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Yu Kil-chun’s Moral Idea of Civilization and Project to Make All People Gentlemen

Yeonsik Choi

Yu Kil-chun (1856–1914) was a pioneering theorist in Korea’s Patriotic Enlightenment Movement. Through works such as Sŏyu kyŏnmun, he proposed a new path for the development of Korean civilization. Yu’s encounter with Pak Kyu-su in his early years prompted his interest in Western civilization. He soon decided to study abroad and experience the Japanese and American civilizations first-hand. Based on his experiences, Yu proposed a general blueprint for political reform during the Kabo Reform of 1894. In 1908, he initiated a political reform movement at the provincial level by organizing two groups named Hŭngsadan and Hansŏng Puminhoe. Subsequently, Yu Kil-chun’s enlightenment theory and writings on reform were regarded as a classical model that helped to initiate the modernization of Korea. However, the existing literature concerning Yu’s work exaggerates the progressive role he played and overlooks the logical contradictions and limitations inherent in his ideas. In this article, I conclude that the contradictions in Yu Kil-chun’s enlightenment theory stem from his moral understanding of civilization and the rights of the people. As a result, the project he envisioned ‘to make all people gentlemen’ ultimately focused on how to raise Confucian subjects of an empire rather than how to cultivate modern citizens.

1. Introduction

Yu Kil-chun was born in Seoul in 1856 and died in 1914 after suffering from chronic nephritis. During his lifetime, the material power of the West overwhelmed the East, and Japan conquered the Great Han Empire. Yu constantly thought of ways to understand the essence of Western civilization and respond to its pressures. He first grasped the world through the window of Shirhak (Practical Learning) and later experienced Western civilization himself as the first Korean student to study in Japan and the United States. He also participated in the Kabo Reform of 1894 as a politician. After spending 11 years as an exile in Japan from 1896 to 1907, he returned to Korea and attempted to initiate citizen-led political reforms at a provincial level by
organizing the Hŭngsadan (Association for the Promotion of Gentlemanship) and Hansŏng Puminhoe (Society of Seoul Residents).

Yu Kil-chun’s enlightenment theory and reform discourse have received positive assessments from most scholars. For instance, his enlightenment theory has been seen as a classical model of modernization theory or bourgeois enlightenment theory (Kim, 1968), and his ideas as expressed in Sŏyu kyŏnmun (Observations on Western Civilization) have been characterized as a theory of conservative and gradual reform (Lew, 1992). Because his experiences in Japan and the United States were pioneering in nature and laid the foundation for his enlightenment theory, they are often written about (Lee, 1969, 1979, 1989). Similarly, the activities of the Hŭngsadan and Hansŏng Puminhoe have been positively assessed and praised for enhancing the rights of citizens and strengthening local governments (Yun, 1998). In other biographical studies, Yu has been portrayed as someone who either shocked the closed society of Korea or succeeded in harmonizing tradition and modernity (Jeong, 2004; Lee, 1992).

However, these previous studies so exaggerate Yu Kil-chun’s contribution to the reform of Korean society that they tend to neglect the inherent logical contradictions and limitations in his thought. I wish to emphasize how such contradictions emerged from his superficial account of modern thinking and his inability to overcome the inertia of Confucian moralism. In reality, Yu was the first person in Korea to experience the confluence of Shirhak (Korea’s distinctive form of modern thinking), Japanese attitudes toward modernism acquired through Fukuzawa Yukichi, and an American education in a democratic citizenship. However, Yu selected each method according to his needs without critically synthesizing these three different forms of modernization. To illuminate the significance and limitations of Yu Kil-chun’s ideas on civilization, I would like to focus on the following three points. First, by analyzing the process through which he came to accept these modern worldviews, I will show that Yu Kil-chun did not overcome Confucian tradition (though he did promptly and sensitively respond to Western civilization). Next, the inertia of Confucian tradition inherent in his ideas on civilization caused Yu to condone social inequality by understanding civilization and the rights of the people in terms of moral obligation. Finally, as a result, his modernization project to ‘make all people gentlemen’ was not logically consistent.

2. An Itinerary to Triple Modernization

Yu Kil-chun studied traditional Confucianism under his paternal grandfather, Yu Ch’i-hong, and maternal grandfather, Yi Kyŏng-jik. As a child, he read Four Books and Three Classics, the official textbooks of Confucianism. At the age of 15 (in 1871), he applied for the county examination. The poem he wrote in the examination was so sophisticated that Pak Kyu-su, the Taejehak (Director) of Hongmun’gwŏn (Office of Special Advisers), praised it highly. This afforded him the opportunity to meet Pak
for the first time, although, as it turned out, this initial encounter did not greatly affect Yu. He continued studying for the civil service examination (Yu, 1987, p. 150).

It was not until September 1874, when he began to learn directly from Pak (who had by now resigned from public office), that Yu’s ideas were transformed. Pak Kyusu was the grandson of the Shirhak scholar Pak Chi-wŏn. Pak Kyu-su promoted a policy of isolation when the General Sherman incident took place in 1866, but his perspective changed after visiting China in 1872. Subsequently, he argued actively for the opening up of his country. Thus, when Yu Kil-chun visited him in 1874, he recommended that Yu read Haiguo Tuzhi (Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms) by Wei Yuan, calling it ‘critical to understand the circumstances of the West in this era’ (Yu, 1971, vol. 5, p. 161, hereafter YCS, 5:161.).

In the same year that he received Haiguo Tuzhi from Pak Kyu-su, Yu Kil-chun gave up applying for the civil service examination. In 1877, he rejected Min Yŏng-ik’s offer to ‘take care of state affairs by applying for the civil service exam’ (Yu, 1987, p. 41), and, illustrating the firmness of his determination, he wrote an essay criticizing the evils of such state examinations for office (YCS, 5:239–242). In 1875, the year after he stopped applying for the civil service exam, a Japanese military ship, Unyō, threatened Korea off the shore of Kanghwa-do. At that moment, Yu penned a poem expressing his conviction that an intellectual must move swiftly to pay attention to changes in current affairs and should not leaf idly through old books (YCS, 5:34).

