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# The Process of Democratization in Asia in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries: A Perspective from The Constitutionalist Movements in Several Asian Countries

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## Abstract

Alongside reform movements, constitutionalist movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constituted important foundational building blocks for the process of democratization in Asia. The penetration of Western powers and the collapse of traditional absolutist monarchical orders were not merely military defeats but also reflected the backwardness of existing power structures. Asia faced an existential crisis concerning its institutional models. In that context, reform and constitutionalist movements emerged as a “salvational” solution enabling countries to escape the imposition and constraints of Western powers, achieve independence, strengthen national autonomy, and modernize the nation-state.

**Keywords:** Constitution, Constitutionalism, Democratization, Asia, Reform

## 1. Introduction

The process of democratization in Asia is often viewed by Western scholars as an outcome of the “decolonization” process following the Second World War. However, such an approach inadvertently overlooks a crucial transitional period during which the first seeds of democratic thought and modern rule-of-law ideas were cultivated – namely, the reform and constitutionalist movements in Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Despite their varying moments of success and failure, the constitutionalist movements demonstrate that Asian nations were actively striving, step by step, to “seek a path” of adaptation in response to the “storms” brought about by Western capitalism. This was a period when Asia was no longer merely a passive entity under the pressure of imperialism, but began a process of self-reform and self-renewal in order to find a path toward survival and development.

This study examines the impacts of constitutionalist movements on the process of modernization in Asia during the critical period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thereby highlighting the transformation of political thought, the modes of synthesis between traditional Eastern elements and modern Western culture, and the formation of foundational factors for future democratic models.

## 2. Historical Context of Asia in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

From the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, Western powers intensified their intervention in and colonization of Eastern countries. Asia was no longer tranquil. From the Bosphorus Strait to the islands of Japan, long-standing feudal dynasties were compelled to confront a harsh reality: the expansion of Western colonialism, backed by the power of “iron ships and muskets.” For Asian nations, “colonialism primarily meant invasion, domination, oppression, and exploitation by Western European capitalism,” yet at the same time, “it also served as a means of disseminating and spreading the influence of a new model of development” (Pham, 2007). The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked the most “vigorous” phase of Western colonialism, drawing the entire world into its vortex through trade, missionary activities, and colonization (Pham, 2007). This wave brought about profound transformations in both the infrastructure and the superstructure of Asian countries. Never before had elements of Western culture exerted such deep and wide-ranging influence, overturning the traditional cultural order of the East as they did during this historical period.

Such historical realities placed Asian societies before a profound “crisis” of perception. People began to question the beliefs on which they had placed their trust for thousands of years, hesitating between rejecting and embracing new ideas. Yet it was precisely in this period of turmoil that rigid patterns of thought gradually began to loosen. Asians increasingly took the initiative to study the West, seeking to understand what made Western societies stronger, why they were victorious, and how they managed to dominate others. As a result, intellectuals from both traditional and modern educational backgrounds, as well as progressive patriots in general, came to recognize that the superiority of the West over the East did not stem solely from disparities in technology or weaponry; rather, it also derived from differences in political and legal institutions.

When sovereignty was eroded and state capacity weakened, progressive patriots realized that the task of “national reconstruction” could not be resolved merely through loyalty to the monarch or through periodic administrative reforms and moral cultivation among rulers and officials. Instead, it required a new institutional design in political thought. As Sun Yat-sen once stated: “*The tide of the world is surging forward. Those who follow it will survive; those who resist it will perish.*” (Sun Yat-sen, 1962, as cited in Nguyen, 2001, p.221). Similarly, Phạm Quỳnh argued that: “*The world today does not consist solely of the culture of East Asia; it also includes the culture of Western Europe, and this culture possesses a strong and overwhelming vitality. In order to survive in the present age, one cannot but selectively follow it.*” (Pham Quynh, 1925/2001, p.77).

In that context, reform movements inspired by Western models emerged in many Asian countries - including colonies, semi-colonies, and independent states - with the aspiration of strengthening their nation-states, securing or consolidating independence, and achieving national self-reliance. Alongside reforms in the fields of economy, education, and science and technology, reformist thinkers also advocated transforming political institutions in accordance with the model of Western bourgeois states, with the aim of turning their countries into powerful nations comparable to those of Europe and America.

