

The Dilemma of Korean Conservatism

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Abstract

A paradoxical argument has been made repeatedly with regard to conservatism in Korea: “There is a conservative force, but no conservative philosophy in Korean politics.” This is what I would define as the dilemma of Korean conservatism. Thus Koreans—both academic scholars and politicians—have been suffering from a perennial complex, this being the lack of a proper conservative political philosophy. However, this complex is derived from a misguided internalization of West-centrism, a phenomenon that is quite common in many contemporary Third World countries that have been spellbound by West-centrism. When they consider conservative philosophy, they usually have a Burkean (or British) conservative political philosophy in mind. But the conditions that had led to the formation of such a conservative political philosophy have been utterly lacking in Korea. The fundamental reason for this difference is, of course, derived from the fact that the context of modernization in Korea, like many Third World countries, was radically different from that in England. Thus, I will first try to articulate the three causes for such ~~this~~ difference in the paper: the conservative monopoly of politics and political power, the original contradiction between “political” and “philosophical” conservatism, and the heavy dependency of Korean political theories upon outside (Western) sources for their formation and innovation. Thereafter I will suggest two strategies for nourishing philosophical conservatism in order to overcome this dilemma: one outlines a strategy of aligning political conservatism with the support for liberal democracy and the market economy more tightly, and the other is a strategy of taking advantage of traditional cultural resources such as Confucianism.

Keywords: the dilemma of Korean conservatism, conservatism, philosophical conservatism, political conservatism, Confucianism.

Introduction

Open debates and conflicts between conservatives and progressives on an equal footing are recent phenomena in Korean politics, a product of the democratization of Korean politics since 1987. Democratization has proceeded as the challenge to the hegemony of conservatives by progressives, and engendered within itself the dynamics leading to divisions and cleavages not only between progressives and conservatives but also even among conservatives (Bak 1999, 113). Thus, the polemics among opposing groups of politicians and activists over North Korea policy, reform measures, and other electoral issues have now become familiar phenomena. However, ~~the ideological terrain still remains unfavorable to~~ ~~for~~ progressives and radicals, ~~as those being who are identified as a communists~~ or North Korean sympathizers ~~are still~~ puts one in danger of ~~faci~~ng political persecution and/or prosecution.

Thus, the provocation of the so-called “color debate”¹ targeted at progressives, together with the agitation of regionalism, has still remained a favorite strategy employed by conservative parties and politicians in presidential and congressional elections. For example, when the Union of Liberal Democrats (ULD) was founded just before the 1996 General Election, the Grand National Party (GNP), the National Congress for New Politics (NCNP), and the ULD together staged an intriguing scene in which the three major parties engaged in ~~furious~~ [intense] [both are okay] debates over which party would represent the true conservatives, each making the claim through names such as “orthodox conservatives,” “mainstream conservatives,” “original conservatives,” “founding conservatives,” “reform conservatives,” “central conservatives,” etc.² The debates were conducted in order to appeal to the middle class, which was known to favor stability. In the midst of these debates, the ULD, which claimed for itself the “original conservatives,” went so far as to initiate a more outspoken color debate, accusing the NCNP of being “disguised conservatives.” Such an accusation was actually a direct attack upon the NCNP, suggesting that procommunist or pro-North agents were hiding themselves in the guise of conservatives.

The polemics between conservatives and progressives did not arise only in times of elections, but also sprang up whenever the Kim Young-sam or Kim Dae-jung administrations carried out reform measures in domestic politics or engagement policies toward North Korea. Under the Kim Dae-jung government, for instance, North Korean policies such as the so-called “sunshine policy,” the beginning of tourism to the Geumgangsan mountain in North Korea, or the North-South summit talks, and so forth have all been subject to continued, heated controversy between conservatives and progressives. In addition, when the National Tax Service, after a close investigation in

¹ In Korean politics, the “color debate” or “color offensive” is associated with anticommunism or red complex, and refers to the phenomenon in which politicians or activists are accused of being sympathetic to Communism and/or North Korea, and therefore being a potential threat to national security in South Korea and the accused in turn make their own defense, denying such claim.

² The ULD was founded by Kim Jong-pil, who was expelled from the GNP for being an old corrupt politician. The GNP as the governing party was then headed by President Kim Young-sam. The NCNP was the major opposition party headed by Kim Dae-jung, an opposition leader, who had long been persecuted by previous military governments from the Park Chung-hee era on for his oppositional activities and alleged sympathy to communism and North Korea.

early 2001, made public the enormous amount of tax evasions committed by the major newspapers, a heated debate arose between conservatives and progressives.³ Moreover, the debate sometimes ~~centered around-on~~ the question of how genuine conservatives should be defined, and the structure of the debate showed that the would-be conservatives were on the defensive.

Yi Mun-yeol, a prominent but conservative novelist, ignited the fiery debate between conservatives and progressives by publishing a column in the *Chosun Ilbo*, “Do We Want a Government without Newspapers?” criticizing the Kim Dae-jung government for its tax investigation into the ~~major newspapers~~ and denouncing the government and its supporters as an “evil spirit” or a “red guard” of political power. ~~He then-in turn received heavy criticism from netizens. Later, he offered a very defensive definition of defined-conservatism and conservatives in-a-very-defensive-way-in an interview with the Chosun Ilbo:~~

Speaking in a fashionable way, conservatism seems to be a bad name synonymous with “slavishly defending the past (*sugu*), reactionary and evil.” . . . Conservatism, however, does not mean that. If conservatives were genuinely understood, I would proudly profess ~~myself to be~~ a conservative. ~~A conservative is the-one who never forgets such things as time, effort and sincere will, which have gone been-put-into making what-the world what it is todaylike at present.~~⁴

In response to this, the progressive intellectuals who usually wrote columns in the ~~progressive newspaper Hankyoreh~~ launched harsh critiques against conservative newspapers and intellectuals, denouncing them as a “press slavishly defending the past” (*sugu eollon*) and “Far Right [~~do you need to capitalize this?~~] intellectuals” respectively. One progressive intellectual even refused them such labels as “intellectual” or “genuine conservative.” As grounds for such remarks, he suggested:

Genuine conservatives are supposed to be patriotic, pursue the values of the community, and defend traditional values. Seen from this perspective, however, the far rightists in our country cannot be judged as conservative at all. They don’t send their sons to the military, and instead send them abroad. Then how can they be said to have patriotic spirit? When policies to improve social welfare are proposed, they are strongly opposed to them as the class of the vested interest. Then, how can they be said to have a communal spirit? They are busy defending their own interests in a reactionary way, so they cannot but be called those “slavishly defending the past.”⁵

³ At the time, the major newspapers representing the conservative forces were vocal in criticizing the major policies of the Kim Dae-jung government. Thus, the tax investigation was seen as a Kim Dae-jung government political maneuver to put a muzzle on the critical newspapers. This perception was especially prevalent among conservative politicians, intellectuals, and people associated with the mass media.

