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Special Issue

The Hierarchy-Oriented Bureaucracy of South Korea: A Type of Neo-Weberian State?

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This paper explores the evolution and operational dynamics of South Korea's bureaucracy through the lens of a neo-Weberian state (NWS) model. It argues that South Korea's bureaucratic system, which is deeply rooted in Confucian hierarchical principles, has uniquely adapted to modern administrative challenges and reforms influenced by new public management (NPM) ideologies. This paper traces the historical trajectory from the Confucian meritocracy of the Chosŏn Dynasty to the contemporary handling of the COVID-19 crisis, encompassing various significant reform periods, with a focus on hierarchy variations: H1, H2, and H3. This analysis highlights how South Korea's bureaucracy has managed to maintain efficiency and effectiveness while integrating market-driven and performance-oriented reforms. Furthermore, this paper discusses the bureaucratic response to "wicked problems"—complex social issues requiring multifaceted and innovative solutions—and demonstrates the bureaucracy's adaptability in times of crisis. This is illustrated via an examination of key case studies, including the rapid implementation of COVID-19 drive-through testing centers, thereby showcasing the bureaucracy's agility and effectiveness in crisis management. This paper ultimately supports the view that, despite global trends toward decentralization and deregulation, a strong hierarchical bureaucracy can effectively meet contemporary governance challenges, reflecting a distinctive NWS approach.

I. Introduction: South Korea, An Administrative State

South Korea's rapid economic advancement and administrative evolution provide a compelling context for examining the role and resilience of its bureaucratic systems. This paper delves into the South Korean bureaucracy's transformation from a strictly hierarchical Confucian framework, prevalent during the Chosŏn Dynasty, to a modern administrative entity, which has engendered a state experiencing rapid economic growth and social progress.

This study critically assesses how the ingrained hierarchical structure of South Korean bureaucracy contrasts with and adapts to new public management (NPM) principles and democratic governance norms. Despite global shifts toward market-oriented governance and decentralized management, South Korea presents an intriguing case of a bureaucracy that has not only preserved its hierarchical roots but also capitalized on them to effectively address contemporary administrative and social challenges.

Historically, the South Korean bureaucracy was characterized by a stringent meritocratic system underpinned by Confucian values, which emphasized ethical governance and structured social order. The financial crisis of 1997 and the subsequent pressures of globalization necessitated a reevaluation of this traditional bureaucratic model. NPM approaches were introduced with the objective of enhancing efficiency and responsiveness through market-driven reforms and performance metrics. However, unlike many countries where NPM led to the dilution of bureaucratic influence, in South Korea, it catalyzed an adaptive transformation, integrating new management practices while retaining hierarchical advantages.

This paper argues that the resultant neo-Weberian state (NWS) in South Korea exemplifies how traditional bureaucracy can evolve to meet modern demands without relinquishing its fundamental characteristics and strengths. Through a detailed examination of policy responses, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper illustrates how hierarchical control combined with adaptive reform measures has enabled rapid, effective decision-making and implementation. By exploring these dynamics, the study provides insights into hierarchical bureaucracies' potential to navigate the complexities of contemporary governance and crisis management, challenging prevailing perceptions about bureaucratic systems in the current digital, globalized era. The South Korean form of bureaucracy may be an alternative to the agile government structure discussed in this paper, especially in times of crisis (such as the COVID-19 pandemic).

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II. "Modern" Bureaucracy Implemented Through the Confucian State in the Korean Peninsula in premodern era: H1

Korea is a country with over 3,000 years of history, ruled by kings supported by a strong bureaucracy recruited on the basis of civil service examinations that can be traced back to 788 AC.[1] Geographically isolated from China, the Korean peninsula has fostered its own type of meritocracy in the ruling elite. The basic concept of governance in present-day South Korea is primarily rooted in Confucian religio-political ideology, which gained official recognition during the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1910). Rather than viewing the government as a contractual arrangement between the rulers and the ruled, it is seen as a natural institution aimed at maintaining a harmonious relationship between the elite and the masses within an authoritative hierarchical social order (H.-U. Lee, 2007). A virtuous government ensures the maintenance of proper relations between the elite and the masses, and the Confucian standard for evaluating good governance is anchored in ethical relations. Consequently, Confucian governance is based not only on the rule of "law" but also on a "prescribed code of ethics," whereby rulers rule through their moral virtue. An ideal ruler, such as a sage king or a scholar-official, should possess virtue, intelligence, and strong authority, which would allow them to maintain a bureaucracy that is both hierarchical and benevolent (B.-R. Park, 2017).

