbo* (Hansŏng Decadal, Oct. 1883 to Oct. 1884), the first modern newspaper in Korea.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> For Ŏ Yunjung's initiative to build a constitutional system during *Kabo* reforms by creating a parliamentary organ, see *Kojong sillok*, 31/06/10, 31/08/02, 31/09/21 and Wang Hyŏnjong, *Han'guk kŭndae kukka ūi hyŏngsŏng kwa kabo kaehyŏk* [Modern State Building in Korea and *Kabo* Reforms] (Seoul, 2003), ch. 6. For the reformists' plan to shift the absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy by opening *Chungch'uwŏn* as a parliament in the late 1890s and its real operation as a parliament, see Yi Pangwŏn, *Hanmal chŏngch'i pyŏndong kwa Chungch'uwŏn* [Political Transformations in the Era of Korean Empire and *Chungch'uwŏn*] (Seoul, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> For the view that a parliament has contributed to Western wealth and power, see *Hansŏng sunbo*, '歐羅巴洲', 10 November 1883 and '在上不可不達民情論', 30 January 1884. For 'lenient rule' as a result of the

Following the *Sunbo*, the reformists in the 1880s, represented by Pak Yŏnghyo and Yu Kilchun, in large measure reiterated the logic of the *Sunbo* in their endorsement of parliament, stressing its great benefits to Western countries' wealth and power. As the first institutional form of parliament in Korea, *Chungch'uwŏn* was initially launched in late 1898 and survived until 1910, although it did not function as expected because its proponent, the Independence Club, was disbanded soon after it was set up. This early installment of parliament in a country like Korea that had not had the similar institutional format is an unusual case. A reasonable explanation for this is a possible connectivity between Korean political traditions and parliamentarianism. I will highlight Confucian respect for public opinion as the very tradition.

### ***The Case of Pak Yŏnghyo***

As noted above, Pak proposed the founding of a parliamentary organ twice, and at his second proposal in 1895, he indeed took authoritative measures, promulgating a series of related ordinances. His political vision was to check the King's power and the Executive through a parliament and independent legal courts. In this regard, it is notable that he repeatedly used the word '定' in the seventh proposal of his memorial on righteous governing, which is interpreted that government affairs should be settled in an institutionally systematized form and that the king's unlimited use of power should be restricted within that form.<sup>46</sup> So, for Pak a parliament was a pivotal institution for building a constitutional, non-arbitrary government. And, as he states in parts of his memorial where he addressed the need to limit the King's power, a parliament was implied as the core mechanism through which the diminishing power of the

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effects of parliament, see '譯民主與各國章程及公議堂解', 7 February 1884.

<sup>46</sup> In the seventh proposal, he used the following expressions, such as '民國有定', '政治一定', '君權有定', to stress the need to systematize governance. And in order to express the opposite system where the king's power is limitless, he used the expression '政治無定'.

King would shift to the increase of the people's liberty and, consequently, to the peace of the country and its wealth and power.<sup>47</sup>

It is noteworthy that Pak inserted his suggestion of *hyŏnhoe* within several concrete policy items attached at the end of the seventh proposal of his memorial, not in the main body of that proposal. A reasonable explanation for this is that that issue had tremendous implications for the King and the country's future, so that he hesitated to handle it more fully in the main body. It will be the very reason why he did not raise a national-level parliament at all. He deliberately proposed a local-level parliament, since a national-level parliament was a grand issue of huge political impact. This perspective is also pertinent in explaining the reason why he found the legitimacy of the local-level parliament in Chosŏn's tradition of consultation with upright Confucian scholars. In the seventh proposal, he first clarified the role of *hyŏnhoe* at which local people discuss problems of their county, and then he related it to Chosŏn's time-honored tradition of listening to high-minded Confucian scholars in both central and local governments, claiming that 'Chosŏn also had the tradition of co-ruling between the government and the people'.<sup>48</sup> Next, he reminded the King of the great authority famous Confucian scholars in withdrawal (*sallim*) had in the past, who had been brought into the royal court for their advice on national affairs. Afterwards, he stated that in Chosŏn significant issues went through counsel and debates before they went to administration, whereupon he unfolded his vision that if such a custom is expanded and becomes more delicate, then that will develop into a civilized institution. The civilized institution, in context, can reasonably be interpreted as modern parliament. So, we can say that Pak referred to that tradition of Chosŏn to soften his radical political vision, but it is also true that the tradition in Chosŏn and Western

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<sup>47</sup> Pak's opinion about regime change to constitutional monarchy is unfolded in the sixth and seventh proposals of his 1888 memorial.