Within this agenda of political reform, a dominant line of thought maintained that the strength of Western countries derived from the existence of parliaments and constitutions serving as foundational pillars, preventing monarchs from exercising arbitrary power while providing the people with a forum to express their views and participate in governing the country - thereby realizing the principle of “shared governance between the ruler and the people.” Consequently, constitutionalist movements erupted and spread across many Asian countries, bringing about significant changes in the political consciousness and thinking of their peoples, while simultaneously promoting national liberation movements as well as the broader process of democratization throughout the region.

## 3. Constitutional Movements in Several Asian Countries in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

### 3.1. The Constitutional Movement in the Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire was regarded as the “eldest brother” of the Islamic world, and it was the place where the reform movement in Asia, as well as in the Islamic world of West Asia, first began. This reform movement served as a model reform movement for the entire Islamic world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The “Gulhane Edict”, promulgated by the Royal Court in 1839, initiated the “Tanzimat” era - “Reorganization” (1839 - 1876) with the purpose of reforming the Ottoman Empire under the patronage of Western powers, aiming to redistribute the Sultan’s powers to a newly established government following the European-style constitutional monarchy model. Reforms were carried out in many fields, including politics and law, education, the military, and the economy. At the same time, there was a fierce struggle between the reformist faction and Islamic conservative forces over the promulgation of a constitution. After numerous efforts and under the pressure of Midhat Pasha, the leader of the reformist faction, in October 1876, Sultan Abdul Hamid II promulgated the Electoral Law, and in December 1876, the Ottoman Constitution was promulgated. The official promulgation of the constitution ushered in a new historical period, namely the First Constitutional Era (1876 - 1878) and later the Second Constitutional Era (1908 - 1922). This was the first modern constitution in Asia and the Islamic world.

The Constitution of 1876 established the legal foundation for a constitutional monarchy in the Ottoman Empire. This constitution is considered to have been significantly influenced by the Prussian Constitution, but it was adjusted to suit the characteristics of an Islamic state. First, the constitution affirmed the indivisible unity of the empire, and the Ottoman Sultan, bearing the title “Supreme Caliph,” was the head of the state and the leader of Islam, possessing extensive powers in both domestic and foreign affairs. However, the Ottoman Sultan's powers were limited by the constitution and the law. Second, the constitution recognized the rights of “Ottoman citizens,” including equality before the law for all citizens holding Ottoman nationality regardless of religion, the right to personal liberty, the inviolability of the person and residence, and the right to vote and to stand for election. Islam was established as the state religion, but other religions were guaranteed freedom of practice, and freedom of the press was guaranteed within the framework of the law. Third, the constitution stipulated the organizational structure and operation of the Government, the Parliament, and the Courts, according to the principle of the distribution of powers, modeled on Western bourgeois states (Brown, 2014). The constitution reflected an effort to reconcile traditional Islamic culture with elements of Western European democracy.

On 19 March 1877, the first Ottoman Parliament was officially convened. However, it existed only for a short time and was dissolved in February 1878. It was not until 1908, under the impact of the development of the Young Turk Revolution, that the constitution was restored, and the Parliament was reconvened, bringing the Ottoman Empire into the Second Constitutional Era (1908 - 1922). Although short-lived, the Ottoman Constitution of 1876 left a profound historical legacy. It was the first modern written constitution of the Islamic world, and it promoted the spread of constitutional movements in West Asia, most notably the Iranian Constitutional Movement (1905 - 1911).

### 3.2. *The Constitutional Movement in Japan*

In 1868, after the collapse of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Emperor Meiji ascended the throne and regained effective imperial authority. With the promulgation of the “Five-Article Oath” and the “Charter of Government” in 1868, Japan began a comprehensive reform process in political, economic, social, and educational spheres with the objective of achieving “*national independence and gradually attaining equality with Western powers*” (Hung, 2012, p.248). At the same time, with the development of capitalist relations in Japan, bourgeois democratic ideas also penetrated and increasingly developed, giving rise to political struggles among various social strata and political parties demanding the establishment of a parliament and the promulgation of a constitution. In order to appease the public, the Meiji government announced the fundamental policy for drafting a constitution and promised that after ten years (in 1890), a parliament would be convened (Hung, 2012, p.266).

