



# How Democracy Became *Minjujuui*: A Conceptual History of Democracy in Modern Korea with Focus on the Generalization Process of *Minjujuui*

Hyun KIM and Kyungho SONG

## Abstract

*This paper examines the generalization process of minjujuui (the Korean translation of democracy) to better understand the conceptual history of democracy in modern Korea. We first argue that a proper understanding of democracy's conceptual history in Korea and other non-Western societies must include an analysis of the initial popularization and standardization of the translated term for what once was a foreign word and concept. Unfortunately, this crucial research area has been largely neglected to date. To fill this academic lacuna, our study divides the generalization process of minjujuui into four periods based on the frequency of the term's use in Korean print media and then subjects each period to a thorough quantitative and qualitative analysis. As a result of this complementary approach, we find that in Korea, the generalization of the translated word minjujuui was accompanied by ideologicalization, politicization, and temporalization of the concept of democracy itself. We further argue that because the key factors that drove this generalization process derived from internal and external forces in Korea, the intensity of the three other processes was even greater than in the West where the concept of democracy originated.*

**Keywords:** conceptual history, democracy, *minjujuui*, modern Korea, generalization

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## Introduction

This study aims to reconstruct the generalization process of the translated word *minjujuui* 民主主義 to better understand the conceptual history of democracy in Korea. As a means to this end, we must first ask whether the golden standard for research on conceptual history, set by the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (G.G., Basic Concepts in History: Historical Dictionary of Political and Social Language in Germany), applies to the Korean context. The G.G., a monumental study in the field, tracked the semantic histories of the basic concepts that constitute modern society, among which “democracy” is indispensable. In order to write democracy’s conceptual history, the authors traced the processes of “*Verzeitlichung*” (temporalization), “*Ideologisierung*” (ideologicalization), “*Politisierung*” (politicization), and “*Demokratisierung*” (democratization) that the concept of democracy underwent during a *Sattelzeit* (saddle period), thus declaring in its concluding remarks that democracy in mid-twentieth-century Western society had become *All-Begriff* (a universal concept) that anyone could use for their own clashing purposes (Brunner et al. 198). If so, is the same true of Korea—a non-Western society that underwent a dissimilar modernization process? How has democracy become one of the most prominent basic concepts representing modern Korea? What are the distinctive characteristics of the generalization process of democracy in Korea?

More than two decades have elapsed since the first studies on Korean conceptual history inspired a steady flow of quality research. Strangely enough, however, this scholarly interest has eluded the crucial historical process by which the imported concept of democracy arose as a basic concept marked by the four characteristics mentioned above (Na 2014, 97). Although numerous studies on modern Korean democracy have been published, most have analyzed it at the levels of political thought or political discourse.<sup>1</sup> To fill this scholarly lacuna, our study directs attention to the historical generalization of *minjujuui*—the translated word for democracy

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1. To name only a few current studies, see W. Kim (2018); J. Kim (2013); and Lee (2017).

that is peculiar but hegemonic in its usage in Korea and East Asia. In our research, the term “generalization” denotes two interconnected phenomena: First, the standardization of *minjujuui* as the translated word for democracy, and second, its popularization among the general public. Thus, our study investigates how this translated word for a foreign concept entered common usage and how it became the standard word for democracy—not two disparate events but two phenomena or processes tied together by their co-occurrence and mutual causation.

This process of standardization and popularization was not dealt with in the G.G. because it is specific to non-Western societies in which a word for democracy had to be newly introduced. In Western societies, the concept of democracy and the word to identify it has existed since the classical era. Hence, it seems sufficient to analyze in what contexts and through what processes the concept of democracy has expanded its meaning from the specific type of polity to the constituent principle of society to delineate its conceptual history. In contrast, the process of generalizing the translated word for democracy in non-Western societies such as Korea needs to be further reviewed because this concept is tied to a word (Olsen 2012, 172). In the early phase of Korea’s reception of *democracy*, several Korean translations for this Western concept were devised, and each competed for official status as the standard translated term for general public usage. This generalization process preceded the *democratization* (*Demokratisierung*) of the imported concept of democracy. In other words, for democracy to take root as a popular *concept* in Korea, the generalization of the translated term for it needed to be achieved in advance. Thus, this article examines the generalization process of the translated term *minjujuui*, mainly focusing on the timeline and manner by which it occurred.

To this end, we adopt both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The generalization process consists of two aspects: popularization and standardization. The completion of the former signifies that *minjujuui* has entered the mainstream language of the political community, while the latter indicates that members of the said political community also confirm the term as the standard translation for democracy. To examine the popularization process, we analyze the frequency with which the word

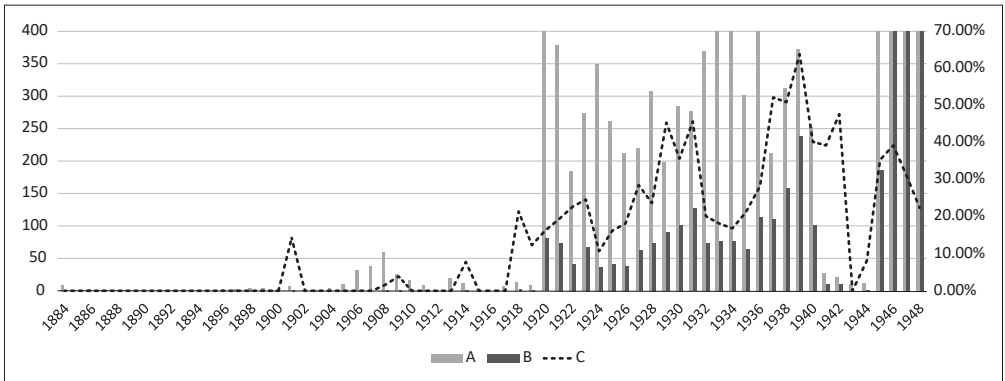
*minjujuui* was used based on data derived from crawling Korean newspapers and magazines, on the assumption that more frequent use of the term *minjujuui* in popular print media indicates the term has become more popularized among Koreans in general. We also examine a series of bilingual dictionaries published in Korea to trace the standardization process. For the qualitative analysis, we investigate the ideological and political contexts of *minjujuui*'s popularization and standardization. Since an increase in the use of *minjujuui* must have been prompted by changes in the ideological and political contexts of the word's users, our qualitative analysis will identify the contexts that were the driving force behind *minjujuui*'s popularization.

