

Abstract

As Korean history of recent past had drastic transformations that included modernisation after Western encroachments, colonisation by Japan, and ideological strife and separation of the state into two, researchers have usually seen the history of Korean political thinking since the nineteenth century as that of discontinuity. The transition of traditional Confucian political thinking to current democratic and republican political ideal was thus regarded as a discrete process. This appraisal is based on the observation of historical contexts rather than the examination of theoretical elements of the idea systems. Appending the latter approach to the former, specifically breaking down Confucian political ideas into two distinct elements, this study testifies that the Confucian political thinking was in continuity with the democratic and republican ideas. For this objective, the present study revisits the political ideas of the late nineteenth-century reformists, or *Kaehwap'a*, for their ideas are located at a transitional period between the Confucian and the modern political thinking. A predominant previous view on them is that they abandoned their traditions and sought for an all-out Westernisation. Researchers who hold this view, however, have failed to grasp the elements within Confucian political thinking which were compatible with modern political ideas. Taking the customary ethics-centred view of Confucianism, they missed to capture the very political nature of Confucian ideas, which is consonant with modern ideas of politics. The current study, therefore, begins with a theoretical examination of Confucian political thinking and suggests a new perspective of comprehending it, conceptualising that in terms of a tension between 'political necessity' and an 'ethical ideal.' Thereafter, examining several aspects of the reformists' ideas, this study argues that the Confucian ideas related to political necessity

functioned as media for the adoption of liberal and democratic political ideas. Moreover, it considers the effects of the worldview pertaining to political necessity ideas and analyses both positive and negative sides that the worldview caused.