

PERCEPTIONS OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION AND LITERARY MODES OF EXPRESSION IN NEWSPAPERS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT PERIOD: EDITORIALS AND POEMS PUBLISHED IN THE *TONGNIP SINMUN* AND *TAEHAN MAEIL SINBO*

LEE HYUNG-DAE

Introduction

This study analyses the perceptions of Western civilization found in modern newspapers during the period 1880–1910, while also tracing the flow of the relevant literary modes of expression. More specifically, it focuses on the *Tongnip sinmun* (獨立新聞 ‘The Independent’) and *Taehan maeil sinbo* (大韓每日申報 ‘Korean Daily News’). Various debates and discussions have been carried out in the fields of historical studies and journalism alike on the theories of civilization and modernization that emerged during this period, as well as on the perceptions of Western civilization reflected in the media outlets of the day. However, to date, no study has been conducted which has attempted to analyse the perceptions of Western civilization, and the civilization and modernization theories which emerged during the Enlightenment period, from the standpoint of works produced in the classical poetry field of Korean literary studies. To this end, an attempt is made herein to conduct a preparatory analysis of national newspapers during the Enlightenment period in order to identify the general perceptions of Western civilization during this era, while also assessing how these perceptions of Western civilization were reflected and expressed in such literary works.

The perception of Western civilization reflected in the *Tongnip sinmun* and the move towards the transplanting of Western civilization

The forced opening of Chosŏn by Japan in 1876 also had the effect of bringing about the incorporation of the Hermit Kingdom into the capitalist world order. Amidst

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the jostling for positions of influence over Chosŏn being waged by the surrounding powers, Western civilization came to be perceived as an immensely powerful entity, with various modernization-oriented measures established as a means of overcoming the crisis occasioned by the growing encroachment of the Western powers in Asia. At the risk of oversimplifying matters, the main positions adopted in the 1880s by advocates of modernization with regards to the acceptance of Western civilization can be divided into two categories. These can be identified as the group led by the Chosŏn government which called for a continued focus on Confucianism and the acceptance of Western science and technology, or what can be called the 'Eastern ways Western technology (*tongdo sŏgi*)' approach to modernization. Meanwhile the other group, which advocated notions of civilization, was led by those at the forefront of the *Kapsin* coup of 1884. This latter group assumed the position that Western civilization was a universal concept, and as such focused their efforts on imitating and transplanting Western civilization into Korea.¹ To this end, while the former position was clearly reflected in the *Hansŏng sunbo* (漢城旬報) and the *Hansŏng chubo* (漢城周報 'Hansŏng Weekly', October 1883–July 1888), the latter stance held sway over at the *Tongnip sinmun*.

The compilation of the *Hansŏng sunbo* and *Hansŏng chubo* was carried out by an agency called the Pakmun'guk (博文局, Office of Culture and Information), and more specifically by government officials such as Nam Chŏngch'öl and Yŏ Kyuhyŏng. These Confucian scholars from the moderate branch of the Enlightenment group regarded the European nations as having achieved national prosperity and military strength, advanced human knowledge and wisdom through their can-do spirit, achieved cultural renewal, and as having explored universal principles as well as the properties of nature.² They also perceived the European nations as being civilized and superior to all other Asian nations but Japan in terms of their politics, institutions, academic theories, culture, and economies. These individuals also reprinted articles and editorials that had first appeared in Chinese and Japanese newspapers in which the origins of the development of Western civilization were analysed. Such articles claimed that the prosperity of Western nations was rooted in the notion of *sirhak*, or more to the point, in the combination of practical learning and science and technology that made it possible to communicate through telegraph wires, travel by steamship, enhance military power, and to develop all kinds of devices using chemistry. Moreover, they also emphasized the need for Western Learning, pointing out that while Asian countries continued to worship impractical fields of studies, these Western nations had seized the opportunity presented to them and achieved national prosperity and military strength; which had in turn allowed them to subject Asian nations to atrocious humiliations.³ Furthermore, although Confucian scholars currently regarded the study of Western Learning as being a shameful act, these two newspapers continued to adhere to a standpoint which combined a belief in the

importance of science and technology with the notion that everything originated from China. To this end, they argued that such scholars would be ashamed of the fact that they did not study Western Learning if they were to uncover the simple truth that this particular school of thought in effect had its origins in Chinese Learning.⁴ As such, we can surmise that the *Hansŏng sunbo* and *Hansŏng chubo* had a positive perception of the materials aspect of Western civilization, such as in terms of science and technology and institutions, and believed that modernization should be brought about by accepting Western civilization based on the notion of Eastern ways combined with Western technology.

