

Early Visions of Reform and Modernity

Sirhak and Religious Movements in Chosŏn Korea

By Don Baker

South Korea in the twenty-first century is a very different place than it was two centuries ago. In the nineteenth century, it was an absolute monarchy. Today, South Korea is a vibrant democracy with a president and parliament selected through hotly contested elections. Two centuries ago, the Korean economy was overwhelmingly agrarian, and Korea engaged in very little foreign trade. Today, South Korea is an industrial and commercial powerhouse producing automobiles and smartphones that are in great demand in markets across the globe. Two centuries ago, Korean society was organized into a hereditary, occupational hierarchy. Today, most South Koreans are members of an urban middle class, with their social status determined more by their educational credentials and personal accomplishments than by their family background.

Since modern democracy, industrialization, and urban middle-class society emerged first in the West, it is not surprising that many people assume that South Korea today is a product of Westernization, abandoning its traditional worldview and practices and replacing them with new Western modes of political, economic, and social organization imported from North America and Europe. A more nuanced explanation might give the Japanese credit for initiating modernization in Korea by imposing its own versions of modern Western institutions on Korea under Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945.¹ However, both explanations of why South Korea looks the way it does today are incomplete. They both ignore developments taking place in Korea before the end of the nineteenth century, when Koreans were in charge of their own destiny and were not beholden to Japan or the West.

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We can find Koreans internally proposing economic and social reforms and calling for a more responsive government decades before they were aware of the modernization underway in the West. We can also find Koreans, even after they had become aware of how much the world outside of their peninsula was changing, proposing creative Korean responses that were different from the wholesale adoption of foreign ideas and institutions or insisting that Korea cling to its traditional ways and resist the pressure to imitate the West.

We cannot deny that Korea today is an example of the global phenomenon of convergence. In many respects, it resembles other countries around the world that have adopted similar approaches to political, economic, and social organization. The spread of new technologies of production, transportation, and communication have

brought nations closer together and provided them similar tools for pursuing the traditional goals of peace, prosperity, and stability.

Nevertheless, we should not assume that Koreans have been no more than passive recipients of what the modern world has to offer. For democracy, industrialization, and the shift from hereditary to earned status to take root on Korean soil, that soil had to be prepared to accept them. Korea's modernization was a two-way process. The tools of modernization had to be made available to the common people. But Koreans also had to already be looking for what the modern world had to offer in order for those tools to be efficiently utilized. Korea was able to change because Koreans realized that those changes would help them achieve goals they had already decided to pursue. Without such openness to reform and change, the rapid transformation of Korea into the modern state, economy, and society it is today would not have been possible.

Sirhak: Early Advocates of Reform

Intellectual life during the last dynasty of Korea, the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910), was dominated by Neo-Confucianism, including its assumptions about how government, the economy, and society should be organized. Confucianism is known for its conservative nature, for looking to the past for advice on how to deal with problems in the present and future. That does not mean, however, that Korean Confucians were forced to operate within a very narrow range of permissible ideas. They could critique the present and propose progressive reforms under the guise of calls for a revival of what they presented as the superior practices of the past. The parameters that defined acceptable Confucian discourse were thus broad enough for a reform movement to emerge within Korean Confucianism in the seventeenth century.

That reform movement is known today as *sirhak*, "practical learning."² The term *sirhak* is a twentieth-century term coined by Koreans under Japanese colonial rule who were searching for indigenous roots of modernity to counter Japanese claims that Koreans had to follow their models. Those nationalist scholars uncovered a few Korean Confucian scholars in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries proposing changes that appeared to foreshadow the modernizing trends of the twentieth century. They then lumped those writers together under the rubric "School of Practical Learning."

These labeled "sirhak writers" today did not see themselves as members of the same political or philosophical movement. Moreover, they had significant disagreements over how they thought Korea should reform. For example, some wanted Korea to import the latest technology from China's Qing dynasty in order to enhance productivity and build a more vibrant commercial economy. Others called for curtailing even the limited trading that was going on in rural markets in order to return to the self-sufficient economy they believed had underlain the ideal society of the ancient past and provided an equitable distribution of the fruits of human labor. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify proposals in the writings from members of various branches of this "sirhak school" that challenged the traditional order and would have, if they had been adopted, put Korea on the road to modernity.

For example, one mark of the modern world is the legal equality of human beings. Sirhak writers did not call for gender equality, but a few of them did call for the end of discrimination against men on the basis of their family background. The two most egregious examples of such discrimination were slavery and the exclusion of sons of secondary wives from high-level civil service posts. Both forms of discrimination were difficult to justify in Confucian terms, yet they were both firmly entrenched in Korea in the eighteenth century.

