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*On This Topic*

# Contemporary Korean Politics: *Philosophical and Religious Perspectives*

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The three papers that follow provide an in-depth exploration of the primary theme discussed at the 10th annual conference of the NAKPA (North American Korean Philosophy Association), which convened at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, USA, June 26–27, 2025, in collaboration with JCPC. Hosted by the Korean Studies Center at GMU and supported by its then-director, Professor Young-Chan Ro, the conference centered on the pressing theme of contemporary Korean politics.

The impetus for the conference's theme originated from the unprecedented political crisis that erupted in South Korea at the end of 2024. On December 3, 2024, President Yoon Suk-yeol unexpectedly declared martial law, citing growing social unrest and perceived threats to national security both internally and externally. This was the first declaration of martial law in South Korea in nearly 50 years. Military forces were deployed, opposition lawmakers were detained by presidential order, and key state institutions—including the National Assembly—came under military control. Press freedoms were curtailed, yet journalists persisted in their reporting, and citizens quickly mobilized to call for the end of the decree. In a remarkable display of civic action, numerous civilians and opposition party members rushed to the National Assembly to prevent martial law troops from entering. With the support of the public, over 150 lawmakers convened an emergency plenary session and rescinded the martial law only hours after its announcement.

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This episode raised several critical questions: How could such sudden political turmoil emerge in a country that had enjoyed nearly 50 years of sustained democratic governance and high political freedom? What aspects of Korean democracy and its political environment enabled this extraordinary event? How can similar crises be prevented in the future? How does this event compare with previous political upheavals in Korea's history?

In response to these questions, NAKPA organized the conference to focus on philosophical topics surrounding Korean politics, governance, constitutionalism, democracy, political leadership, and social-political sentiment. Special attention was given to concepts such as good government, human well-being, human rights, people-centrism (*minbonjuui*), meritocracy, the legitimacy and limits of political revolution, and related issues. These themes were examined through critical philosophical analysis.

To understand the present discussions, the historical background of Korean politics is essential. Throughout the nearly 500-year-long Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), Confucianism played a formative role, fostering intellectual development and institutional establishment. This era was marked by the rise of Dohak 道學 ("Learning of the Way"), which became the guiding state ideology. Influential seminal figures such as Jeong Dojeon (1342–1398) created foundational administrative codes modeled after classical Confucian texts. The civil service examination system shifted in focus from classical literature to neo-Confucian doctrines, and the state supported a network of local schools (*hyanggyo* 鄕校).

The neo-Confucian elites who supported the founding of the new dynasty constituted a relatively small and tightly interconnected community centered around the royal court. Joseon goverment was highly centralized and the Confuian literati not only supported but also influenced the royal court. Confucian elites were actively engaged in state decision-making. An important part of this effort was the education of the Joseon kings by way of court lectures (*gyeongyeon* 經筵) in the hands of leading scholars at the time. The idea was *naeseong eowang* 內聖外王 ("inner sage, outer king"). Even the king had to be a sage. Only a virtuous philosopher-king was thought to fulfill

a good government. Ethics and politics were regarded as inseparable concepts. Thus, Joseon Confucianism advocated the idea that individual self-cultivation and self-reflection go hand in hand with the political virtues for the king to rule his subjects and the nobles (scholars) to rule the people. About halfway through the dynasty we observe the unprecedented growth of Confucian writings and publication of collected works. It is this intellectual and cultural milieu that gave rise to such towering neo-Confucian philosophers as Yi Hwang (1501–1570) and Yi I (1536–1584). The Confucian communities and scholars became extensive and financially stable enough to create and sustain their own intellectual and social environments, that were not directly tethered  court service (and provided enough resources to print the collected works of renowned literati). The same can be said about literati efforts to transform the local population; the movement promoting community compacts (*hyangyak* 鄕約) only started to gain momentum during the sixteenth century, when local Confucian communities had grown powerful and efficient enough to actively engage in these kinds of initiatives.

But Joseon aristocracy gradually turned to academicism and dogmatism. Factional politics developed with intense, often violent, power struggles for power among Confucian scholar-officials (*yangban*) divided by ideology, regional ties, and school affiliation. But this also exposed the Confucian elite to vulnerability to the frequent and severe political upheavals of the dynasty; a political purge (*sahwa* 士禍), some sort of *coup d'état*, often took place and could wipe out an entire generation of scholars. The whole society that lasted 500 years was coming to an end.

When Joseon Korea opened its doors by force to the world in the late nineteenth century with the ensuing international wars in East Asia, Korea had experienced a tumultuous century of foreign invasions and occupation as well as the split into two Koreas after independence from forced occupation. This split was quickly followed by the civil war between South Korea and North Korea backed by the USA and the West on the one hand and the communist Russia and China on the other. The division seems almost fixed at this point after half a century of cold war. North Korea has followed Marx-Leninism and Juche (self-reliance)

Ideology of its communist founder Kim Il Sung. But we will have to deal with the philosophy of North Korean politics on another occasion someday and our themes today will have to be limited to South Korean politics.