During this process, the question of which constitutional model Japan should adopt, how to harmoniously combine Euro-American constitutionalism with traditional culture, and how to draft a constitution suitable to Japan’s national conditions became the central subject of debate among different political forces at that time. According to Professor Saburo Ienaga’s statistics in *Studies on the History of Modern Constitutional Thought in Japan*, more than 50 constitutional drafts were proposed by the government, political parties, or individuals (Han Dai Nguyen,

2009). As a result of this process, on 11 February 1889, the constitution was promulgated under the official title *Dai Nihon Teikoku Kenpō* (The Constitution of the Empire of Japan). The Meiji Constitution of 1889 became the most important legal foundation regulating the organization of state power in Japan's constitutional monarchy from 1889 to 1946.

The constitution consisted of 76 articles and first affirmed that "*the Imperial line shall reign over Japan eternally. The Emperor was defined as the head of state who possessed supreme governing authority and exercised that authority in accordance with the provisions of the constitution*" (Blaustein & Sigler, 2013, pp.446 - 447). This meant that the Emperor's powers were limited by the constitution. The constitution also stipulated the rights and duties of subjects, including freedom of speech and association, the inviolability of the person, residence, and correspondence, as well as the rights to vote and to stand for election. However, all these rights were exercised "in accordance with the provisions of law." The Imperial Diet consisted of two chambers: the *Shūgiin* (House of Representatives, the lower house) and the *Kizokuin* (House of Peers, the upper house). Within the government, the Privy Council served as an advisory body to the Emperor, while ministers assisted the Emperor and were responsible to him. The courts exercised judicial power in accordance with the law (Blaustein & Sigler, 2013, pp.449 - 455).

The constitution officially took effect in 1890. Although it still granted extensive authority to the Emperor, that authority was limited by the constitution, the law, and other state organs. The constitution formally established a constitutional monarchy in Japan. It was the second constitution in Asia (after the Ottoman Constitution of 1876), but it was the first constitution in Asia to be effectively implemented, exerting significant influence on constitutional movements in East Asia in the early twentieth century.

### 3.3. *The Constitutional Movement in China*

From the mid-nineteenth century, after Western powers launched military attacks, China was transformed from an independent country into a semi-colonial state. Under the influence of Western democratic thought and inspired by Japan's success, particularly after China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894 - 1895), reform movements known as "Institutional Reform" and "Modernization" intensified. During the Hundred Days' Reform (1898), China's constitutional movement was initiated and gradually expanded, attracting many progressive thinkers of the time. They proposed a political program advocating "*proximity to the people's rights, the pursuit of democracy, the establishment of a parliament, and the promulgation of a constitution.*" (Truong & Tang, 1979, p.16). Two main factions emerged within the constitutional movement. The monarchist reformists, led by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, advocated that the Qing dynasty adopt a constitutional monarchy modeled on European countries and Japan. In contrast, the democratic faction, led by Sun Yat-sen, founder of the *Tongmenghui* (Revolutionary Alliance), sought to overthrow the feudal monarchy and establish a republic with a constitution guaranteeing the people's rights.

Under strong pressure from reformist intellectuals, the populace, and Western powers, the Qing court in 1908 promulgated the first constitutional document in Chinese history, *the Outline of the Imperial Constitution (Qinding Xianfa Dagang)*. This constitution was based on the principle that power was centralized in the imperial court, yet it formally recognized several basic rights of subjects, such as freedom of speech, writing, publication, and association; protection from arbitrary arrest and detention (except as provided by law); and other rights as stipulated by law (Truong & Tang, 1979, p.297). However, equality before the law was not recognized. This document was the first constitution and also the only constitutional monarchy constitution in Chinese history. Although it contained many limitations and was not effectively implemented, it nevertheless represented a significant breakthrough in the thousands-year history of China's feudal autocratic rule.