As many as 30 percent of Koreans may have been slaves in the eighteenth century. That appalled sirhak scholars such as Yu Hyōng-wōn (1622-1673) and Yi Ik (pen name Sōngho, 1681-1763), both of whom recognized that slavery on such a large scale did not exist in China—their model for an advanced civilization. They acknowledged that some human beings deserved more respect than others and that some human beings were better-suited for giving orders while others were better-suited for heeding such orders. Nevertheless, they insisted such distinctions should be decided on the basis of individual merit, as they believed they largely were in China, rather than heredity.

Confucius himself had argued that a true gentleman was such by merit rather than by inheritance. Yu and Sōngho were true to the spirit of Confucianism when they called for an end to slavery. Sōngho applied that spirit to the discrimination against secondary sons, as well. He was joined in that call for all sons of noble fathers to be treated equally by Yu Suwon (1694-1775), who wrote that a lot of talent was wasted by the prohibition on secondary sons serving in high-level government posts. Korea, like China, selected government officials on the basis of their performance on civil service examinations. However, unlike China, Korea restricted admission to those examinations to men with the proper paternal and maternal background. If a young man had a father of noble (defined as coming from a family of officeholders) background but his mother was a commoner, he was not allowed to compete for higher-level civil service positions. Both Sōngho and Yu Suwon argued that such discrimination against sons on the basis of their maternal background was contrary to the spirit of Confucianism and should not be a part of the process for selecting government officials.

Neither of these proposals for a more egalitarian society was implemented during the Chosŏn dynasty. Nevertheless, the fact that such challenges to key elements of the rigid social hierarchy were voiced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries shows that Koreans were already thinking about reform before they encountered the modern West.³

Another feature of the modern world is the legal equality of countries, the basis for the nationalism that defines modern national identity. Korea has been an independent country for far more than a millennium. However, until the end of the nineteenth century, it was a tributary state of China, which it referred to as the “superior country.” Koreans in the past often measured their own country by how well it conformed to the standards set by China. Such “sino-centrism” remained strong in Korea until the 1890s. However, in the eighteenth century, we begin to see a growing interest in things distinctively Korean and even hear a few voices calling for decentering China.

Hong Dae-yong (1731-1783) was a sirhak scholar who traveled to China and was impressed by how much more technologically advanced it was compared to Korea, as was his friend Pak Chi-Wōn (1737-1805). They are considered representative members of the “Northern Learning” branch of sirhak for their suggestions

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that Korea import the latest technology used in the Qing dynasty. Nevertheless, they both also suggested that China was not necessarily the “central kingdom.” Such a designation was arbitrary, they argued. Any country could be the center, depending on the standpoint of who was applying such a designation. Hong went even further and said that it was also somewhat arbitrary to claim that the earth was the center of the universe because that statement, too, depended on the standpoint of the person determining the center of the universe’s location.⁴

Along with these theoretical challenges to China’s centrality, implying that China and Korea were equal, we can also see some concrete manifestations of a greater concern for non-Chinese features of Korean life and culture. Traditionally, Koreans had followed the Chinese tradition of landscape paintings and had painted scenes of mountains that were either Chinese or generic. However, Chōng Sōn (1676-1759) broke with that tradition and started depicting famous Korean mountains in his paintings, such as his series of paintings of the famous Diamond Mountains that lie just north of the current boundary between North and South Korea. A few decades later, Kim Hong-do (1745-?) and Sin Yunbok (1758-?) went even further and began producing genre paintings that reproduced scenes from everyday life in Korea. These included scenes of Korean *yangban* (noblemen in their distinctive Korean clothing),

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enjoying an outing in the countryside with *kisaeng* (Korea's professional women entertainers), and of a crowd gathered in a village square to watch two men testing each other's strength with Korean-style wrestling. In another display of growing pride in Korean culture, the first anthologies of *sijo*, a unique Korean poetic genre, were published in the eighteenth century. *Sijo* had been an oral tradition for centuries but had not been written down and published in *Hangŭl*, the indigenous Korean script, even though *Hangŭl* had been invented three centuries earlier.

These growing assertions of pride in Korea's cultural identity did not reach the level of proclamations of Korea's formal equality with China until the end of the nineteenth century. However, the ground was prepared for such proclamations by these earlier strides toward more explicit acknowledgement that Koreans constituted a respectable and distinct cultural community. Without such challenges to political and cultural Sinocentrism before the encounter with the modern world, the nationalism that arose in response to that encounter would have been much more muted and have emerged much later.