After Pak Kyu-su handed him a copy of Haiguo Tuzhi, Yu frequently visited him and interacted with many figures from the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement. After Pak died in February 1877, Yu studied under Kang Wi (Lee, 1992, p. 13). Kang, who was originally a soldier, was also a great poet who had such a profound interest in Han’gŭl that he wrote a book analyzing its vowels and consonants. His interest in and study of Han’gŭl influenced Yu significantly (Yu, 1987, pp. 36–39).

During this period, it is likely that Yu was reading books other than Haiguo Tuzhi, including those about the Self-Strengthening Movement in China such as Yinghuan zhiliăe (A Short Account of the Maritime Circuit), written by Xu Jiyu, and Yiyan (Presumptuous Views), by Zheng Guanying. A Shirhak scholar, Ch’oe Han-gi, is known to have already owned Yinghuan zhiliăe and Haiguo Tuzhi, and Yiyan was brought to Korea by Kim Hong-jip along with Huang Zunxian’s Chaoxian Celüe (A Proposal for Korea) (Lee, 1969, pp. 5–19).

Yu Kil-chun’s first overseas experience was in 1881. Through the good offices of Min Yŏng-ik, Yu was chosen to join a Mission of Inspection. He was responsible for inspecting the achievements of the Meiji Restoration with Yu Chŏng-su, Yun Ch’i-ho, and others. From the beginning, however, they planned their trip to Japan with the goal of studying there. It can be assumed from the available records that Yu Kil-chun and Yu Chŏng-su enrolled at Keiō Gijuku, run by Fukuzawa, on 8 June 1881. Yun Ch’i-ho also enrolled at Dōjinsha, run by Nakamura Masanao, around the same time (Lee, 1992, p. 16). Remarkably, they were the first-ever foreign students to enter these schools.

Yu Kil-chun learned Japanese after he entered Keiō Gijuku, and once he was familiar with the language, his understanding of Western civilization naturally
broadened as he read Western books translated into Japanese. He initially read Seiyō jijō (Conditions in the West), Gakumon no susume (An Encouragement of Learning), and Bunmeiron no gairyaku (An Outline of a Theory of Civilization) under the guidance of Fukuzawa. He also broadened his perspective on Western scholarship and civilization by participating in various lectures held at Keiō’s Enzetsu-kan, the Hall of Public Speaking. There, he must have heard of Minyaku yakkai, written by Nakae Chōmin, who translated Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Du contrat social (Lee, 1992, p. 94). As a result, only one year after his arrival in Japan, a piece of writing by Yu was published in Ji ji shinpō (Current Events), created by Fukuzawa, without a single word being edited (Lee, 1992, pp. 19–22).

Everything Yu Kil-chun experienced at Keiō Gijuku was new and astonishing, but he also felt that Japanese civilization was limited because it was a mere imitation of the West. In the prologue to Sōyu kyōnmun, he was emphatic in pointing out that modern Japanese civilization had arisen by imitating the West:

In the spring of 1881, the 18th year after King Kojong’s accession, I went to Japan on an inspection. Seeing the diligence of the people and the affluence of things, it was different from what I imagined on my own. I talked with a person who had a lot of experience and knowledge, listened to his opinion, and read new eccentric books. As I examined the reality of Japan through repeated studies, I came to know that many of their institutions and statutes were modeled after those of the West. Before, Japan had treated them as an enemy and only opened peripheral markets. But as their relationship became close after Japan signed treaties with many countries, Japan examined the innovations of the period, took advantages, emulated various institutions, and achieved wealth during the last 30 years. (YCS, 1:3)

In the passage above, the ‘person who had a lot of experience and knowledge’ refers to Fukuzawa. As previously pointed out, Yu Kil-chun read many books on civilizations other than Fukuzawa’s that were widely read among Japanese intellectuals. In the end, he realized that modern Japanese civilization had begun by emulating the institutions of Western countries.

Soon, an opportunity to experience the West presented itself to Yu Kil-chun. Following his return to Seoul in January 1883, he was selected as a member of the first Korean mission to the United States that same year. The mission team arrived in San Francisco on 2 September 1883 and crossed the continent by train to meet President Chester A. Arthur in New York, on 18 September. They were to inspect several cities and public institutes in the United States and then return to Korea (The New York Times, 17 September 1883; 18 September).

However, Yu did not return to Korea with the mission team. With help from Min Yŏng-ik, he secured a chance to stay in the United States with government support for his studies. Yu spoke of his decision to study in the United States in an interview with The National Republican on 7 October 1883:

Three years ago, I hated foreigners. But after meeting a white person who was visiting Japan, I realized for the first time that I was wrong. I started to think that they were great people. My door to foreigners had been closed, but Japan was the key to opening that door. (Kim, 2005, p. 103)
Yu Kil-chun was able to correct his understanding of Western civilization by studying in Japan and, with this newfound perspective, decided to study in the United States. During his stay in the United States, Yu changed out of his traditional Korean garment, Hanbok, into a Western suit. On 10 November 1883, instead of accompanying the mission team back to Korea, he visited Edward S. Morse in Salem, Massachusetts (The New York Times, 8 November 1883). It was reported in The New York Times on 16 November 1883 that Yu had started his studies in the United States under Morse. Especially noteworthy is the part of the article stating that Min Yong-ik, the envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary, had bought lavish, high-priced gloves in the United States, but ‘Yu Kie Chin [Yu Kil-chun], however, not satisfied with mere material improvement of dress, has considered his mind’ (The New York Times, 16 November 1883). Yu wrote about this in the prologue to Sŏyu kyŏnmu as follows:

I asked Morse, the great scholar of Massachusetts, to teach me. Massachusetts is often referred to as the center of American civilization, and many great figures grew up here. Therefore, the scholarship and craft of the people here are the best in the U.S. Morse is a leader of academia for the whole of the U.S. With his extraordinary talent and intelligence, his name is widely known throughout the world. He taught me ways of studying, and informed me of the regulations needed for entering school. He let me stay at his house and taught me with sincerity. He also recommended that I acquaint myself with literary and scholarly people. His help was indispensable in broadening my perspective and developing my qualities. (YCS, 1:5)

