

# From Subjects to Citizens

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Reactions to Samil Undong's Failed Revolution to Reform Korean Statehood



1919

The March First Movement began as a nationwide nonviolent protest against Japanese colonial rule. What seemed like a failed uprising became a turning point in modern Korean history.

## A Revolution Beyond Failure



On March 1, 1919, Koreans declared that Korea was an independent state and that Koreans were a self-governing people. This was more than a protest against the empire. It marked a revolutionary shift in political identity: Koreans no longer imagined themselves only as subjects under a ruler, but as citizens with collective sovereignty.

Although the movement did not win immediate independence, it transformed the meaning of independence itself. The March First Movement became the moment when the nation began to move from hierarchical obedience toward modern citizenship and participation.

## COLONIAL REACTION



After the uprising, Japan replaced military rule with the so-called "Cultural Rule." Though it appeared softer, it actually expanded surveillance, policing, and control. This reaction forced Korean leaders to rethink how independence could be achieved.

## Education and New Citizens



Education and New Citizens Reformers believed that literacy and schooling were essential to national survival.

Night schools taught workers and farmers to read, helping ordinary people understand their rights and resist exploitation.

The movement also supported higher education through campaigns such as the People's National University Movement, which aimed to train future Korean leaders. Education was no longer reserved for elites; it became a tool of citizenship.

## From Protest to Reform



After 1919, many activists shifted from immediate revolution to long-term capacity building.

They argued that independence required a stronger society—educated, disciplined, united, and economically self-reliant.

## WOMEN, MORALITY, AND SOCIAL CHANGE



THE REFORM MOVEMENT ALSO EXPANDED THE MEANING OF CITIZENSHIP. WOMEN GAINED GREATER ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND BEGAN TO CHALLENGE CONFUCIAN GENDER HIERARCHY. THE RISE OF THE "NEW WOMEN" SHOWED THAT NATIONAL STRENGTH DEPENDED ON THE PARTICIPATION OF THE WHOLE POPULATION.

AT THE SAME TIME, GROUPS SUCH AS THE YOUNG KOREAN ACADEMY AND THE YMCA PROMOTED HONESTY, DISCIPLINE, RESPONSIBILITY, AND SELF-CULTIVATION. REFORM WAS NOT ONLY POLITICAL—IT AIMED TO CREATE MORALLY RESPONSIBLE MODERN CITIZENS.



CULTURE AND ECONOMIC SELF-STRENGTHENING KOREAN ACTIVISTS ALSO DEFENDED THE NATION THROUGH EVERYDAY PRACTICE.

LANGUAGE PRESERVATION PROJECTS, INCLUDING THE GRAND KOREAN DICTIONARY, PROTECTED KOREAN IDENTITY FROM COLONIAL ERASURE. ECONOMIC CAMPAIGNS SUCH AS THE JOSEON PRODUCTS PROMOTION MOVEMENT ENCOURAGED PEOPLE TO BUY KOREAN-MADE GOODS AND REDUCE DEPENDENCE ON JAPAN. IN THIS WAY, NATION-BUILDING ENTERED DAILY LIFE THROUGH LANGUAGE, EDUCATION, AND CONSUMPTION.

### Conclusion

The March First Movement failed to achieve independence in 1919, but it reshaped Korean nationalism.

Its legacy lies in turning mass protest into a broader project of reform—one that helped transform Koreans from subjects into citizens.



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