In October 1911, the Xinhai Revolution overthrew the Qing dynasty and established the Republic of China, creating a republican political system. As Provisional President, Sun Yat-sen promulgated "*the Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China*" on 11 March 1912. This was the first constitution of a democratic China and the first democratic constitution in Chinese constitutional history. The constitution was influenced by Sun Yat-sen's doctrine of people's rights and by Western constitutional models. It stipulated the fundamental principles

of a bourgeois democratic republic, basic civil rights, and the organization and functioning of state power according to the principles of separation of powers and cabinet government. Legally, this constitution brought an end to thousands of years of absolute monarchy in China and affirmed the sovereignty of the Chinese people, stating that: “*The Republic of China is organized by the Chinese people; sovereignty of the Republic of China belongs to the entire citizenry*” (Truong & Tang, 1979, pp.299 - 300). However, subsequent political upheavals led Sun Yat-sen to resign in favor of Yuan Shikai, after which China fell into a period of authoritarian rule under Yuan Shikai and later warlord regimes.

### 3.4. *The Constitutional Movement in Vietnam*

At the end of the nineteenth century, Vietnam was invaded and occupied by France and became a semi-feudal colonial country. At the beginning of the twentieth century, under the influence of the wave of New Texts (Tân thư) from China, together with the resonance of the Meiji Restoration in Japan, reform and constitutional movements emerged among many prominent thinkers, including Phan Chu Trinh, Phan Bội Châu, Phạm Quỳnh, Bùi Quang Chiêu, Phan Văn Trường, and Nguyễn An Ninh. Similar to China, in Vietnam, there were two major tendencies: promulgating a constitution to establish a constitutional monarchy and promulgating a constitution to establish a democratic republic.

A typical representative of the constitutional monarchy tendency was Phan Bội Châu and Phạm Quỳnh. Phan Bội Châu was the initiator of the Đông Du (Go East) movement, and he advocated constitutionalism in order to establish a monarchical model similar to that of Japan. He regarded Japan as “a mirror” for Vietnam: “*Japan’s example, a land of East Asia / Our mirror we must look into together lest we go astray*”; “*Establishing a Constitution since the beginning of the Meiji era / In forty years the people’s intellect has expanded*” (Phan, 1990, p. 71). In the program of the Vietnam Duy Tân Association, the objective was also defined as: “*to overthrow France, restore Vietnam, and establish a constitutional monarchy*” (Phan, 1990, p. 112). The method for building a constitutional monarchy was to seek assistance from Japan, then, together with the people, use force to expel France and establish an independent nation.

Phạm Quỳnh was a prominent scholar and cultural figure and the editor-in-chief of *Nam Phong Magazine* in the early twentieth century. He advocated the establishment of a tripartite constitutional monarchy model, which would ensure democratic rights for the Vietnamese people, the governing authority of the Vietnamese Emperor, and the protectorate authority of the French Government, with the aim of building an autonomous state within the French Union. However, unlike Phan Bội Châu, Phạm Quỳnh pursued a political orientation that relied on the French Government, granting the Huế court and the people the right of self-determination, and then gradually building an independent and autonomous constitutional monarchy.

The second constitutional tendency aimed to establish a republic and to emphasize the people’s rights. A typical representative of this tendency was the thought of Phan Chu Trinh, a pioneering patriot in the Duy Tân movement of the early twentieth century, well known for the slogan: “*to enlighten the people’s intellect, to invigorate the people’s spirit, and to improve the people’s livelihood.*” He strongly opposed the establishment of a constitutional monarchy and instead aimed at establishing a republic and expanding people’s rights. He argued: “*If the monarchy cannot be destroyed, then even if the country is restored, it will not bring happiness to the people*”. “*People’s rights must be advocated; once the people possess rights, they will be able to accomplish whatever they wish.*” (Vietnam National University, 1997, p.490). However, the path he chose toward a democratic republic was a “peaceful” and “non-violent” approach, relying on France and gradually enlightening the people’s intellect, invigorating the people’s spirit, and improving the people’s livelihood. He repeatedly expressed his views in the hope of receiving support and assistance from the French. Reading his works reveals the hope he placed in the French. However, this was perhaps an unrealistic expectation in the specific historical context of Vietnam at that time.