Although he decided to continue studying in the United States, Yu was not yet fluent in English. It also took him some time to become familiar with the American education system. During the first six months, he was tutored while he stayed at Morse’s house. According to an article from a local newspaper in Salem, Yu gained sufficient English from studying with a tutor to enroll in a school. After high school, he planned to attend Harvard University to study law and commercial business (Kim, 2005, pp. 109–110). Later, in June 1884, he moved out of Morse’s house, where he had stayed for more than six months, to a place on Sommer Street. He enrolled in Dummer Academy near Salem with a recommendation from Morse (Lee, 1992, p. 43). But in the winter of 1884, news of the Kapshin Coup in Korea caused him to alter his original plans to pursue higher education (YCS, 1:6). Although Yu told Morse in a letter dated 17 December 1884 that he would continue studying, following Morse’s advice (Dodge & Bean, 2007, p. 34), he eventually gave up on higher education in May 1885 and returned to Korea after just one year of study (Dodge & Bean, 2007, p. 44).

Yu Kil-chun’s life in the United States began under Morse’s guidance; thus, his perspective on American civilization must have been constructed through the eyes of Morse. The 19 letters that Yu sent to his mentor over a period of 13 years, from June 1884 to June 1897, shed light on the continuous exchange between him and Morse. The first letter was sent only a week after he left Morse’s house, while the last letter notified Morse of the publication of Sŏyu kyŏnmu.
Two things are worth paying attention to in this correspondence. First, Yu Kil-chun showed a deep interest in the American education system. As he wrote in a letter from October 1884, he was surprised to observe an election for a student council president, where young students voluntarily and independently expressed their opinions and reached a democratic decision through voting. He was very impressed by the fact that these ordinary American students faithfully abided by democratic procedures. In this respect, he took a deep interest in the American education system and concluded that the core of the system lay in cultivating citizens with natural discernment, a public spirit, and independent judgment (Dodge & Bean, 2007, pp. 22–24).

Second, Yu did not forget that the original purpose of his experience studying abroad was to plan for the future of his nation. In a letter dated 3 February 1885, Yu reflected on the reality of his country having had its sovereignty undermined while he had been abroad. He asked for advice from people around him to find a solution (Dodge & Bean, 2007, p. 42). Nonetheless, he did not accept Christianity as a viable path for reform. In this, he was probably influenced by Morse, who took a hostile stance toward the church (Cross, 1996, p. 331). In a letter from September 1885, Yu did not deny that Christianity was a good religion in principle, but he made it clear that he did not believe in any religion. He concluded that Christianity did not propose new values that could replace paganism in China or India, as its doctrines still appealed to divinity and morality, as in ancient China and India. In addition, he stressed that the injunction to ‘return good for evil’, the sublime slogan of Christianity, was not actually being applied in Western empires, although it was actively used to profit from weak countries (Dodge & Bean, 2007, pp. 52–54).

Yu Kil-chun’s embrace of modernization started when he chose Shirhak over traditional Confucianism. After he had adopted the perspective of Shirhak, Yu twice proposed to King Kojong (in 1877 and again in 1883) that the civil service examination be abolished and that intellectuals be cultivated through practical education instead (YCS, 4:63–72). Rather than reading traditional Confucianism, he read the works of Shirhak scholars such as Yu Hyông-won, Chông Yag-yong, and Ch’oe Sŏng-hwan. In his essays concerning the tax and land system, written in 1891, Yu quoted parts of Ch’oe Sŏng-hwan’s Komun piryak (Brief Words of Counsel), Yu Hyông-won’s P’angye surok (The Treatises of P’angye), and Chông Yag-yong’s Mongmin shimsŏ (Admonitions on Governing the People) in detail. This familiarity with Shirhak philosophy was possible because he was continuously studying the Shirhak scholars’ ideas about social reform even after his return from the United States.

Eventually, in March 1892, Yu Kil-chun passed the civil service exam on the basis of his continuous study of Shirhak philosophy (Lee, 1992, p. 93). While this application must have been tried on a personal motivation, it also tells us that his effort to break away from tradition was not thorough enough. When Yu was studying in Japan, Fukuzawa pursued a completely different approach to the development of civilization, one that broke away from older traditions. To Yu Kil-chun, however, giving up on tradition seemed too passive an approach, lacking agency. Moreover, as
Yu thought that Christianity was not morally superior to Confucianism, he did not regard it as an alternative model for reform. In fact, the time Yu spent in Japan and the United States was too short to effectively overcome his dedication to Confucian tradition. As a result, his idea of civilization became a conservative one in which maintaining tradition, rather than reforming it, was emphasized as the way to endure pressure from the West.

3. Yu’s Moral Idea of Civilization and the Rights of the People

Yu Kil-chun learned during his stay in Japan that the driving force behind that country’s rapid and successful modernization was its imitation of Western civilization, and he also learned that a civilization develops through competition. Based on the knowledge and information he obtained in Japan, he wrote Segye taeseron (A Treatise on the Contemporary Situation of the World) and Kyŏngjaengron (A Treatise on Competition) in 1883. These are representative essays that reflect Yu’s realistic worldview. In Segye taeseron, he stated that the national power of a country depends on its military power (YCS, 3:93), and he briefly explored the demographic and military status of Japan and other Western countries (YCS, 3:94–98). In fact, he was summarizing parts of Fukuzawa’s Ji ji shôgen (A Comment on the Times, 1881) (Fukuzawa, 2002–2003, vol. 8, pp. 114–117, hereafter FCS, 8:114–117). Kyŏngjaengron states that the essence of international society is competition between nations and that competition is an impetus for progress and development. In the same essay, he also stated, ‘There is nothing in the world that does not depend on competition. From international matters to personal and family problems, all things can progress through competition’ (YCS, 4:47).

