

# The Origin of the Reformist Intellectuals' Self-Deprecating Mentality: *Effects of the Progressive Conception of Time in Late Nineteenth-Century Korea*

Choong-Yeol KIM

## Abstract

*This study explores the origin of Korean reformist intellectuals' self-deprecating attitude towards their past, and these intellectuals' viewpoints of the seemingly contrasting values of munmyeong gaehwa 文明開化 (civilization and enlightenment) and of the nation. Concerning the origin of the reformists' negative view of their past, a number of scholars have ascribed it to the effects of social Darwinism. This study, however, finds it in the modern conception of time and specifically in the Enlightenment's progressive view of time. This view of time prompted the reformist intellectuals to place more weight on the future than the past. The past was regarded as the state of being less developed and less progressed and the present as the time to be devoted to accomplish an enlightened future. The Korean reformist intellectuals' negative view of their past arose from this conception of time. This notion of time provided the reformists with a deontological view of munmyeong gaehwa. However, they did not pursue munmyeong gaehwa at the expense of national independence. Contrary to previous studies, this study proposes that most of the reformist intellectuals balanced between the two values at least until the 1890s. In order to analyze these points, this study draws on the discourse of Dongnip sinmun (The Independent).*

**Keywords:** modernity, time, progress, civilization, enlightenment, *Dongnip sinmun*

---

Choong-Yeol KIM is Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge. His research interests include the history of Korean political thought and comparative political thought. E-mail: chunglyeol@hanmail.net.

## Introduction

Modernity had a dual effect on the Koreans in the late nineteenth century. It liberated them from traditional political and sociocultural restrictions but, at the same time, bound them with new constraints. Above all, radical change in the conditions of thinking, such as the conceptions of space, time, and civilization, had huge effects on the Koreans' way of thinking. It led a number of reformist intellectuals to hold a self-deprecating attitude towards Korean traditions and have a negative view of the condition of Korea. This study aims at clarifying these side effects of modernity and its intellectual origin with the case of *Dongnip sinmun* (The Independent), which was published from April 1896 to December 1899.<sup>1</sup>

Many scholars have endeavored to make clear the negative mentality of the modern intellectuals by focusing on the academic trends in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Social Darwinism has been pointed out as the intellectual origin of the negative effects of modernity (D. Kim 1986; Chu 1988; de Ceuster 1994; Chun 1996). It was Chu Chin-Oh, in particular, who focused on the effects of social Darwinism in *Dongnip sinmun* and its English edition, *The Independent*. However, he failed to grasp that the idea of *munmyeong gaehwa* (civilization and enlightenment) and that of the stages of civilization originated from the Enlightenment's progressive view of history rather than social Darwinism itself. The newspaper editors' common characteristics of the negation of their past are also well explained in terms of their future-oriented or progressive view of history. This study finds the particular mentality of *Dongnip sinmun* editors in the very modern conception of time.

---

1. *Dongnip sinmun* is a newspaper that was published by Suh Jae-Pil (Philip Jaisohn) with the support of the Joseon government in 1896. This newspaper, distinct from the *Dongnip sinmun* (Independence News) published from August 1919 to September 1925 by the Provisional Government of Korea in Shanghai, is an important historical source in understanding the political ideas and actions of the Independence Club and the visions of reformist intellectuals in the 1890s. I have referred to a photo-printed edition republished in 1996 by the LG Sangnam Foundation of Press.

According to Koselleck (2004, 1-2), time can be categorized into two: physical-astronomical time and historical time. The former is *given* through the scientific investigation of the Earth as a planet. The history of this conception of time has been humans' effort to find the most precise and convenient calendar system and units of physical time. Previous studies of the effects of *modern time* on Korean people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were focused on this conception of time. In the era of transformation, how Koreans adapted themselves to the modern time system was their focal point (Jung 2000, 2005; Jeong Sang Woo 2000; Park 2003; Jeong Seong Hee 2003).

However, the conception of time that had greater influence on the Koreans was that of historical time. It is *formed* by men under certain conditions of history, and works as a fundamental criterion for men's projection of will and their interpretation of the world. This conception of time is more related to the *direction* of time. The traditional Korean circular view of history, formed under the China-centered East Asian world order, was superseded since the late nineteenth century by a progressive view of it under the influence of Western civilization. This conception of time had a duality. It supplied a moment for the Koreans to reflect on their conventional ways of thinking and their culture and customs, and to place more weight on the *future*, which had never been the center in their consciousness of time. The progressive conception of time also provided a certain mindset that regarded the past as less developed, less progressed while perceiving the present as the period to be devoted to accomplishing an enlightened future. *Dongnip sinmun* editors' typical ways of thinking, that is, the negation of their past and criticism of conventional ways of living, are deeply related to this conception of time.

In order to examine the effects of this modern conception of time on Korean reformist intellectuals, this study first discusses how the conception of time changed in the wake of the late nineteenth century. Then, it clarifies the mental effects of the modern conception of time and its intellectual origin, analyzing *Dongnip sinmun*. Lastly, it discusses how the modern intellectuals who regarded *munmyeong gaehwa* as the task of the time responded to Korea's gloomy reality.

## Joseon People's Ways of Thinking

Joseon people's peculiar ways of thinking were closely related to the conditions in which they lived. This is clearly illustrated when we look at the moments when they were faced with foreigners for the first time and had to respond to the latter's very different ways of thinking, or world views. The diplomatic dispute between Joseon and Japan over the Japanese memoranda and the military struggle in 1875 form good examples. A key element in the dispute was the grounds that led the Joseon government to refuse to accept the diplomatic document from Japan for seven years.