Conversely, the *Tongnip sinmun* (April 1896–December 1899) exposed a deep-rooted belief in the universality of Western civilization and in the need to discard the absoluteness of Confucianism. Thus, in addition to calling for the acceptance of Christianity, which it regarded as the source of Western civilization, the newspaper also believed in the need to transplant the West's modern political systems, cultures, and customs as well as the technological aspects of its civilization. In other words, a comprehensive assimilation of Western civilization became perceived as the most urgent task with regards to the establishment of a modern nation-state. The *Tongnip sinmun*'s position has generally been understood as having been rooted in Chosŏn's first-hand experience of the power of Western capitalist civilization in the form of the victory of Japan, which had already accepted Western civilization, during the Sino-Japanese War. Moreover, this perception was also heavily influenced by the fact that pro-American intellectuals such as Sŏ Chaep'il and Yun Ch'ihŏ, who had experienced Western civilization first-hand through their studies in the United States, were the main actors involved in the publication of the *Tongnip sinmun*. To this end, the motto of the *Tongnip sinmun* was civilization, military strength, and the independence of Chosŏn, and the editorials which appeared in the *Tongnip sinmun* regularly claimed that Western nations had already achieved their mottos. In this regard, the United States was represented as the ideal model of a civilized country. Although only rarely, the *Tongnip sinmun* did from time to time focus public attention on Western powers' imperialist encroachments on weaker states, and urged the government of the Taehan Empire to pay close heed to the moves being made by these Western powers.⁵ Nevertheless, it perceived Western nations as being the model for a universal civilization, and used ideological rhetoric to depict these nations in a positive light. For example, based on the degree of civilization achieved by a particular state, the *Tongnip sinmun* classified the Western nations into civilized countries (England, the United States, Germany, France, and Austria), modernized countries (Japan, Italy, Russia, Denmark, and the Netherlands), semi-modernized countries (Chosŏn, Qing, Thailand, Persia, Myanmar, Turkey, and Egypt), and barbarian states. It claimed that, 'a civilized country establishes laws and regulations, governs the state in a transparent and fair manner, provides freedom to its people, and maintains a level of stability and

prosperity that is comparable to the Yao-Shun (堯舜) Era'.⁶ The United States and European countries classified as being civilized were described as possessing a state system under which the democratic management of the state and human rights were guaranteed.

In addition, the *Tongnip sinmun* also introduced the state management strategies adopted by the so-called 'civilized' countries. To this end, while England was described as a country whose predominant naval power had allowed it to seize control of the seas and to exercise great influence over trade, and as one which was now pursuing the furthering of common interests through the continuation of the *status quo*, the United States was depicted as a country with no territorial ambitions. Described as a paradise, the US was said to rule the public based solely on the rule of law. Moreover, if an island in the Pacific Ocean desired to become a subjugated state, the United States would instead push it towards independence. What's more, it was a country willing to come to the rescue of any weak country invaded by a stronger neighbour, and this even if it meant that the US had to incur great human and economic costs. As such, these two countries were described as just and righteous countries.⁷ However, the inherent limitations of the *Tongnip sinmun's* perception of Western civilization and of its assessment of the international political situation become evident when we consider the fact that this period was one in which these imperialist countries were in reality engaged in a fierce competition with one another to expand their colonies.

Having adopted the United States and European nations as the model of an ideal civilized country, the newspaper went to great lengths to stress the urgent need to accept and transplant all aspects of these relevant countries into Korea, such as their religions, political and educational systems, customs, public health structures, and security systems. Therefore, the poems included in the *Tongnip sinmun* expressed in a clear fashion an optimistic view of a future world in which an independent Chosŏn has achieved a civilization similar to that of the civilized Western countries.

If you raise the national flag in the air/it will shine the world over and even overwhelm
 China
 Of all the independent countries, our independence is the best/
 America's customs and England's strong laws
 Take lessons from these countries/make efforts to establish the best country in the
 world
 Independence for all ages, generations, and for eternity
 (Pak Kiryŏm's *Aegukka*, *Tongnip sinmun*, 1 August 1896)

The above poem consists of a hopeful discourse in which Korea is regarded as having the potential to surpass China and become the world's best nation if it secures independence by achieving civilization and military strength through the learning of US customs and the strong laws of England. However, this kind of poem, which

was written from the standpoint of the other and based on a predetermined future, and although only a slogan, one that is devoid of reality, can be regarded as a form of Orientalism, in that the long historical traditions of the Korean nation are regarded as an illusion or those of a barbarian civilization. This was also the case in another poem, ‘Wake up, wake up from this 4,000 year-old dream’.⁸

