

The Protestant Work Ethic and the Origin of Korean Enlightenment Nationalism, 1896-1900

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Protestantism

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- *The Independence* (독립신문); 1896-1900



Previous Research: Ethical Nationalism (Wells, 1990)

- Max Weber
- the unintended positive impact of Protestant ethics on the development of capitalism in Europe



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- A conscious and deliberate influence on Korean nationalism
- Protestant reformers in Korea emphasized that inward, ethical, and spiritual transformation—achieved primarily through education—was essential for the prosperity of the Korean nation.



Previous Research: Ethical Nationalism (Wells, 1990)

- “However, the writings and activities of one group of Protestants indicate that Protestants did directly influence the formation of at least one stream of nationalism: *self-reconstruction*, or ethical nationalism... among Protestant reformers the idea gained currency that inward, spiritual and ethical strengthening was required before outward, material strength could be achieved...” (Wells, 1990, pp. 9–10)



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- Wells does not address how Protestant ethics influenced the formation of Enlightenment discourse and Enlightenment nationalism more broadly in the late 1890s



Nationalism

- 이만열, 1980; 1990; 1998
- 조영렬, 2003
- 김영민, 2004
- 옥서준, 2008
- 류대영, 2008



Argument

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- **The Protestant work ethic**—characterized by diligence, self-reliance, and moral reform—provided **conceptual resources or frameworks** for the Independent's diagnosis of the nation's problems, especially its discussion of "**Chosŏn Disease.**" (조선병)



Methods and Primary

Sources

- Employs a comparative textual analysis of *The Korean Christian Advocate* (조선그리스도인회보) and *The Independent* (독립신문)



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- Employs a comparative textual analysis of *The Korean Christian Advocate* (조선그리스도인회보) and *The Independent* (독립신문)
- Examines whether the ethical themes articulated in the Protestant newspaper were reflected in the nationalist discourse of *The Independent*



The Korean Christian Advocate (조선그리스도교인회보, 1897-1900)

- First published in July 1897 by the Methodist Church
- Korea's first Protestant newspaper
- Published twice monthly, it contained editorials, short narratives, didactic essays, and reports on church activities.



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- The newspaper consistently emphasized ethical reform
- Its explicit goal was to instill Protestant values into Korean society



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- The newspaper's prescriptions—labor, education, hygiene, and the reform of customs—closely paralleled Protestant ethical themes



Advocate

- Laziness and Lack of Productive Labor
- Absence of National Self-Reliance; Dependence on Foreign Powers
- Alcohol, Tobacco, Gambling
- Concubinage, Child Marriage, Arbitrary Taxes



Advocate

- Work Ethic (생업)
- Education and Learning, especially Women's education as essential
- Sabbath Observance
- Temperance and Hygiene



The Korean Christian Advocate's Orientation Towards Public Sphere

- Its readers were not limited to Christians; it targeted the broader literate population interested in reform and modernization
- The newspaper's ethical prescriptions not simply as Christian virtues but as universal requirements for a civilized and independent nation



Independent

- The Concept of "Chosŏn Disease" (조선병)
- The term referred to widespread *idleness* and *dependence* (유익유식)



The Discourse of “Chosŏn Disease” In *The Independent*

- The Concept of “Chosŏn Disease” (조선병)
- The term referred to widespread *idleness* and *dependence* (유익유식)
- Korea’s greatest national calamity
- The solution lay in cultivating a diligent, industrious population



Independent

- Livelihood and Labor
- Education and Learning (Universal Literacy and Women's Education)



Independent

- Livelihood and Labor
- Education and Learning (Universal Literacy and Women's Education)
- Reform of Social Customs
- Temperance and Hygiene
- Equality and Women's Rights



Main Findings

- *The Korean Christian Advocate* directly articulated **Protestant critiques** of idleness, concubinage, child marriage, alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and social inequality



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- *The Korean Christian Advocate* directly articulated Protestant critiques of idleness, concubinage, child marriage, alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and social inequality
- *The Independent* translated these Protestant concerns into a nationalist framework by diagnosing widespread idleness as “Chosŏn Disease”
- The close relationship between the two newspapers—through shared personnel, mutual references, and thematic overlap—shows that Protestant ethics were central to shaping reformist discourse



Conclusion

- Not the only source of Enlightenment discourse or Enlightenment nationalism
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- Yu Kil-June's Essays on Western Civilization (서유견문)
- While Enlightenment discourse presented itself as secular and nationalist, its ethical substructure was profoundly shaped by Protestant ethics
- Protestant ethics, the work ethic in particular, served as a moral and conceptual substructure of Enlightenment nationalism



Implications for Understanding Korean Nationalism and Statehood

- The intellectual genealogy of Enlightenment nationalism
- Ahn Chang-ho's emphasis on self-reformation and national capacity
- Lee Kwang-soo's discourse on national-reformation (민족개조론)
- Lee Yong-hee's progressive nationalism (전진적 민족주의)

- Divergent historical appropriations of self-reliance as a foundation for national survival and advancement