A dialogue among the high officials of the Joseon government on May 10, 1875, shows how the traditional officials viewed the dispute, making clear the assumptions regarding their ways of thinking. Kim Byeong-hak (1821-1879), one of the three highest officials at the time, expressed these with emphasis:

The reason why our government did not accept the diplomatic memorandum is because of some words contained in it. In the Spring and Autumn Period (770-403 BC) of ancient China, the peoples of Wu 吳 and Chu 楚 presumptuously called their rulers "kings," but this was done only within their national boundary. When they sent emissaries to other countries, they reduced the name of their rulers to "petty prince" (*gwagun* 寡君) and their countries to "troubled country" (*pye-eup* 弊邑). This memorandum from Japan calling their king an emperor is outrageous and unprecedented. This is the reason why we did not permit the reception of the memorandum for over a year. They also insist that they will not wear the traditional costume at a welcome feast. This might cause a problem in the future so that we should be cautious and careful in dealing with this issue.<sup>2</sup>

The main message of Kim's speech was that Japan's memorandum was in contravention of the old conventions between the two coun-

---

2. *Gojong sillok* 高宗實錄 (Annals of King Gojong), 10th day of the 5th lunar month, 12th year of King Gojong's reign (1875).

tries and, therefore, the government should be wary in handling the dispute. Illuminatingly, he cited an anecdote from ancient Chinese history as exemplary, just as it was customary. He found the reference for his judgment in past precedents rather than in strategic considerations directed to the present and the future, seeing these simply as a continuation of the past. For him, the present and the future were subject to the past.

This *past-oriented, precedent-preoccupied* way of thinking could not accept Japan's use of the words "*hwang* 皇" (emperor) and "*chik* 敕" (emperor's decree), words reserved only for Chinese emperors. Given this viewpoint, the government officials hesitated to clearly express their own opinions in discussing the issue, because it lay beyond their conventional horizons. This past-oriented viewpoint was not confined to Kim Byeong-hak and a small group of conservative officials, but prevailed among most of the traditionally educated officials and Confucian scholars, with the exception of rare figures like Bak Gyu-su (1807-1877), who put more emphasis on current strategic considerations than on adherence to the conventions of the past.<sup>3</sup>

The traditional way of thinking reappeared in the negotiations in January 1876, which resulted from the *Unyo* Incident in August 1875.<sup>4</sup>

- 
3. Bak Gyu-su's practical and strategic attitude towards the memorandum issue reflects his family tradition of Silhak 實學 (Practical Learning) dating back to his grandfather Bak Ji-won. Silhak scholars had an unconventional conception of space, looking at the world beyond the old China-centered world order. Hong Dae-yong's *Uisan mundap* 醫山問答 (Dialogue in Mount Yiwulu), which took a scientific perspective on the world, represents the Silhak scholars' view of the world. But the orthodox China-centered view of the world was still greatly influencing the mainstream of the government officials. For Bak Gyu-su's opinions about the memorandum issue, see *Gojong sillok*, 10th day of the 5th lunar month, 12th year of King Gojong's reign (1875).
  4. The *Unyo* Incident, the military fighting between the Japanese naval vessel *Unyo* 雲揚 and Korean artillery guards at Ganghwado island in the 8th lunar month of 1875, was an extension of the diplomatic row between both countries over a new memorandum from Meiji Japan since 1868. The Joseon government's refusal to receive the memorandum because of the problem of protocols led to a diplomatic dispute between them and the so-called *seikaron* 征韓論 ("advocacy of a punitive expedition to Korea") within Japan. As the conservative Daewongun retreated

The Joseon representative's way of expressing himself reflected past conventions, in stark contrast to Japan's representative, who focused entirely on current strategic interests. The negotiation table became the collision site between these two different world views. Whilst the Japanese representative, Kuroda Kiyotaka 黒田清隆 (1840-1900), approached the issues with a realistic focus on interests, Joseon's representative, Shin Heon (1810-1884), responded in a mixed way: partly realistic and strategic and partly traditional. Likewise, whilst the Japanese representative's way of speaking was concrete, argumentative, and analytical, the Joseon counterpart's was also mixed: argumentative and analytical at some points, but evading at others. The latter even seemed to prefer to quieten conflicts by concentrating on the occasion of the meeting.<sup>5</sup> His evasive attitude partly resulted from the subtle position of Joseon on the issue, but a more important reason was related to Joseon's Confucian scholar-officials' traditional attitude towards the world and their way of speaking, which was more synthetic and conflict-evasive than analytical and argumentative.

The Korean representative was also adopting Kim Byeong-hak's mode of expression. Shin Heon drew his references from anecdotes in ancient Chinese history and Confucian texts. For instance, when the Japanese representative asked why the soldiers on the side of Joseon had fired on the Japanese ship, Shin Heon responded by citing a reference from *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites), a primordial Confucian text on *li* 禮 (ritual propriety):

In *Liji*, it is written that when people trespass on a foreign country's border, they should ask about the restrictions. But, last autumn, your vessel did not state its purpose in crossing the border

---

from politics and the Joseon government showed a compromising attitude toward them, the Japanese rather took an aggressive policy in order to open up Joseon. They plotted a military feud with a naval vessel to force Joseon to a negotiation table. As the Japanese intended, the *Unyo* Incident led to the Ganghwa Treaty of 1876. For more detailed explanations on the incident and its historical context, see Y. Kim (2001, 148-199) and Yi (2002).