Yu Kil-chun utilized parts of Ji ji shôgen when he was writing Segye taeseron. Therefore, he is likely to have read Fukuzawa’s major works, such as Seiyô jiijô (1866), Gakumon no susume (1874), Bunmeiron no gairyaku (1875), Tsûzoku minken ron (Popular Discourse on People’s Rights, 1878), and Tsûzoku kokken ron (Popular Discourse on the Rights of Nations, 1878). It is notable that Yu identified himself as Fukuzawa’s pupil in a letter to him dated 28 December 1895 (YCS, 5:278–280). Therefore, we must see Fukuzawa as providing a gateway to Yu’s understanding of Western civilization.

 Nonetheless, Yu did not rely completely on the worldview of Fukuzawa. In fact, Fukuzawa’s influence on Yu has been somewhat exaggerated. For instance, Fukuzawa believed that international law was incompetent and argued that ‘a hundred books on international law are less useful than several cannons’ (FCS, 7:195). In contrast, Yu did not abandon his optimism with regard to the goodwill of international law. This was true even in Segye taeseron, in which Yu explicitly accepted that the basis of national power is derived from military power. Yu expressed his thoughts on this subject as follows:
In today’s world, people do not start a war without a good reason, unlike in the old days. They judge based on international law. In peace time, we respect and abide by all kinds of laws enacted to maintain friendship. (YCS, 3:99)

Likewise, although Yu considered himself Fukuzawa’s pupil, he did not rely wholly on his worldview because he could not accept the philosophical ruptures that existed in Fukuzawa’s writings. In the beginning, Fukuzawa introduced Victorian individualism and capitalist thought to Japanese intellectual circles and pursued a practical and pluralistic worldview. Especially during the 1860s and early 1870s, Fukuzawa was influenced by the Scottish enlightenment in the course of translating William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* and Francis Wayland’s *Elements of Political Economy* and *Elements of Moral Science*. This influence was reflected in *Seiyō jijō* and *Gakumon no susume* (Craig, 2009, pp. 28–32). Starting in 1875, however, when he started writing *Bunmeiron no gairyaku*, Fukuzawa transformed from a libertarian civil rights advocate into a conservative advocate of national sovereignty. From Fukuzawa’s point of view, by 1875, Japan had already completed the modernization process under the guidance of its government. Therefore, in *Bunmeiron no gairyaku*, he aimed to outline a new form of civilization for the Japanese people to pursue instead of simply emulating the West (Craig, 2009, pp. 101–102).

In *Seiyō jijō*, Fukuzawa distinguished between two stages of development: savagery and civilization (FCS, 1:194). In *Sekai kunizukushi* (All the Countries of the World), published in 1869, he outlined four stages of civilization: chaos, savagery, unenlightened or semi-enlightened, and civilized and enlightened (FCS, 2:154–156). In *Bunmeiron no gairyaku*, he proposed a three-stage classification: savagery, semi-enlightened, and civilized. He also said that being civilized and enlightened was not an absolute condition, but rather a relative one (FCS, 4:21–22).

Following Fukuzawa, Yu Kil-chun proposed four stages of civilization in his *Segye taeseron*: savagery, unenlightened, semi-enlightened, and civilized. He also understood the progress of civilization as a relative matter. According to Yu, many Western countries were civilized, but their models were not the ultimate goal of civilization or even its standard. For Yu, it was impossible to assess the present civilization from the perspective of the past, just as it was impossible to forecast the future of civilization based on the current outlook; instead, Yu maintained, one should seek to adopt a relative viewpoint. What is especially noteworthy in *Segye taeseron* is that its comparison of civilizations was undertaken in order to find a way to civilize Korean nation (YCS, 3:27–34). Yu made this point as follows:

We should clarify the differences between the four stages of civilization so as not to forget that our nation has been humiliated and insulted, and to ensure that we do not neglect our customs and practice. One who observes how other nations reached the state of being civilized and compares the case with our nation’s enlightenment and progress is a wise intellectual who is truly worried about his country and loyal to his king. (YCS, 3:35)
Clearly, Yu Kil-chun’s initial account of civilization owes much to Fukuzawa’s views, but he did not simply follow Fukuzawa. The four-fold classification of civilization he presented in Sŏyu kyŏnmun incorporated many discourses on civilization based on references other than Fukuzawa. In Sŏyu kyŏnmun, Yu defined the meaning of enlightenment and rank as follows:

Being enlightened means all things in the world have reached the utmost level of good and beauty. So it is difficult to put a limit on the extent of enlightenment. Depending on talent and capability, there are higher or lower levels of enlightenment, but the qualities of a people or the size of a country can lead to differences as well. This is because the process of enlightenment is not all the same, but also because the most important thing is a people’s actions. If one learns to do his duty by behaving according to the five relations of humanity, it is an enlightenment of deeds. If people study and state the logic of things clearly then it is an enlightenment of learning. Governing a country well, so that subjects feel secure and joyous, is an enlightenment of politics. Enforcing law fairly, so that no subjects feel injustice, is an enlightenment of law. Improving the institution of machines, so that people can use them easily, is an enlightenment of machines. Manufacturing accurately so that there is no crudity, making life more comfortable, is an enlightenment of materials. After all these enlightenments are combined, a true enlightenment is achieved. No country, past or present, has reached the ultimate level of enlightenment. But, roughly classified, all countries belong to one of three categories, enlightened, semi-enlightened and unenlightened. (YCS, 1:395–396)

Considering the overall context, Yu Kil-chun accepted Fukuzawa’s view of civilization as ‘a relative thing, and it has no limits’ (FCS, 4:57). In the excerpt above, Yu’s assertion that it is ‘difficult to put a limit on the extent of enlightenment’ shows that he accepted Fukuzawa’s relative view of civilization. An important difference exists between these two thinkers, however. While Fukuzawa believed that ‘civilization ultimately means the progress of man’s knowledge and virtue’ (FCS, 4:62), he nonetheless criticized traditional conceptions of morality: ‘What pertains to morality has made no advance since earlier times’ (FCS, 4:148). In stark contrast, Yu did not lose trust in the moral values of Confucianism, and this is why he claimed that an enlightenment of deeds is always the first to arise. Indeed, Yu claimed that an enlightenment of deeds, unlike other kinds of enlightenment, does not vary according to the era or region, but always remains the same (YCS, 1:398). For Yu, an enlightenment of deeds, a standard for all of the other enlightenments, is more important than an enlightenment of transformative materials.