<sup>48</sup> '設縣會之法 使民議民事 而得公私兩便事 今政府之山林 府縣之座首 皆因於儒教 隨民望選拔 而協議民國之事 則本朝亦有君民共治之風也'. Pak, 'kŏnbaeksŏ', 309.

parliamentarianism are not different in their spirit.

Chosŏn's tradition of consulting with *sallim* scholars was to follow the ancient sage kings Yao and Shun's anecdotes of listening to the people and its institutionalization in China. The key phrase penetrating all this is, 'respect for public opinion', one of the iron rules in managing the country in Confucian Chosŏn. Because of this tradition, in Chosŏn the three government agencies, called *Samsa* (三司), in charge of communication between the king and the people and in possession of a unlimited right to present (right) opinions, played a central role in handling government affairs.<sup>49</sup> Regardless of political feuds caused by *Samsa*'s extraordinary right to right opinion, the inviolability of those agencies and the value of public opinion were seen as essential for good governance in Confucian Chosŏn. The tradition of listening to the people remained a pivotal means of practicing *minbon*.

Hearing public opinion through both the *Samsa* and learned Confucian scholars had fundamental limits because they mostly came from the ruling yangban class and represented their interests. So, at peaceful times, the value of *minbon* was frequently compromised by yangban elites' class interests. How to take in the public opinion of the masses was not tackled seriously in Chosŏn. This question eventually rose to a core political agenda from the 1880s. Pak's opinion that *sallim*'s counsel is to be expanded and become more delicate for it to develop as a civilized agency addressed this very issue, and his answer was to adopt the institution of parliament. We can say that through Western parliament, the Confucian tradition of listening to public opinion grabbed the moment to develop into a modern form. Consultation with *sallim* was still ongoing in the 1880s and 90s, so Pak's political vision was in continuity with Chosŏn's time-honored tradition.

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<sup>49</sup> For *Samsa* or three remonstrating agencies, particularly that in the period of Literati Purges in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and the abuse of their power by young Confucian bureaucrats and consequent political conflicts, see Edward W. Wagner, *The Literary Purges: Political Conflict in Early Yi Korea* (Cambridge Mass, 1974).

### *The Case of the Independence Club*

The Independence Club's reattempt to carry out Pak's initial plan of transforming the *Chungch'uwŏn* to a parliament was facilitated by the Club's common understanding of the need to change the traditional regime. The political turbulence since 1894 and the resulting incidents seriously impaired the authority of King Kojong and the government and drove the Club to bear the responsibility for leading the country to a right way of governance. The two core ideas of *TS*, national independence (*chaju tongnip*) and civilization and enlightenment (*munmyŏng kaehwa*), represented this political vision. The Club's aim was to engage legally in the government through that agency and then steer the country toward faster modernization.

The *Chungch'uwŏn* as the first senate-like parliament in Korean history was set up by the mutual agreement of both sides of the King and the Club in late 1898. For King Kojong, there was a practical reason for his agreement on the demand of the Club for the installment of parliament in October 1898. He thought that the mass street demonstrations were difficult to suppress because of the legitimacy the Club held, so he tactically reckoned that if their demand was accepted, their vociferous mass meetings would disband. Established as a result of political strategy, the *Chungch'uwŏn*, *de jure*, had proper rights and roles to operate as a modern form of parliament, since the members had the rights to legislate, revise laws, discuss national affairs, and recommend policy agendas to the Cabinet. Nevertheless, it still had a serious limit in that the entire fifty members were to be appointed by both the King and the Club, not by the masses at any way.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> For the rights and roles provided to *Chungch'uwŏn* in the initial ordinance, see *TS* 5 November 1898. The original rights slightly diminished in another revision made on 12 November. In particular, the number of representatives selected by the Club decreased into seventeen from its original twenty five. For more information about the rise of *Chungch'uwŏn* as a parliament in 1898, see Shin Yongha, *Tongnip hyŏp'oe yŏn'gu* [Studies of the Independence Club] (Seoul, 1976), pp. 361–75.