5. *Gojong sillok*, 20th day of the 1st lunar month, 13th year of King Gojong's reign (1876).

of our country and it approached the defense area, so it was inevitable that our army fired.<sup>6</sup>

In the same context, he quoted the traditional Confucian principles of international relations, implying that Joseon-Japan relations should be based upon them:

Traditionally, the right way of building friendly relations with a neighboring country was thought to be based on four principles: sincerity (誠 *cheng*), trust (*xin* 信), propriety (*li* 禮), and respect (*jing* 敬). If your country and our country restore the former good relations [upon the basis of these principles], it will be a good thing for both of us.<sup>7</sup>

This dispute demonstrated the core assumptions of Joseon's Confucian officials with great clarity. They presupposed an integrated viewpoint based on distinctive conceptions of space and time, reflecting Chinese political and cultural hegemony and having the profound marks of Confucianism. They viewed their world through the lens of this Chinese world order. Their conception of space was fixed by China and its smaller neighbors. Likewise, their conception of time was formed from Chinese historical experience. The repetition of a well-governed and a turbulent period was regarded as natural.

Moreover, under the dogmatic hegemony of Confucian texts written in the ancient turbulent times called the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770-221 BC), the three states of ancient China were seen as the ideal states upon which later generations and states should model themselves. Under this heritage of Confucianism, the laws and institutions, culture and customs, and even the characters of the people of the ancient times were idealized. Thus, most of the reformers in later periods tried to model their views on those ancient

---

6. *Gojong sillok*, 19th day of the 1st lunar month, 13th year of King Gojong's reign (1876).

7. *Gojong sillok*, 19th day of the 1st lunar month, 13th year of King Gojong's reign (1876).

laws and institutions. The past-oriented way of thinking of both Kim Byeong-hak and Shin Heon arose from these deeply traditional assumptions, transmitted through Joseon's centuries-old Confucian intellectual heritage. The way in which they handled the case of the memorandum, their hesitation in making decisions, their lack of strategic thinking, and their habit of looking back to the past in search of precedents all stemmed from this deep-seated legacy.

### **The Modern Conception of Time and Its Effects**

This traditional mindset could not survive the collapse of the conditions that had enabled it to exist. The inroads of Western civilization undermined its foundations. The principal intellectual impact of the nineteenth-century globalization came with the new conceptions of space and time. Their effects on Korean intellectuals' ways of thinking are well shown in *Dongnip sinmun* (The Independent).

A distinctive aspect of the post-traditional ways of thinking lay in their conception of space and civilization. As the traditional Chinese world order collapsed, space expanded to a global scale. The traditional idea of civilization that presupposed space with Chinese civilization at the center was demolished. Instead, the existence of multiple civilizations came to be recognized by the newspaper editors. However, since the expansion of the world had been precipitated by Westerners through their advanced technology, the most developed civilization was assumed to lie in Europe and America. The shift in the locus of civilization from China to the West meant not only a change in geographical location, but also a change in the criteria for civilization itself. The traditional standard of civilization, which emphasized the ethical constitution of society, was discredited. A new standard, which placed more stress on material or practical elements than conceptual ones, such as military power, economic wealth, and scientific and technical advancement, was now seen as desirable. This change prompted criticism of the old civilization, rendering China "the country treated most contemptuously in the world" (*Dongnip sinmun*,



August 4, 1896).

A dramatic effect of the change in the conditions of thinking was made on the conception of time. The newspaper's editors abandoned the traditional past-oriented manner of thinking for the one orientated towards the future. In the editorials of *Dongnip sinmun*, writers divided time into past, present, and future, and matched each of these with an unenlightened age, the age of working to achieve enlightenment, and an enlightened age, respectively. They highlighted the future as something to be achieved by negating the present:

If Joseon concentrates on the education of the people *from now on*, then, *in a few years* the government and the people will cooperate with each other and the people will become enlightened. Moreover, as a result of education, everyone in the nation will have their own jobs and, henceforth, the people will get rich. Therefore, we hope that the government will do its best in educating the people at the moment. Then, in a few years, Joseon will rise up to the same position as other countries (*Dongnip sinmun*, August 25, 1896).<sup>8</sup>

If someone commits wrongdoings, tells a lie, maligns others, or takes others' possessions, following *old habits*, he will be committing an unpardonable crime not only to His Majesty but also to his ancestors and descendants. So, *we hope that all the people of Joseon will forget the ways they followed in the past and will open a new page of history from today*. And we believe that, if the people, whether they be officials or commoners, do their best to work for the nation, abandoning their private preferences and aversions, *then, in five years all the people of the nation will benefit from it*. *Therefore, let us throw away the old habits and follow new morals, laws, rules, and ideas, modeling ourselves on those of civilized and enlightened countries, . . .* and, by doing so, let our nation become one of the top countries in the world (*Dongnip sinmun*, February 23, 1897).

---

8. All italics in citations are mine unless otherwise noted.

As these passages show, once time was combined with the idea that history develops toward civilization and enlightenment, the uncivilized past was thought to be discarded and the present to be negated in favor of a civilized and enlightened future. This future-oriented mentality was reflected in the editorials themselves. Many of them had three sections: introduction, main paragraphs, and concluding remarks. The main paragraphs were usually filled with current social and cultural problems, whilst the concluding remarks were devoted to remedies and prospects for the future. Interestingly, these concluding remarks, in many cases, adopted a particular formula: "We hope that . . . ." For example, in the editorial of the issue of May 20, 1897, the editor writes: "We hope that the people of Joseon will wake up from sleep as soon as possible and cooperate with each other, so that Joseon will be ranked amongst the powerful countries in the world."<sup>9</sup> In addition, conditional sentences are widely used to express both things to be done in the present and the rosy prospects to be achieved in the future, affirming that "if one wants to . . . , it will be necessary to do . . . now."<sup>10</sup> These concluding remarks usually have a deontological nuance, conveying hope for the future. For example, in the editorial of April 24, 1897, the editor writes that "it is right to make our country dignified with wealth and power and glorified with civilization."<sup>11</sup>

