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Confucian Characteristics of Korean Democracy: *An Approach from a Republican Perspective**

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Abstract

Unlike conventional approaches, this study aims at critically analyzing the relationship between Korean democracy and its Confucian tradition from a republican perspective. With this purpose, it pays particular attention to the Neo-Confucian tradition of mixed constitution, which is characterized by "co-governance by the monarch and his subjects" (*gunsin gongchi* 君臣共治). This tradition provided a historical precedent or an embryo for a certain type of democracy that was later to be developed in Korea—to be precise, "democratic republic." In this respect, Korean democracy can be understood simply neither as an import from the West nor as its imitation, but rather as the product of Korea's own historical processes. This approach stresses the importance of the tradition of civic politics, which has a Confucian-republican hue, in the development of democracy in Korea. On the other hand, the Confucian tradition of politics has admittedly cast a dark shadow on Korean democracy, leading above all to a legacy of "meritocratic oligarchy" by a small group of elites too, which has been created and legitimized by the Confucian tradition of meritocracy.

Keywords: Korean democracy, Confucian tradition, republicanism, mixed constitution, civil politics, meritocracy, oligarchy

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I. Foreword

The Economist has ranked the Republic of Korea as the world's 23rd most democratic country in its Democracy Index in 2019, classifying it as a "flawed democracy." Although not joining the group of "full democracies," Korea was ranked the top within the group of "flawed democracies," ahead of Japan (24th) and even the United States (25th), the first democratic republic of the world. There might be some controversy over the methodology of country rankings, but the index confirms "objectively," to some extent, that Korean democracy has quite matured, though not yet completely. In other words, the index exhibits both the bright and dark sides of Korean democracy.

It may surprise some observers that a country that experienced Japanese colonial rule after the collapse of its premodern Confucian Joseon dynasty, liberation, national division, civil war, and even a long military dictatorship, has been developing Western-style democracy, to the extent of being compared to the United States, which is often considered a model of modern democracy. Of course, Korean democracy still falls behind the expectations of a mature democracy. In the Democracy Index 2019, Korean democracy was evaluated as insufficient in terms of political culture and political participation. Though not agreeing with this evaluation, it is hard to deny that Korean democracy still has many limitations.

How has Korean democracy been able to make this amazing achievement? How can we understand the potentials of Korean democracy, which from certain perspectives appears to exceed Western standards? Nevertheless, why is Korean democracy not "sufficient?" Where does this or that limitation come from, and can it be overcome? What challenges are ahead for Korean democracy?

The potentials and limitations of Korean democracy can be understood in the respect of Korean-style "hybrid modernity," which I shall refer to as "Confucian modernity" (Chang 2014). Korea's modernity is not simply an import from the West or an imitation of Western modernity, but a modernity that has developed amid the splicing of the long Confucian tradition with Western modernity. Likewise, Korean democracy developed with its own dynamics against

the backdrop of a long Confucian tradition, and this very fact is the key to understanding the possibilities and limitations of Korean democracy.

There have been many discussions comparing the Confucian tradition with the ideal of democracy or human rights and mapping out their relationships. Some discussions deny any affinity of Confucianism with democracy while others try to confirm the universality of democracy in the Confucian tradition. There even have been arguments that Confucianism has the potential to address and emend the limitations of Western-style democracy.

In this article, I try to develop a "republican" approach, which I believe is different from conventional ones. This approach starts with the fact that Korean democracy is by no means simply an antithesis to Confucian tradition. Although it cannot be said that the Confucian tradition is democratic in itself, it is not unconditionally anti-democratic but rather has many democracy-friendly components. However, I pay particular attention to the Neo-Confucian tradition of mixed constitution, which is characterized by "co-governance by the monarch and his subjects" (*gunsin gongchi* 君臣共治). This tradition provided a historical precedent or an embryo for a certain type of democracy that was later to be developed in Korea—to be precise, "democratic republic." In this respect, Korean democracy can be understood simply neither as an import from the West nor as its imitation, but rather as the product of Korea's own historical processes.

From this point of view, one special point to be noticed in the development of Korean democracy is the fact that a strong tradition of civic politics has existed throughout its development, although its civil society was "immature" by Western-liberal standards. Armed with their own "civic virtues," which I shall refer to as the "consciousness of moral anxiety" (*uhuan uisik* 憂患意識), Korean citizens established their own democracy or rescued it from crisis.

On another hand, I believe that the Confucian tradition of politics has cast a dark shadow on the democracy of Korea. First of all, it led to the seriously problematic monopoly of politics by a small elite group, which has been produced and legitimized by the Confucian tradition of meritocracy as well as Confucian moral politics (Moralpolitik).

Similar cases may be found in Western democracies, but the elite politics of Korean society protects the hierarchical order and class hereditary system, thus imperiling democracy in the nation. Korean democracy is now faced with a historical task of fighting against this new type of aristocracy, in other words, the meritocratic oligarchy.