Besides the aforementioned thinkers, from the 1920s and 1930s, many political parties and individuals also proposed constitutional doctrines in Vietnam, such as the Constitutionalist Party in Cochinchina, the Vietnamese

Nationalist Party, and the “Ngũ Long An Nam” group. Unfortunately, prior to the August Revolution of 1945, Vietnam had not yet officially promulgated any constitution.

#### 4. The Impact of Constitutional Movements on the Process of Democratization in Asia

The reform movements oriented toward constitutionalism took place across a wide range of Asian countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was one of the important transformations in the political and legal superstructure of the Eastern region under the impact of Western capitalist penetration. Although this movement resembled a rainbow with different shades of light and darkness, it nevertheless painted a new horizon for the history of Asian nations. “Asia awakened” and began to move in step with the historical trend of humanity, democracy, and progress.

First, in essence, this was a transitional period of transformation in thinking about political institutions, shifting from the conception of “monarchy” to “democracy”, and from “divine authority and monarchic authority” to “people’s sovereignty.” As mentioned above, Asia during this period was a place of “collision” between Western and Eastern civilizations, as Phạm Quỳnh described: *“We stand at the frontier of two civilizations. Eastern civilization is old, but it is our own heritage, and we cannot bear to abandon it; Western civilization is new but comes from outside, and it is difficult to fully embrace it. Thus, many people remain hesitant about whether to completely abandon the old and follow the new... Perhaps the best way is to reconcile the old and the new so that both may be preserved”* (Pham, 2016, p. 603). Both Islamic scholars (such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani) and Confucian scholars (such as Liang Qichao and Phạm Quỳnh) confronted the same question: *How can modernization be achieved without losing cultural roots?* This context reflected the intellectual struggle among constitutional thinkers of the period between the constitutional monarchy faction, which sought to preserve traditional monarchical political culture, and the constitutional republican faction, which advocated the establishment of a bourgeois democratic republic, granting sovereignty to the people.

The developments of constitutional movements across Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries clearly reflected this transitional reality. A common feature among many countries was the initial dominance and spread of constitutional monarchy ideas. The first official constitutions promulgated in countries such as the Ottoman Empire, Japan, and China were all oriented toward preserving the monarchical institution while limiting the monarch's power. They sought to reconcile the two political-legal cultures of East and West within their societies.

However, except in Japan and Thailand, the failure of the “pro-monarchy” movements advocating constitutional monarchy, together with the realities of colonial rule and the development of revolutionary movements, led to the increasing ascendancy of the constitutional republican-democratic tendency. A typical example is China. After the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, the Qing dynasty collapsed, the Republic of China was established, and the Provisional Constitution of 1912 was promulgated, which completely transformed the thinking of both intellectuals and the Chinese people. They broke with the monarchy that had been deeply embedded in society for generations and accepted an entirely new political mindset: democratic republicanism was legitimate, while monarchy was illegitimate. The revolutionary Ngô Ngọc Chương, who participated in the Xinhai Revolution, later stated: *“Previously, the emperor called himself the Son of Heaven. If anyone said that the emperor was tyrannical and could be overthrown, people would certainly regard that person as insane. Sun Yat-sen was once regarded as such a madman. However, after the Xinhai Revolution, anyone who wished to become emperor or supported someone becoming emperor was considered insane.”* (Tang, 1982, p.79).

At the same time, this process also reflected a transformation in the concept of political power, shifting from “divine authority” to “people’s sovereignty,” and from “royal law” to “constitutional law.” The constitutional movement contributed to the “desacralization” of state power in Asia. For thousands of years since the establishment of their states, monarchs had been sacralized, regarded as messengers of supreme deities entrusted with the mission of governing and guiding the people, such as the Son of Heaven in China, Vietnam, and Japan, or the Caliphs and Sultans in Islamic countries. Therefore, their authority was believed to originate from a sacred divine source, and legally, almost no limitations were imposed upon the power of emperors. With the emergence

of constitutional movements, even where the aim was to establish constitutional monarchies that still granted considerable authority to monarchs, as seen in the Ottoman Constitution or the Meiji Constitution, a fundamental change had occurred: the power of the monarch was no longer unlimited but was restricted by the supreme legal document, the constitution. Monarchs were required to swear an oath before the nation to obey the Constitution. This represented a symbolic victory of the rule of law, breaking the deeply entrenched conception of “divine authority and monarchic authority” in the consciousness of Eastern societies.