In addition, while arguing that ‘enlightenment is about learning the strength of others as well as preserving one’s own strength’ (YCS, 1:401), Yu developed proactive ways of achieving enlightenment that would fit Korea’s circumstances rather than blindly follow the West; the former constituted ‘real enlightenment’ whereas the latter was ‘false enlightenment’. According to Yu, ‘real enlightenment is studying the logic and essence of things and promoting transformation according to the circumstances of the country’, while ‘false enlightenment happens when the pursuit of enlightenment is made without discernment, and, envious and fearful of others, people end up expending a fortune for little gain’ (YCS, 1:400–401).
According to Yu Kil-chun, there were three approaches to enlightenment that did not take into account the reality of Korea. These can be roughly summarized as follows. In the first approach, one put blind trust in foreign things and neglected one’s own things. This type of person belonged to the so-called Progressive Party, but Yu categorized them as ‘sinners of enlightenment’. In the second approach, one considered foreigners barbaric and regarded one’s own nation as the best in the world. This type of person belonged to the so-called Conservative Party and was regarded by Yu as an ‘enemy of enlightenment’. The last approach applied to those who were swayed by the waves of enlightenment but did not engage their own opinions. Yu called them the ‘invalids of enlightenment’, who did not even reach the moral level of sinners or enemies of enlightenment (YCS, 1:402–403).

Yu Kil-chun thought the existence of sinners and enemies of enlightenment problematic because the former promoted enlightenment too hastily for Korea’s circumstances, and the latter denied enlightenment too firmly. To compare these two cases, Yu quoted a maxim attributed to Confucius: ‘Going beyond is as wrong as falling short’ (Analects, 11:15). But Yu did not interpret this saying conventionally; instead, he suggested that going beyond is worse than falling short when it comes to enlightenment. Consequently, Yu came to criticize the sinners, the Progressive Party, more harshly than the others because he concluded that going beyond would endanger the nation sooner than falling short would. Thus, in an effort to resolve this matter, Yu proposed a doctrine of the mean to balance the speed of development (YCS, 1:402).

Yu also classified three subjects of enlightenment according to the ways in which people practiced it. First, the ‘master of enlightenment’ who recognizes and communicates the need for enlightenment and practices tasks related to it. Second, the ‘guest of enlightenment’ envies enlightened people and develops strength in order to master it. Third, the ‘slave of enlightenment’ fears and dislikes enlightened people but cannot help following the current. Yu Kil-chun thought a nation’s level of enlightenment could change depending on the practices of individuals. One could move from being a guest to a master through striving with initiative; in the same way, a master could be dragged down to become a guest. However, a slave always would remain dominated by others (YCS, 1:398–399). Yu wanted the people of Korea to move beyond being slaves, reluctantly promoting enlightenment, and at least maintain the status of guests, with the ultimate hope of rising to become masters.

It is evident that a slave who is passively dragged by the forces of enlightenment cannot preserve the independence of a nation. Yu Kil-chun said that becoming a slave not only is personally humiliating, but also leads to the loss of national territories and peoples. In order to prepare for this worst-case scenario, he compared three methods (wisdom, firm resolution, and force) that other countries employed to establish enlightenment. First, enlightenment through wisdom easily avoids adverse effects because a good political structure is present; this is the best way to maintain the master status. Second, enlightenment through firm resolution has negative consequences due to the lack of laws and institutions, but it is the second best way to maintain master or guest status after some time has passed. Third, enlightenment
through force is an exceptional measure taken only when people’s intelligence is so low that the preservation of the country seems in danger because the people are at risk of degenerating into slaves (YCS, 1:399–400). Yu thought that, unless the Korean government promoted enlightenment through firm resolution or force, the people would become slaves and the autonomy of the nation would be lost.

For proactive enlightenment to succeed, each individual should have a sufficiently developed political consciousness to be able to recognize himself or herself as an agent capable of exercising rights. This is the reason Yu said, ‘Only after each person realizes that his or her rights are important will he or she learn that the right of a nation is precious and, therefore, also swear to guard the nation till death’ (YCS, 1:149). Yu’s idea that the independence of individuals comes before the independence of the nation was probably influenced by the following assertion by Fukuzawa in *Gakumon no susume*: ‘When the people of a nation do not have the spirit of individual independence, the corresponding right of national independence cannot be realized’ (FCS, 3:27–28).

In *Seiyō jijō*, Fukuzawa translated liberty and rights, which were not well-known concepts in Japan, as jiyū 自由 and tsūgi 通義 (FCS, 1:230).5 Yu Kil-chun also used the term t’ong’ūi 通義 to mean the rights of the people, but he defined t’ong’ūi as ‘doing what is reasonable in all matters, acting honorably and being faithful to one’s duty’ (YCS, 1:129). Rather than understanding t’ong’ūi as a translated term for rights, he faithfully followed Confucian ideas, writing, for example: ‘The difference in what duty one has between the ruler and the ruled is a universally recognized principle.’6 The way in which Yu understood the concept of t’ong’ūi in the context of Confucian morality is manifested in the following sentence: ‘One has to control the overuse of liberty with t’ong’ūi as it can reach indulgence’ (YCS, 1:133).

Yu stated that the utility of rights lies in preserving individual liberty (YCS, 1:130), and rights given to men at birth should not differ according to whether one is the son of Heaven or a humble man. He thus boldly argued that ‘there is no person above or below any other person’ (YCS, 1:134). Fukuzawa used the same logic in his *Gakumon no susume*, stating, ‘Heaven does not create one person above or below another’ (FCS, 3:6). Yu, however, acknowledged differences in social status in human society and thought of imposing limitations on rights to control the chaos generated by social competition (YCS, 1:136).