The *Taehan maeil sinbo*’s perception of independent civilization and realistic expressions of Western imperialism

The efforts of the radical faction of the Enlightenment group, which had advocated the comprehensive acceptance of Western civilization at the expense of oriental traditions, were effectively dashed with the dissolution of the *Tongnip hyŏphoe* (獨立協會 ‘Independence Club’). It was at this juncture that the civilization theory was reformulated in editorials written by reform-minded Confucian scholars such as Chang Chiyŏn and Pak Ŭnsik of the *Hwangŏng sinmun* (皇城新聞 ‘Capital Gazette’, September 1898–September 1910). The core objectives of the *Hwangŏng sinmun* were to reveal a new approach to the acceptance of Western civilization, which was to be conducted through interactions designed to restructure and reinterpret the theory of Western civilization within oriental traditions, or conversely to interpret the oriental traditions based on the theory of Western civilization.⁹

The civilization strategy adopted by the *Taehan maeil sinbo* (July 1904–August 1910) and reform-oriented Confucian scholars such as Yang Kit’ak, Pak Ŭnsik, and Sin Ch’aeho can also be understood as both a compromise and an interaction between Western and oriental civilization. The *Taehan maeil sinbo* was founded at a time when Japanese encroachment on the Korean peninsula was at its zenith. This newspaper reached its apogee during the period in which Japan secured its supremacy over the Korean peninsula and began its full-fledged attempt to subjugate its neighbour, a period which commenced with the onset of the Russo-Japanese War. It hit another high in popularity in the aftermath of the actual incorporation of the Taehan Empire into the Japanese empire following the Protectorate Treaty of 1905. This period was also one in which the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement, whose objective it was to restore national sovereignty through the education of human resources, was at its peak. Therefore, amidst such circumstances in which the fate of the state was at stake, the *Taehan maeil sinbo* found itself being more focused on the internal dynamics of civilization than on the external imitation of Western civilization. This claim is supported by a look at Mun Ilp’yŏng’s *Theory of Civilization*.¹⁰ According to Mun, the energy of civilizations rotated like the sun, and this energy had originally emanated in the Orient before moving westwards to create what is now Western civilization. Therefore, as Chosŏn’s rites and music were well developed and had at

some point been more advanced than those of China, and its public strictly abided by the five moral imperatives (*oryun*), Korea would someday have the chance to create its own civilized world. Thus, the most important factors in the civilization process were education and enlightenment designed to awaken the latent national spirit. To this end, the main thing that Chosŏn should learn from Western civilization was the education needed in order to inspire the national spirit and patriotism. For example, Bismarck's implementation of an elementary school educational system contributed to the cultivation of the German spirit; Mazzini's focus on youth education had inspired the Italian spirit; and Washington's independent nature had inspired the US spirit of independence. Thus, based on these lessons, the *Taeahan maeil sinbo* adopted a strategy which called for the acceptance of Western civilization through education related to new knowledge and Western laws.¹¹ In other words, although the acceptance of Western civilization was tolerable, what mattered more was the internal motivation of the actors who accepted such Western civilization. Moreover, such acceptance should eventually result in the realization of an independent nation-state. The logic developed by the brains trust of the *Taeahan maeil sinbo* has been regarded as being connected to the emergence of the resistance-oriented nationalism sought in the struggle for survival after Korea was confronted with the brutality of Japanese imperialism.

Therefore, the aspect of Western imperialism captured in the poems included in the *Taeahan maeil sinbo* is not that of a Western civilization viewed through rose-coloured glasses as an ideal model, but rather the achievement of its objectives through the expansion of its military power.

Looking at the international scene, we can see that the Western powers have a tendency to favour imperialism. Some of these powers have decided to manufacture armaments and battleships this year. Others have established a provisional budget to be used next year to expand their military forces and military supplies as part of their preparations to launch wars designed to secure new colonies. Meanwhile, Korea is rife with spies. This situation is deplorable. (Commentary on current issues II, *Taeahan maeil sinbo*, 1 May 1910)

The narrator in the above article, whose tone is dark and woeful, is thoroughly focused on reality at that time. In depicting the tragic situation in Chosŏn he contrasts hordes of spies actively walking around even as Korea finds itself under the influence of a Western imperialism concentrated on preparing for wars designed to secure colonies, and under the military thumb of Japanese imperialist forces. Without making use of any specific literary rhetoric, the narrator manages to provide a realistic description of the general situation at that time. Although not quoted here, the *Taeahan maeil sinbo* also published other poems which made use of satire—some of which compared the imperialist powers to kites, wolves, or coyotes—to remove the mask of civilization and reveal the actual face of the imperialist powers.