This conception of time, which presumes a single pathway of history, is traced to the Enlightenment concept of time, which puts

---

9. See other examples: "We hope that the students studying in Japan will work for the nation after coming back and make great achievements for the country, so that Joseon will be treated as a high-ranking country in the world" (*Dongnip sinmun*, April 8, 1897); "We believe that the way to cure the root of the ills of Joseon is that, from today, people cooperate, discard the wrong, old customs, and make their efforts in advancing towards civilization" (*Dongnip sinmun*, February 13, 1897). This kind of writing is common in the editorials of *Dongnip sinmun*.

10. For example, "If the government wants to achieve national independence, then, first of all, it must try to protect the people's rights" (*Dongnip sinmun*, March 9, 1897).

11. See another example: "We regard it as one of the most important things for the government to make Joseon become a wealthy state" (*Dongnip sinmun*, May 25, 1896).

progress at the center of the development of human history.<sup>12</sup> In this view, as Kant ([1795] 2006, 8) puts it, human history is the process of “achievement of a civil society which administers right universally,” which will be attained collectively and gradually and hence will be potentially realized in the future. This optimistic understanding of history, which regarded human history as “the realization of a concealed plan of nature” (Kant [1795] 2006, 13), or as the attainment of “enlightenment . . . as a great good” (Kant [1795] 2006, 14), offered a paradigmatic view of time for Enlightenment Europe.

Hegel inherited this view of history, proclaiming in his lectures on the philosophy of history: “The History of the world is none other than the *progress* of the consciousness of Freedom” (Hegel [1837] 1956, 19, 56, 63, 72). He divided world history, according to the stages of advance of freedom, into the oriental world, the Greek and Roman world, and the German (Western) world. This division of world history in accordance with the stages of progress was prevalent among French Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire, Turgot, and de Condorcet. For example, de Condorcet, convinced of “the march and progress of the human mind” (de Condorcet [1795] 1955, 9), divided world history into ten stages in which human beings first formed tribal society, reached the development of the modern Europe of his time, and left further progress still to be achieved.

This view of time, which saw human history as progress, also deeply penetrated the editorials of *Dongnip sinmun*. The terms “progress” and “enlightenment” were deployed regularly:

The people of *enlightened* countries study all the time and invent more convenient and useful ways and methods, whatever they do

---

12. It is natural that a certain notion of time is formed upon the basis of certain space and civilization. The progressive conception of time reflects the space of modern Europe in the eighteenth century and its civilization. The changes in Europe since the sixteenth century, such as the weakening of religious authority, scientific revolution, and political and social revolutions, engendered this progressive view of time. For the changes in Europe and its influence on the conception of time, see Koselleck (2004, ch. 13).

for their living. So even in farming the present method of cultivation is very different from that of ten years ago, and in every trade people invent new methods every year . . . and make an effort to build progress. About 500 years ago, Western farmers were not very different from Korean farmers, but, at present, one Western farmer does the same amount of work that 100 Western farmers did 500 years ago, and the product is 200 times greater than that of 500 years ago. This was not caused by anything except the will to make progress in making convenient and useful goods (*Dongnip sinmun*, July 25, 1896).

The view of history in *Dongnip sinmun*, however, was different from that of the European Enlightenment thinkers in that the future of the then contemporary Korea, as depicted by the editors of the newspaper, was “equivocal.” On the one hand, they saw it as progress towards a wealthy, strong, and civilized country; on the other hand, they saw it as uncertain and potentially desperate. This ambiguous conception of the Korean future may have reflected the political oscillations between reform and reaction after the year 1894. Yet it appears to have arisen more fundamentally from the modern conception of time. On a single pathway of history to *enlightenment* and *civilization*, a “semi-enlightened country” like Korea faced two alternatives. If it achieved domestic reforms and stepped forward to become a part of the enlightened world, then it could expect a bright future; however, if it failed to do so, it must face a dreadful fate.<sup>13</sup>

This ambiguous view of Korea’s future was predetermined by the

---

13. As an anonymous commentator has correctly pointed out, the sense of crisis in *Dongnip sinmun* also reflects the *location* of Korea in the imperialist century. The newspaper’s pursuit of *munmyeong gaehwa* and national independence were restricted by unfavorable conditions around Korea at the time. The then contemporary Korea was sustaining itself upon the balance of power between Russia and Japan, and, as several editorials dealt with it, the sovereignty of Korea would be put in danger if the balance of power were to break down. Thus, the sense of crisis was a result of the spatio-temporal condition under which Korea was situated. The importance of *location* in explaining different responses among East Asian countries to the Western challenge was highlighted by a number of scholars. For a study directly addressing it, see Chang (2002).

vocabulary of enlightenment. Time was assessed in terms of the degree of enlightenment or civilization. Whereas the later time was seen as enlightened or progressive, the preceding time were conceived as under-enlightened or under-progressed. As Koselleck (2004, 238) illuminates with the intellectual history of Europe, this view of time schematized civilizations, ethnicities, and races according to their different stages of development. As he puts it, “[t]he contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous, initially a result of overseas expansion, became a basic framework for the progressive construction of a world history increasingly united since the eighteenth century” (Koselleck 2004, 246). The four-stage theory of the development of civilization, which was prevalent in European social science from the mid-eighteenth to the nineteenth century, was familiar to Korean reformist intellectuals, who adopted that conception of time:<sup>14</sup>