In 1948, Republic of Korea in the south was proclaimed but it also sparked North Korean invasion in 1950. In 1953 armistice ended Korean War and South was sustained by crucial US military, economic and political support. But in 1960 President Syngman Ree stepped down after student protests against electoral fraud. New constitution formed Second Republic, but political freedom remained limited. Then by surprise a military coup put General Park Chung-hee in power 1961. Later, General Park restored some political freedom and proclaimed the Third Republic, becoming its first president. At the same time, a major program of industrial development took off. But as he faced many political challenges, Park declared a martial law so as to increase his powers with constitutional changes in 1972.

In 1979 Park was assassinated by his own aid, and General Chun Doo-hwan seized power the following year. Once again, a martial law was declared after student demonstrations in 1980. In the city of Gwangju, Chun's army killed at least 200 people. In 1981 Chun was indirectly elected President to a seven-year term. Martial law ended, but government continued to have strong powers to prevent dissent. In 1986 constitution was changed to allow direct election of the president. The 1980s saw the increasing shift towards high-tech and computer industry but in 1987 President Chun was pushed out of office by student unrest and international pressure in the build-up to the Sixth Constitution. General Roh Tae-woo succeeded President Chun, granted greater degree of political liberalization and launched anti-corruption drive. In 1993 President Roh was succeeded by Kim Young Sam, a former opponent of the regime and the first freely-elected civilian president. He was followed by President Kim Dae-jung as he was sworn in as president and pursued "sunshine policy" of offering unconditional economic and humanitarian aid to North Korea. But in 2014 North and South Korea exchange fire into sea across the disputed western maritime border during largest South-US military training exercise. By the way, over the course of the half a century, South Korea has

had two impeachments of sitting presidents since its transition from authoritarian rule in 1987: President Roh Moo Hyun in 2004 (reinstated) and President Park Geun Hye in 2017 (whereby the latter was removed from office). In both cases, the Constitutional Court took less than 180 days to issue its final decision. Even though this history does not cover all the important political events in the past century, South Korea now is at a crossroads. Its economy and military are one of the leaders in the world yet they still are still instable and volatile at best. Is this the fateful "suffering" that the philosopher Ham Seon-heon warned about the historical process in Korea and deemed "necessary" for the eventual uplifting of the Korean spirit? (Kim 2016).

Korean philosophy today occupies a distinctive position on the peninsula, shaped by the historical developments since 1945.[1] After independence, a fierce ideological divide emerged between socialists and liberalists. South Korean philosophy in the 1950s and 60s gravitated toward German Idealism and Existentialism, reflecting the collective trauma of colonialism and war. The prevailing ideology was one-nationism (一民主義), fostering strong nationalism and anti-communism, often intertwined with the philosophical ideas of Hegel (Kim 2008, 97). This dynamic persisted until the pro-democratic movements of 1987, during which even liberalism was sometimes considered insufficiently patriotic.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, philosophers outside academia engaged in debates on social theory, Marxism, Juche ideology, neo-rationalism, post-Marxism, and post-structuralism,[2] while academic philosophers pursued studies in Western and Korean traditions. These efforts contributed to democratization and the search for a distinct Korean philosophical identity, often in dialogue with Western modernity (Kim 2022).

Today, Korean society stands at a crossroads, where tradition confronts modernity and postmodernity. Modernization in Korea was largely imposed from above, rather than arising from grassroots

[1] For a discussion, see Kim (2023).

[2] We may point out the view of Antonio Negri's radical post-Marxist theory criticizing global capitalism.

revolution. Thus, the Sixth Republic of South Korea began in 1987 with the transfer of power from the authoritarian Fifth Republic of Chun Doo-hwan. It is characterized by a direct presidential election system introduced in 1987, known as the "1987 system." This system has been the longest in Korea's history, lasting 39 years as of 2026. Nevertheless, strong collectivism and individualism coexist, and modernization has often come at the expense of environmental degradation.

It must be noted that philosophers and political theoreticians are now seeking ways to harmonize traditional Confucian communitarianism with Western libertarianism. Some advocate reinterpreting Western modernity through the lens of Korean tradition, while others propose the reverse. There are also calls for embracing post-modernity or autonomous movements inspired by thinkers like Spinoza and Marx. Debates persist on whether liberalism suits Korean society, with some arguing for the revitalization of Confucian communitarian values in both economic and political spheres to realize East Asian ideals.

