

## Book Reviews

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*Populist Collaborators: The Ilchinhoe and the Japanese Colonization of Korea, 1896-1910*, by Yumi Moon. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013, 312 pp., US\$ 45.00, ISBN: 978-0801450419 (hardcover)

### **New Turning Point of Ilchinhoe 一進會 Studies: Copernican Shift of Approach**

In Korea, the pro-Japanese collaboration before and during the colonial period is still a highly sensitive issue prompting a strong sense of nationalism. Thus, Ilchinhoe has been blamed on moral bases although it deserves more scholarly and objective attention so that we can understand why and how some of the colonized voluntarily collaborate with the imperial colonizers. Prior to Yumi Moon's work, Korean historians have viewed Ilchinhoe as a collaborative puppet organization that petitioned Japan's colonization of Korea and also actively advanced that process.

It is not too much to say that Yumi Moon's Harvard doctoral dissertation in 2005 marked a milestone in studies of Ilchinhoe. Taking a Copernican turn from previous studies, Moon introduced a new perspective by analyzing Ilchinhoe in terms of civilization movement, enlightenment movement, and civil rights movement. The Korean academia still views this kind of approach as problematic. Yet it is Moon's feat to have tackled this difficult topic of Ilchinhoe by arguing that its orientation and objective included aspects that could be interpreted as efforts toward civilization or modernization movements. The previous scholarship before Moon rests on the dichotomic framework of resistance or collaboration vis-a-vis colonial invasion. Within that paradigm, Ilchinhoe stood at the opposite end from the anti-Japan resistance, and it was simply an object of moral blame by nationalists. Such a view dismisses any attempt to analyze what the political desire among the members of Ilchinhoe implied. If its "pro-Japan" stance was not the goal but a means at the time when Korea (TaeHan Empire 대한제국, 1897-1910) was caught between the collapse of the feudal Choson Dynasty and the establishment of modern nation-state, then what was its true political orientation? Now is the time we need to address this question.

"Populist Collaborators" did an extensive historical research on internal and external motivations behind their collaborative practices and raises a crucial question about how a political status of Ilchinhoe ought to be re-

assessed amidst the political cataclysm in which the old force of tradition and the new force of modernity cross each other's paths and a national sovereignty was taken over by the Japanese colonialism.

### **What was the Goal of Collaboration? Was there a Substance of Civilizing Reform?**

The most controversial point of Moon's new approach to Ilchinhoe is whether Ilchinhoe members abused political opportunities for their own profits with the help of foreign power, or their activities could be interpreted as modernization reform resisting the feudal oppression from the traditional ruling class.

There were examples in which Ilchinhoe in their early years refused to pay miscellaneous tax charged by Department of Royal Household 궁내부 and was involved in the issue of station-territories, which could make the argument possible that Ilchinhoe somehow represented the interest of the people. We nevertheless come to question the authenticity of their slogans—protection of people's lives and properties—when seeing the cases in which Ilchinhoe members used tenants' complaints as an excuse to take supervisors' positions for themselves, thus fulfilling their private interests.

From early on when Ilchinhoe embarked on their movements, nationalist activists and presses, such as Taehan Maeil Sinbo 대한매일신보, critiqued that Ilchinhoe's slogan for civilizing reform was merely a rhetoric veiling the pursuit of Ilchinhoe's own profits. Since Ilchinhoe undid their political pledges of assuming a defending role of people, undercutting their reformist images, we should raise a question of reliability about Ilchinhoe's claims.

Although Ilchinhoe refused to pay a tax—a financial basis for the imperial court—to Department of Royal Household and used that money to establish a school, that case was almost the only enlightenment activity that Ilchinhoe carried out. Yet the Korean emperor also embarked on the modernization reformation, called Kwangmu 광무 Reform, and its financial resource was based on the Department of Royal Household revenue from miscellaneous taxes, mine management and station-territories sharecrop income. It would not be difficult to assess which reformation between the Kwangmu 광무 Reform and Ilchinhoe's civilization project took a more successful role in modernizing Korea.

Japanese Residency-General 통감부 of Korea then focused on

undermining Korea's imperial finance on the pretext of the administrative improvement to emasculate the remaining power of the Korean emperor resisting the dispossession of national sovereignty. This political pursuit of the Residency-General precisely coincides with Ilchinhoe's movement to refuse to pay tax to Department of Royal Household. Hence, it would not be highly difficult to assess whether Ilchinhoe's anti-tax movement was the pro-civil rights movement for advocating people's life and property right, or ultimately the pro-Japanese action facilitating Japan's annexation of Korea by way of undercutting the economic foundation of the imperial power of the Korean court.

There is nevertheless no controversy about Ilchinhoe's populist reformism, which Moon reveals, because the group gathered power of the masses toward the political line of anti-emperor, anti-government, and anti-bureaucracy movements and raised the people's political consciousness about civil rights. However, the movement ended up with petitioning the Japan's annexation of Korea, as opposed to promoting civil rights movement or people's government establishment movement. This fact hardly challenges a conventional view of Ilchinhoe as a traitorous group betraying their national community and collaborating with the foreign colonial power.