As far as countries are concerned, there are four distinctions of countries into savage, under-enlightened, semi-enlightened, and fully enlightened countries. Savage countries’ people are called the lowest of races, because they do not know much about human beings’ humanity, cannot make meals with grains but eat only fish and wild animals, cannot build houses, sleep under the shade of trees in summer, live in caves in winter, cloak their bodies with hides, do not live under government and law, and fight one another all the time. In under-enlightened countries, people have some knowledge, rear cattle, and engage in agriculture; but they do not like learning, live with under-organized institutions, build their houses of soil in damp places, wear shabby clothes, know nothing about sanitation, and do not make things in an orderly way. In semi-enlightened countries, people exert themselves to make their living in all areas of literature, agriculture, art, technology, and commerce; but they try to keep their old ways of life, do not revere new knowledge, have arrogance in their hearts and treat others with contempt, and do not like progress and becoming enlightened. In fully

---

14. For the four stage theory and social science in eighteenth-century Europe, see Meek (1976, chs. 1-2).

enlightened countries, people have advanced knowledge, are good at all kinds of arts and technology, expand commerce around the world to increase their national finance, try to advance knowledge, exert themselves to make progress, communicate with foreign countries with sincerity, and love their own country very much (*Dongnip sinmun*, September 11, 1899).

As this passage shows, the editors held a specific pattern of thinking in their understanding of the world. In many editorials, their style of argument was based on categorization and comparison on a definite basis. In the editorials of *Dongnip sinmun*, the criteria for comparison were: national wealth and power, the advancement of science and technology, the development of practical studies, emancipation from old customs and social habits, and particular characteristics of the people, like diligence and honesty. The editors divided nations, races, and even religions according to these criteria, and assessed their degree of *enlightenment*, *civilization*, or *progress*. Racism was inherent in this way of thinking:

The people of foreign countries think on the basis of what really exists, whatever they think of, and even though the real thing clashes with their original ideas, beliefs, and opinions, and is even harmful to them, they do not reject the real thing but create ideas and acts on the basis of the real thing. On the contrary, in the Eastern tradition of learning, once someone has learnt that a white object is black, he sticks to what he has learnt, and though another person tries to show that the white thing is really white on the basis of evidence, he does not listen to the person and sticks to his original idea. So, the people in the East do not try to learn what really is, do not want to learn it, and are even afraid of it. As a result, the people's ways of living, law, and politics are not based on what really is but on what is empty and unsubstantive, so their ways of thinking are inclined more to the empty and unsubstantive than to the real or true (*Dongnip sinmun*, February 24, 1897).

The whites are the smartest, most diligent, and most brave among the races. They are spreading across the world, winning over the

lower races and occupying their land and resources. Therefore, a race that does not learn from the studies and morals of the white people and does not keep pace with them in progress is being exterminated. For example, tens of millions of Native American Indians have nearly been exterminated, due to their failure to learn the studies of the white people (*Dongnip sinmun*, June 24, 1897).

These texts establish one important point. The newspaper editors' perspective of the world followed the progressive view of time of the Enlightenment, and Korean intellectuals' preoccupation with *munmyeong gaehwa* was an extension of this view of time. This provided modern Korean intellectuals with a certain way of viewing the world, influencing their stance on enlightenment, progress, and advancement. The perspective that sees social Darwinism as the epicenter of the problems of the modern ways of thinking seems to be myopic.<sup>15</sup> The four-stage theory and the idea of social progress were not created in the nineteenth century under the influence of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1858). The idea of social progress had already been prevalent in the social science of eighteenth-century Europe, prompted by the Enlightenment thinkers. Herbert Spencer's theory of social evolution continued this mode of analysis. Guizot and Buckle's works on civilization, following the progressive view of history and discussing from the point of view of Europeans, were also written under the same academic influence and affected East Asian intellectuals by being translated into Japanese.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Fukujawa Yukichi 福澤諭吉 (1835-1901), who had great influence on Korean intellectuals in the 1880s, also adopted this view of social progress (Maruyama and Kato 2000, 150-151).

15. The editorials of *Dongnip sinmun*, indeed, do not contain any phrases indicating the influence of social Darwinism, such as *useung yeolpae* 優勝劣敗 (the superior wins and the inferior loses), *jeokja saengjon* 適者生存 (survival of the fittest), and *saengjon gyeongjaeng* 生存競爭 (competition for survival).

16. See Guizot (1997) and Buckle (1857). Korean intellectuals adopted this view of civilization through their study in Japan and America in the 1880s and 1890s. Ha Young Sun makes clear the intellectual course of the introduction of the concept of civilization into Korea in the late nineteenth century (Ha 2009, 61-64).

What are, then, the fundamental grounds that determined this particular conception of time? It seems to be deeply related to *rationalization* in human thinking as a condition of modern times. As the traditional frames of thought were shaken, modern men interrogated the *raison d'être* or purpose of things and institutions and, in doing so, were soon led to question how to achieve that purpose most *effectively*. Thinking in terms of *purpose* and the corresponding *rational* means was a process of rationalization in thinking. And this rational view of the world was deeply embedded in modern men's conception of time, by providing the standard of advance or retardation.