⁴ *Chosun Ilbo*, July 13, 2001.

⁵ *Hangyereh 21*, August 1, 2001.

As can be seen in Yi's reply and progressive intellectuals' rejoinders, the immorality and corruption of conservatives in Korean society is a kind of Achilles' heel.

Thus, Korean conservatives have been criticized not only for their immorality and corruption, but also for their chronic lack of a coherent philosophy. In this way, a conservative scholar once described Korea as being a "society of no thoughts" and deplored the ideological terrain of Korean politics in which structured thought and ideology have been regarded as the exclusive possession of the left. "What is the national political philosophy with which to guide the nation in the Republic of Korea? What is the moderate and lawful ideology, the system of ideas, and the so-called right-wing ideology, which the South in the Korean peninsula represents? Can it be called anything at all?" (Choe 1989, 15). However, when we look around the intellectual world to search for an ideology that attracts the masses to act upon it, the poverty of philosophy applies not only to conservatism but also to progressivism as well. Thus, pointing to the one-sided dependency of both rightists and leftists upon outside, Western sources for the development of their ideologies without any genuine effort to indigenize them, a progressive sociologist once characterized the Korean ideational horizon as "the realm of no thoughts, no ideologies, and no principles" (Kim D. 1996, 298).

Thus, references to the poverty of Korean conservatism have become a banal ritual at the introductions or the end of most books or essays on conservatism in Korea. This is true of a recent book, *Hanguk-ui bosujuui* (Conservatism in Korea, 1999), which was published more than ten years after democratization, during the Kim Dae-jung administration, and included the contributions of many young, bright scholars. For example, Kim Byeong-guk ~~made-voiced~~ the criticism that although they adopted the "discourses of capitalism and democracy" as their official language, Korean conservatives' official language adds up to nothing more than mere political slogans and rhetoric that lacks any philosophical or theoretical substance" (Kim B. 1999, 254). Kim Yong-min also pointed out that conservatism in Korea was bereft of any "philosophical and religious base" and "has worked only as a political ideology ~~which that intends only to mobilize the ruling power, those the-foree-slavishly defending the past, those with the-class-of-the-vested interests, and the conservative middle class~~" (Kim Y. 1999, 46).

In short, all those remarks boiled down to the paradoxical statement, "there is a conservative force, but no conservative philosophy in Korean politics." Then we are faced with the question, "Why do not Korean conservatives have a conservative philosophy?" The purpose of this essay is, then, to attempt to deal with this "dilemma of Korean conservatism." Before exploring this subject however, we need to present the conceptual definition of the term "conservatism" itself.

What Is Conservatism?

Conservatism is generally defined as "an attitude, policy or set of values tending to accept authority, to prefer the known to the unknown, and to relate the present and future to the past" (Klemperer 1972, 164). Conservatism is based on the aspect of human nature that prefers familiar surroundings and ways of life and tries to avoid disruptive changes as much as possible. Conservatism may usually be understood in

terms of three meanings: “temperamental,” “political” and “philosophical” conservatism.⁶ I will examine and explain each briefly below.

Temperamental Conservatism

In the most basic and broadest meaning of the word, conservatism refers to a general mentality or attitude that is often called “traditionalism” (Klemperer 1972, 164). In this understanding, conservatism denotes an attachment to the familiar and a distrust of the unfamiliar. This conservative attitude seems to be rooted deeply in human nature, for humans feel a strong attachment to the type of life that was inherited from the past and familiar to themselves, and instinctive hostility and distrust toward any disruptive change that would threaten things familiar. Thus we have an Arab saying: “Humans favor familiar evils more than unfamiliar goods.” Here the “conservative” means “traditional,” “conventional,” and “adhesive to the past,” and, in contrast, the “progressive” refers to being “adventurous,” “open-minded,” “experimental,” and “future-oriented.”

Political Conservatism

Conservatism in its political dimension seems to have two meanings: one is technically political and the other is ideological, and thus, synonymous with “the Right.” In the first sense, political conservatism refers to the position that seeks “to maintain the *status quo*, regardless of what that may be” (Michels 1954, 230). Thus, we can call diverse political positions conservative, regardless of their concrete ideological content. In this sense, the present conservative party might have been a revolutionary party in the past, and “progressive” political parties after the completion of revolution might have become conservative without any change in ideological content. In such a case, the revolutionary ideology once espoused has become a ruling ideology that serves to maintain the stability of the system. For example, liberalism in Europe was a revolutionary ideology in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and yet turned into a conservative one once it began to be challenged by socialism in the mid-nineteenth century. Likewise, the Soviet Communist Party became a conservative ruling party after the success of the Russian Revolution in 1917. **In this context, we may well understand ~~that-why~~ the Korean media called the communist party leaders ~~and/or~~ the military who were opposed to ~~the~~-ongoing reforms in the early 1990s, adhering ~~instead~~ to Marx-Leninism, “conservative” hard-liners.**

However, if we stretch the definition beyond the boundaries of common sense as in the case of the technically political definition, then political conservatism becomes universal in all kinds of organized society, so that the Soviet Communist Party, the Tories of Great Britain, the Republicans of the United States, the Gaullists of France, and the Worker’s Party in North Korea all become identified as politically conservative. **~~Then-It-it~~ becomes extremely difficult to speak about political conservatism in any meaningful sense. ~~So-Thus,~~ many studies of conservatism seek to confine political**

⁶ Here I have made an adaptation of Clinton Rossiter’s classification presented in his article “Conservatism,” which was submitted to the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968). He identifies four meanings for conservatism: temperamental, situational, political, and philosophical conservatism.

conservatism to the position of the moderate right:

that is to say, the aspirations and activities—most of them defensive rather than creative—of parties and movements that celebrate inherited patterns of morality and tested institutions, that are skeptical about the efficacy of popular government, that can be counted upon to oppose both the reforming plans of the moderate Left and the deranging schemes of the extreme Left, and that draw their heaviest support from men who have a substantial material and psychological stake in the established order (Rossiter 1968, 291).