This article will first introduce the basic framework of the new "republican" approach to understand the relationship between Korean democracy and its Confucian tradition (Ch. II). On this basis, it will explain the roots of the pro-democratic dynamics of Korean society, focusing on the civic politics that was formed in the course of the development of the Confucian ideology of meritocracy (Ch. III). This is also intended to show that Korean society is at risk of degenerating into some sort of oligarchy with its apparent leaning towards Confucian meritocracy (Ch. IV).

II. Confucian Political Tradition and Democratic Republicanism

In the so-called "Asian values" debate, which was once hot, many people claimed that Confucian East Asian societies could not but have a different kind of democracy or political system from Western countries because they pursued different political values from those dominant in the West. In the cases of China, North Korea, and Singapore, such claim seems to be still valid today. However, it is no enigma that non-Western countries under the strong influence of Confucian tradition, such as South Korea, can also adopt and maintain the Western style of democracy, which we often call "liberal democracy." Judging by the cases of Japan as well as South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, it is obvious that the Asian values are not self-evident. Given the crisis of democracy in the developed countries of the West and the spread of far-right populism, we may go so far as to say that the Korean or Taiwanese democracy offers a new perspective from which to view and perhaps overcome this crisis (Mounk 2018).

However, although we can affirm the possibility of a Western-style democracy in an East Asian society like Korea, it would be hard to

completely deny that this style of democracy still has different aspects from the Western examples. East Asian political culture and legal systems are often deemed unfriendly toward human rights, mainly because of their cultural tradition of prioritizing "community" over "individuals."[1] From the usual "liberal" point of view, Korean democracy plainly seems to fall short of expectations in many respects.

However, I think it is possible to understand Korean democracy from a "republican" perspective. To my knowledge, this attempt has never been made so far. This is quite surprising, considering that Korea declared itself a "democratic republic" in its Constitution—for the first time in the world—and has developed democracy, pursuant to the principle of a democratic republic for almost 100 years. The reason why this attempt is unprecedented may be ascribed to the overwhelming preference for liberalism in the West but is also partially due to Korea's lack of understanding about the complexity of Western republicanism.

Of course, it is not easy to properly understand and define the Western political philosophy of republicanism, as it is found in the West. However, it would be no harm to try to identify the most important characteristic of that tradition, using the idea of "mixed constitution" (Honohan 2002; Pettit 2012; Elazar and Rousselière 2019).

Polybius, a Roman historian from Greece who laid out his theory of the mixed constitution following Aristotle (2017), classified the different political systems of human societies into monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, which ends up being referred to as "republic" (G. Kim 2007). Polybius viewed the republic as the best political system combining the merits of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy and claimed that the great achievement of the Roman Republic resulted from the mixed constitution.[2] Based on these, mixed constitution may be defined as a political system that

1 One example is the National Security Act, which is notorious as an evil law against human rights. The laws and public sentiment of Korea tend to be too intolerant of the "crimes without victims" such as drug abuse and illegal gambling.

2 Aristotle (2017, 1293a35) considered this mixed constitution as politeia itself. He also understood democracy as a distorted form of mixed constitution (1279b4).

maintains checks and balances among various social actors of a political community or among different governing mechanisms so that it could prevent certain interests from being dominant and pursue the interests of all members, namely the common good. This is what the word "republic," which comes from the Latin term *res publica*, is meant to imply.

Besides, this tradition, especially guided by the model of the Roman republic, has stressed the significance of freedom, which is understood as the state in which a man is not subject to arbitrary interference by others, that is, "freedom as non-domination," and the idea of rule of law that guarantees freedom. It has also highlighted the importance of "popular participation" in the maintenance of a political community and its prosperity, as well as of "civic virtue," which is characterized by devotion to the common good or the values of the republic.

The political tradition of Confucianism has most of these characteristics, though being slightly different from the Western one in terms of focal points and contexts. First of all, the Confucian tradition formulated a political ideal of "the whole world as one community" (*cheonha wigong* 天下爲公), which "embraces everyone in the world" (S. Kim 2011; Na 2017), as the most fundamental political value that an ideal society should pursue. This shows that the Confucian political philosophy is principally based on the pursuit of the common good of the entire political community. Although this tradition put greater value on "rule by virtue" than on "rule of law," it also pursued constitutionalism in its own manner without neglecting the importance of rule of law. In particular, this tradition placed the utmost emphasis on ethical self-discipline or cultivation of civic virtue for Confucian scholars or *sadaebu* (the literati), who were supposed to fulfill their highest obligations like devotion to politics and to the common good (Chen Lai 2018).

Most importantly, Neo-Confucianism, which has been established as a sophisticated political philosophy since Zhu Xi of the Song dynasty, has developed its own idea of mixed constitution—different from the Western one—named *gunsin gongchi* (co-governance by the monarch and his subjects) (Wyings 2015; Kim Young-soo 2008). In

this co-governance, the literati/subjects were engaged in state administration together with the monarch while the monarch could exercise his power and authority within certain limits, although his status was recognized by them. The literati/subjects checked and controlled the monarch's power through forming a "public consensus" (*gongnon* 公論),[3] which represents Confucian idea of justice, called *do* 道 (the Way). They monopolized the interpretation of Confucian justice, claiming their legitimacy as carriers of the "tradition of moral principle" (*dotong* 道統) against the "tradition of political power" (*chitong* 治統), which constituted the legitimacy base of the monarch's secular power (Yi and Kang 2018).