### **Did Ilchinhoe Represent Interests of Mass People as a Populist Party?**

When Ilchinhoe was active, other political groups were also beginning to voice out their political desires after a dormant period during which they had been oppressed by the power of Korean emperor following the dissolution of the Independence Club 독립협회. After the Russo-Japanese war, the diminished imperial power and the establishment of the Residency-General witnessed the bursting of enlightenment groups and societies. The majority of them sought to participate in politics and to reform the power structure. Among those groups, Ilchinhoe was the largest one and professed itself to be a populist political organization.

Moon also views that Ilchinhoe was a populist party representing civil rights and interests of the majority of people. Yet I doubt that except its early activism, opposing an institutional power by way of the tax issue which could mobilize people rather easily, Ilchinhoe embraced and represented political

aspiration of majority of the masses even after the group embarked on political activism in full scale.

Ilchinhoe was built on a dualistic structure with leadership members in its early period from the Independence Club and local members from the remnants of Tonghak 동학. Its mainstream, however, consisted of non-aristocrat, non-privileged, and non-elite intellectual classes compared to other patriotic enlightenment groups. As seen in the example of Song Pyong-jun 송병준, rivaling Yi Wan-yong 이완용 who was an aristocrat, the majority of Ilchinhoe members, because of their relatively lower origin, were a target of contempt by both the traditional land-owning aristocrats and the elite intellectuals such as pro-reformation and pro-modernization scholar-officials who were trying to make philosophical transformation away from aristocrats. Here, I want to raise a question whether Ilchinhoe was actually able to speak for the masses, given that the majority of its members came from lower than the middle class, then called pro-Japanese “villains.”

Yi Yong-gu 이용구, a devotee of Tonghak, endorsed Tarui Toukichi's 樽井藤吉 Greater Asian Unification (Daitō gappōron 大東合邦論). Yi stresses that Tonghak seeks out not monarch but people, upholding Japan's leadership in unifying Asia, civilizing Asian culture, and improving politics through supporting promotion of industries and populist parties. It is noticeable that Ilchinhoe as a populist party does not seek to defend the power of monarch. Song Pyong-jun also took a leading role in dethroning the emperor and liquidating royal household's assets, because he believed Emperor Kojong was the biggest obstacle in Japan's annexation of Korea. In my view, these were the political attempts by opportunists and government post-seekers, marginalized by the feudal aristocratic system. Those people strove to pave political paths that were previously precluded to them by taking advantage of foreign power, pursuing immediate selfish profits, as opposed to national sovereignty.

Yet we need to ask whether the perception and behavioral patterns of Ilchinhoe's core leaders—such as Yi Yong-gu and Song Pyong-jun—represented political disposition of the majority of the masses of the time. I think that Ilchinhoe's leaders prioritized personal desire to be liberated from the feudal aristocracy's ruling system over a great cause of national independence and sovereignty.

Following the 1894 Kabo Reform was significantly undermined the long-heralded conventional governing system, yet the power of the privileged

*Yangban* 양반, seen in immense power that Yi Wan-yong's cabinet held, persistently functioned as an unsurpassable wall for the “lower class villains” of Ilchinhoe members. Ilchinhoe's leaders petitioned Japan-Korea unification to utilize the Japanese power for overcoming that obstacle.

Following the petition, however, a large number of members in provinces seceded from Ilchinhoe, a crisis that forced leaders to advocate the watchword of “endorsement of the Korean court” despite the group's opposition to the emperorship. That strategy was implemented, I believe, because majority of the masses at the time sympathized more with emperor-centered patriotism, rather than with constitutional monarchy and civil rights asserted by patriotic enlightenment movement. The 1909 Emperor Sunjong's national tour, planned by Resident-General 통감 Itō Hirobumi 伊藤博文 to publicize consequences of administrative improvement, ended up with instilling the masses with the sentiment of monarch-centered patriotism.

The groups which opposed the emperorship throughout the TaeHan Empire period were the conventional privileged of *Yangban* class (e.g., Yi Wan-yong) and pro-modernization intellectuals seeking the constitutional monarchy. The masses, however, reckoned that the emperor was a symbol of national sovereignty. The enforced dethronement of Emperor Kojong and coerced dispersion of national army brought about a nationwide Righteous Armies' 의병 struggles against Japanese invasion. Because Ilchinhoe took a leading role in dethroning the emperor, it was stigmatized as a traitorous group and became a target of attack by the Righteous Armies. The dethronement also prompted the secession of members from Ilchinhoe.

Thus, I think that it is problematic to interpret Ilchinhoe leaders' deviant political desire as representation of political interests of the masses. Ilchinhoe's claims, such as prioritizing modernization reform over national sovereignty, masking the pursuit of personal interests with a rhetoric that practical interests are more critical than a great cause of independence, and petitioning the Japan-Korea unification, were not far from a collaborator's logic appropriated by the Eastern Peace Theory, which Japan disseminated following the Russo-Japanese War, and Pan-Asianism such as Tarui Toukichi's Greater Asian Unification. Unless these issues are resolved, I believe that a conventional critique against Ilchinhoe is unlikely to be challenged.

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