Taking this position, thus, Clinton Rossiter states that it is not easy to find any meaningful conservative party or statesmen in non-Western countries except in Japan and possibly in India (Rossiter 1968, 291-92). In South Korea, too, political conservatism is mostly understood as the position of the Right, which seeks to maintain the *status quo*, although sometimes it is used in the technically political sense as noted earlier.

Philosophical Conservatism

If the conservatism of the first two meanings is a concept to be applied more or less transhistorically, conservatism in the sense of political philosophy is the product of a particular historical situation. Philosophical conservatism as a “conscious form of traditionalism” refers to an ideology that emerged as a response to diverse challenges to the European old order—i.e., *ancien regime*—since the late eighteenth century. Modern conservatism in particular appeared as a reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Of course, philosophical conservatism has much to do with temperamental conservatism based on human nature, and has also been a defensive ideology, like political conservatism, which emerges in response to challenges or attacks from radical forces.

Modern conservative philosophy originated from Edmund Burke’s fiery polemics leveled against the French Revolution in his famous book *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). The central themes of conservatism for the two hundred years since Burke amounted to almost nothing more than the elaboration and expansion of the themes Burke first articulated in criticizing the French Revolution, a particular moment in history. Therefore, it might be said that there exists no ideology more dependent upon a single thinker and a single historical event than conservatism, as Robert Nisbet has noted in the beginning of his book, *Conservatism* (Nisbet 1986, 1).

Philosophical conservatism, including that of the Burkean type, attaches great importance to such nonrational and practical elements in human society as religion, authority, tradition, history, custom, mores, and so forth. It is not a product of rational and systematic thinking in the way that liberalism and socialism are, but rather is antitheoretical by nature. Therefore, when it comes to the matter of explaining philosophical conservatism, there is a general tendency to summarize its persistent themes. Rossiter summarizes what conservatives emphasize in general with regard to human nature, society and politics [in the following list](#) (Rossiter 1968, 293).

The existence of a universal moral order sanctioned and supported by organized religion.
The obstinately imperfect nature of men, in which unreason and sinfulness lurk always behind the curtain of civilized behavior.

The natural inequality of men in most qualities of mind, body, and character.

The necessity of social classes and order, and the consequent folly of attempts at leveling by force of law.

The primary role of private property in the pursuit of personal liberty and defense of the social order.

The uncertainty of progress, and the recognition that prescription is the chief method of such progress as a society may achieve.

The need for a ruling and serving aristocracy.

The limited reach of human reason, and the consequent importance of traditions, institutions, symbols, rituals, and even prejudices.

The fallibility and potential tyranny of majority rule, and the consequent desirability of diffusing, limiting, and balancing political power.

The Convergence of Conservatism and Liberalism in the Contemporary West

As the challenge of socialism and communism had been on the rise since the mid-nineteenth century, liberalism and conservatism, which had been originally opposed to one another, began to gradually converge in the West. First of all, having shaped the political order of Europe as a ruling ideology, liberalism had gone through a process of “conservatization” as relatively more progressive and radical socialism appeared on the horizon from 1848. Furthermore, liberalism has become decisively conservative twice in history: first, since the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in 1917, and second, since the establishment of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War in the aftermath of World War II. On the other hand, traditional conservatives began to designate socialism and communism as their foremost enemy, as something definitely more threatening to the existing order than liberalism, and began to embrace liberalism and the reality transformed by it at the same time. As a consequence, liberalism turned into conservatism, and conservatism which in turn became more adaptable to liberalism and have converged into liberalism, so that they might forming a contemporary version of conservatism which that seeks to defend the existing liberal-capitalist order against socialism.

The Dilemma of Korean Conservatism

Then why has no coherent conservative philosophy formed in Korea, as many Korean scholars have pointed out? To answer this question, I would suggest three crucial interrelated factors that have caused the poverty of Korean conservatism. First of all, as an immediate political factor, I may point to the fact that the political arena has been monopolized by conservatives, and thus the entry of progressive forces into politics was thoroughly contained from the establishment of the republic in 1948, at least until the Kim Young-sam administration. As a consequence, conservative philosophy could not take shape in active response to the challenge of radical or progressive ideologies. In other words, conservative philosophy has not had to develop to defend the existing political order in the absence of any meaningful challenge from radical ideologies.

Second, as the context of modernization in Korea was so radically different from that in the West, the original condition for breeding conservative philosophy in the West was glaringly absent in Korea from the beginning. Third, we may note the more general cause that might explain the poverty of modern political theories in Korea. As the formation and innovation of political theories has been so heavily dependent upon outside (Western) sources since modernization, [Korean society as a whole has been suffering from a poverty of political theories in general, not to mention conservatism. I will examine these points in more detail below.](#)

*Conservative Monopoly of Politics and Political Power*⁷

As the most immediate reason explaining the poverty of contemporary Korean conservatism, we cannot but point to the fact that the institutionalized political sphere in Korea has been almost completely monopolized by conservative politicians and political parties since the establishment of government in 1948, in both ruling and opposition camps.⁸ Especially until the inauguration of the Kim Dae-jung government, the ruling conservative bloc had been able to seize and maintain political power by relying upon a litany of coercive instruments: ~~—such as~~ the police, military, the national prosecution office, ~~and the~~ national security agencies, ~~the a~~ [right-wing monopoly of political ideologies supported by pervasive anti-communism and the formidable National Security Law](#), ~~the~~ “political funds” contributed by big business conglomerates, the control of mass media including television, radio, and newspapers, and finally, the regionalism that was formed and utilized in favor of the ruling conservative bloc. This overwhelming power on the part of Korean conservatives obviated the need to defend their position with any coherent argument, [a fact](#)~~[the fact]~~ that would ultimately lead to what is now called the poverty of Korean conservatism, as expressed in the idea of the so-called “boomerang effect.”