In this special issue, the first paper entitled "Confucianism and Meritocracy: Perspectives on Exams and Fairness" argues that Confucianism should not be equated with modern meritocracy, despite the historical association between Confucian learning and examination systems in East Asia. Using South Korea's exam-centered culture as a contemporary case study, Professors Kwangho Joo and Yunwoo Song challenge claims—most notably by Daniel Bell—that Confucianism offers a viable philosophical foundation for political meritocracy. The core thesis is that Confucian "merit" is fundamentally ethical rather than competitive or procedural. In classical Confucian thought, especially in Mencius and Zhu Xi, worthiness for office depends on moral character (virtue, trustworthiness, righteousness, and propriety), not on demonstrated performance or exam success. Political office is understood as a moral calling (*ming*, 命) rather than a reward earned through competition. Historically, while the civil service examination system expanded during the Song dynasty and adopted Confucian texts, Confucian thinkers themselves—particularly Zhu Xi—were deeply skeptical of exams as reliable measures of virtue. Exams, they argued, incentivized cleverness, display, and ambition rather than genuine moral cultivation, hollowing out Confucian learning into a performative

pursuit of status. Confucianism thus retained an enduring tension between moral cultivation and bureaucratic selection. Applied to modern Korea, the paper shows that contemporary faith in standardized exams reflects a desire for procedural fairness amid inequality, not a continuation of Confucian ethics. Modern meritocracy prioritizes competition, individual achievement, and neutral rules, whereas Confucianism prioritizes responsibility, trust, and contribution to the common good. The paper concludes that attempts to revive "Confucian meritocracy" misinterpret Confucian ideals and risk legitimizing technocratic or elitist systems under a moralized cultural banner.

The author of "Democracy and Nationalism in Korea: Subjectivity, Collectivity, and Pre-Subjective Relation," Professor Hye Young Kim offers a philosophically ambitious reinterpretation of South Korean democracy by arguing that its durability cannot be explained solely through liberal individualism or Confucian familism. It advances a layered model of relational subjectivity, distinguishing between Confucian role-based relationality and a more fundamental pre-subjective "We", an ontological being-with that precedes roles, norms, and individual selfhood. Through historical analysis of major democratic uprisings—from April 19 (1960) and Gwangju (1980) to the Candlelight Vigil (2016) and the 2024 protests against martial law—the paper shows how Korean democratic agency repeatedly emerges as a horizontal, pluralistic solidarity that suspends hierarchical roles and resists paternalistic authority. The paper's main strength lies in its conceptual innovation. By introducing the pre-subjective We, it illuminates forms of collective action that Confucian political theory (including the sophisticated accounts of Sungmoon Kim and Joseph Chan) struggles to explain—namely, spontaneous, cross-role, anti-authoritarian solidarities formed in moments of crisis. The dialogue with phenomenology allows the author to reconceptualize democracy not merely as an institutional or normative achievement but as an expression of a deeper relational ontology. In this respect, Korea is convincingly presented not just as a case study, but as a philosophical site that challenges dominant assumptions in democratic theory.

In his "Machiavelli in Korea: Republicanism and Korean Political Thought," Professor Gordon B. Mower argues that South Korea's

political development is best understood through classical republican theory, especially Machiavelli's conception of freedom as non-domination, rather than through liberal-democratic frameworks. It advances three intertwined claims: (1) Korean political history—from the late Joseon period through authoritarian modernization—can be reinterpreted as a republican trajectory; (2) Western republicanism can be "Koreanized" through Confucian resources (Dasan, Toegye, Yulgok); and (3) contemporary Korean institutional instability stems from abandoning core republican mechanisms, particularly class-based checks and balances, most notably the absence of a bicameral legislature. A central and provocative thesis is that authoritarian leaders (Rhee, Park, Chun) played a Machiavellian role as "virtuoso princes," coercively cultivating the material, military, and civic conditions necessary for republican self-rule. While condemning their brutality, the paper claims their rule nonetheless prepared Korean society for the democratic Sixth Republic. The author further criticizes liberalism for flattening republican ideas—especially checks and balances—into functional separation of powers while ignoring their original class-conflict rationale. The paper's most original contribution lies in its Confucian–republican synthesis, particularly its use of the Four–Seven Debate to regulate dangerous collective passions such as patriotism. This offers a non-liberal, sentiment-based model of critical allegiance that avoids both atomistic individualism and uncritical nationalism. Similarly, Dasan's legal thought is presented as a native pathway for reconciling rule of law with rule of virtue.

Together, these three papers address some of the most significant philosophical questions facing Korean politics today. While open to further critique and questioning, they represent meaningful progress in rethinking the topic. Collectively, the contributions reframe Korean democracy through a nuanced account of relationality that transcends the binary of individualism and collectivism, offering central insights that are compelling and timely.

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