### **Munmyeong Gaehwa and the Nation: Two Different Views of Contemporary Korea**

The adoption of the progressive conception of time gave Korean intellectuals a deontological view of *munmyeong gaehwa*, but it left a big gap between the ideal and reality. In the late 1890s, Korea was still in severe social disorder as a result of both domestic and international political turmoil, but the conservative government did not want to initiate a radical reform. In this situation, there arose two perspectives of Korea: one that was optimistic of the future of Korea and balanced between the ideal of *munmyeong gaehwa* and the dismal reality of Korea, and the other that was pessimistic of its future, inclined to *munmyeong gaehwa* at the expense of the nation.

These two contrasting views appear in the editorials of *Dongnip sinmun* and its English edition, *The Independent*.<sup>17</sup> At first glance, they all seem to be written from a common experience of contemporary Korean society, conveying identical or similar messages throughout the whole issues. But a more careful reading underlines the difference between editorials and the contrasting views of the editors. When Suh Jae-Pil (Philip Jaisohn, 1864-1951) assumed the editorship

---

17. The English edition was originally published every other day like the Korean edition, but later was published as a weekly.



from April 7, 1896 to May 19, 1898, his editorials balanced the deontological and critical view of Korea with appraisals of its real conditions, and not once did he fall into pessimism. He pointed out problems concretely and criticized them appropriately. In the wake of the experiences of running the newspaper and teaching at the Baejae School, the first modern school in Korea, he remained confident that Koreans were capable of making a modern change by themselves:

Pessimists may say what they please in regard to the future of Korea, but we see that there is a hope, a great hope at that, for the regeneration of this nation in the near future. We say this, not because we see things through rosy-hued glasses, but through unprejudiced spectacles. Our hope and faith are based upon many incidents that have come to our notice lately. The students of the different schools give us more hope than any other class of Koreans, especially those children who are under foreigners' supervision. The boys in the schools under a foreign teacher are entirely different from the lads who are idling away their time at their homes or who waste the precious moments of their young lives in committing to memorize Chinese classics. These students who are taught by the foreigners have the same kind of ambitions as the boys of European and American schools. They have eagerness for knowledge; they acquire independent, manly habits, spirit, and dispositions; they are ambitious to be well informed on all subjects so that they can converse and deal with the people of the world on equal terms; they look down on those who are not honorable nor patriotic; they realize that the strength of a nation lies in the united effort of the people of the whole nation; and above all, they understand the necessity of reforming the political and social customs of their country (*The Independent*, December 3, 1896).

In his editorial, which was continued in the next edition, Suh concluded that Korean people possessed all necessary qualities that would make their nation prosperous and independent, and the only requirement in bringing out these qualities was proper guidance (*The Independent*, December 5, 1896). This optimistic view was carried over to his outlook of politics. He understood it in volitional rather than struc-

tural terms. His approach to breaking through the dependent policies of the conservative government in relation to Russia in 1898 and his organization of mass street demonstrations showed this volitional standpoint very clearly. His view of politics is well shown in the following editorial:

The people of Joseon have many of their own rights, but they do not seem to have these rights just because they do not use them. If every person in the nation wants to make Joseon a wealthy and powerful country, then this will be achieved in a few years, whatever country interrupts it. If every person in Joseon wants things to go on as they are, then that will happen, and, if they want things to be worse than now, that will also happen. Therefore, we think that whether Joseon becomes prosperous or poor lies in the hands of the common people, not in the hands of the officials (*Dongnip sinmun*, August 24, 1897).

Whether due to his volitional view of history or to his strong will, Suh did not suffer from the conflict between a deontological ideal of *munmyeong gaehwa* and the value of the nation. The two values were well harmonized within him.

Rhee Syngman (1875-1965), one of Suh's students and a young radical leader in the 1898 street demonstrations and, later, the first president of the Republic of Korea, was also optimistic regarding the future of Korea. He was a fervently patriotic nationalist and a young intellectual educated in the modern school, the Baejae School. He was acutely aware of the gap between the ideal of *munmyeong gaehwa* and the dismal reality of Korea. For him, the necessity of modern reform of Korea for the sake of civilization and enlightenment was counterbalanced by the value of the nation. Yi, who had an ability to see the situation in Korea from the viewpoint of *history*, could assess the political situation from a strategic and realistic perspective and did not succumb to a purely normative understanding of political affairs. He held a steadfast belief that the most important task for Korea at the time was to change its political system. He definitely stated that "the reason why Korea is now placed in this wretched situation is due to

the fact that we have not changed the political regime.”<sup>18</sup>

By contrast, Yun Chi-ho (1865-1945), who was educated in foreign countries in most of his teens and twenties and edited the *Dongnip sinmun* from May to December 1898, was more deontological in his attitude towards *munmyeong gaehwa* and more critical of the realities of Korea. He was not eager to consider either the real conditions of Korea or concrete and strategic ways to improve them. His viewpoint was excessively critical, deontological, and structural, and showed lack of strategic insight into social problems:

If things go on as they are, Koreans will be deprived of all their jobs and businesses by foreigners; all of the houses in central Seoul will belong to Chinese, Japanese, or Westerners; and all Koreans' economic lives will be exploited by foreigners. *It is truly regrettable, but the blame should be placed on Koreans themselves. If we are diligent, sincere, and talented, and if we do well whatever we do and, as a result, become rich, then why will we have to fear foreigners, however many live in Seoul? The way to get out of this dangerous situation is not by lamenting, weeping, swearing, resenting, or rueing, but by stopping the old ways of living, such as sleeping and eating without achieving anything and depending on others. Instead, we should eagerly learn foreigners' talents, orderliness, diligence, and sincerity.* If we do so, then we will be able to protect our houses and even our nation. Contrarily, if we stay in an idle, nasty, disorderly, and insincere state, as we have done, we will lose this city and nation to foreigners. I do not know what is more urgent than this (*Dongnip sinmun*, July 18, 1898).