One more feature of the modern world whose roots we can trace back to the *sirhak* movement is the call for a government more responsive to the needs of those it governs and for one that promotes more equitable distribution of the country's resources. Chosŏn Korea was not a democracy, and none of the *sirhak* scholars proposed that it become one. However, Confucianism called for a government that was responsible for the people it governed. In fact, the Confucian Mandate of Heaven concept allowed people to rise up and overthrow a government that was considered illegitimate—defined in terms of failure to ensure that those people are safe from threats to their lives from either bandits or starvation, and were treated fairly. In the eyes of some *sirhak* scholars, that minimal requirement for a legitimate government, particularly the requirement of fairness, was barely being met.

Yu Hyŏng-wŏn, Yi Ik, and Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836) were concerned about poverty among the masses. To address the unequal distribution of resources they were convinced was responsible for that poverty, they proposed a redistribution of farm land, taking from those who had more than they needed and giving it to those who did not have enough.⁵

Chŏng also addressed the issue of ineffective and unjust governance. Early in his career as a government official, he had served as a district magistrate. Later, when he was forced out of office and into exile because of his involvement with the founding of a Catholic community in Korea, he drew on his experiences to write a guide to local government administration. His *Admonitions on Governing the People* presents example after example of exemplary district magistrates performing their duties as tax collectors, judges, and administrators of famine relief and public works in such a way that no one can complain that they were treated unfairly. He contrasts those salutary examples with examples of district magistrates ignoring the needs of the people in their districts by engaging in favoritism or pursuing their own selfish interests instead. His overarching advice is that government officials should remember that they are responsible for taking care of the people in their district the way a shepherd takes care of his flock. The job of a district magistrate is to help the people in his district live more productive lives. To do that, he points out, he needs to treat them fairly and remember that he was not appointed to that post to make his own life more comfortable.⁶

This is not democracy, but nevertheless Chŏng emphasized that a government is responsible for the well-being of the people it governs. He felt now in his day had forgotten this notion, and he prepared

Koreans a few decades later for the shift from a responsible government to the modern notion of a responsive government—one that represents the people, is chosen by them, and is run on their behalf.

The *sirhak* movement did not bring modernity to Korea. However, it pointed Korea in that direction and made Koreans more receptive to modern ideas when they finally reached the peninsula.

New Religions and the Dismantling of the Pre-Modern Order

Sirhak was not the only intellectual force challenging the traditional order. Two new religions appeared in Korea in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that also undermined some of the assumptions on which that traditional order rested. One was the imported religion of Catholicism. The other was *Tonghak*, an indigenous new religion that emerged in response to the religious challenge Catholicism posed.

Among the essential features of the modern world are limits on the reach of the state and participation by the people in the decisions that state makes. Neither feature was present in traditional Korea. The first was introduced to Korea by Catholicism, and the second was brought to the fore by *Tonghak*.

Catholicism was, of course, an imported religion. However, it is significant that Catholicism took root on Korean soil before there was any Western presence in Korea. There were Catholics in Korea before there were any Catholic missionaries there. A few young Korean Confucian scholars read missionary publications in Chinese written by Jesuit missionaries in China and sent one of their number to meet with a European priest in the Chinese capital. He returned to Korea as a baptized Catholic and began converting many of his friends.⁷

Korea's first Catholics apparently believed that Catholicism and Confucianism were complementary and that the Catholic belief in God would give them the strength they needed to meet the high moral demands Confucianism imposed. Soon, however, they discovered that the Vatican did not allow Catholics to place a spirit tablet honoring deceased parents on a family altar. That was a problem, because the Chosŏn Confucian government required every educated man to have such a family altar and to offer ritual sacrifice before the spirit tablets it held. When the government started executing Catholics for their refusal to obey its ritual regulations, Korea's first Catholics had to make a choice: Abandon Catholicism, remain Confucian, and stay alive; or abandon Confucianism, remain Catholic, and risk martyrdom.

Those who decided to remain Catholic posed a novel challenge to the Chosŏn government. Though the limits of the communication and transportation technology of the day limited the actual reach of government, no area of society was theoretically off-limits. The government had the right to interfere even in matters of religion and ritual. Catholics insisted, however, that there should be a separation of church and state that would leave Catholics alone to follow their consciences. This was the first time in history that an organized group in Korea had raised objections to the state's claim to total control over society. Though that claim was not accepted at first (thousands of Korean Catholics died in a series of persecutions from 1791 through 1871), it was the opening salvo in the battle that eventually led to the state relinquishing enough of its power to clear space for civil society to emerge. Once civil society was able to challenge the power of the state, Korea was on the path to the democracy that now prevails in the southern half of the peninsula.