From the early works of Fukuzawa, Yu learned that a libertarian stance on inalienable rights and the recognition of the rights of the people are preconditions for national independence. As a result, Fukuzawa’s later conservative nationalism is not reflected in *Sŏyu kyŏnmun*. This is perhaps because Yu was able to observe first-hand how the development of the United States began with the education of its citizens. Yu believed that it was this which guaranteed the freedom and rights of the people, as is evident from a letter to Morse in which he stated that national character is determined by the nature of the citizens (Dodge & Bean, 2007, p. 24). Nonetheless, as he wrote in a letter briefing Morse on the Kabo Reform,7 Yu believed that a constitutional monarchy, rather than American-style democracy, was a more realistic means for Korea to guarantee its people freedom (Dodge & Bean, 2007, p. 66). As he
suggested in his essay on the tax and land system (1891), Yu aimed for a continuation of the Shirhak scholars’ ideas about social reform, one that favored marginal adjustment within the system rather than the abrupt dissolution of the ancient regime.

4. To Make All People Gentlemen

Yu actively pushed for the reform of Korea by participating in the Kabo Reform, which began in 1894. The extent of Yu’s participation and the goals of the reform are communicated in ‘The Reformation We Made’, which he enclosed in a letter to Morse. Yu, however, was forced to flee to Japan after the king’s removal to the Russian legation in February 1896. His exile lasted for 11 years, until Emperor Kojong abdicated for organizing a secret mission to the Hague in July 1907, and on 16 August of that year he finally returned to Seoul. Soon after arriving in Korea, he established Hŭngsadan (on 29 November 1907) and quickly resumed his political activities. According to Yu, founding Hŭngsadan was undertaken for several reasons:

In order to raise the ethos of the gentry scholars through national education, utilize their general knowledge, leverage their moral learning, adapt to rules of social evolution, and profit to become a rich and powerful nation, we organized a group and named it Hŭngsadan. (YCS, 2:367)

Thus, Hŭngsadan can be said to have had three primary goals. First, Hŭngsadan aimed to inspire a new kind of citizenship in people through national education. Second, Hŭngsadan aimed to provide a common academic and moral education that could easily be put to use in daily life. Third, Hŭngsadan anticipated that the people would adapt to survive in the face of competition and contribute to an increase in national wealth and power.

The general direction Yu Kil-chun planned for national education was for all people to pursue civilization. Believing the key to civilization to be the development of knowledge and the fostering of morality, he wanted to make all people in the Great Han Empire into modern citizens who were conscious of individual rights and duties. He explained this as follows:

The tendency in the development of civilization is high or low, fast or slow depending on their level of knowledge development and morality cultivation. A grand plan for the nation’s future depends on fostering people’s knowledge and improving morality. The ultimate purpose of education is to know the rights and duties of a person and make happiness in life complete by cultivating intellectual ability and moral discipline based on learning and character-building. (YCS, 2:363)

As this excerpt indicates, Yu Kil-chun established Hŭngsadan to educate people to become civilized citizens. He did not judge their level of civilization solely based on the development of knowledge; fostering morality was also an important barometer of civilization. Yu stated that the ultimate purpose of education was to pursue complete happiness in life, and he therefore emphasized that both the rights and the responsibilities of individuals needed to be inculcated.
Second, Yu Kil-chun’s project to ‘make all people gentlemen’ aimed to provide a common education to everyone. At that time, Korean education system was the sole preserve of the gentry scholars, just one of the four social classes of the nation: sa (gentry scholars), nong (peasant farmers), kong (artisans and craftsmen) and sang (merchants and traders). Movement between these classes was extremely restricted. Korean sa class comprised the most privileged people, who monopolized knowledge and the study of Confucian ethics. But Yu understood the four classes as providing different kinds of jobs, and he thought anyone equipped with knowledge and morality could enter the sa class. Yu’s arguments on this matter were as follows:

All people who learn can become sa. Therefore, when people are taught through a common education, a basic foundation for sa is established. This is why sa today is different from sa in the past. Sa in the past was a kind of privileged class among the four social classes. At that time, only they were educated and able to monopolize knowledge and morality to become sa. However, in the contemporary era, regardless of their form of occupation, whether nong, kong, or sang, anyone who has knowledge and morality can be sa. Therefore, we should not differentiate the names of the classes according to the type of job. If all of the people, regardless of their jobs, become sa and cherish a sense of honor and accumulate knowledge, the benefit will reach not just the individuals but all throughout the nation. (YCS, 2:364)

Third, the ultimate goal to ‘make all people gentlemen’ was proposed by Yu Kil-chun in order to increase national competitiveness through education. Yu, observing that there was no established school system and that the education of young people depended on the will of each family, thought that the general condition of education was very poor at that time (YCS, 2:364). Although many elementary schools had been founded nationwide by significant figures, no meaningful education system was being implemented due to financial problems and a lack of teachers (YCS, 2:366). In order to solve such problems, Yu first suggested a substantive primary school education:

Because we never educated farmers, craftsmen and merchants, they could not escape an unenlightened status, bound by old customs. Even now, in the midst of 20th century enlightenment, we are still stuck in a prehistoric era, before the age of recorded history; thus our national destiny and wealth are declining. Determined figures in the nation awakened and learned that the nation’s destiny and wealth rely on the education of young people. (YCS, 2:365–366)

To accomplish substantive national and common education, Yu Kil-chun prioritized the writing of textbooks and the cultivation of teachers. He clearly stated these two points in the ‘Hûngsadan rules’, which outlined the purpose and methods of Hûngsadan’s activities (YCS, 3:371). Hûngsadan set up a printing agency named Tongmungwan and published 55 textbooks. Three were written under the name of Hûngsadan, and 48 were written or translated by members of Hûngsadan. Yu himself also wrote four textbooks, including Nodong yahak tokbon (Textbook for Workers’ Night School) (Yun, 1998, pp. 152–153). As a next step, Hûngsadan planned to establish a teachers’ college for 500 people and an attached primary school. Instead,
it first established a primary school called *Yunghŭi* and later attached a teachers’ college to provide two-year training courses (Yun, 1998, pp. 157–158).