He approached issues with a structural view, but lacked a balanced understanding between the ideal of his country and its gloomy reality. As a result, he readily settled for reformation, which stressed *education*, and saw the absence of it as the key reason for Korea's problems at the time. Only by educating the ignorant and changing them into modern men, he thought, could Koreans hope to advance

---

18. See Rhee ([1904] 1993, 110). Rhee finished this book when he was jailed in the Seoul Prison in 1904.

toward a civilized world:

For our nation to get out of this state of weakness and to achieve enlightenment and progress, what is urgent is not to make the palace splendid and to increase the army and navy. It lies in establishing many elementary schools. We hope that the government will exert itself to educate children in the primary schools, not spending a penny on founding a high school or a university (*Dongnip sinmun*, July 6, 1898).

In a similar way, Yun opposed a radical approach to the problems of politics, such as establishing a lower chamber of parliament and providing the common people with the right to vote:

In an ignorant society, whether it is ruled by one person or many, the society's moving in the wrong direction will not make any difference. Rather, in an ignorant world, monarchy is more durable than democracy, as is proved by the history of both the past and the present and by the current situation in Europe and America. Therefore, whichever country it is that tries to establish a lower chamber of parliament, the education of the people must take precedence in order to give them the ability to discuss the topics of the nation and feel responsible for national affairs, just as in his or her own private affairs. However, our people were not educated for hundreds of years during which they were uninterested in national affairs. If those affairs do not affect them, they will not mind even if the state is subject to a foreign country, as long as they can find their own meals. They do not know about liberty and human rights. And even if they have heard of these ideas, they regard licence as liberty and seeking self-interest at the expense of others' as pursuing human rights. Therefore, granting political rights to this kind of people and establishing a lower chamber will lead to a national crisis. . . . Only after the people are enlightened in 40-50 years, will it be possible to think of building a lower chamber (*Dongnip sinmun*, July 27, 1898).<sup>19</sup>

---

19. Shin Yong-Ha has regarded this editorial as the Independence Club's opinion on the establishment of a lower chamber, but it should be attributed to Yun's own personal view. This misjudgment occurred because Shin failed to capture the difference of editorials depending on different editors (Shin 1976, 363).

As is shown from the above passage, his structural approach to problems forced him to prefer enlightening the people through education to a transformation of the state through political rearrangements. Furthermore, his structural view led him to see the problems of Korea as those of nationality, as several parts of his diary show. He ascribed the problems of the Korean nation to the “absolute control” of Confucianism, which is inborn with corruption, perceives women as inferior, and teaches “go-backism.”<sup>20</sup> He, thus, wrote that “The blood of the [Korean] race has to be changed by a new education, a new government, and a new religion.”<sup>21</sup> In order to cure the nation of these fundamental problems, he was ready even to abandon national sovereignty: “Since the Koreans are thus incapable and unwilling to better their condition, it may be a mercy to them for Japan or England to take possession of the peninsula altogether.”<sup>22</sup>

The reformist intellectuals with contrasting views of the condition of Korea at the time responded to Japanese colonial rule in accordance with differing assessments. Optimists like Suh Jae-Pil and Rhee Syngman devoted to the liberation of Korea, while Yun Chi-ho became a Japanese collaborator. Yun’s case, however, was not a typical one among Korean reformist intellectuals. He studied in foreign academic institutions and stayed there from the age of 15 up to 29 (in Western age), so that he lost opportunities to cultivate his national identity and patriotism. His timid and introverted personality also encouraged him to see problems in structural terms and to hold his excessive commitment to civilization and enlightenment. Therefore, although the argument that *munmyeong gaehwa* prompted Korean reformist intellectuals to collaborate with the Japanese colonial authorities is plausible,<sup>23</sup> it fails to explain why some reformists fell to collaboration while others did not. As the cases of Suh Jae-Pil and Rhee Syngman show, the ideal of *munmyeong gaehwa* could be balanced by the value of the nation.

---

20. *Yun Chi-ho ilgi* (The Diary of Yun Chi-ho), entry dated December 12, 1893.

21. *Yun Chi-ho ilgi*, entry dated February 1, 1899.

22. *Yun Chi-ho ilgi*, entry dated September 28, 1894.

23. Chung Yong-Hwa and Andre Schmid have suggested this perspective (Chung 2001, 297-314; Schmid 2002, 136-138).

## Concluding Remarks

This study has aimed to clarify the origin of modern Korean intellectuals' negative view of Korean traditions, and argued that the origin should be found in the progressive view of time of the Enlightenment, rather than in a single social theory like social Darwinism. This finding is crucial in explaining why quite a number of Korean intellectuals living in the twenty-first century still have a negative attitude towards their own past. Contemporary Koreans seem to still be influenced by the modern conception of time. The nineteenth-century intellectuals' commitment to civilization and enlightenment has now changed to development or advancing toward a developed country, while the fundamental conditions of thinking such as the modern notion of civilization have little changed. This is why a considerable number of Koreans still find it difficult to take pride in their past.

This article has also emphasized that the logic of *munmyeong gaehwa* is compatible with the value of the nation. Scholars have often treated the relationship between the ideal of civilization and enlightenment and the value of the nation as mutually exclusive. As I have discussed in relation to *Dongnip sinmun*, Suh Jae-Pil's editorials were balanced between the ideal of *munmyeong gaehwa* and his stress on national independence and patriotism. This balance inclined towards the former when Yun Chi-ho took the editorship. Yet Yun's pessimism regarding the future of Korea was closely related to his life experience and personality, as his diary witnesses. Why some reformist intellectuals, including Yun Chi-ho, fell to collaboration with the Japanese colonial regime will be properly explained, only when their individual cases are concretely analyzed in relation to their own contexts of life.