At the same time, under the influence of the Western doctrine of popular sovereignty, constitutional thinkers advocating the establishment of democratic republican institutions in Asia, such as Sun Yat-sen, Song Jiaoren, and Phan Chu Trinh, aimed to completely abolish the monarchy and transfer state power to the people, enabling the people to become the masters of their own country. The constitutions of the Republic of China from 1912 onward affirmed a supreme principle: “*The Republic of China is organized by the people; the sovereignty of the Republic of China belongs to the entire citizenry.*” This represented a true revolution in political thinking in the Eastern world, laying the first foundations for the later process of democratization. Without limiting monarchical power by constitution and law, without recognizing that state power belongs to the people, and without acknowledging that the people are the supreme holders of state power who determine the destiny of the nation and their own lives, there could be no space for the emergence of democratic institutions in the future.

Second, after the constitutional movements, “constitution” and “constitutional governance” became standards ensuring the legitimacy of new progressive political institutions in Asian countries. From the constitutional movements across Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whether successful or unsuccessful, whether oriented toward constitutional monarchy or republicanism, the ultimate goal was always the promulgation of a constitution. This was because reformers had come to recognize the extraordinary importance of the constitution in political and social life. The constitutions of the bourgeois states they studied always stipulated fundamental principles in the organization of state power, particularly the principles of the rule of law and separation of powers, ensuring that state power could not be concentrated entirely in the hands of a single individual but must be distributed among the Parliament, the Government, and the Courts, and that all subjects including the monarch must obey the constitution and the law. At the same time, the constitution clearly defined the powers and responsibilities of state authorities and the rights of the people. It was regarded as the supreme legal document of a nation, establishing the most fundamental principles for organizing state power, governing society, and operating the political system. Therefore, promulgating a constitution and building a political system based on constitutional foundations became an important criterion for Eastern nations in their search for a path toward civilization and modernization. Constitution-making, elections, and the convening of parliaments became a “measure” of the legitimacy of a government and the progress of a nation. From this point onward, governments, whether monarchical, republican, or colonial, had to justify their legitimacy through constitutional language, such as rights, representation, rule of law, constitution, and parliament. Even military regimes or anti-democratic forces often had to legalize their actions and objectives through constitutions or constitutional amendments. This demonstrates that state power in Asia had been drawn into a new standard of legitimacy, constitutional legality.

Third, constitutional movements initially established the fundamental institutional foundations of democratic systems. Electoral laws were promulgated in some countries, and parliaments were convened. State institutions were organized according to the principle of separation of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, following the model of bourgeois states. Although in practice the operation of these institutions, such as electoral systems, voter qualifications, and the representative character of parliaments in Asian countries, including independent states and colonial or semi-colonial territories, remained very limited, formalistic, and sometimes manipulated to serve the interests of Western powers or local ruling elites, they nevertheless marked an important transformation in the structure of state power in traditional Eastern monarchies. Parliaments appeared for the first time in Asia, representing the will of the people rather than the will of the monarch, and became public political arenas for debate, breaking the isolation of royal courts that had been surrounded by “high walls and deep moats” for thousands of years. Whether it was the Ottoman Parliament of 1877, the Japanese Parliament of 1890, the Iranian Parliament of 1906, or the Parliament of the Republic of China in 1913, regardless of whether they lasted long or were dissolved quickly, they all became symbols of legitimacy and representation of the people. They planted in the hearts of the people a belief in representative institutions and the understanding that national affairs

must be discussed publicly and must reflect the will of the people. All these elements helped to create a basic institutional framework for democratic politics in Asia in later periods. Constitutional activities in Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have therefore been described as “early laboratories” for experimenting with and cultivating the elements necessary for future democratic systems.