While the Western tradition of republicanism sought to control arbitrary rule by the powerful through law and constitutional order that reflected the principle of check and balance, Confucianism tried to limit the power of the monarch by relying on the "public consensus" in accordance with moral principle and the constitutional order based on the principle. To borrow Aristotle's categorization of political system, the Confucian literati would correspond to the nobility of the West, and the Confucian political system of co-governance by the monarch and his subjects could be understood not simply as a sort of monarchy but as a mixture of monarchy and aristocracy.

Of course, there are differences between two. In the Roman Republic or in the small republics of Italy that had existed since the 13th century, the conflict and confrontation between the nobility and the plebeian structured the basic political dynamics. If the dominance of the nobility were overwhelming, it could be called aristocratic republic, while if the plebeian played a central role in politics, it could be defined as "plebeian republic" or "democratic republic." However, considering that the relationship between the monarch and the literati (or nobility) counted more than anything else in the East Asian tradition, the Confucian system of co-governance by the monarch and his subjects could be counted as an East Asian version of "aristocratic republic," which did not actually exist in the West.

3 This is a political view that can be justified in terms of the West's republican notion of the "common good."

Given this, it is worthwhile to understand the mixed republican constitution in a more universal context that encompasses both East Asia and the West. It is also needed to comprehend this political system more comprehensively beyond its definition by Aristotle and Polybius to include the East Asian version as well as the Western one. Since the mixed constitution is a kind of power-sharing system that has been established through compromises among major political and social forces for the safety and prosperity of the entire political community, it can be seen in any country of the world.

By the way, "People" (*min* 民), the absolute majority of society, played a crucial role in the mixed constitution of East Asia too, albeit in a different way from the Western republican system. The political tradition of Confucianism has always upheld the idea that "people is the base of the power" (*minbonjuui* 民本主義), by which both the monarch and the literati are instituted as representatives of people (Yi Kwan 2016b, 6; Cheonlai 2018, 87). Of course, it was never a representation by elections. However, in Confucian states, those (the monarch and the literati) who came to power by means that commoners did not have, whether it be armed force, bloodline, scholarship, or virtue, proclaimed themselves as representatives of people and pursued well-being and prosperity of the people (*wimin* 爲民). This was the way they believed they could justify their political power.

According to Pettit (2013), this kind of representatives can be called "indicative representatives," who represent and assume responsibility for their community in accordance with a certain norm or principle, unlike "responsive representatives" who have to take responsibility for their people because they were elected or entrusted with power. In this vein, the "dynastic revolution" or "doctrine of tyrannicide" of Mencius can be construed as a teaching that a king should act as a faithful representative of people. Given this, though indirectly proved, the political foundation of the people was clear in East Asia too. It can be said that this was the decisive starting point for the conversion of the Confucian mixed constitution into a democratic republic.

Furthermore, the aristocratic elites had a special status in the East Asian mixed constitution. The literati or aristocrats, key constituents

of the Confucian co-governance, were not "natural aristocrats," that is, not of aristocratic blood, unlike in the West. Nor did the economic wealth bring aristocratic status. It was a status acquired only by those who had objectively proved their scholarship and virtue by passing the state examination called *gwageo* (科擧). In principle, anyone (except for slaves in Joseon dynasty) could become aristocrats. Therefore, the mixed government ruled by aristocrats had strong potential to evolve into democracy.

On the basis of this Confucian co-governance was the ideology of meritocracy that has long dominated East Asian society. The term "meritocracy," meaning the "rule by the cleverest people,"[4] was coined by British sociologist Michael Young (1958) and became generally used to explain the principle of socio-economic distribution (Chang 2014, 2016). But its basic idea has been evolved at a political level in China and can be dated back to about 2000 years ago when the imperial examination system was initiated and evolved (Bell and Lai 2013). This Chinese idea is presumed to have influenced the Western idea of meritocracy (Na 2017, 291ff; Creel 1997, 306ff; Puett and Gross-Loh 2016, ch. 9). It started with a political ideal that it is desirable for "benevolent" and "competent" people to have political power, which is stated in the "Liyun 禮運" (Conveyance of Rites) section of the *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites). This ideal of rulers can be likened to Plato's "philosopher king." According to this ideal, a righteous political system should select through state civil service examinations (*gwageo*) public servants who are judged to have obtained through learning and self-discipline enough wisdom and ability to rightfully govern the state.[5]

By the way, this idea of meritocracy cannot work properly without moral egalitarianism represented by the principle of "equality of opportunity" by which everyone should be given the opportunity to be fairly evaluated by competence regardless of one's social status.

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4 In China, it is called *xianneng zhengzhi* 賢能政治 (Bell 2017).

5 The Greek tradition of republicanism (distinguished from its Roman tradition), whose exponents include Sir Thomas More, James Harrington, and Thomas Jefferson, pursues the ideal of controlling the unjust influence of wealth in politics through abolition of private property or redistribution of wealth so that rule by the wise and competent can be attained (Nelson 2006).