Among these various elements that contributed to the overwhelming political domination of the conservatives, it is important to elaborate on the effect of anticommunism upon the suppression of freedom of thought and the subsequent underdevelopment of conservatism.⁹ The Cold War in general and the division of the Korean peninsula into the capitalist South and the communist North in particular have regimented the Koreans into a black-and-white worldview. The situation was further worsened by the Korean War, which claimed millions of Korean lives. Thus, a simplistic dichotomy and equation of “supporter of the free world = recognizer of the legitimacy of the South Korean regime = supporter of the South Korean ruling elite” vs.

⁷ Despite the importance of this point, I would rather discuss it briefly, as many Korean scholars have already produced respectable works on it. See especially Kim and Jo (1985), Choe and Yi (1991), and Kim D. (1996).

⁸ After this paper was submitted for publication, the political situation has recently changed in a drastic way under the Roh Moo-hyun government, as the progressive Democratic Labor Party (leaning toward social democracy) had their candidates elected in the April 2004 General Election, thereby emerging as a major third party in Korean politics, a truly unprecedented event. We also have to note the remarkable victory of the ruling Uri Party, which was founded just before the election and is quite progressive in comparison to the major parties that came before it.

⁹ The following explanation applies to Korean politics before the inauguration of the Kim Dae-jung government, which actively pursued a truly peaceful engagement policy with North Korea, which culminated in the historic North-South summit talks of 2001,

“communist bloc sympathizer = recognizer of the legitimacy of the North Korean regime = supporter of the North Korean ruling elite” has been firmly established (Kim and Jo 1985, 415). According to this dichotomous anticommunist ideology, the communist North was stigmatized as an absolute evil, and the “democratic” South was reflexively defined as embodying an absolute good. That is to say, whatever the North may do or say is certainly wrong or evil. As a result, whoever advanced any argument similar to that of the North was denounced for just that reason—as an evil sympathizer with North Korea—and had to suffer political oppression without any due process of law.

As a result of the conservatives’ monolithic control of politics, the entrance of progressive forces into the political arena was blocked from the beginning altogether, such that the poverty of conservative philosophy was all the more worsened.¹⁰ ~~The progressive forces could not present any viable political alternatives equipped with vibrant debates, concrete policies, or attractive visions by entering politics and competing with the ruling conservatives. [In the this context, the progressive forces had no could not have opportunity to compete with the ruling conservatives, thereby failing to present any viable political alternatives, let alone which could be created through vibrant debates, and should be equipped with concrete policies, or and attractive visions.]~~ In turn, conservatives never had a reason to determine which elements of the existing order were in need of preserving or reforming, and if so, why and for what reason. Thus individual politicians, factions, and parties ~~had been were~~ engaged in Machiavellian power struggles with a blind will for power, ~~rather than as opposed to a struggle to advance a particular common agenda~~. As Western political history has shown, conservatives cannot develop and present coherent conservative ideas and their own alternatives until they are confronted with viable challenges from radical political groups whom they might not be able to defeat by force alone. When such a challenge is confronted with considerable visibility and support, conservatives are able to discern which elements of the existing order the progressives seek to reform, what the methods should be, why it should be done, as well as what public reaction will look like. In response to this, as Albert Hirschman has noted, conservatives may be able to fashion three kinds of conservative rhetoric and develop a coherent conservative philosophy in the process as well.¹¹ The first is the “perversity thesis” that “any purposive action to improve some feature of the political, social, or economic order only serves to exacerbate the condition one wishes to remedy.” The second is the “futility thesis” that “attempts at social transformation will be unavailing, that they will simply fail to ‘make a dent’.” The third is the “jeopardy thesis,” that “the cost of the proposed change or reform is too high as it endangers some previous, precious accomplishment” (Hirschman 1991, 7).

However, Korean conservatives could not present any valuable political visions that might offer Korean society anything other than the blind pursuit of self-negating and Western-oriented modernization, due to the absence of any moderate progressive

¹⁰ This statement does not apply to current Korean politics under the Roh Moo-hyun government in 2004 any longer, as I noted above in footnote 20. Now a vehement controversy over the repeal of the National Security Law in the National Assembly has been drawing Korean politics into a thick morass. Of course, the new political situation we are now witnessing merits further serious examination.

¹¹ In the following, I am quoting Albert Hirschman’s three kinds of rhetoric of reaction that he identifies in modern Western history— perversity, futility and jeopardy—(Hirschman 1991).

forces and the subsequently passive silence of the depoliticized masses. In such a political situation, it is indeed almost impossible even to clearly discern what conservatism might look like, “not because there was none, but because there was nothing else” in the political arena.¹² In short, the fact that progressives were unable to enter the political arena with viable, competitive ideologies has ultimately contributed to the poverty of conservative philosophy.

Since the beginning of democratization in 1987, the political sphere has begun to show a discernable but loose line of demarcation between conservatism and progressivism that is similar to that separating the Republican and Democratic Parties in the United States. Some progressive activists define conservatives as belonging to the last of the following dichotomous pairs of “democracy vs. anti-democracy,” “unification vs. anti-unification,” and “critical of vs. subservient to the surrounding great powers,” notably the United States and Japan. However, the distinction does not have much to do with ideological differences between political parties like that in the United States. In Korea, conservatives and progressives somehow grouped in arbitrary ways, into either ruling or opposition parties, a truly confusing phenomenon observed under both the Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung governments. Thus, insofar as the political parties or politicians with progressive ideologies were not able to send their candidates to the National Assembly as an independent political force, the prospective appearance of a coherent conservative philosophy does not seem likely in the near future.¹³

The Original Contradiction between Political and Philosophical Conservatism

In addition to the conservative monopoly of political power, we may suggest as another reason for the underdevelopment of conservative philosophy that the historical situations under which modernization was undertaken were radically different between Korea and advanced Western nations. Basically, Western nations such as England and France undertook modernization autonomously, endogenously, and earlier than non-Western ones. In contrast, modernization in most non-Western nations such as South Korea was dependent, exogenous, belated, and partially externally imposed to serve the interests of imperialist powers. Besides, while liberal progressive forces such as the rising bourgeois class propelled modernization in the West, modernization in Korea was carried out by royal families and reform-oriented *yangban* (nobilities) in the late Joseon dynasty or by the colonial government during the Japanese colonial rule, as well as the state elite in contemporary South Korea.