The chronological scope of analysis is from January 8, 1884 to August 15, 1948. The start date for this time frame is set on the year in which the newly translated word *minju* 民主 first appeared in a Korean newspaper after being translated from English to Chinese and then into Korean. During the early stages of democracy's reception, various new translated words for democracy were derived from this original term. The endpoint of the research was also based on a preliminary analysis of the frequency of *minjujuui*'s use. Therefore, we first investigated the frequency with which the word *minjujuui* appeared in print from a total of 26,259 articles in Korean newspapers and magazines that include the word *minju*.<sup>2</sup> The chart below represents the findings of our analysis in time series.

Figure 1 shows that the use of the word *minjujuui* increased exponentially during the founding of a democratic South Korea immediately after independence, thus suggesting that the word *minjujuui* was widely used and recognized around this period. Based on this finding, we limit our

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2. The total of 26,259 articles were taken from the *Korean History Database* (KHD, <https://db.history.go.kr/>), *Korea Newspaper Archive* (KNA, <https://www.nl.go.kr/newspaper/>), *Dong-A Digital Archive* (DDA, <https://www.donga.com/archive/newslibrary>), and the *Chosun News Library 100* (CNL, <https://newslibrary.chosun.com/>). These articles were collected up to August 9, 2021 using Python 3.9, with Jupiter Notebook, Beautiful Soup, and Selenium. Data cleansing was conducted in the data collecting stage. All statistical claims made in this article were performed by this method unless mentioned otherwise. Furthermore, all numbers in our figures and tables are the results of this method applied to search title, body, and keywords of newspaper articles.



**Figure 1.** Annual frequency of *minju* and *minjujuui* in Korean media (January 8, 1884 to August 15, 1948)

A: Number of articles that include *minju*

B: Number of articles that include *minjujuui*

C: The proportion of the articles that include *minjujuui* among articles that include *minju* ( $C = B/A$ )

research scope of the generalization process of *minjujuui* to the period between January 8, 1884 and August 15, 1948, i.e., the foundation date of the Republic of Korea. Also, given the fluctuation in frequency trends, it is possible to assume that the generalization process of *minjujuui* consists of four critical periods: during these periods, the use of *minjujuui* increased significantly. Therefore, we will focus on the four periods that figured so prominently in the generalization process, attempting to place each period in its proper ideological and political contexts.

Based on this preliminary analysis, this article is organized as follows. First, to understand the background of the use of the term *minjujuui* as the translated equivalent of “democracy,” we briefly examine early translations of “democracy” from the late 19th century to the 1910s in Section 2. We then examine four periods in which the use of *minjujuui* notably increased: the early 1920s in Section 3, the late 1920s to the early 1930s in Section 4, the mid-to-late 1930s in Section 5, and the United States Military Government period in Section 6.

### **Minju’s Transition from the Translation for “Republic” to that for “Democracy”**

According to our quantitative analysis, the term *minjujuui* did not feature in Korean media until 1900, whereas the word *minju* figured in Korean newspapers decades before this, i.e., from the earliest phase of democracy’s transplant into the Korean context. In this initial stage, the concept of democracy was translated in various ways, and *minju* was only one of these early translations. However, in contrast to the present common meaning of the term, the word originally originated as a Chinese translation of the English word “republic” and not “democracy” (Song and Kim 2021, 9–10; Chen 2011, 12–14). Subsequently, Korean literati, heavily influenced by Chinese cultural clout, uncritically embraced this translated term in the early 1880s.

In Korean media, the translated word *minju* first appeared in the *Hanseong sunbo* in 1884.<sup>3</sup> In the KNA database for the *Hanseong sunbo*, there are nine articles in which *minju* was used in three variations (*minjujiguk*, *minjuguk*, and *minju*) to introduce Western political affairs. However, given the context in which these expressions were used, it is possible to ascertain that they correspond to “republic,” not “democracy.”<sup>4</sup> This translation practice continued in the *Hanseong jubo*, which succeeded the *Hanseong sunbo*.<sup>5</sup> Many articles in both the *Hanseong sunbo* and *Hanseong jubo* were translated reprints of Chinese newspaper articles from Shanghai or Hong Kong, so it seems that in this reproduction process the

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3. This does not mean that *minju* was unknown in Korean society until 1884. It had already been used sporadically among Korean literati from the early 1880s. Only its first appearance in Korean media is identified as dating to 1884. For an overview of the use of *minju* during this period, see H. Park (2013).

4. In order to confirm that *minju* was the equivalent of “republic,” we compared the article titled “Revolt in Portugal (葡國亂耗)” (*Hanseong sunbo*, January 8, 1884) with an English-language article that dealt with the same event (*New York Times*, October 18, 1883). This confirmed that the reference was indeed to “republic” as used in the context of international law.

5. In the *Hanseong jubo*, only four articles (September 20, 1886; September 27, 1886; September 27, 1886; and September 27, 1886) used the expression *minju*.

Chinese translation of “republic” as *minzhu* 民主 was uncritically accommodated in Joseon Korea as *minju* in the 1880s.<sup>6</sup>

During the late 1890s, *minju* emerged in the *Dongnip sinmun* as the translated term for “democracy” instead of “republic.” This new usage of *minju* seems to be indebted to the cultural influence of Japanese translation practices.<sup>7</sup> However, of the 13 total mentions of *minju* in this newspaper, 12 were still used to indicate “republic,” and only one corresponded with the word “democracy.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it is fair to say that until the end of the 1890s, *minju* was used primarily to translate the word “republic,” in line with Chinese translation practices. However, this situation began to gradually change in 1905, as can be identified in the *Hwangseong sinmun*. In this newspaper, we found the word *minju* in 52 articles, of which 32 were judged to be the equivalent of “democracy,” and 31 of these 32 were published after 1906.<sup>9</sup> This fact suggests that, as of 1906, *minju* was more frequently used to translate “democracy” than “republic.”