During the Chosŏn period, both the rank-in-person and rank-in-position approaches were used in personnel administration. According to the rank-in-person framework, bureaucrats could get a rank within the hierarchybased on personal qualifications, such as academic credentials or seniority (Cha, 2018). The terms used to denote "rank" include 品階, 散階, and 資級, which served as the criteria for grading and organizing civil servants. The distinction between rank and position must be emphasized. Rank and position were completely separate; thus, individuals could be considered for a position even if they did not currently hold one. Rank in person was a minimum requirement to be placed in the same ranked position. This divergence from the modern bureaucratic system marks a significant difference, highlighting the unique features of personnel administration during the Chosŏn period.

Furthermore, the Chosŏn Dynasty possessed a well-known form of recruitment system, used in the premodern state in Korea, called *kwageo* (科擧). This reflected merit principles as an open competitive examination measuring candidates' competence of ethical traits that had been trained with Confucianism (Cha, 2018). Thus, historically, South Korea's merit principles were not originally imported from the United States or transplanted from Japan during the colonial period; rather, they were indigenous to a certain degree, even though they originated from China.

Most bureaucrats entered through the open competitive civil service examination. Moreover, someone who had already become a low-ranking official as a reward for his father's contribution had to pass the examination to be promoted (Won, 2011). The basic principle of recruitment was clear: ability demonstrated through the competitive examination. There was equality of opportunity, at least officially. By law, the examinations were open to all candidates, not just members of the serf class. After passing the preliminary examination, candidates could take an annual examination or an irregular one.

In addition to the existing personnel management structures, appraisal methods were introduced, particularly the Law of Job Performance Evaluation (循資法). This evaluation occurred every six months, with incumbents being rated as "top, middle, and bottom." By accumulating the "top" grade over three evaluation cycles, an individual could achieve a higher personal rank. This evaluation depended on factors such as daily attendance (考功) and an overall assessment of one's work performance by the supervisor (褒貶). These regular evaluations played a pivotal role in determining an individual's career trajectory within the bureaucratic framework (Cha, 2021).

Personal rank, which was a kind of merit, assigned the responsibility and qualification of the role to the individual. The precedence of personal rank over position rank was the operating principle of hierarchical bureaucracy, which guaranteed the efficiency of this form of bureaucracy even in the premodern era.

Along with the personnel management system, the organizational structure and principles were also very rational. Following the form of an ancient Chinese government, the government of the Chosŏn Dynasty was divided into six ministries according to their functions: the Ministry of the Interior (吏曹), the Ministry of Population and Finance (戶曹), the Ministry of Protocol, Culture, and Education (禮曹), the Ministry of Military Affairs (兵曹), the Ministry of Justice (刑曹), and the Ministry of Construction (工曹). Notably, such a six-department structure can be found in the history of many Western countries as well (Timsit, 1987); this ministerial structure continued until the end of the Chosŏn Dynasty. This form of bureaucracy, whose organization principle depended on the efficiency and function of the hierarchical structure, indicates that even the premodern Confucian state was capable of instrumental rationality.

The military-style bureaucracy during Korea's Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945 strengthened its hierarchical culture in a negative way. It could be considered an enhanced form of bureaucracy demonstrating strict principles, such as unity of command, due to having its genesis

1 Some scholars (e.g., Hejtmanek, 2013; Woodside, 2006) insist that there were "modernities" in Korea even in the premodern era. Modernity (or modernities) is a characteristic of a society, system, or state, which does not come in chronological order.

under wartime conditions. This was followed by the American military government period (1945–1948), during which the methods of American scientific management were actively learned from the United States.