Thus, while conservative philosophy emerged as a consequence of the efforts to coherently defend ~~[coherently]~~ the premodern order ~~[coherently which place is better?]~~ by conservatives in the West who were resisting and opposing modernization, in the Korean case, a conservative philosophy could not develop as a conscious traditionalism. They themselves, being estranged from their own past tradition and history and in alliance with external forces, were burdened with the task of modernization itself. Judging from European experience, it was authority, tradition, religion and history that

¹² This is my adaptation of Hugh Cecil’s remark cited by Kenneth Minogue (1967, 195).

¹³ However, the current political situation might be interpreted as a radical change in the political terrain of Korea, as noted in footnote 20, and thus enable us to predict the appearance of a coherent conservative political philosophy.

provided fertile ground for nourishing conservative philosophy. However, modernization in Korea has been undertaken in a self-negating way since ~~the~~ liberation at the end of World War II. It has proceeded in the direction of demolishing authority, tradition, religion, and history, and of assimilating Korea to the Western Other. Therefore it seems rather natural that conservative philosophy, either as a ruling ideology or as a reactionary ideology, has not been able to strike root in the Korean political soil. With regard to the absence of a conservative philosophy as a reactionary ideology opposing modernization, one might wonder why the traditional ruling classes or ruling ideas such as Confucianism were unable to mount any significant opposition to the process of modernization, as their European counterparts had done. The proper answer might require more serious research, and yet I am reminded, above all, of the plain historical fact that the cultural as well as political authority of the ruling classes which dominated the five hundred years of Joseon kingdom had broken down all at once. For they failed to actively meet the challenge of modernization by imaginatively and critically re-appropriating traditional Confucianism, and fell an easy prey to the incoming Japanese imperialism in the end. In that process Confucianism as a tradition and religion that underpinned the political and cultural authority of the ruling classes missed the opportunity to reformulate itself to be able to meet the task of modernization, so that it ended up even losing its own civilizational legitimacy as well. Finally, the colonial interpretation of Korean history presented and circulated only a negative interpretation of the Korean past, such that Korean history, which could have worked as a potential site for fostering conservatism, fell into complete ruins, despite the heroic struggles by a few nationalist historians. As a consequence, authority, religion (Confucianism), tradition (culture) and history, which could have worked as rich soil for nourishing conservative philosophy in an autogenous way was destroyed beyond any recovery, especially under the harsh rule of Japanese colonialism.

Besides, the thoroughness and radicalness of the transformation experienced in contemporary Korean society since the 1945 liberation has made the development of a conservative philosophy into a ruling ideology all the more difficult, and perhaps even impossible. ~~The scale of socioeconomic change--economic development, urbanization, industrialization, etc.--introduced over the thirty year_s of the reign of the conservative ruling elite, from the Park Chung-hee regime in the early 1960s to the Rho Tae-woo government in the early 1990s, has been so is of such a dramatic nature that Korea has accomplished in less than thirty years what took Western nations took three hundred to do.~~ The change has been so radical and sweeping that no conservatives in the West could have justified or even approved it. Moreover, the radical change has proceeded not in the direction of preserving and appropriating traditional culture in a gradual way, but of eradicating it with a single blow. Indeed, the Korean conservative ruling elite has initiated such a gargantuan transformation, which can by no means be defended by any conservative philosophy.

In short, while conservative philosophy in the West appeared to justify the conservation of the traditional order and to oppose modernization, the ruling Korean conservatives in power since 1945 had to carry out enormous change in the name of modernization, severing their ties from their own tradition and history. Thus, although political conservatism existed in Korea in the general sense that it sought to preserve the existing political order, the philosophical content with which political conservatism could have been filled was lacking from the beginning. That is to say, political

conservatism in Korea, unlike that in the West, could not feed itself on the nutritious philosophical conservatism, so that it has had to suffer from chronic malnutrition and underdevelopment.

Therefore, the conservative ruling elite in Korea has faced the ironic situation of having to justify itself not in terms of authority, tradition, religion, or the history it has inherited from the past, but rather in terms of the futurist goals of modernization, such as capitalist industrialization with material wealth and democratization. In other words, they have not been able to justify the present in terms of a glorious peak that the past has reached “through a continuous, seamless growth,” which is the familiar vantage point of conservatives, but as a point of departure from which to extrapolate a rosy future, from the conventional perspective of progressives.¹⁴

[This sentence is quite wordy. How about:

In other words, they have not been able to justify the present from the conservative perspective, which assumes a glorious peak reached in the past “through continuous, seamless growth”, but rather from the progressive perspective, which assumes the past as a point of departure from which to extrapolate a rosy future.]

Then, how can we anticipate or demand a conservative philosophy of the Western kind from conservatives confronted with such a contradictory situation? ~~Holding such an expectation~~ Expecting as much would be ~~must have been as good~~ as anticipating a conservative philosophy from communist leaders in communist countries.¹⁵ Therefore, political conservatism seeking to maintain the *status quo* has not been able to reconcile itself with a conservative philosophy from the beginning. From this springs the tragic contradiction facing Korean conservatives.

*Heavy Dependency of Korean Political Theories upon Outside (Western) Sources for Their Formation and Innovation*¹⁶

As to the final reason for the poverty of conservative philosophy, the formation and innovation process of modern political theories in Korea merits our special attention. If we compare, at the risk of crude simplification, the Western advanced nations with non-Western countries like Korea in terms of the process of developing modern political theories, we might note that political theorists in the West were not able to rely upon external authority, philosophy or religion, as they had to formulate new political

¹⁴ I have made an adaptation of Nisbet’s phrase to fit my purposes. See Nisbet (1986, 25).

¹⁵ Actually, the ruling communist leaders faced a similar need in making order to make their revolution fait accompli. Hence, the invention of ~~so that they used to invent~~ “revolutionary tradition.”