That it truly was a battle became clear in the second half of the nineteenth century. Korea's first indigenous organized religion

emerged in the 1860s. Calling itself Tonghak (“Eastern learning” to distinguish itself from Catholicism, which was called “Western learning”), it did not begin as a challenge to political power. However, the founder was executed in 1864 for his own ritual improprieties. His followers, forced into an anti-government posture, went underground but continued to spread their new faith. In the 1890s, joined by thousands of converts, they resurfaced in the largest peasant rebellion Korea had ever seen. Though the revolutionary nature of that rebellion may be somewhat exaggerated, it nonetheless was the first time that large numbers of peasants over a broad expanse of Korea had joined together to demand that their government listen to their complaints about corruption among local government officials.⁸ This was a clear sign that the Korean attitude toward authority had changed and more Koreans were now demanding a voice in the decisions that affected their lives. Such an attitude is another mark of modern political community, but it arose out of indigenous developments within Korea’s religious and political culture, rather than from the adoption of Western ideas. Equally indigenous in origin was the Tonghak expansion of the original sirhak call for more equal treatment of men into an insistence on the fundamental equality of all human beings regardless of occupation, age, or gender. The Tonghak doctrine that there is a little bit of the divine within every human being signaled yet another shift toward a modern stance, one of respect for all human individuals.⁹

Conclusion

The various reform proposals of the sirhak movement, as well as the demands for religious freedom, made by Korea’s first Catholics; the Tonghak demands for more popular input into government decisions; and the end to discrimination based on age, gender, or occupation were not in themselves enough to pull Korea into the modern world right away. It wasn’t until the last quarter of the twentieth century that South Korea began to look like the democratic and industrialized country we see today. Nevertheless, when compared to many other countries around the world that remain third-world countries, the progress South Korea has made over the last few decades has been quite remarkable. Much of the credit for that progress should be given to those Chosŏn dynasty Koreans who began calling for reform long before they were fully aware of modern Western ideas like democracy, equality, and economic growth fueled by industrialization. ■

NOTES

1. Whether Japan’s colonial rule had a positive or negative impact on Korea’s march toward modernity is a subject of heated debate among scholars who study modern Korea. For contrasting views, see Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson, eds., *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Hong Yung Lee, Yong-chool Ha, and Clark W. Sorensen, eds., *Colonial Rule and Social Change in Korea, 1910-1945* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).
2. For a survey of the sirhak movement, see Michael C. Kalton, “An Introduction to Silhak,” *Korea Journal* 15, no. 5 (1975): 29-46.
3. English translations of excerpts from Yu Hyŏng-wŏn’s criticism of slavery and Yu Suwon’s criticism of discrimination against secondary sons can be found in Yong-ho Chŏe, Peter Lee, and Wm. Theodore de Bary, eds., *Sources of Korean Tradition, Volume II: From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 157-167.
4. For more on late Chosŏn dynasty challenges to Sinocentrism, see Lim Hyung-taek, “Sinocentrism in East Asia and the Task of Overcoming It,” *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 8, no.1 (2008): 71-87; Song Young-bae, “Countering Sinocentrism in Eighteenth-Century Korea: Hong Tae-Yong’s Vision of ‘Relativism’ and Iconoclasm for Reform,” *Philosophy East and West* 49, no. 3 (1999): 278-297.
5. *Sources of Korean Tradition, II*, 70-88.

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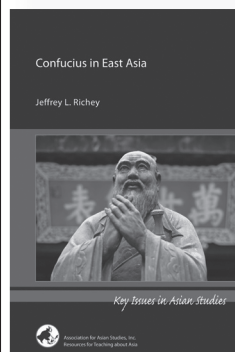
6. Choi Byong-hyon trans., *Admonitions on Governing the People: Manual for All Administrators*, (Berkeley: University of California, 2010).
7. James Huntley Grayson, “A Quarter-Millennium of Christianity in Korea,” *Christianity in Korea*, eds. Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Timothy S. Lee (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 9.
8. For an argument for the less-than-revolutionary nature of the Tonghak Uprising, see Young-Ick Lew, “The Conservative Character of the 1894 Tonghak Peasant Uprising: A Reappraisal with Emphasis on Chŏn Pong-jun’s Background and Motivation,” *Journal of Korean Studies* no. 7 (1990): 149-180.
9. For more on the Tonghak movement, see George L. Kallander, *Salvation Through Dissent: Tonghak Heterodoxy and Early Modern Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2013).

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