Yu also outlined concrete plans to establish a national education system. In ‘Opinion on Primary Education’, written in 1908, he argued that schools should use Korean, that education should be in accordance with the national political system, and that education must be compulsory (YCS, 2:257). Yu’s focus on teaching in Korean meant that, while he would abandon the teaching of Chinese, Chinese characters themselves would continue to be used as a secondary written script for Koreans (YCS, 2:259). Second, a national, politicized system of education was suggested to establish patriotism and maintain social order. However, Yu preferred a monarchy to a republic, writing the following: ‘A monarchy emphasizes loyalty to the king and does not allow textbooks arousing republican thoughts’. Third, he argued that compulsory education should be enforced to ensure that all young people in the nation can learn. He considered compulsory education a basic duty, like paying taxes and serving in the military (YCS, 2:258).

All of these basic principles related to primary education were conveyed in *Nodong yahak tokbon* to instruct workers properly. The book, written using a combination of Korean and Chinese characters, emphasized loyalty and patriotism as the basic elements of culture and aimed to educate people about their rights and duties. It was composed of 50 units, covering the social nature of humans (units 1–8), duties to the family and nation (units 9–13), the importance of labor and labor ethics (units 14–30), and personal duties and ethics (units 31–50). Although *Nodong yahak tokbon* includes a brief explanation on the rights of humanity, in general it is focused on ethics and the duties of people and workers.

However, the national education plan had limitations because of its basis in Confucian morality. Yu Kil-chun’s consciousness of Confucian ethics was manifested in the fact that he explained the duty of humanity before the rights of humanity. Yu concluded that when children are devoted to their parents, the wife obeys the husband, subjects are loyal to the king, and a social ethic that distinguishes high from low rank maintains discipline; then one can discuss the rights of the people (YCS, 2:268–270).

All humans were obviously equal to Yu Kil-chun because they were granted inalienable rights from heaven. But he considered the social division of labor to be a law of nature (YCS, 2:345–346). Based on the logic Mencius used to distinguish a person who uses his mind from a person who uses his strength, Yu distinguished mental and manual labor (YCS, 2:274). He compared mental labor to work done while sitting and manual labor to work done while standing, considering the former higher than the latter (YCS, 2:308). In principle, he said that one is not more important than the other, just as the two wings of a bird are equally important (YCS, 2:308), but he advised workers that their children should escape a life of manual labor through education (YCS, 2:314).

Although Yu did not reject a discriminatory order that distinguishes social status, he showed interest in workers’ education because he believed this to be the basis for national independence and the means to recover national sovereignty. In unit 46 of
Nodong yahak tokbon, on the subject of independence, he stated: ‘When a person can preserve the independence of one’s body, the independence of a nation is preserved’. This originates from a phrase by Fukuzawa in Gakumon no susume: ‘National independence through personal independence’. Nevertheless, Yu said the following: ‘Only after the high and low are harmonized by following social order is the recovery of national sovereignty possible’ (YCS, 2:347). This implies that, for Yu, maintaining the discriminatory order of social class division was a precondition of independence or recovery of national sovereignty.

In the end, for Yu Kil-chun, universal education was intended to transform workers into subjects of the Great Han Emperor while maintaining a discriminatory class structure. He emphasized that all people in the Great Han Empire were blood relatives, biologically connected to Chŏnju Yi’s imperial family. His logic was that all of the people had formed blood relationships with the Yi family since the foundation of Chosŏn 500 years earlier, and therefore all people of the Great Han Empire should carry out their duties with the propriety of emperors’ children (YCS, 2:319–320).

Such beliefs were inaccurate and unscientific but very Confucian in that loyalty to the king was to be derived from one’s duty to one’s parents. A similar type of Confucian thinking is presented in the Book of Rites (Liji 礼記) ‘According to the rules of propriety for a minister, he should not remonstrate with his ruler openly. If he has thrice remonstrated and is still not listened to, he should leave his service. In the service of his parents by a son, if he has thrice remonstrated and is still not listened to, he should follow his remonstrance with loud crying and tears (Liji, Quli 曲禮)’. In Confucianism, because loyalty was easily betrayed, there was a tendency to expand family ethics (filial piety) into political ethics. Yu also tried to transform workers into loyal subjects of the Great Han Empire’s imperial family using such Confucian precedents.

In Nodong yahak tokbon, Yu Kil-chun understood workers as subjects of governance who have to fulfill public duties. Rather than treating them as agents with rights, Yu wanted to turn workers into imperial subjects. This explains why he mentioned only the duties of the people, omitting any discussion of their rights when he discussed character in spite of the fact that, in the first chapter, he discussed the abstract rights that people hold in principle (YCS, 2:320–321).

In order for the national education project to yield substantive effects, compulsory education had to be realized nationwide. In this respect, it is worthwhile to examine the role of Hansŏng Puminhoe, which Yu founded on 8 May 1908 and for which he served as president. It was established in order to launch an autonomous local government system in Hansŏng, the capital of the Empire, as laid out in the ‘Statement on the Establishment of Hansŏng Puminhoe” (YCS, 4:313). In the ‘By-laws of Hansŏng Puminhoe’, Yu stipulated that it was the Hansŏng-bu citizens’ duty to enroll their children into private schools (YCS, 4:287).

However, compulsory education through the Hansŏng Puminhoe was realized only to a very limited extent. Yu Kil-chun restricted admission into Hansŏng Puminhoe to the heads of households who had lived in Hansŏng for more than one year, those who
paid tax of more than 1 won, and those were over 20 years old (YCS, 4:287). In a work he translated, *Political Science*, he described a British institution in which suffrage was restricted according to economic power (YCS, 4:582), and he tried to apply this notion to *Hansŏng Puminhoe*. In this sense, Yu’s support of civil rights was not great enough to grant suffrage to every citizen, and thus he restricted opportunities to receive education. In addition, he considered having an autonomous local government system to be a precondition of constitutional monarchy (Dodge & Bean, 2007, p. 66). It was natural that the autonomous education system led by *Hansŏng Puminhoe* was also centered on cultivating subjects of the Empire. His project to ‘make all people gentlemen’ yielded partial success because Yu wanted to provide compulsory education for the children of citizens with established economic power.