Fourth, constitutional movements formed a system of political concepts and vocabulary for the new democratic order in Asia. During the process of initiating and carrying out constitutional activities, progressive thinkers developed a new system of political concepts and terminology in the East, such as republic, democracy, people’s rights, constitutionalism, constitution, freedom, equality, representation, parliamentarian, voter, election, citizen, and civil rights. These concepts and political language associated with democracy were created by thinkers through the process of receiving and assimilating the values of Western civilization, and they became normative ideas shaping the struggles of Asian peoples. Without thinkers such as Liang Qichao, Sun Yat-sen, Phan Chu Trinh, Phạm Quỳnh, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, and Ueki Tomori, it would have been impossible to translate and transmit Western political terminology into the languages of Asian societies. Once these concepts were translated and debated in newspapers, schools, parliamentary forums, and associations, they gradually became legitimized, forming a new political vocabulary for discussing state power and democracy in Asian countries.

Fifth, constitutional movements created a broad public sphere and a class of professional political activists in Asia in the early twentieth century. By advocating that fundamental human and citizen rights must be recognized in constitutions, and because many constitutions indeed recognized such rights to varying degrees, a legal foundation was created for Asian peoples to struggle for their rights of self-government. In particular, rights such as freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of publication, and freedom of speech helped make the activities of intellectuals, patriots, and revolutionaries appear “constitutional” and “legal.” This created a favorable political environment for the spread of progressive ideas and the mobilization of patriotic and democratic movements. From the late nineteenth century and especially the early twentieth century, across Asia, there was an explosion of publishing houses, newspapers, political parties, and socio-political organizations. These new forums, fronts, and methods were described as “uncrowned parliaments” in the struggle for democracy, contributing to the formation of modern political culture in Asian countries. Within these constitutional and reform movements, a new class of intellectuals gradually emerged in Asian societies, possessing experience in parliamentary practice and legal argumentation, and this class would later play an important role in revolutionary struggles and constitutional developments in subsequent periods.

## 5. Conclusion

The constitutional movements in Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not merely immediate reactions to the penetration of the West; rather, they represented a revolution in the political thinking of Eastern societies. Despite geographical distance and differences in religion, ideology, culture, and race, the constitutional movements of this period all expressed the aspiration of Asian nations to self-strengthen and integrate. In the context of Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the reform and constitutional movements can be regarded as a great search for a path forward. From the efforts of the Ottoman people and the Islamic world to reconcile Islam with democracy, to the aspirations for reform and renewal among the scholarly of China and Vietnam, and to the Meiji Restoration in Japan, all these movements generated a profound value, namely, the awakening of national consciousness. This constituted the first great rehearsal, which, although it may not have fully succeeded in establishing a complete democratic system, nevertheless succeeded in “implanting the genetic code of democracy into the political body of Asia.”

At the same time, together with the reform movements, constitutional movements in many countries created a spillover effect across different regions. The reform and constitutional movement of the Ottoman Empire became a banner for Islamic countries in West Asia. The Meiji movement and the Japanese Constitution became a model for East Asian countries sharing common regional and cultural ties, serving as “*a typical model of the Asian reform movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries*” (Nguyen, 2007, p.51). Constitutional models in different countries spread through translation, overseas study, the press, and intellectual networks. Many studies indicate that Asian constitutions were influenced by European constitutions (such as those of Belgium, Prussia,

and France). However, this influence did not occur through a direct transmission. In East and Southeast Asia, Japan became an intermediary node in the process of learning from the West, leading to Japanese experiences being widely accepted as a normative model for Asia. Similarly, the Ottoman Constitution of 1876 and the Ottoman experience of constitutionalism became an important reference within the Islamic world, as they demonstrated the possibility of combining modern concepts (parliament, rights, constitution) with the legitimacy of Islam, thereby opening the way for constitutional debates in other Islamic countries during the twentieth century.

Although there were both successes and painful failures, the seeds planted by the constitutional movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became the premises for national liberation revolutions and the process of democratization in Asia throughout the twentieth century.

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