The critical historical contexts to this shift in usage were the increased Japanese influence over Korea and the top-down political reform in imperial Russia that followed the First Russian Revolution. Japan’s cultural sway grew even more potent in Korea with the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War and the subsequent conclusion of the Protectorate Treaty of 1905 between Korea and Japan. Under such changed circumstances, news about Russian politics in the post-Revolution era became a catalyst for the frequent use of *minju* as the translation for “democracy.” While delivering news from Russia via a foreign news agency, the *Hwangseong sinmun* consistently referred to the Russian “democratic party” as *minjudang* following the Japanese translation practice. All 31 references to *minju* in the *Hwangseong sinmun* starting from 1906 fall under this category.

Furthermore, this phenomenon was not limited to the *Hwangseong sinmun*. According to our statistical analysis, the expression *minjudang*

6. On the influx of Chinese newspapers into Korea, see M. Kim (2017).

7. For Japanese translation practices, see Song and Kim (2021, 12–16).

8. The only case in which *minju* indicated “democracy” was an article on November 5, 1896.

9. Of the remaining 20 cases, seven seemed to be used as a translation for “republic,” while the rest are unclear.

appeared with increased frequency in every Korean media from 1906, suggesting that the new translation practice resonated with other contemporary newspapers and magazines. The usage of *minjudang* as a translation of “democratic party” continued into the 1910s after the Japanese annexation of the Korean Peninsula. In the *Maeil sinbo*, the only Korean-language newspaper in the 1910s, we identified 82 articles from 1910 to 1919 that included the expression *minju*. The most significant number of articles were written in 1913 when all expressions with *minju* were references to *minjudang*. This practice of translating a democratic party as *minjudang* played a pivotal role in phasing out the late 19th-century Chinese translation practice of using *minju* to mean “republic.”

### The Global Spread of Democracy during World War I and the First Popular Use of *Minjujuui* in Colonial Korea

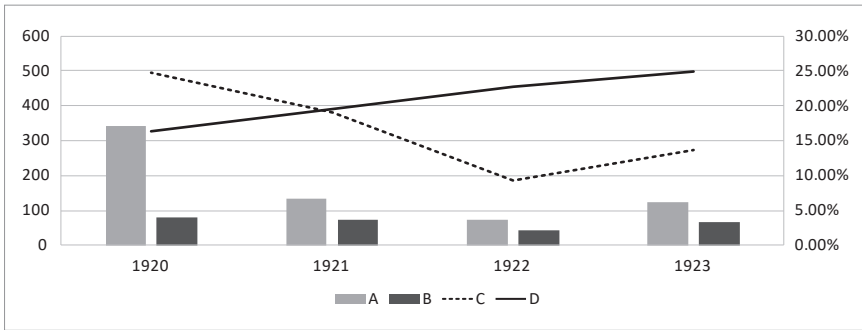
Though *minju* shifted from being the translation for republic to that for democracy at the beginning of the 20th century, this did not coincide with the widespread use of *minjujuui* as the translated word for democracy. The term *minjujuui* had begun to circulate in early 20th-century Korea under deepening Japanese influence, but the frequency of its use was negligible throughout the 1900s, with only two articles including *minjujuui* being found in Korean newspapers and magazines of the period.<sup>10</sup> According to our analysis, this trend continued into the 1910s—the word *minju* was used in only 76 articles between 1911 and 1919; *minjujuui* was limited to only five cases.<sup>11</sup>

By the 1920s, there was a dramatic change in the frequency of *minjujuui*'s use, as visually represented in Figure 2. In the 1920s, the total number of articles including *minju* amounted to 495 articles—81 of these

10. These two articles appeared in the *Daehan hyeophoe hoebo* (August 25, 1908) and the *Hwangseong sinmun* (June 3, 1901).

11. Four articles were published in the *Maeil sinbo* (July 8, 1914; January 30, 1918; March 2, 1918; November 20, 1918) and one in the *Bando siron* (February 10, 1919).





**Figure 2.** Annual frequency of expressions of *minju* in Korean media (1920–1923)

A: Number of articles including *minjudang*

B: Number of articles including *minjujuui*

C: Number of articles including *minju*

D: Proportion of Frequencies of *minjujuui*'s use to *minju*'s use ( $D = B/C$ )

included *minjujuui*. This seems to be a sudden increase of frequency in the use of both *minju* and *minjujuui*, given that the number of articles including *minju* and *minjujuui* in 1919 was only eight and one, respectively. While the number of articles including *minjujuui* decreased slightly from 1921 to 1922, the general tendency indicates an upward trend with the proportion of articles referring to *minjujuui* to all articles that included *minju* steadily rising each year from 16.36 percent in 1920 to 24.82 percent in 1924.

This rapid spike in the usage of *minjujuui* can be attributed to the popular use of *minshushugi* 民主主義 in Japan that was provoked by World War I and its subsequent diffusion into colonial Korea following a reluctant change of Japanese colonial policy in 1920. During World War I, the Entente Powers framed their war against Germany as democracy's valiant fight against militarism (Siracusa 1998, 3). British society in particular advanced this ideological purpose with great persistence from the onset of the war. British newspapers drummed for Britain's struggle against Germany, portraying it as the conflict between two fundamentally competing forms of political organization.<sup>12</sup> According to this popular opinion, democracy was

12. The public clamor for democracy can be identified in the British Newspaper Archive (BNA,

not only a specific form of government but also an ideologicalized construct that embodied a particular type of civilization.<sup>13</sup> This public opinion about democracy that began in Britain gained greater mileage as American forces joined the war. In his 1917 State of the Union Address, Woodrow Wilson declared Allied effort to make the world “safe for democracy,”<sup>14</sup> which gave strength to the Allies’ attempts to shape the ideological nature of the war as a defense of democracy.

In contrast, imperial Japan had firmly repudiated democracy internally. But she swiftly declared war on Germany from the early stages of World War I in consideration of its national interests. Japan’s entry into the war unexpectedly sparked domestic public demands for democracy in tandem with the widespread fervor for democracy that swept its wartime allies Britain and the United States. According to John Dewey, during his 1919 visit to Japan, the political atmosphere had changed, with even manual workers and rickshaw men expressing their opinions on democracy in the streets (Dewey 2008, 156). Such a burst of public interest in democracy naturally led to the explosive use of the translated word *minshushugi* in Japanese popular media. In short, the word and concept of *minshushugi* became considerably popularized in Taisho Japan during this time (Song and Kim 2021, 23).