¹⁶ In this paper I define political theory according to Bhikhu Parekh’s definition. According to Parekh, political theory is concerned “to offer a coherent and systematic understanding of political life” (Parekh 1992, 536). It has the following three dimensions:

It is conceptual in the sense that it defines, analyses and distinguishes concepts, and develops a conceptual framework capable of comprehending political life. It is also explanatory in the sense that it seeks to make sense of political life, and to explain why it is constituted and conducted in a particular manner and how its different parts are related. Finally, it is normative in the sense that it either justifies the way a society is currently constituted, or criticizes and offers a well-considered alternative to it. ... It makes a society intelligible to itself and offers it the great gifts of self-consciousness and critical self-understanding (Parekh 1992, 536).

theories endogenously and for the first time in history. On the other hand, modern Korean intellectuals had the advantage of easily depending upon external sources for their innovation of political theories since the late nineteenth century, as Korea belatedly arrived in the modern world under the unilateral influence of Western civilization. Thus, we find that modern Korean political theories were drifting, without taking root in reality, due to a rather superficial importation and adaptation of Western theories and their subsequently chronic severance from the Korean tradition and history,¹⁷ at the same time Western theories preserved and enriched their own roots by creative re-appropriation of inherited intellectual resources. In other words, it might be said that the Western theorists have been engaged in “pristine/original” innovation, and the Koreans in “derivative/secondary” innovation. It is possible, then, that the final reason may well be closely related to the poverty of Korean political theories in general.

In order to elaborate this contrast further, let me briefly re-examine the process of developing political theories in the West by focusing upon the invention of John Locke’s pristine liberalism. Locke’s liberalism, notably the notion of a government by the consent of the ruled, was the product of intense intellectual struggle against the doctrine of the divine right of kingship, prevalent during the age in which he lived. The doctrine insisted on the absolute authority of the king over his subjects on the basis of the then mainstream interpretation of Christianity and the Bible. Representative of the divine right theorists, Robert Filmer asserted that subjects had the obligation to obey their rulers absolutely, as “God gave the whole earth to the first man, Adam, and all political authority and all rights of ownership [were] a historical and legal consequence of that gift” (Dunn 1984, 34). All the succeeding rulers would inherit and subdivide such political authority and rights of ownership. Thus, for Filmer and the royalists, the rulers’ rights should “be essentially understood as rights of ownership over human beings, as well as over land and material goods” (Dunn 1984, 35). As the property of subjects was also granted by the king, Filmer maintained, he had the right to dispose of it without their consent.

In response to Filmer’s argument, Locke sought to develop his liberalism by advocating for a government by consent and property rights based on natural law. In order to support his argument, ~~first of all~~^[place, OK?], Locke had to first refute the divine right of kingship, but without denying the supreme authority of Christianity and the Bible which underpinned it. Besides, considering the ideological terrain then prevailing in Europe, alternative intellectual resources outside of Christianity from which Locke could draw upon, either within or without the European civilization, to challenge Filmer’s argument, were not available to Locke. Ultimately, the only strategy open to Locke was to re-interpret Christianity and the Bible “radically” and “differently” from mainstream thinkers, including Filmer, so that they were made to support Locke’s liberal argument that the authority of a ruler was derived from the consent of the ruled, and that property was not what was approved or given by the ruler, but what they acquired by mixing their labor with nature without having to receive any one’s approval.

What is particularly interesting about the debate between Locke and Filmer is not the question of ~~which~~^[who] interpreted Christianity and the Bible correctly, either Filmer or Locke. It is rather the simple fact that Filmer, who sought to defend the

¹⁷ Might this not also be interpreted as the inevitable cost Koreans have to pay for learning and transplanting Western political theories?

existing order, and Locke, who challenged it, waged their intellectual battle on the common cultural terrain of Christianity. Indeed, that terrain must have been very disadvantageous to Locke, as Christianity had been used to support the theory of divine kingship throughout the Middle Ages. Thus, it is only by struggling with Christianity and thereby presenting his new interpretation to make Christianity hospitable to liberal doctrines that Locke was able to bestow legitimacy upon his nascent liberalism.

Locke, as the founder of liberalism, succeeded in squeezing interpretations favorable to his liberal arguments out of the doctrines of Christianity and the Bible, with painstaking effort and undaunted spirit. In addition, since this intellectual struggle, despite being a strenuous uphill battle, was waged on the very same terrain he shared with his enemies, Locke could double the effect of his success by reducing their resistance by half, at which point his theory would become successful. In the end, as we now know, Locke's liberalism and interpretation of the Bible won out over the doctrine of divine kingship in England after the Glorious Revolution in 1688. Furthermore, Lockean liberalism would enable political modernity, shaking and overturning the European subcontinent later. As a result, non-Western as well as Western scholars have now come to regard Christianity as the cultural womb out of which liberalism was born. Moreover, contemporary Western scholars such as Samuel P. Huntington have gone as far as to award Christianity with the elevated, sanctified status as a religion uniquely hospitable to liberal democracy, for example, in contrast to Confucianism and Islam (Huntington 1991).

In contrast to Locke, who was engaged in pristine innovation, modern Korean intellectuals have engaged in derivative innovation of political theories depending upon external sources. For example, progressive intellectuals in late nineteenth century Korea who supported Western notions of liberty and equality—notably Phillip Jaisohn (Seo Jae-pil, 1864-1951), a leader of the Dongnip Hyeophoe (Independence Club)—were able to develop their arguments with ease by relying upon doctrines of Western liberalism, Christianity, or Seohak (Western Learning), rather than taking pains in squeezing Confucianism or other intellectual resources into supporting their theories, as Locke had done. They might have, for example, forced progressive political theories out of Confucianism.¹⁸ However, a rather easy alternative was ~~to wide open that they might borrow what they needed from liberalism, the Enlightenment philosophy, Christianity and other Western intellectual resources what they needed.~~ However, there is no such a thing as a free lunch. In return for ~~saving[saved]-conserving~~ efforts to ~~make critical critically~~ reinterpretation of their traditional intellectual resources ~~in to~~ support of their new theories, the new theories in turn were not able to take root in Korean traditional soil, which remained stubborn and hostile to them. As a result, they could not mobilize the wide support necessary, either from traditional intellectuals or the general masses to whom these theories remained still alien, to carry out their intended reforms. Thus, whether progressive theory imported from the West was liberalism or socialism, each had to rely on derivative and borrowed legitimacy, instead of securing a pristine and indigenous legitimacy for itself. Thus, while Western progressive theories were able to enjoy the advantage of being transplanted to Korean society with ease, their base must have remained weak and fragile from the beginning, contrary to apparent rhetoric and influence.