However, the *Chungch'uwŏn* was not simply a product of the political circumstances in 1898 and the King's strategic judgment. It was the consequence of mutual agreement based on common intellectual backgrounds, too. Both the Club and the King shared the need to set up a parliament upon the tradition of 'respect for public opinion', just like Pak Yŏnghyo did. From the outset, the Club pressed the need to install a parliament on the basis of the necessity to form public opinion or *kongnon* (公論) through that organization. In the editorials of *TS* and memorials to the King, the Club consistently argued for a space to create true public opinion through a systematic process of discussion. For example, at the first announcement of their vision for parliament in the editorial of the 24 February 1898 issue of *TS*, the Club's view was that because there was no place to form public opinion, the government submitted to Russian demands of concessions. In this regard, the Club defined themselves as a group to create the public opinion of the country through discussions on national affairs.

A pivotal issue related to the public opinion was who was entitled to form it or who could participate in the creation of it. In Chosŏn Korea, the class that could participate in the formation of public opinion was the aristocratic yangban class. The Club now urged the King that the commoners had the right to participate in that. Indeed, the essential conflict between the Club and the King since the Club's engagement in governmental affairs was made over this issue. So, in the memorials presented on 3 and 11 July 1898, as a way of persuading the King to allow the people (including the Club) to express opinions freely, they cited the sage kings Yao and Shun's teaching, Mencius' remark on the need to consider the people's opinion, and other Confucian texts and even a Western proverb on the inevitability of collecting wider opinions of the people.<sup>51</sup> With respect to this issue, *TS* added particular modifiers in its use of the word *kongnon*, such as '*sesang/segye kongnon*' (public opinion of the world) and '*inmin/paeksŏng ũi kongnon*' (public opinion of the masses).<sup>52</sup> So for the first time in Korean

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<sup>51</sup> Chŏng Kyo, *Taehan kye'nyŏnsa* [The History of the Last Years of Great Korea] Vol. 1, Trans. by Kim Uch'ŏl et al. (Seoul, 2004), pp. 202–4, 205–7.

<sup>52</sup> In the section of King Kojong in the annals *Sŭngjŏngwŏn ilki*, particularly in the period before the

history, the subjects of the forming of public opinion were expanded to the commoners by the Independence Club. The Club saw parliament as the place to collect the opinions of entire Korean people and then to form *true* public opinion through appropriate procedures. Western parliament, therefore, was not far from their traditional conception of righteous governance. A parliament was the extension of their political tradition. Other benefits of parliament, such as division of labor within the government and upright government through the checks of parliament, were added to the forming of public opinion.<sup>53</sup> This easy adoption of Western parliament in Korea was possible due to the Confucian tradition of respect for public opinion.

This tradition also drove King Kojong to agree on the transformation of the *Chungch'uwŏn* to parliament. In late October, as the two-month-long confrontation of the Club with the King and conservatives reached a compromise and the King reshuffled the Cabinet with reformist figures, the Club pressed the new government toward national reform, presenting six proposals for reform (獻議六條). The King in response added five articles (詔勅五條) for the government to address and carry out. In the first article of the five, he ordered that the law concerning *Chungch'uwŏn* be revised for it to work as a parliamentary organ. A crucial point to consider is the phrases he attached *vis-à-vis* the old tradition of remonstrance in the Chosŏn government. He found the need to set up a parliamentary organ in the abolishment of the remonstrating agency and, due to the absence of that agency, according to him, 'the communication between the king and the people was clogged and the encouraging and awakening of the government was not existent'.<sup>54</sup> This remark, if short, clearly exhibits that he conceived a

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Independence Club movement, the following modifiers *vis-à-vis kongnon* were commonly used: '朝廷公論', '士林公議', '朝野公論', which mainly signified the opinions of yangban elites. However, due to the literal meaning of *kongnon* itself, there existed other expressions indicating the opinions of the entire population, such as '國人之公', '國之公論', '天下之公議'. Even in this case, however, it is difficult to say that the opinions of the masses are included into public opinion. <http://sjw.history.go.kr/search/inspectionMonthList.do>.