This popularity, however, did not immediately spread to colonial Korea due to Japanese restrictions on freedom of the press there.<sup>15</sup> Japanese suppression of Korean political expression was so severe that the Japanese Government-General of Korea did not issue a single license for Korean-owned newspapers until the March First Movement in 1919 (Jung 1978,

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<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>). The number of articles that included such terms as “democracy” and “militarism” increased between 1914 and 1919.

13. For example, in the official announcement of the British secretary of state for war in August 1914, democracy was regarded as “a system of civilisation and government” (*Daily Citizen*, August 31, 1914).

14. On his address, see “Making the World ‘Safe for Democracy’: Woodrow Wilson Asks for War,” History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web, accessed August 8, 2021, <https://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4943/>.

15. This can be easily seen in the fact that there were only five articles including *minjujuui* in the 1910s, as mentioned previously.

243–244). Due to such restrictions on a free press, colonial Korea initially remained immune from the feverish spread of democratic ideas and values that swept the Entente Powers. However, as Japan reluctantly adopted a conciliatory policy after the March First Movement, freedom of the press was allowed, albeit with limitations.<sup>16</sup> Indebted to this propitious circumstance, the public passion for democracy and the concomitant popularity of *minshushugi* in Japan swiftly transferred to colonial Korea.

Under these new circumstances, *minjujuui* (the Korean equivalent of *minshushugi*) was easily picked up by Korean intellectuals. However, we need to be careful not to jump to the hasty conclusion that their use of *minjujuui* was simply a reflex of the popularity of *minshushugi* in Japan. Instead, it must be seen as the fruit of their active endeavors to receive and internalize the idea of democracy. The concept of democracy was still an obscure and remote one in colonial Korea in the 1910s, regardless of whatever translated term was used in the print media. However, Korean students studying in the cosmopolitan center of Japan were surrounded by the idea of democracy and determined to introduce it to their Korean homeland. In the latter half of the 1910s, these students formed a cohort group roughly 700 strong bound by their shared hopes for the post-war fate of colonial Korea. These new Korean elites were conscious of their national responsibility to save Korea from its tragic colonial status. They saw grounds for new hope in the face of the seemingly rapidly changing world order prompted by WW I. In this awakening, they naturally came close to the Japanese Taisho democracy movement, which upheld democracy as the symbol and promise of a coming new world order. Korean elites did not limit themselves to passively assimilating the movement's ideas, but actively engaged in the Movement itself (Lee 2017, 72–74).

In their active involvement in the Taisho democracy movement, the Korean students in Japan found new prospects for overcoming the reality of colonial Korea in the much-touted concept of democracy. Many of them returned to Korea with this expectation and joined the ranks of Korean newspapers. The *Dong-A Ilbo* is a representative case because all its major

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16. On the colonial policy change, see Jung (1978, 245–246).

writers and staff—editor-in-chief Chang Deok-soo, members of the editorial board such as Lee Sang-hyup, Jang Deok-jun, Jin Hak-mun, and Park Il-byong, and the owner of newspaper Song Jin-woo—had studied in Japan as members of the cohort mentioned above (Lee 2017, 78). As was the case with the *Dong-A Ilbo*, a new generation of Japan-educated Korean intellectuals pegged their hopes for their nation's future on democracy, and this expectation led to their frequent and fervent invocation of *minjujuui* in colonial Korea.

### Worldwide Spread of Communism and the Second Popular Use of *Minjujuui*

In the early 1920s, *minjujuui* was, being used to denote “democracy,” had yet to become the standard translation word for “democracy.” It was even further removed from entering the everyday language. The use of *minjujuui* in newspapers and magazines slightly decreased from 1923,<sup>17</sup> and it was not used in contemporary dictionaries.<sup>18</sup> However, the number of articles including *minjujuui* steadily increased from 1927 to 1931 and numbered 63, 73, 90, 102, and 127 respectively for each year. Furthermore, the proportion of articles with *minjujuui* among the articles that include *minju* almost doubled between 1927 and 1931.<sup>19</sup>

This increase in the use of *minjujuui* in the late 1920s can be attributed to the worldwide spread of communism during the first half of the 1920s. According to Marxist-Leninism, the mainstream form of communism in the 20th century, democracy was a means of proletariat domination and a

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17. The number of articles including *minjujuui* peaked in 1923, reaching 68 articles. After that, there were only 37, 43, and 39 cases, respectively, over the three following years.

18. In James Scarth Gale's *Present-day English-Korean: Three Thousand Words* (三千字典), democracy was translated as *pyeongminjeongchi* (commoners' politics), not *minjujuui*. Horace Grant Underwood and Horace Horton Underwood's dictionary also translated democracy as 1) *minjyeongjuui* 民政主義), *minjujyeongche* 民主政體, 2) *minjujiguk* 民主之國, *baekseong-ui nara*, *minjyeongdang* 民政黨 3) *baekseong*.

19. This percentage was 28.64%, 23.70%, 45.23%, 35.79%, and 45.85%, respectively, for the years between 1927 and 1931.

prerequisite to arriving at the final stage of communist society (Lenin 1964, 457–461). With this new perspective, communists militantly engaged in the semantic struggle over democracy in which various other political forces defended democracy as defined from their respective viewpoints.<sup>20</sup> This battle over the meaning of *democracy* spread to the Far East as Soviet leaders turned their eyes to Asia (Service 2007, 115; S. Kim 2019, 350). The ideas of revolutionary international Marxism deeply resonated with the socialist group that had formed in Korea around 1919, which then proceeded to actively organize domestic mass movements from 1920 (J. Park 2008, 80).<sup>21</sup> Along with the nationalist movement, these socialist movements formed one of the two central pillars of mass movements in Korea and played a crucial role in increasing the use of *minjujuui* starting from 1927, as illustrated in Table 1.

The above table suggests that the increased use of *minjujuui* dating from 1927 was associated with a simultaneous increase in the number of articles related to communism or socialism.<sup>22</sup> This implies that *minjujuui* was primarily associated with the mid-1920s communist and socialist movements. However, one peculiar aspect is that the Korean socialist movement was already actively underway by the early 1920s. In contrast, *minjujuui* began to be used frequently in this context only after the mid-1920s, so there is a conspicuous time lag between the event and the invocation of *minjujuui* in its context. Why was the term *minjujuui* brought forth with such frequency in this context from the mid-1920s, rather than from the early 1920s? The following four factors may account for this gap.