In this regard, Confucianism can be said to have developed quite a unique tradition of moral egalitarianism (Tao 2012). Classic Confucians believed that everyone is born with the potential of moral equality. However, they did not believe in the equality of all individuals in terms of morality as the Western society did. They believed that the difference in the degree of self-discipline should be taken into account. In other words, they believed that only those with a higher degree of self-discipline are qualified to be the ruling class of a society (Chang 2014).[6]

This belief led to an interesting sociopolitical consequence. A Western type of hereditary aristocracy did not exist in the Confucian society of East Asia; even if it had existed, their status would not have been so strong because any one could become a nobleman or scholar through self-discipline and learning. In principle, the opportunity to become a literatus was open to all members of society. Otherwise, the society would have been faced with fierce pressure for that opportunity. Against this backdrop, many members of society were willing to make great efforts to seize that opportunity.

In fact, until the mid-Joseon period, a considerable number of people had succeeded in climbing up the social status ladder through state examinations. And in the latter half of the dynasty, more of the population desperately sought to become *yangban* (nobility) by buying or forging a genealogical book (*jokbo*) of *yangban*, to borrow Jeong Yak-yong's phrase, "all becoming *yangban*" (S. Kim 2011). This actually led to majority of people becoming *yangban*, blurring discrimination based on status and providing an impetus for the society's transition towards a democratic political order. The abolition of slavery that started with the emancipation of the vast majority of government slaves (*gong nobi*) (J. Kim 2019, 32) as well as the popular uprisings that began to sweep across the country in the early 19th century resulted in dismantling the *yangban*-centered status system. Since then,

6 Na (2017, 251ff) percieves this Confucian idea of "universal equality" as matching today's democratic egalitarianism, but I do not agree with it (Chang 2017, 11ff). Meritocracy, even if founded on the egalitarian premise, focuses on justification of certain discrimination, and may threaten democracy as will be discussed later in this article.

political sovereignty of the people has become an obvious constant in the history of Joseon.

Seen from this perspective, the Confucian co-governance system of Joseon can be viewed as an historical precedent for democracy in its development process in Korea. In fact, the ideology of co-governance was succeeded by reformists in the modern era, who pursued *gunmin gongchi* 君民共治 (co-governance by the monarch and people), a kind of Western-style constitutional monarchy, under the influence of Western powers. After the end of the Joseon dynasty, this, in turn, led to the ideology of a democratic republic in which people have sovereign power, and the representatives of the people govern the state.[7] In the early days of the independence movement, the *Daedong danggyeol seoneon* 大同團結宣言 (Proclamation of Grand Unity), drafted by Jo So-ang, claimed that people should directly assume the dynasty's sovereignty abandoned by King Sunjong (Y. H. Kim 2012, 103). It was in this line of thought that the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea was founded in Shanghai, proclaiming the establishment of a democratic republic. This orientation towards a democratic republic should be interpreted as a natural manifestation of the strong dynamics latent in the history of Korea.

This approach, compared with the conventional liberal perspective, has greater advantage in understanding the relationship between political traditions and democracy in East Asia. The liberal approach compares liberalism and Confucianism, either by defining Confucianism as altogether liberal (de Barry 1998) or by distinguishing Confucianism from Western liberalism on the grounds that Confucianism is a collectivist-based value system and lacks the concept of rights. One approach overemphasizes a democratic characteristic of Confucianism while the other excessively devalues it. In the light of the discussions so far, neither of the two can be said to provide a proper understanding of the relationship between Confucianism and democracy.

7 This may be understood with the concept of *samin gongchi* 士民共治 (co-governance by intellectuals and people) (N. Yi 2015).

We should "historically" understand the affinity between Confucianism and democracy in terms of republicanism that has been universalized enough to encompass Confucian tradition. It cannot be denied that Korean democracy has developed under strong influences from the West, but it also should be admitted that it has resulted from the political dynamics inherent in the traditional Confucian politics, which held the seed of a democratic republic. In this context, the universality of democracy confirmed in Korean society should be called precisely the universality of a "democratic republic."

III. "Modern Men of Virtue" and Civic Politics

Korean society went through many challenges and crises until democracy took root in it. It can even be said that the society has never had an environment favorable for democracy. Korea's modern history has been marked by strong anti-democratic trends, including the Japanese colonial rule of the country, division of the Korean peninsula, the Korean War, and military dictatorships. In such an environment, Korean civil society has, until relatively recently, remained in a seriously low state of development when judged by usual Western-liberal standards.

The political centrality of the people, which had been growing since the end of the Joseon dynasty, became inevitably distorted due to Japanese colonial rule. Lacking the political preconditions for "collective freedom," which is necessary for citizens to become the sovereigns of democracy (J. Kim 2019),[8] Koreans were treated at the time only as "second-class citizens" of Japan. Therefore, they were not only unable to develop a minimum sense of citizen rights or civic life, but were also forced to live as dependents on imperialist power. Even

[8] This pursuit of collective freedom can be viewed, from the perspective of republicanism, as pursuit of "non-domination" against imperialist aggression. It shows the basis upon which the Korean society shares the normative orientation toward "freedom as non-domination" with Western republicanism. The world's first democratic republic, the United States, was born through the American Independence War against Britain.

after liberation, such a situation remained fundamentally unchanged, where people were pressured to live as "nationals" blindly loyal to the state while suffering through national division, war, and long-standing military dictatorships (Song 2016).