¹⁸ In part, historical urgency might not have allowed them time sufficient for such leisurely experimentation.

Such differences between Korea and the West in the formation and innovation of political theories are observed not only in modern but also in contemporary political theories, such as feminism and ecological theory. For example, earlier ecologists in the West who were critical of the ecological destruction caused by Western civilization's science and technology traced its original cause to the "instrumental reason" of the Enlightenment that had propelled the industrial revolution, and then further back to Christianity or ancient Greek civilization, thereby launching a wholesale attack upon Western civilization. However, after passing an initial plethora of indiscriminate critique, they then began to find passages in the Greek classics or the Bible that stressed respectful, symbiotic relations between human beings and nature. They then positively reinterpreted them so that they could legitimize their ecological thought on the basis of Christianity or Greek thought. The same is true of feminism. Earlier feminists traced the origin of patriarchy to liberalism, then further back to the Bible and Greek thought, all of which were then subject to severe criticism. However, in the next stage, feminists sought to deconstruct elements that supported patriarchy in the Bible or the Greek classics while actively rejuvenating elements containing traces of gender equality, in order to enable the Bible or Greek thought to support the feminist cause.

Thus, the classical texts and other intellectual traditions in the West have been reborn with diverse appearances in every age through the process of continuous and critical reinterpretation, so that they play the role of yielding new political theories that meet the fresh needs of new eras. In that process, classics have renewed and prolonged their own lives by relying upon new theories, which in turn can secure sacred legitimacy from the former's support as well. For this reason, we come to observe such apparently paradoxical situations in which all the mutually ~~conflictual~~-~~conflicting~~ political theories such as the divine theory of kingship, liberalism and even socialism—e.g., Christian socialism and liberation theology—have found their basis for legitimacy in Christianity.¹⁹

However, the situation in Korea has been quite different from that in the West. Contemporary Korean scholars tend to innovate progressive theories either by importing them as finished products or by processing them to meet their needs, instead of inventing new theories by drawing upon their own classics or tradition. For example, most theorists who are interested in the liberation of women develop and justify their ideas and movement by relying upon diverse Western theories of feminism rather than drawing new insights by critically reinterpreting and extracting traditional resources such as Confucianism, Taoism, Shamanism or Buddhism. As a consequence, the long painstaking process of innovating political theories that should incorporate the critical reinterpretation of traditional resources has been abridged. Such easy innovation is, however, accompanied by many negative side effects. Among them, in connection with the subject of this paper, I would like to stress more than anything else, the fact that such process has a retrogressive effect upon the traditional intellectual resources that Korean society has inherited from the past. They would be thrown into a historical dustbin and reduced to mere reactionary or retrogressive trash as they have missed the valuable opportunity for continuous reinterpretation and creative self-renovation. Such a predicament might be further worsened by a reckless "West-centric" presupposition that

¹⁹ Likewise, a group of agrarian socialists once found the legitimacy of their theory in Locke's theory of property, while it was frequently criticized for justifying the unlimited accumulation of capital in modern capitalist society.

they are useless and doomed to extinction, because of the harmful influence they exerted in the past.

This retrogressive effect will constitute an important cause for the poverty of conservative philosophy in Korea. Therefore, I maintain the position that Koreans should reinterpret and re-appropriate traditional resources more actively, either in conservative or progressive ways, for the following reasons. First, the entire East Asian cultural heritage including the Korean retains value as the common property of humankind. Second, to make an ecological analogy, we need to preserve, increment, and renovate them for the sake of preserving bio-diversity. Third, we are in a better position to effectively develop these resources, for they constitute **our identity** and therefore are more familiar to us.

Strategies to Overcome the Dilemma

Thus far, I have tried to show why and how conservatism in Korea has emerged differently—the so-called poverty of Korean conservative philosophy—from that in the West, based on the plain fact that the modernization experience in Korea has been so different from that in the West. Now I would like to conclude this paper by suggesting some basic guidelines for the formation of philosophical conservatism in Korea to overcome the dilemma. As to the causes for the poverty of philosophical conservatism in Korea, I have pointed out three factors: the perennial monopoly of political power by the conservatives, the original contradiction between political and philosophical conservatism, and the heavy dependency of Korean political theories upon outside sources for their formation and development. All of these causes represent the dilemma facing conservative philosophy in Korea. As the dilemma is closely intertwined with the macro and historical factors Korea has been confronted with, the task of overcoming it is a daunting one indeed. **However, as the modernization undertaken over the last fifty years has achieved some of its cherished goals—especially in terms of economic development and democratization—political conservatism seems to be gaining a certain momentum, to a considerable degree, insofar as the sense that there has been formed a firm belief in and support for a once-weak capitalist market economy and a liberal democratic political order has grown, that were weak and fragile in the beginning, seems to be gaining a certain momentum.** This is confirmed in political parties' electoral competition for the title of the so-called “genuine conservatives” in successive elections since democratization. Then the immediate task facing Korean conservatives would be to consolidate political conservatism by undergirding it with the formation and support of explicit and coherent philosophical conservatism. As indicated earlier, political conservatism needs the fertile soil of philosophical conservatism that would nourish it from the root.

Regarding how to nourish philosophical conservatism, two strategies seem to be presented by various scholars. One is a strategy of aligning political conservatism with support for liberal democracy and the market economy more tightly (Bak 1999; Seo 1999), while the other involves a strategy of taking advantage of traditional intellectual resources such as Confucianism (Ham 1999; Jo 1999). It seems to me that the former aims at overcoming the first cause, and the latter seeks to counter the second and third causes.