First, the sudden increase in references to *minjujuui* can be explained in part by the debate between the “ML” and “Seoul” Korean socialist factions over the issue of the “National Cooperation Front,” a revolutionary strategy advocated by the ML faction that was based on an understanding of the

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20. In this semantic battle, communists denigrated Western democracy as “bourgeois democracy” that was doomed to collapse while also denouncing “social democracy.”

21. For a detailed explanation of the general history of the socialist-based mass movement in Korea in the 1920s, see J. Kim and C. Kim (1986), chapter 8.

22. This phenomenon started to appear gradually from 1925 and became more prevalent in 1927.

**Table 1.** Annual Frequency of Articles Including *Minjujuui* and the Number of Articles Related to Communism or Socialism in Korean Newspapers (1924–1932)

	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	Sum	
A	37	43	39	63	73	90	102	127	74	648	
B	C	3	17	12	36	35	48	52	57	290	
	D	0	3	2	4	16	3	3	1	34	
	E	1	2	0	1	2	7	5	6	27	
	F	1	2	3	9	1	4	1	15	4	40
	Total	5 (13.51%)	24 (55.81%)	17 (43.59%)	50 (79.37%)	54 (73.97%)	62 (68.89%)	61 (59.80%)	79 (64.20%)	39 (52.70%)	391 (60.34%)

A: Number of articles including *minjujuui*

B: Articles related to communism or socialism among articles including *minjujuui*

C: Number of articles including expressions such as “social democracy” or “bourgeois democracy”

D: Number of articles including expressions such as “democratic centralism” or “centralized democracy”

E: Number of articles that contain explicit claims based on communist or socialist art (articles including keywords mentioned in C and D excluded)

F: Number of articles that contain explicit claims based on the ideologies of communism or socialism (same as above)

Total: Percentage of B/A

Korean revolution as a stage of bourgeois-democratic revolution (Jun 1998, 114; I. Kim 2004, 392). This consequential debate was conducted in newspapers, and thus *minjujuui* was also frequently mentioned in the same pages. Second, Korean socialists actively devoted themselves to organizing various public associations during this period, and in this process, they adopted *minjujuui-jeok jungang jipgwonje* (democratic centralism) as their operational rule for associations (J. Kim and C. Kim 1986, 114). In the newspapers, the word *minjujuui* was repeated with great frequency to introduce their organizing activities.

Third, the surge in references to *minjujuui* also reflects the Korean public’s interest in the political activities of Japan’s socialist movements. In 1928, Japan conducted the first election following its General Election Law (1925) that had introduced universal male suffrage. Japanese socialists participated in this electoral process, actively vying for seats in the House of

Representatives (Masumi 1988, 138–139). Korean newspapers such as the *Chosun Ilbo* and *Dong-A Ilbo*, delivering news about these exciting new political developments, employed terms such as “*sahoe minjujuui*” (social democracy) or “*bureujoa minjujuui*” (bourgeois democracy) commonly mentioned by Japanese socialists in their speeches. Fourth, yet another factor was the socialist literary and art movement that sought to employ the arts to revolutionary ends. The Korea Artista Proleta Federatio (KAPF) was organized in late 1925 and attempted to promote socialist culture to a popular audience from the late 1920s (Choi 2014, 202). To this end, its members often contributed to newspapers as a part of their promotional endeavors. While doing this, they frequently used the word *minjujuui* in their submissions.

The second popular spread of *minjujuui* also influenced the translation practice, as can be seen in the 3rd edition of James Scarth Gale’s *The Unabridged Korean-English Dictionary* (韓英大字典) published in 1932. Gale added more than 35,000 new words in these dictionaries, reflecting timely updates in modern words and their contemporary usage in Korea (Gale 2012, 18–19). According to our research, this dictionary was the first to introduce *minjujuui* as a Korean word for “democracy.” Although this entry represents a significant development in the generalization of *minjujuui*, this single dictionary entry alone certainly cannot attest to the complete popularization or standardization of the term. Even Gale’s dictionary included *minju* and *minju jungche*—alternative expressions that had been commonly used as translations for democracy. A similar word, *minjujiguk*, was even listed as the Korean counterpart for “republic,” thus indicating that the original Chinese translation still exerted semantic influence. Furthermore, the frequency with which the word *minjujuui* appeared in print media decreased from 124 to 74 articles between 1931 and 1932, a trend that lasted until 1935.<sup>23</sup>

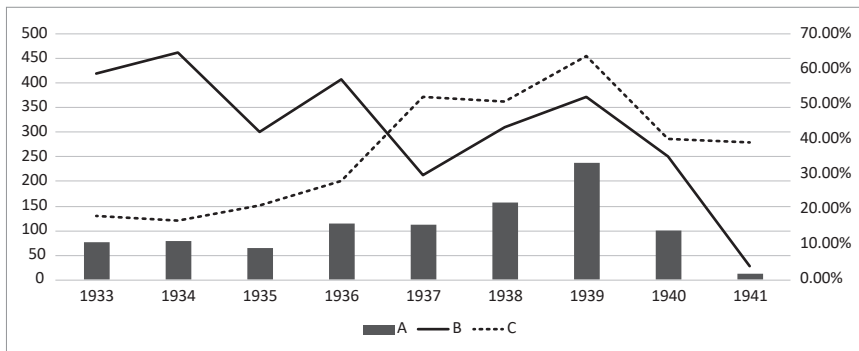
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23. Such a decrease, especially notable among articles about Korea, seems to be related to the retreat of communism from a legal movement. In accordance with guidelines from the Comintern and the Profintern, the socialist movement in colonial Korea practically abandoned lawful engagement as a popular movement and instead adopted a strategy of illegal struggle (J. Kim and C. Kim 1986, 68–70, 122–130). This change seems to have

### Global Confrontation between Democracy and Fascism and the Third Popular Use of *Minjujuui*

This short downward trend in the use of *minjujuui* changed suddenly in 1936 (Fig. 3). The number of articles including *minjujuui* was only 64 in 1935, but this figure almost doubled in 1936, when a total of 115 articles featured this word. This upward trend continued until 1939, when we identified 238 cases—this is twice as much as the highest count from the second period of popular spread that coincided with Korea’s socialist movements in the late 1920s. More interestingly, the percentage of occurrence of *minjujuui* among articles that included *minju* was more than 50 percent in 1937 and 1938 and then peaked in 1939, when it reached 63.81 percent. Thus, we note that after the downturn in use between 1932 and 1936 came a boom in the use of the term *minjujuui*.