Yu Kil-chun selectively incorporated Fukuzawa’s libertarian thoughts about civilization while purposely excluding his conservative nationalism. His convictions about the power of a civilization composed of free citizens were further fortified through his experience in the United States. However, a problem arose because he could not help but rely on the firm determination or force of government to realize proactive enlightenment in Korea, as there was no educated citizenry capable of leading the process of civilization. As a result, Yu ended up stressing the people’s duty to the nation or monarch rather than the people’s own rights. His project to ‘make all people gentlemen’ drifted from its original libertarian ideals.

5. Conclusion

Yu Kil-chun was a pioneering intellectual and the first among Korean intellectuals to directly experience Western civilization. He first recognized the power of Western civilization through *Shirhak*. He then experienced Japanese civilization, which had succeeded in emulating the West, before finally staying in the United States, which had served as the model for Japan. As he stayed only one year in each country, however, these experiences were not sufficient for him to discover the essence of Western civilization and turn it into a blueprint for his homeland. Moreover, the kinds of civilization he experienced in Japan and the United States were drastically different from Korea. As a result, he selectively interpreted his experience and sought to develop independently a form of civilization that incorporated a focus on Confucian morality.

Yu Kil-chun understood the nature of civilization through the works of Fukuzawa; therefore, as has been noted, his libertarian and relativistic outlook on civilization owes much to Fukuzawa’s ideas. Once Fukuzawa became a conservative nationalist in 1875, however, Yu tried to distance himself from his former mentor for two reasons. First, while Fukuzawa thought that a rupture with tradition was a precondition of civilization, Yu retained a belief in Confucian tradition and thought an enlightenment of deeds must precede an enlightenment of materials. Second, whereas Fukuzawa concluded that, since 1875, the Meiji government’s goal had changed from raising consciousness about civil rights to engaging in a power struggle with the West, Yu
thought that cultivating sound citizens who would devote themselves to the nation was Korea’s foremost task.

Yu’s belief that cultivating citizenship was the basis for civilization became even stronger after he went to the United States, and he eventually implemented these ideas through the activities of Hŭngsadan and Hansŏng Puminhoe. As his understanding of rights was largely influenced by the early works of Fukuzawa, he thought the independence of individual rights came before national independence. But Yu emphasized a Confucian context of rules of propriety and duty, translating the concept of rights as t’ong’ūi. In the end, although he implemented a project to ‘make all people gentlemen’ through Hŭngsadan, the purpose was tailored to cultivating loyal and patriotic subjects of the Empire rather than modern citizens who were agents with their own rights.

The Western civilization that Yu Kil-chun tried passionately to accept was completely foreign to Korea, clashing in every aspect with its traditions and practices. Nonetheless, Yu did not conclude that a rupture with tradition was the only means of developing his nation’s civilization. Instead, he continued to read Shirhak scholars even after he returned from the United States, and he accepted their ideas about reform as a realistic alternative. Like other Shirhak scholars, he favored addressing problems within the existing system rather than overthrowing the ancient regime. Instead of fighting the pressure of Western civilization with methods acquired from the West, he wanted to maintain the power of tradition to endure the pressure. That method required a systematic program dialectically combining Eastern and Western civilization as well as more time to allow trial and error. At that time, however, Korea could not provide such conditions, and there was no successful precedent to follow. In this respect, the morality embedded in Yu Kil-chun’s ideas on civilization was original, but it was also a limitation he could not overcome.

Notes
[1] Yu Kil-chun published a Korean grammar book titled Taehan munjŏn in 1909. In the foreword, he said that his studies of grammar had begun 30 years earlier and that the book had been through eight revisions (YCS, 2:105). Based on this remark, it is probable that his studies of Han’gŭl grammar started around 1879, when he studied under Kang Wi.
[3] Yu Kil-chun converted to Christianity and participated in Sagyŏnghoe, a Bible study conference in the tenth year after he fled to Japan, around 1906. In an essay explaining his purpose in establishing this group, he did not abandon his trust in Confucianism as a political ideology saying, ‘Confucius is the saint of political morality and Jesus is the god of religious morality’ (YCS, 2:397). Therefore, his conversion to Christianity was probably a way to overcome his personal sorrow at being a refugee.
[4] But Yu did eventually accept Fukuzawa’s negative understanding of international law, quoting the latter’s statement, ‘A thousand words of international law is less useful than a cannon,’ in the foreword to a translation, History of King Frederick’s Seven Years’ War, published in 1908 (YCS, 3:484).
Fukuzawa tried various translations for tsūgi. In *Gakumon no susume* he translated it as kenritsūgi 權理通義 or kengi 權義 (FCS, 3:26), in *Tsūzoku minken ron* he used both kenri 權理 and kenri 權利 (FCS, 7:102).

A Confucian use of the word tongyi, 迂義 meaning universal principle, is found in *Mencius*. According to Mencius, 'Those who labor with their minds govern others; those who labor with their strength are governed by others. Those who are governed by others support them; those who govern others are supported by them. This is a principle universally recognized (*Mencius*, 3A:4). The central argument of Mencius is that according to the level of moral capability, the duties granted to gentlemen and petty people should be distinguished.

Lee Kwang-rin assumed that this document was enclosed in the letter sent in March or April of 1896 (Lee, 1990, p. 114). But according to Peabody Essex Museum, the document was enclosed in the letter sent on 3 December 1896 (Dodge & Bean, 2007, p. 64).

According to the housing tax law at that time, 1 won of tax was imposed on people who owned a house bigger than 10 kan 間 (Yun, 1998, p. 196). Kan is a unit for the space enclosed by four pillars.

**References**