On the other hand, Korean society has developed a system of "family liberalism" that leaves the task of meeting people's basic needs in life to each and every family, who is thrown into limitless market competition (G. Jang 2018). The development of the national welfare system has been feeble and family-centered selfishness has become more pervasive while true individualism has not yet matured. Most of all, until recently in Korean society, so-called premodern cronyism based on blood, school, and regional ties has been more dominant than "voluntary association" based on rational self-interest or shared values.[9] Regionalism is even still the strongest variable influencing electoral behaviour in Korea.

Nevertheless, despite a great deal of historical turbulence and the immaturity of liberal civil society, Korean citizens have been establishing a tradition of "civic politics" that exhibits a strong orientation toward democracy. This is the most striking characteristic of Korean democracy today. Amidst all the threatening circumstances, citizens have slowly established themselves as subjects of democracy with a firm direction. Under the harsh dictatorship, many citizens have not hesitated to criticize its oppressive character and questioned its legitimacy. They have been leveraging democratization by declaring, whenever opportunity arose, that citizens (people) are the only sovereigns with political legitimacy.

It is very obvious that Korean citizens who have grown up as subjects of democracy are not the same as the "bourgeois" of the West. In other words, in Korean Society nothing like the "bourgeois class" of the West has ever existed, and even if some would argue it has existed in some form, it has not played the same political role as in the West (Choe 2011). Nevertheless, in every crisis, South Korean citizens have been saving and developing democracy through various civic move-

9 Song Ho-geun (2016) regards this as the most important base of a democratic civil society.

ments, such as national independence movements—including the March 1st Independence Movement in 1919,[10] the April Revolution of 1960, the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement, the June 10th Uprising, and the recent candlelight protests in the fall and winter of 2016 and 2017—thus contributing to the establishment of democracy in the nation.

Furthermore, the process through which civic movements developed in Korea and subsequently revitalized their civil society differ in many ways from the Western process of reviving civil society, which can be explained through the concept of so-called New Social Movements. Though relatively recently, especially after democratization, various social movements based on nonmaterial values, such as feminism, environmental protection, sexual-orientation equality, multiculturalism, and human rights, have begun to develop in Korean society (Jeong 2005), Korea's civic movements have grown mainly with a strong political orientation in response to political crises (H. Im 2018).

At its center were intellectuals and students. They played decisive roles in the national independence movements during the Japanese occupation in the distant past, but also in the April Revolution of 1960 (H. Yi 2017). Even during the military dictatorships of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, most civil society movements were centered around progressive intellectuals and students.

In order to properly understand the status and meaning of citizens formed during Korea's democratization process, a republican approach that has been universalized across both the East and West is useful. In a word, Korean citizens can be compared to *citoyens* of the West. It can be said that Korean citizenship was formed with the aim of common good, which has been considered as a civic virtue in Western tradition, rather than based on economic interests. But it

[10] The March 1st Independence Movement is the first democratic revolution in the history of Korea (D. H. Kim 2019). This movement was basically a movement for the realization of people's sovereignty and democracy and can be defined as an ideal type of republican movement. For more on the claim that this collective action for the realization of people's sovereignty is a common denominator of the fundamental/radical republicanism universally identified across the world, see Lepold et al. (2020).

was not motivated by an active assessment of political life itself, as has been observed in the Western republican tradition. Rather, South Korean citizens have grown into political players, based on their anger at injustice or active sense of justice, through which they have been asserting themselves as the main agents of justice. This trait of theirs is a legacy of a Confucian-Republican tradition.

This sense of justice, which Korean citizens passionately displayed at every critical juncture of the democratization process, can be understood in terms of a kind of "sense of anxiety" (*uhwan uisik* 憂患意識), one of the virtues demanded of an ideal Confucian scholar (*seonbi*). Confucian intellectuals in the past understood participation in realizing justice or rectifying injustice in society as the most important responsibility stemming from their identity. Not only have many intellectuals continued this tradition up until today,[11] but ordinary citizens have also armed themselves with, so to speak, a "democratic" sense of anxiety, which can be epitomized by the words of an anonymous citizen: "I should step forward and play a role in this situation of serious social chaos and injustice." In this sense, Korean citizens can be regarded as descendants of Confucian men of virtue (*gunja* 君子), or as "modern men of virtue."

A strong tradition of civil politics was planted in this cultural soil, which can hardly be seen in any other society, as a result of the constant political awakening and resistance of Korean citizens, who have been asserting themselves as sovereigns through the nation's "history towards democracy" (J. Kim 2015). The dynamic political force that South Korea's citizens have been displaying in the process of motivating democracy has been in itself a constant of Korean democracy although it was not sufficiently institutionalized or organized and would appear in different ways each time in different backgrounds and occasions. The so-called Candle Revolution of 2016–17 that was waged by Korean citizens in a situation where Korea's democracy had been descending into the abyss of authoritarianism under the two successive conservative administrations of Lee Myung-

11 These intellectuals, called *jaeya insa* 在野人士 (opposition figures) or *uguk jisa* 憂國之士 (patriots), were respected.

bak and Park Geun-hye, was a historical event that confirmed the constancy of citizen politics in the most dramatic manner.[12] This kind of historical experience in which a republican ideal of "popular sovereignty" was put into practice in such an active manner is not common in the West either.