This third popular spread of *minjujuui* occurred during a period in which political repression and thought control were strictly enforced in the



**Figure 3.** Annual frequency of expressions of *minju* in Korean media (1933–1941)

A: Number of articles including *minjujuui*

B: Number of articles including *minju*

C: Proportion of frequency of *minjujuui*'s use to *minju*'s (C = A/B)

influenced the decrease in the use of the socialist-related *minjujuui*.



name of the Kokutai Meicho 國體明徴 (Clarification of the National Polity). In 1935, the Japanese government adopted two declarations to clarify the *kokutai* (Gordon 2005, 364), and in 1936 the *tosei-ha* (control faction) in the Imperial Japanese Army later reiterated the importance of the Japanese *kokutai* and its incompatibility with democracy (*Osaka mainichi shimbun*, December 5, 1936). In 1937, the Japanese Ministry of Education officialized this position by issuing a statement on the relationship between the *kokutai* and Western thought, in which it condemned democracy, socialism and communism alike as contrary to the *kokutai* (Monbushō 1937, 5). However, *minjujuui* became popular again in colonial Korea despite the Japanese government's staunch anti-democratic stance. To make sense of this counterintuitive trend, it is necessary to look into the articles published in the two major Korean newspapers (*Chosun Ilbo* and *Dong-A Ilbo*) containing the most significant number of articles including *minjujuui*.

Table 2 shows that articles about Europe, the Americas, and Russia accounted for almost 90 percent of the articles that included *minjujuui*. This staggering proportion suggests that foreign news was the primary driving

**Table 2.** Annual Frequency of Articles Including *Minjujuui* and the Number of Such Articles Related to Europe and America in Korean Media (1933–1941)

	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	Sum	
A	77	78	64	115	111	158	238	101	11	953	
B	C	18	23	23	32	25	29	24	9	183	
	D	51	59	44	95	87	130	207	74	753	
	E	24	23	17	32	51	71	77	48	350	
	F	1	2	2	11	10	8	7	7	0	48
	Total	61 (79.22%)	67 (85.90%)	53 (82.81%)	102 (88.70%)	101 (90.99%)	146 (92.41%)	226 (94.96%)	83 (82.18%)	8 (72.73%)	847 (88.88%)

A: Number of articles including *minjujuui*

B: Articles related to Europe and America among articles including *minjujuui*

C: Number of articles including fascism

D: Number of articles related to Europe

E: Number of articles related to the Americas and Russia

F: Number of articles related to South America and Africa

Total: Percentage of B/A

force behind this third popular spread of *minjujuui*. The underlying cause of this burst of foreign news was the escalation of the global political and ideological confrontation between democracy and fascism. In 1936, the Spanish Civil War broke out as reactionaries launched a *coup d'état* against the country's Popular Front government, which quickly led to fatal ramifications at the international level. Moreover, Germany, which had concluded an Anti-Comintern Pact with Italy, persisted in its expansion to unite the German nation and thus triggered World War II. Ideological confrontation over democracy also intensified during this escalation of political conflict. This is because fascist leaders, despite their blatant opposition to Western liberal democracy, nonetheless fancied themselves as vigilant guards of *true* democracy and actively pushed for recognition as such.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the rise of these totalitarian ideologies did not simplify ideological competition into the dichotomous camps of fascism and democracy, but rather intensified and complicated the semantic competition over democracy itself. The third popular use of *minjujuui* was indebted to this deepening political and ideological confrontation. Newspapers in Korea intently traced the series of turbulent events that culminated in the outbreak of World War II and in the process adopted the expression *minjujuui* to deliver information regarding growing global confrontation.

This third popular spread of *minjujuui* marks a critical juncture in the word's long journey to become the standard translated term for democracy. One way to identify the standard translated word for "democracy," and thus *minjujuui*'s status relative to alternative expressions, is to examine the standard Korean translation for "democratic country/democracy." Although *minjujuui* was used in the 1920s as established in the preceding paragraphs,

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24. In the article titled "the Doctrine of Fascism" in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* (1932), Mussolini described fascism as the purest form of democracy, contrasting it with "democracy," which was identified with majority rule (Oakeshott 1939, 164–179). Hitler also praised National Socialism (Nazism) as "a truer form of democracy," denouncing so-called democracies that did not understand its true meaning. For his address, see "Adolf Hitler-Speech before the Reichstag, January 30, 1937," WORLD FUTURE FUND, accessed August 8, 2021, <https://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/reading/hitler%20speeches/Hitler%20Speech%201937.01.30.html>.

it was rarely appended to the letter “country” (*guk*) to form the amalgam *minjujuuiguk* to refer to democracy as a polity.<sup>25</sup> Rather, the word *minjuguk* was more frequently called upon for this purpose. However, this trend began to change as *minjujuuiguk*, an idiosyncratic translation in the 1920s, came to be more widely used than the previous orthodox expression during the peak of *minjujuui*'s popularization i.e., between 1938 and 1939. This suggests that *minjujuui* had by then gained the upper hand in the battle to become the standard translation of democracy.<sup>26</sup>

At this point, we are compelled to adopt a comparative perspective to assess the validity of the conclusions we draw from our data-based analysis. This general trend in the reception and popularization of the translated word for “democracy” was not an exceptional phenomenon limited to colonial Korea. We identified a similar pattern in Japan. According to our analysis of two Japanese Databases—the Kobe University Library Newspaper Clippings Collection and the Japanese National Diet Library Digital Collections—the number of articles and books including *minshushugi* (democracy) increased significantly from 1936 to 1941.<sup>27</sup> It is, however, unsurprising that such a similarity exists between Korea and Japan, given their shared political experiences. For World War II, the outcome of heated global ideological confrontation was a common subject of intense interest for both countries. Thus, it was natural that a significant increase in the use of *minjujuui* and *minshushugi* in Korea and Japan, respectively, occurred in similar forms and at similar times.