Conclusion

Although this study has carried out a general analysis of the perceptions of Western civilization and literary modes of expression reflected in contemporary newspapers during the Enlightenment period, certain regrets persist. While a micro-level analysis of individual periods and media outlets would have revealed various differences and flows in terms of the perceptions of Western civilization, as well as with regards to the characteristics of the literary modes of expressions and aesthetic results linked to these perceptions, such an exercise has not been carried out in this presentation. This remains as a task for the near future. The full scope of the modes used to express the Western civilization reflected in Korean poems and literature will be exposed when comparative studies of the perceptions of Western civilization as reflected in traditional literary genres such as the *kasa*, Chinese poems (*hansi*), and short lyrical poems (*sijo*) produced during this period are carried out.

Notes

1. Chu Chino, 'The formation and establishment of civilization and modernization theories during the late 19th century (*19 segi huban munmyōng kaehwaronūi hyōngsōnggwa chōn'gae*)', in Institute of Korean Studies, Yonsei University, *The Acceptance of Western Culture and the Drive for Modernization (Sōgu munhwaūi suyonggwa kūndae kaehyōk)*, T'aehaksa, 2004; Kim Tohyōng, 'The development of civilization and modernization theories during the early period of the Taehan Empire (*Taehan cheguk ch'ogi munmyōng kaehwaronūi paljōn*)', in *ibid.*
2. '各國近事: 亞細亞洲總論', *Hansōng sunbo*, 8 March 1884.
3. For more on the *Hansōng sunbo* and *Hansōng chubo*, please refer to Kim Minhwan, *History of Korean Journalism (Han'guk ōllonsa)*, Nanam Publishing, 2005; Ch'a Paegūn et al., *The 100-year History of Korean Newspapers (Uri sinmun 100 nyōn)*, Hyōnamsa, 2001; Kil Chinsuk, 'The implications of the theory of civilized-uncivilized worlds as reflected in the *Tongnip sinmun* and *Maeil sinmun (Tongnip sinmun Maeil sinmune suyongdoen munmyōng/yaman tamnonūi ūimi ch'ūngwi)*', in Korea Cultural Research Institute, Ewha Woman's University, *The Acceptance of the Concept of Knowledge during the Enlightenment Period and Changes Therein (Kūndae kyemonggi chisik kaenyōmūi suyonggwa kū pyōnyong)*, Somyōng Publishing, 2005. The passage above was cited from Kil Chinsuk's paper.
4. '私議: 廣學校', *Hansōng chubo*, 11 October 11 1889.
5. For example, see 'The emergence of a crisis', *Tongnip sinmun*, 17 June 1899. 'The degree of Western encroachment in the East has so increased over the past 10 years that we are rapidly approaching a crisis situation in East Asia.' The newspaper also introduced reports first published in Western papers to the effect that Western powers such as Russia, Germany, England, Italy, France, the United States, and Japan intended to conquer China and carve it up amongst themselves, arguing that, 'although this situation is occurring in China, it is closely related to the crisis surrounding the very survival of the Oriental world'.

6. 'Country Rankings', *Tongnip sinmun*, 23 February 23 1899.
7. 'The strategies of countries around the world', *Tongnip sinmun*, 27 February 1899.
8. Yi Chungwŏn, 'Tongsimga', *Tongnip sinmun*, 26 May 1896.
9. Kil Chinsuk, 'The reorganization of civilization and the reinterpretation of oriental tradition: With a special focus on the *Hwangsŏng sinmun* (*Munmyŏngŭi chaegusŏng kŭrigo tongyang chŏnt'ong tamnonŭi chaehaesŏk: hwangsŏng sinmunŭl chungsimŭro*)', in Korea Cultural Research Institute, Ewha Woman's University, *The Discovery of Knowledge and Expansion of Thought Horizons during the Enlightenment Period (Kŭndae kyemonggi chisikŭi palgyŏn'gwa sayu chip'yŏngŭi hwakdae)*, Somyŏng Publishing, 2006, p. 46.
10. Mun Ilp'yŏng, 'Theory of Civilization', *Taehan maeil sinbo*, 9–12 November 1907.
11. Editorial: 'The spirit of Korea', *Taehan maeil sinbo*, 27–29 September 1907.