The revolution can be seen as taking place in the "Machiavellian Moment" (Pocock 2011) in which citizens check the instability of their republic in times of crisis and seek solutions with a full sense of citizenship (C. Im 2017). Many citizens, who usually seemed to just live their daily lives without big political complaints, flocked to the square, realizing that our democratic republic was seriously broken in the face of the unprecedented state-run manipulation scandal and asking, "Is this the righteous country?" They declared themselves sovereigns of a democratic republic, displaying remarkable civic virtues such as the restraint of violence.

Among other things, Korean citizens were angry that their democratic Republic had degenerated into a tool for the pursuit of private interests of a privileged segment of the nation. Korean citizens also expressed deep disappointment at some "political classes" who had been serving as faithful servants to the very few privileged and who the citizens believed had until then taken advantage of the democratic political process as a tool to cover up their corruption and pursued private interests, representing only the privileged. Citizens realized the uncomfortable truth and tried to correct the situation on their own through the candlelight revolution.

It has always been through this civil revolutionary route that Korean society introduced and has deepened democracy. Although frustrated at times, Korea's strong civil politics has resulted in the long run in drastic changes in the constitution and political order as well as in the deepening of democratization. To borrow Ackerman's (1991) notion of "dualist democracy," which was employed to understand American democracy, Korea's civil politics can be regarded as a "constitutional politics" that defines the basic framework and direction that should be taken, unlike the usual party-

[12] S. Kim (2017) sums it up with a succinct, "Candlelight is Mencius."

centered "normal politics." Therefore, any future attempt at historical reaction will only succeed if it overwhelms the strong power of this civil political tradition. In that sense, the democratic civil society in Korea is strong enough.

IV. Dangers of Meritocratic Oligarchy

It was not only by imitating Western democracy that Korea has developed its democracy. There was also a strong influence of the long-standing Confucian tradition behind it. However, this Confucian origin and its confines did not always and in every way have a positive effect on the democracy of Korea, which has been established in the form of a hybrid modernity. The Confucian tradition also cast dark shadows—the various negative effects that Korean society is now witnessing—on its democracy.

The first thing to point out is that "moral politics (Moralpolitik)," which takes a moralist approach to many political issues due to the influence of the long-standing Confucian tradition, is still dominant in Korea. Here, politics basically revolves around power struggle over such issues as what kind of moral truth should be sought and which faction has the most righteous cause for moral correctness. The precept of "self-cultivation for the governance of men" (*sugi chiin* 修己治人), meaning that only those who succeed in self-discipline are qualified to become politicians, is still being upheld, which has resulted in a political culture in which any minor moral infraction on the part of a politician can be a bone of political contention.[13]

Of course, this tradition of moral politics should not be viewed as negative altogether. When judged in terms of Confucian-republican citizenship, it also has many positive aspects. From the independence movement through the prodemocracy struggle in the 1980s to the recent candlelight revolution, the ardent pursuit of justice in Korean society has provided rich cultural nourishment for the society's

13 Confirmation hearings for minister nominees, among other things, is a stark example of this political culture.

democracy. In particular, its progressive politics, by means of which citizens have been fighting against the powers and vested interests of dominant social and corporate classes, has constituted an integral part of this moral politics. And citizens' strong demand for moral politics has also served as a mechanism to check the arbitrary exercise of power.

However, the moral politics of Korea often has gone no further than political strife over politicians' minor human flaws or fighting for factional causes without focusing on the common good of society or justice. Political factions were only locked in extreme power struggles and catastrophic confrontations without any rational deliberation on how to solve social problems. As a result, the country's politics remains extremely polarized, breeding "public hatred of politics" throughout society.

On a more fundamental level, this dominance of moral politics can be seen as an essential aspect of the potentials of democracy exhibited by the Confucian political tradition. As mentioned earlier, Confucian meritocracy tradition developed the idea of co-governance, and democratic republic as its historical product was naturally accepted and developed by Korean society. However, as the tradition of meritocracy emphasizing individual leaders' competence and virtue persist in the polity of a democratic republic, it has led to demands for excessively rigorous morality even in personal lives of political leaders. This is an expression of the essential and structured meritocratic aspects of Korean democracy.

Of course, today's representative democracy originating in the West can be regarded as a form of political meritocracy. Scholars like Daniel Bell (2017), who presents Confucian meritocracy as an alternative to the representative democracy, fail to note it, but representative democracy, in some ways, may be called a "democratized aristocracy" (Manin 2015; G. Yi 2016b). The elected politicians who are supposed to represent ordinary citizens—whose job is not politics—can be regarded as "wise and competent" leaders of the society, chosen through elections in which candidates compete to gain recognition for their excellence or superiority. Through elections of representative democracy, ordinary citizens democratically control their leaders, the

modern nobility, in accordance with their will and interests. Elections are the most excellent mechanism of democracy to keep politicians in a correct assessment of their actual virtue and capabilities, ideally at the least. In this respect, elections can be viewed as a fairer and more effective mechanism to screen and control the elite than the intellect-based assessments such as state civil service examinations adopted by traditional meritocracy of East Asia.