However, it may be an oversimplification to deem the two phenomena identical, given that the third popular spread of *minjujuui* in Korea was more than a reaction to global ideological confrontation. Korean media viewed *minjujuui* from a more positive outlook, as seen in the articles covering the global confrontation between democracy and fascism. For

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25. In the 1920s, there were only three articles including *minjujuuiguk*. All of them used *minjujuuiguk* with regard to social democracy.

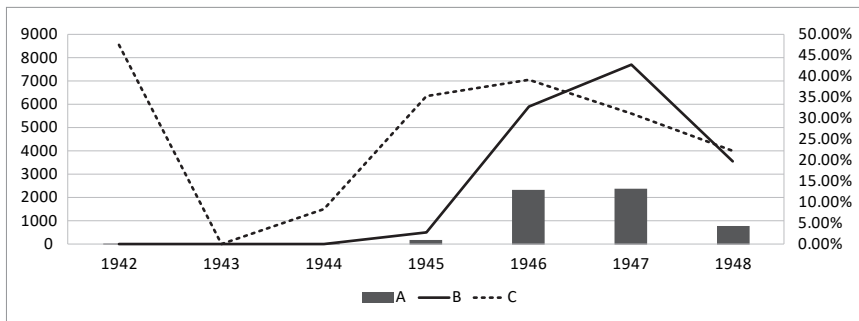
26. In 1938 and 1939, *minjuguk* appeared in 9 and 17 articles, respectively, whereas *minjujuuiguk* appeared in 24 and 45 articles.

27. There were 46 cases in 1935, 84 in 1936, 70 in 1937, 48 in 1938, 140 in 1939, and 106 in 1940.

example, in a *Chosun Ilbo* editorial published on June 6, 1936, the writer predicts that *minjujuui* will prevail in its mortal combat with fascism because human beings have a strong and innate desire to enjoy fundamental freedoms and rights. The *Dong-A Ilbo* article entitled “Lack of Awareness of Rights,” published on May 1, 1936, also expressed similar hopes for *minjujuui* and its promise of human dignity. The fact that all major newspapers in Korea spoke in unison in their hope for democracy during the mid-to-late 1930s proves the unified desire that Korean intellectuals had for democracy, even though these expectations were temporarily abandoned after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Pacific War.

### The Global Triumph of Democracy and the Generalization of *Minjujuui* after the Independence of Korea

As the Japanese Government-General’s control over Korean media intensified in preparation for all-out war in 1940, freedom of the press was heavily restricted, and the major dailies *Chosun Ilbo* and *Dong-A Ilbo* were forced to close. As a result, the number of articles including *minju* and



**Figure 4.** Annual frequency of expressions of *minju* in Korean media (1942–August 15, 1948)

- A: Number of articles including *minjujuui*
- B: Number of articles including *minju*
- C: Proportion of Frequency of *minjujuui*'s use to *minju*'s (C = A/B)

*minjujuui* plummeted, as shown in Figure 4. It is no exaggeration to say that *minjujuui* almost completely disappeared from the pages of the Korean press between 1943 and 1945. There is only one exception to this rule: an article published in the *Maeil sinbo* (August 6, 1944) mentioned *minjujuui*, but primarily to criticize American hypocrisy.

However, the use of *minjujuui* exploded immediately after Japan lost the World War II and its former colonies gained independence. In the first half of 1945 through August 15, there were precisely two articles that even mentioned *minju*, but this number rapidly increased to 528 between August 15 and December 31, with a total of 187 articles among these explicitly referring to *minjujuui*. The word *minjujuui* became daily more popular once newspapers and magazines began to publish again in 1946. In 1946, there were more than 2,300 articles including *minjujuui*, almost ten times the number of 1938—the peak year of the third period of popularization.

This fourth popular spread of *minjujuui* resulted from the happy marriage of the American policy of Korean democratization and the Korean people's own passionate desire for the long-awaited promise of democracy. First, the US military government championed and pushed for the democratization of the Korean peninsula—a policy goal that became the trigger for *minjujuui*'s explosive popular use. Furthermore, as mentioned before, World War II was cast as a confrontation between competing ideologies. Thus, the victory of the Allies and the defeat of Japan could be interpreted as a triumph of none other than democracy itself. In this vein, the US attempted to apply principles of democratic self-government to the reforms in Japan immediately after World War II (Dower 1999, 76–77), and the US military government in Korea similarly presented its goal as the democratization of Korea and the establishment of a stable democratic country, as John Reed Hodge, the American military governor, declared at a press conference (*Jayu sinmun*, October 10, 1945).

In addition, American government policy, as embodied in the outcome of the Interim Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the United States, United Kingdom, and USSR, was another major factor that enabled *minjujuui* to emerge as a mainstream catchphrase on the Korean Peninsula. In the communiqué agreed to by the three victorious powers, it was decided to

install “a provisional Korean democratic government” in consultation with “the Korean democratic parties and social organizations,” with “a view to the re-establishment of Korea as an independent state, the creation of conditions for developing the country on democratic principles.”<sup>28</sup> Given these straightforward guidelines, the American military government instated democratization policies in various fields from the very outset of its interim military rule. In turn, Korean media frequently invoked *minjujuui* to deliver the latest news about the US military government’s policies and their editorial boards’ opinions on them.<sup>29</sup>

However, the fourth popular spread of *minjujuui* cannot be explained by American policy decisions alone. The rivalry between political parties over the course and goals of democratization in Korea also had a decisive influence. In an optimal environment to seek and explore Korean democracy made possible by American policy decisions, domestic political parties tried to funnel the deep desire for democracy simmering in Korean society by rallying around the catchphrase *minjujuui*. This collective desire for democracy in Korean society was palpable even in the eyes of a foreign correspondent for an American newspaper (*Jayu sinmun*, November 4, 1945).