The first strategy to nourish philosophical conservatism is, as noted earlier, to return their fair share to progressives in Korean politics. Of course, this begins with the assumption that conservatives and progressives have to recognize each other as genuine partners in a democratic dialogue, rather than as deadly enemies—as either as a red devil or a moribund reactionary (*sugu*) to be annihilated—and share political power in the broad arena of politics. In other words, Korean conservatives should now become fully aware that they have not been able to maintain the monopoly of political power as before, as the new political situation has developed. The new situation here refers to the successive inaugurations of relatively progressive governments headed by Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung, and Roh Moo-hyun, the consequently increased representation of progressive politicians in the government and national assembly—notably the emergence of the Democratic Labor Party as a viable progressive political force in the 2004 General Election, the overall democratization of the Korean society as a whole, the end of the Cold War, and the gradual improvement of South-North Korean relations. Thus, Korean conservatives have to accept the reality in which they share political resources such as political power, political funds, media coverage, cultural hegemony, etc. To do this, they themselves have to initiate or at least support political reform more coherently, including the partial revision or the entire abolition of the notorious National Security Law that has been abused to suppress the freedom of thought and conscience. Moreover, ~~the~~ conservatives should consolidate their commitment to liberal democracy by transforming themselves into genuinely democratic politicians, humbly accepting ~~humbly the~~ criticism from progressive activists and democrats that the current conservative mainstream—of current conservatives—the majority of current opposition party members, the military, public officials, major newspapers, etc.—had once used or approved anti-democratic measures to suppress democratic movements in the past. It is in this way that they might well be criticized just as reactionaries, not worthy of being called “genuine conservatives.” Thus, those who are the targets of such criticism—parties, politicians, major newspapers—should make clear their commitment to liberal democracy and make an effort to form an attitude different from what it had been before.

On the other hand, progressives who have fought in the forefront of democratic struggles should now accept the fact that the economic development initiated and engineered by the conservative ruling elite provides the material base for the democracy Koreans now enjoy. Thus they should be willing to make a historical rapprochement with conservatives at this stage, renouncing their self-righteousness that once invigorated their undaunted struggles for democracy. Just as criticism of Kim Young-sam’s government for the economic crisis in 1997 grew less as the economy recovered, so too blame of previous authoritarian regimes, including that of Park Chung-hee, would become less intense, the more Korean politics are democratized—in other words, the more the negative heritage of such regimes is overcome. In this sense, political responsibility is more situation-dependent and outcome-centered, so that both conservatives and progressives should treat each other more tolerantly in the arena of politics. Also, the progressive alternative to such a renovated conservatism is the presentation of viable ideas and concrete policy options for advancing people’s socioeconomic rights and deepening democracy in Korea.

The second strategy begins by appropriating Korean traditional resources more positively. Ham Jae-bong (Hahm Chaibong), a leading scholar espousing this strategy,

offers the analysis that there has been a poverty of conservatism in Korea because there has been no understanding or examination of Korean political tradition. He then argues that “genuine conservatism should take root in traditional Confucian thought.” Ham suggests “traditionalism, moralism, and authoritarianism” as conservative elements of Confucianism (Ham 1999, 216, 218-25). In connection with this, we should note recent theoretical trends to legitimize capitalism and liberal democracy in East Asia by drawing upon Confucianism. For example, “symbiotic capitalism” suggested by Kim Il-gon, and “coordinated capitalism” formulated by Jo Hye-in merit serious attention (Kim I. 1999; Jo 1999). On the other hand, Daniel A. Bell, a professor of philosophy at Hong Kong University, also seeks to justify democracy not in terms of such Western values as autonomy or self-government, but in terms of Asian communitarian values. He endeavors to justify liberal democracy from Confucian perspectives by demonstrating that democracy is more effective than authoritarianism in protecting communitarian life centered on family which is so cherished by Asians (Bell 1995).

From our examination so far, we may observe that two apparently contradicting strands of thought—liberal democracy and Confucianism—are presented as resources from which to build a philosophical conservatism. Although there are some contradictory elements in philosophical assumptions or principles, however, some coordinated and concerted operation of Confucianism and liberalism would not be impracticable if we differentiate the realms of life-world and properly allocate the realms each philosophy is supposed to apply. The plausibility of such a combined strategy is well suggested in Kim Yong-min’s careful examination of contemporary conservatism in the West. Kim defines the characteristics of contemporary conservatism as the “general endorsement of liberalism as the major principle of system operation, with reinforcement of conservative elements.” Thus, conservatism, which originally began as a set of philosophical and political principles, Kim maintains, has now turned into “spiritual values of the cultural realm” (Kim Y. 1999, 41, 45).²⁰ Thus, contemporary Western conservatives pay attention to such contemporary malaise as the loss of a standard of good and evil, the loss of a sense of the sacred, insecurity, loneliness, emptiness, and the like, which many contemporary humans experience in daily life despite the unprecedented material wealth and prosperity achieved by modern civilization. Thus contemporary conservatism seeks to instill new meanings in the lives of humans by redeeming individual and cultural values contained in tradition.²¹ In contemporary Korea, too, ancient Chinese classical texts seem to perform a culturally equivalent function of Western conservatism, as seen in the recent phenomenon of many Koreans returning to and become immersed in such Chinese classics as the *Analects* and *Daodejing*, despite the material abundance and contentment they now enjoy.

This might well be a naive presupposition, however, if traditional resources are to be regarded as the exclusive possession of conservatives. For progressives might be able to re-appropriate traditional thought and culture to serve their own purposes. Just as there are Christian democrats who are conservative and Christian socialists who are progressive, so is it possible and desirable to formulate progressive and innovative

²⁰ Kim Y. (1999, 41, 45).

²¹ Kim Y. (1999, 45-46).

political ideologies based on Confucianism, Buddhism or Taoism.²² In connection with this, we need again to be reminded that not only Lockean liberalism but also ecological thought and feminism in the West have actively taken advantage of traditional intellectual resources by radically reinterpreting them. Thus, we may well re-appropriate and expand the idea of Great Harmony in *liji* (Book of Rites), the rule of benevolence as the fundamental principle of Confucianism, and Mencius' stress on the provision of basic material needs for the people and "sharing pleasures with the people," to envisage a progressive vision beyond capitalism-liberal democracy.²³ Thus, the position which affirms Asian values does not have to be conservative at all, as some might be prematurely worried over.

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²² In this context, it seems useful to remember that there has once been intellectual attempt to formulate Confucian socialism to understand socialist countries in East Asia such as China, Vietnam, and North Korea.

²³ For example, Syngman Rhee has been engaged in such a task by attempting a radical reinterpretation of Confucianism (Yi 1999).

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