<sup>53</sup> TS 30 April 1898.

<sup>54</sup> '간관(諫官)을 폐지한 후에 말길이 막히어 위와 아래가 서로 권면하여 깨우고 가다듬는 뜻이

parliament upon the ground of the old institution of remonstrance. In other words, Kojong agreed to the founding of parliament not simply upon strategic grounds, but also upon the basis of the time-honored Confucian tradition of respect for public opinion. Due to this shared tradition, he readily accepted the demand from the Club and the *Chungch'uwŏn* as a parliament could survive until 1910 even amidst the absence of the exponent.<sup>55</sup>

The Confucian teaching of respect for public opinion was still alive in the 1890s and affected the thought and deed of the King and government officials. So, when Kojong announced his determination to reset his governance with a new spirit in June 1898, he pledged that he would follow ‘public opinion’ (公議) in all his implementations of awards and punishments.<sup>56</sup> Following *kongnon* was a long-maintained principle for righteous governance in Confucian Chosŏn and this principle could easily be grafted onto a different institutional form. Wearing the new institutional coat, the tradition of *minbon* indeed survived.

## Conclusion

This study provides implications to discourses on Confucian democracy. Current democracy in South Korea is *Confucian* democracy at its origin which is shored up by Confucian *minbon* tradition. *Minbon*'s idea of righteous governance is harmonious with the principles of democracy and contributed to the early adoption of democracy into Korea. As Amartya Sen has aptly put it, a country's culture is hardly

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없으니’ (Adapted to modern Korean). *TS* 1 Nov. 1898.

<sup>55</sup> The *Chungch'uwŏn* as a parliament, in fact, checked the Cabinet, but it did not counter-balance the king's power at all. And before contemporary Korea fell to a protectorate of Japan, its rights and roles became seriously atrophied so that from the early 1900s it hardly operated as a parliament. Yi P., *Hanmal chŏngch'i pyŏndong kwa chungch'uwŏn*, chs. 4, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Chŏng K., *Taehan kyenyŏnsa* vol.1, 201–2.

monolithic. Just like heterogeneous religious and intellectual traditions co-exist within a culture, even within an intellectual tradition exist diverse elements of thought.<sup>57</sup> Confucian Democracy theorists have yet to scrutinize plural traditions within Confucian political thought. Sen has also argued that democratic values are intrinsically ‘valuable’ to all people anywhere on the globe so that they are to be seen as ‘a universal value’. Viewed in this light, Asian value apologists including Confucian Democracy theorists victimized the universal basis of democracy within Confucian political thought, while holding on to ‘Confucian culture’ as distinct from Western individualist culture. The message from the Korean experience is clear: Confucian ‘political’ thinking is to be distinguished from Confucian ‘ethical’ thinking and it is the former that democracy has amicability with and modern public values like liberty, equality, and rights are compatible with.

It is worth reminding that with democracy introduced in the late nineteenth century, the division of values into public and private values took place. From the 1890s, public values of Korea began to be grounded upon modern Western values tied with democracy, and Confucian ethical values retreated to the private sphere. This state of division has engendered some problems, but it is obvious that amid the construction of a post-Confucian governing system, the adoption of modern public values as universal and emancipatory was legitimate. Confucian ethical values could not become an alternative for the post-Confucian public sphere. Any democracy theory for Korea (and probably for East Asia) since the late nineteenth century is to be based on this historical experience.

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<sup>57</sup> Amartya Sen, ‘Democracy as a Universal Value’, *Journal of Democracy* 10(3) (1999), pp. 3–17.