However, the representative democracy of Korea exhibits a more traditional aspect of political meritocracy. This is evidently represented by the state examinations, called *gosi*, and the unique "juristocracy" system. Until recently, the South Korean government has been selecting high-level officials and lawyers through *gosi*, a modern form of *gwageo*, which can be seen as vestiges of Japanese imperial rule of the country. The sociopolitical domination of this elite group has often had a profound effect on society, even to the extent of their authority prevailing over the power of elected representatives. The judiciary often nullifies decisions of the democratically elected administration,[14] and the prosecution under the wing of the administration has been wielding almost inexorable power with its monopoly on investigative and prosecution rights until recently, overwhelming the elected power holders. This closed group of elites forms their own cartels,[15] and maintains close ties with other privileged groups like *chaebol* and media moguls. It is also one of the candidate groups for elected political office, which is preferred the most by the public.

This phenomenon is also observed with other meritocratic elite groups. Aside from the judicial profession, academic backgrounds and alumni ties are one of the most important assets that politicians possess in Korea. In Korean democracy, what are deemed important qualifications for politicians are not a commitment or lifelong devotion to the common good, but diplomas from prestigious schools

14 The Constitutional Court nullified the Roh Moo-hyun government's plan to relocate the country's administrative capital on the ground that the position of Seoul as the capital of Korea was covered by the "customary constitution," that is, the Great Code of National Governance (*Gyeongguk Daejeon* 經國大典) of the Joseon dynasty.

15 Kim Du-sik (2009) refers to it as "holy family."

that are perceived as evidence of social success. Those without illustrious academic backgrounds should possess a successful career as an entrepreneur, at least, if they are to prove their qualification and ability as a political leader.

This tradition of meritocracy is ascribed to the immaturity of party politics in Korean democracy. Korean democracy has yet not to see the mature development of Western-style "mass parties," which are based on social class interests or political ideologies. Led mostly by big names who are most likely to be elected, Korean political parties are basically "cadre parties," which align themselves around such big names for election purposes and then disband after election. The meritocratic tradition also accounts for why Korean voters tend to vote for candidates based on their social reputation or alumni ties rather than policy lines, ideologies, and platform.

Against this background, small elite groups monopolize power in a peculiar way. This meritocratic ideology, coupled with capitalist market economy, has been settled as a principle of distributive justice at the socioeconomic level, not at the political level, serving to stratify members of the society based on education level or academic background. This social stratification differs from the class division in capitalist society in the traditional Marxist sense. A meritocratic society stratifies citizens by college diplomas—especially those of prestige schools—or rent-seeking licenses, thus structuring political inequality, beyond the simple division of capital and labor.

Meritocracy builds an insurmountable economic and social barrier between winners, who are guaranteed wealth and comfortable life, and losers. The division and discrimination between the successful "people inside the castle" and "those outside the castle," which is justified by the differences in ability and effort, is structural, fundamental, and systematic. Democratic politics, in fact, is also centered around the winners of this meritocratic competition system. In other words, inequality is deepened and solidified not only at the economic level but also at the political level.

Of course, there is a distinction and conflict between political progressives and conservatives. In Korean society, conservatives consist mainly of holders of socioeconomic vested interests, such as

chaebol and winners in the meritocratic competition system (judicial officers, senior officials, mainstream journalists, entrepreneurs, etc.), while progressives are advocates of the interests of the middle and lower classes. The problem is that because even the progressive politics is over-regulated by the upper and middle classes centered on regular workers in large corporations and highly educated professionals such as professors and intellectuals, the poorly educated, low-skilled, temporary precarious workers, long-term unemployed, and small business owners are systematically excluded from politics.

This is not just a matter of absence of a political party that claims to be an advocate for the socially weak and alienated, or fewer seats of radically progressive parties in the National Assembly. The more serious problem is that democratic politics itself is predominantly monopolized by a handful of elites (mostly meritocratic elites) and the lower class is marginalized in political participation, often not being able to participate properly in formal electoral processes, to say nothing of daily political affairs in the public domain.[16] Basically, Korean democracy is a democracy of meritocratic elites.

In advanced Western capitalist societies, similar problems are observed, among which the most serious is the problem of far-right populism. As many have pointed out (Walter and Marg 2013, 106–107; Piketty 2018; Frank 2018), the rise of far-right populism in Western societies is strongly related to the lower classes' being excluded from meritocracy, politically and culturally isolated and devastated, and thus becoming captives of far-right demagogy. This resulted from the fact that even center-left parties came to stand for "Brahman leftists" with higher income and education, neglecting the interests of the majority lower class citizens. Since the 2000s, Japan has gradually become a polarized society, which is divided into the "group of winners" (*kachi gumi* 勝ち組) and the "group of losers" (*make gumi* 負け組). Abe's right-wing politics is said to be related to the political extremism of the "group of losers" (J. Yi 2019).