---

**REFERENCES**
**Primary Sources**

*Dongnip sinmun* (*The Independent*).

*Gojong sillok* 高宗實錄 (*Annals of King Gojong*).

Yun, Chi-ho. 1974. *Yun Chi-ho ilgi* (*Yun Chi-ho's Diary*). Vols. 1-6. Edited by the National Institute of Korean History. Seoul: Tamgudang.

**Secondary Sources**

Buckle, Henry Thomas. 1857. *History of Civilization in England*. 3 Vols. London: Longman Green.

Chang, In-sung. 2002. *Jangso-ui gukje jeongchi sasang* (*International Political Thought of Location*). Seoul: Seoul National University.

Chu, Chin-Oh. 1988. "Dongnip hyeophoe-ui sahoe sasang-gwa sahoe jin-hwaron" (*The Social Thought of the Independence Club and Social Darwinism*). In *Son Bogi baksa jeongnyeon ginyeom sahak nonchong* (*History Papers in Honor of the Retirement of Dr. Son Bogi*). Seoul: Jisik Sanupsa.

Chun, Bok-hee. 1996. *Sahoe jinhwaron-gwa gukga sasang* (*Social Darwinism and the Idea of the State*). Seoul: Hanul.

Chung, Yong-Hwa. 2001. "Munmyeong gaehwaron-ui deot: Yun Chi-ho ilgi-reul jungsim-euro" (*The Trap of Civilization and Enlightenment Theory During Early Modern Korea: Focusing on Yun Chi-ho's Diary*). *Gukje jeongchi nonchong* (*Korean Journal of International Relations*) 41.4.

de Ceuster, Koen. 1994. "From Modernization to Collaboration, the Dilemma of Korean Cultural Nationalism: The Case of Yun Ch'i-ho (1865-1945)." PhD diss., Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

de Condorcet, Antoine-Nicolas. [1795] 1955. *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*. Translated by June Barraclough. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Guizot, François. 1997. *The History of Civilization in Europe*. Translated by William Hazlitt. London: Penguin Books.

Ha, Young Sun. 2009. "Geundae hanguk-ui munmyeong gaenyeom doipsa" (*The History of the Introduction of the Concept of Civilization in Modern Korea*). In *Geundae hanguk-ui sahoe gwahak gaenyeom hyeong-seongsa* (*The History of the Formation of the Social Sciences as a Concept in Modern Korea*). Seoul: Changbi.

Hegel, George W. F. [1837] 1956. *The Philosophy of History*. Translated by

- John Sibree. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.
- Jeong, Sang Woo. 2000. "Gaehang ihu sigan gwannyeom-ui byeonhwa" (Change in the Conception of Time after the Opening Up). *Yeoksa bipyeong* (Critical Review of History) 50.
- Jeong, Seong Hee. 2003. "Daehan jegukgi taeyangnyeok-ui sihaeng-gwa yeokseo-ui byeonhwa" (The Administration of the Solar Calendar System and the Change of the Calendar Book in the Era of the Great Empire of Korea). *Guksagwan nonchong* (Review of National History) 103.
- Jung, Keunsik. 2000. "Hanguk-ui geundaejeok sigan cheje-ui hyeongseong-gwa ilsang saenghwal-ui byeonhwa" (The Formation of the Modern Time System and the Change of Everyday Life in Korea). *Sahoe-wa yeoksa* (Society and History) 58.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. "Sigan cheje-wa singminjijeok geundaeseong" (The System of Time and Colonial Modernity). *Munhwa gwahak* (Cultural Science) 41.
- Kant, Immanuel. [1795] 2006. "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective." In *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace and History*, edited by Pauline Kleingeld and translated by David L. Colclasure. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kim, Do Hyung. 1986. "Hanmal gyemong undong-ui jeongchiron yeongu" (A Study of the Political Ideas of Enlightenment Movement in the Last Years of Joseon Korea). *Hanguksa yeongu* (Journal of Korea History) 54.
- Kim, Yonggu. 2001. *Segyegwan chungdol-gwa hanmal oegyosa, 1866-1882* (The Collision of Worldviews and the History of Diplomacy in Late Joseon, 1866-1882). Seoul: Moonji.
- Koselleck, Reinhart. 2004. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Maruyama, Masao, and Kato Shuichi. 2000. *Beonyeok-gwa ilbon-ui geundae* (Translation and Japanese Modernity). Translated by Im Seongmo. Seoul: Isan.
- Meek, Ronald L. 1976. *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Park, Taeho. 2003. "Dongnip sinmun-gwa sigan gigyee" (*Dongnip sinmun* and Time Machinery). *Sahoe-wa yeoksa* (Society and History) 64.
- Rhee, Syngman. [1904] 1993. *Dongnip jeongsin* (The Spirit of National Independence). Seoul: Jeongdong Chulpansa.
- Schmid, Andre. 2002. *Korea between Empires, 1895-1919*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Shin, Yong-Ha. 1976. *Dongnip hyeopoe yeongu* (A Study of the Independence Club). Seoul: Ilchokak.



- Yi, Tae-jin. 2002. "Unyangho sageon-ui jinsang" (The True Story of the *Unyo* Incident). In *Joseon-ui jeongchi-wa sahoe* (Politics and Society in Joseon), by Choe Seunghui et al. Seoul: Jipmoondang.