The Korean people’s fervent longing for democracy, apparent to anyone who visited the nation, did not arise suddenly after 1945 but had been dormant in Korean society since the mid-to-late 1930s, as mentioned in the previous section. Under colonial rule, *minjujuui* was invoked to signify the vast array of aspirations held by the suppressed but hopeful Korean people so that the usage of the term was more intense than in Japanese society. Although the Japanese totalitarian government suppressed the expression of these aspirations during World War II, democracy’s defeat of fascism and the concomitant independence of Korea unleashed an outburst of

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28. “The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Harriman) to the Acting Secretary of State,” Office of the Historian, accessed August 8, 2021, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v02/d268>.

29. For these examples, see *Sinjoseonbo* (October 27, 1945, November 29, 1945, and November 29, 1945).

suppressed longing for democracy with the explosive use of *minjujuui*.<sup>30</sup>

The term *minjujuui* became much more than a word, and this new embodiment of the aspirations of the Korean people naturally became the focal point for heated confrontation between political parties on the left and right. The major right-wing political party that came to the defense of *minjujuui* was the Hanmin Party, which had roots in the *Dong-A Ilbo* group. Immediately after Korea gained independence, editorial members of the *Dong-A Ilbo* reaffirmed their endorsement of *minjujuui* (*Dong-A Ilbo* December 1, 1945), and the Hanmin Party, in which key figures from the *Dong-A Ilbo* participated, also advocated the implementation of “political *minjujuui*” and “economic *minjujuui* in order to realize democracy’s promise of freedom and equality” (*Chosun Ilbo*, December 22, 1945).

On the left, the Communist Party portrayed itself as the political force that had shouldered the “struggle for *minjujuui-jeok* (democratic) freedom and its development” during the colonial period. It advocated for the establishment of “progressive *minjujuui*” that was understood to be “substantial *minjujuui* with specific contents to tackle fundamental challenges, such as the rapid improvement of working people’s lives” (*Jayu sinmun*, October 12, 1945; *Dong-A Ilbo*, December 2, 1945). In line with the stance and claims of the Communist Party, various other social groups joined forces and also defended the slogan of “progressive *minjujuui*” (*Jayu sinmun*, December 14, 1945; *Joongang sinmun*, January 25, 1945; *Chosun Ilbo*, January 25, 1946).

On the other hand, a group of moderates endeavored to form a left-right coalition by promoting what they coined “new *minjujuui*.” One such proponent was Ahn Jae-hong, a center-right figure who published a series of articles titled “New Nationalism and New *minjujuui*” in the *Sinjoseonbo* between October 12 (no. 1) and November 14, 1945 (no. 23), arguing for the necessity of a “new *minjujuui*” to build a “unified nation-state.” Baek Nam-eun, yet another center-left figure, argued further that a “united new *minjujuui*” was the “right route for establishing a democratic Korea” (*Sincheonji*, June 1946).

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30. For a representative example of this perception, see the *Dong-A Ilbo*, December 9, 1945.

In short, almost every political party advocated the cause of *minjujuui* and repurposed it toward their ideological demands. They then cast each other as anti-*minjujuui*, the most damning accusation possible in these heated *minjujuui* debates. This scramble for *minjujuui* among the political elite reveals the popularity of the concept of *minjujuui* among the general public. “Time for *minjujuui*,” a seemingly odd radio program title, symbolized the status of *minjujuui* that had finally entered the everyday language of Koreans with broad appeal among all Koreans.<sup>31</sup> As the title of the program suggests, all Koreans were living in the time for *minjujuui*, and in the heat of the moment, their collective concept of democracy gained added measures of diversity and complexity, which became expressed in an equally diverse number of ways. Simultaneously, the word *minjujuui* entered the colloquial language of everyday Korean (*dailyization*). Thus, this once word-for-word translation of a Japanese term for a Western concept gained official status as the standard Korean word for the concept of democracy (*standardization*). In bilingual dictionaries published after the establishment of the Republic of Korea, democracy was almost consistently and uniformly translated as *minjujuui*.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, going through this fourth period of popular use, *minjujuui* was finally generalized as the translated term that would serve as the bedrock for the concept of democracy in Korea.

## Conclusion

To address the crucial questions of how democracy became a basic political concept in Korea and what characterized this process, we examined the generalization process of the word *minjujuui* because this was a prerequisite for the democratization of the concept of democracy and its eventual realization in political organization and society. As a result of our

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31. This program was produced and broadcast by the Department of Public Information of the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK). For further details, see Y. Park (2006, 23).

32. For example, see Jeon and Park (1953) and J. Lee (1953).



quantitative and qualitative analysis, we established that *minjujuui* was already subject to ideologicalization, politicization, and temporalization in its generalization stage. The first popular use of *minjujuui* was driven by the temporalization of *minjujuui*, and then it was ideologicalized and politicized in tandem with successive waves of the popular use of *minjujuui*. These phenomena were even more intense than in the West, from which the concept of democracy originated. One explanation for Korean democracy's intense conceptual history is the confluence of internal and external factors that drove the generalization process.

The popularization of *minjujuui* in Korea reflected the global spread of democracy that had already been intensely ideologicalized and politicized in the West. All four periods examined in this article were a reaction to global trends and events—more specifically, the conflict between democracy and militarism during World War I, the spread of communism following the Russian Revolution, and the ideological confrontation between democracy and fascism in the inter-war and World War II periods. In their endeavor to keep abreast with these global ideological currents, Korean newspapers and magazines frequently used *minjujuui* in their printed pages, which in turn contributed to the generalization process at home.

However, the generalization process of *minjujuui* was not simply a byproduct of the ideological confrontations that started in the West and spread to East Asia. Desperate to overcome the yoke of Japanese colonial rule, a generation of young Korean intellectuals sought hope and vision for an alternative political future in the concept of democracy. For this reason, the meaning of the word *minjujuui* came to further embody fervent hopes and expectations for an autonomous Korean future so that the Korean word for democracy came to assume additional layers of meaning more intense than in the West. In other words, the Korean people's confrontation with the reality of colonial rule provided the temporalization of *minjujuui* in Korea with its peculiar intensity. This intensified the semantic competition over this term and its political appropriation. Therefore, the generalization process of democracy in Korea was accompanied by much more intense ideologicalization, politicization, and temporalization of democracy than in the West.

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*Daily Citizen*  
*Dong-A Ilbo*  
*Dongnip sinmun*  
*Hanseong jubo*  
*Hanseong sunbo*  
*Hwangseong sinmun*  
*Jayu sinmun*  
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