16 There are quite many citizens who do not vote on election days, which are usually public holidays, due to their livelihood activities as well as their political indifference (Son 2010).

In Korea, the dangers of far-right populism do not seem as serious as in Western societies. Unlike Japan, a rightward shift is not seen in Korean society. However, the so-called "post-democracy" (Crouch 2008) phenomenon seems more notable in Korea. On the surface, democracy seems to be working in the country, but it does not properly fulfill its tasks of correcting social injustice and politically justifying itself. It seems to have something to do with the fact that the self-contradictory aspect of meritocracy has been strengthened, solidifying a sort of new system of hereditary inequality (Chang 2017).

This is such a bizarre hereditary oligarchic system that can hardly be explained by means of concepts like "hereditary capitalism" (Piketty 2015) and "re-feudalization" (Neckel 2013). The hereditary domination by the so-called "gold-spoon" or "little Kim Jong-un" class has been established and consolidated in almost every area of the society, from large conglomerates to mega-churches, mass media, private schools, and even large trade unions. This is what Korean youth call "hell-Joseon" (hellish Korea) (Ryu 2016). Paradoxically, the meritocracy, which was originally accepted and rooted as an ideology to resist the hereditary system and acted as a decisive cultural driving force in Korea's modernization, has now created the opposite, that is, a new kind of hereditary system.

However, Korean democracy has been protecting and even strengthening such a hereditary system. Even the current democratic/progressive administration, born out of citizens' ardent democratic aspirations, has now become part of the hereditary system, inviting criticism that it has not made a single crack in the system (B. Yi 2018). Despite its democratic structure, South Korea's "oligarchic system," characterized by exclusive privileges of a few elites, is not only strong but also remains a decisive determinant in the shaping of the society.

In fact, socioeconomic inequality itself is not a problem, nor does there exist natural nobility based on blood in Korea. Nominally, opportunities to become a member "inside the castle" are open to all. However, inequality is justified in the manner of meritocracy and even accepted by the public, and thus with time, the castle became operated by a de facto hereditary mechanism through which wealth is inherited and "economic capital" is converted into

"educational capital."[17] And those inside the castle monopolize not only important resources of power in society, but also political processes, excluding vast majority of citizens from politics and driving them into political lethargy.[18]

In this system, serious republican injustice (Pettit 2012), represented by the domination of those few in power and the state over the majority of the citizenry—which Western tradition has emphasized and whose universal validity we have no reason to doubt—is bound to become routine and structured. The arbitrary exercise of "dominium" (private or horizontal domination) by the socially and economically strong over the weak, such as *gapjil* (abuse of underlings by people in power), has become the daily events of social life, and the state authorities such as the judiciary and the prosecution still unjustly and arbitrarily wield "imperium" (public or vertical domination) over citizens. If this is left uncontrolled, the republican polity, as a political system of balance and harmony among various social forces for the common good, will inevitably collapse, and the sovereignty and democratic centrality of ordinary citizens, the absolute majority of society, will be nothing more than a formality. The democratic republic system of Korea is now on the verge of degenerating into a new kind of aristocracy, so to speak, meritocratic oligarchy.[19]

V. Conclusion

This examination into the Confucian features of Korean democracy is not simply a probe into the Galapagos exhibited in its development. Many aspects that Korean democracy has in common with other

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17 This understanding is based on the sociological concept of Bourdieu (see Stefanidou 2014).

18 This is particularly the case with young people, the majority of whom suffer from unemployment and deprivation of opportunities (see Chang 2016).

19 For the discussions on various types of modern oligarchy system, see Winters (2011). He argues that the oligarchy should be understood as the "politics of wealth defense among materially endowed actors" (2011, 7), in accordance with Aristotle's definition of oligarchy (2017, 153), and differentiates it from a simple "government of the few" (2011, 1).

democracies in the world, apart from its own evolutionary background and context, should not be overlooked. Nevertheless, the universality of democracy—which here means the universality of democratic-republican polity—confirmed in the case of Korean democracy can be better understood from a republican perspective, rather than from a conventional liberal one.[20]

This study has confirmed that such universality has been concretized in a special manner in the nation's unique historical and social contexts. In this respect, Western cases cannot simply be the standard for that universality, and a "universality within us" needs to be recognized. It is also confirmed that the "universality within us" with regard to Korean democracy has something to do with a certain republican orientation of Confucianism, and that the Confucian features of Korean democracy define both its potentials and limitations.

Given this, how can Korea overcome the limitations while maximizing the potentials? The tasks that the nation is now confronting are to build up the ideal of the democratic republic, which has been pursued in its modern political history and realize it in its own historical circumstances and context. As discussed earlier, this study has confirmed how Korea's democratic republic came to face the risk of being degraded into a meritocratic oligarchy. This problem is not unique to Korea, but in Korean society it is found to have clearly somewhat different background and character from Western societies. Based on these observations, this article argues that Korean society should now seek to establish the best form of democratic republic of its own, reflecting on its uniqueness while preserving its universal character.

[20] On the reconstruction of the liberal tradition of modern Korea from a republican perspective, see Chang (2012).

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