This was a time when the original hierarchical bureaucracy of the Chosŏn Dynasty, the Western form of efficiency-oriented bureaucracy influenced by Japan and also heavily influenced by Prussia, and the American administration imported from the United States were combined.[2] In particular, misconstruing the job descriptions of the American job classification system as the role descriptions of the rank system in the hierarchical bureaucracy in South Korea began. In sum, this is the first version of H, which emphasizes the responsibility of the role ranked in bureaucratic and social hierarchical relations. Hierarchical bureaucracy was the sole manifestation of socio-political infrastructure, which means that the market and network of governance space suggested by Bouchaert (2023) cannot be found in the Confucian state; rather, there is only the philosophy of governing the country with the people categorized based on social class and social role in a relationship. H was the dominant power structure within the country. In this context, H1 denotes the hierarchical bureaucracy functioning during the period of traditional authority in the Weberian sense of the term in the Korean peninsula.

III. Developmental State: H2

1. The Miracle on the Han River

South Korea stands out as a highly exceptional success story as the nation has achieved rapid economic growth, with an average annual growth rate of 9.1%, especially under the presidency of General Park Chung Hee. The causes of South Korea's remarkable economic growth and development are multifaceted, with the prevailing consensus attributing these achievements to the leadership exhibited by the bureaucracy and the government (Cha, 2018). A nuanced assessment of these factors illuminates the unique trajectory of South Korea's economic development during the 1961–1993 period.

In the process of economic development in South Korea, administrative elites contributed significantly to policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation via five-year plans for transforming an agricultural country into an export-driven industrial country. The well-trained elite bureaucrats and technocrats possessed a strong sense of responsibility regarding their roles, emphasizing the value of efficiency, and they were able to develop the skills needed for economic planning and implementation. This is the reason bureaucrats maintain a positive connotation in South Korean society, unlike in many other countries.

Furthermore, this period witnessed the emergence of a mixed understanding of the meanings of "job" and "role" as a blended system of personnel management. A job means "things to be done as a detailed job" in the United States, while a role means "the responsibility and authority granted by rank" in the traditional bureaucracy of South Korea. Based on the concept and practical guidance of a job classification system from the United States, the South Korean civil service interpreted "the job" as "the role" in a bureaucracy that is heavily hierarchical. This phenomenon served as the impetus for making the "role" to be performed more specific but also engendered a mismatch between the classification of jobs by function and the actual role. This adaptation, which offers extraordinary flexibility in its operation, remains in the current government bureaucracy.[3]

Thus, the evolved version of hierarchical bureaucracy that proved its efficiency during the developmental state can be named H2. Bureaucrats contributed to the efficient achievement of goals by being responsible for each member's role, which combines detailed tasks with the hierarchical bureaucracy.

2. The New Public Management Wave

Despite the excellent characteristics of H2, the South Korean bureaucracy could not follow the "global standard" to adapt to globalization. New public management (NPM) emerged in the late 20th century as a comprehensive set of administrative and managerial reforms designed to optimize the efficiency and effectiveness of public administration. Rooted in applying private sector management practices to the public sphere, NPM garnered particular significance in South Korea following the economic tribulations of the late 1990s.

The adoption of NPM principles in South Korea was motivated by a confluence of factors and challenges that necessitated reforms in the public sector across the world, starting from Anglo-Saxon countries. South Korean scholars of public administration played a pivotal role in this process. Professors were aware that countries worldwide were turning to NPM principles in response to the challenges of globalization, fiscal constraints, and demands for more accountable and responsive governance. South Korean policymakers in tandem with public administration academics likely drew on international best practices and academic literature highlighting the success of NPM reforms in improving public sector performance throughout

2 The bureaucracy of the Japanese Government-General of Korea greatly influenced the formation of South Korea's bureaucracy after liberation. The bureaucracy of the Japanese Government-General of Korea pushed the agenda of "promoting administrative efficiency" in the mid-1920s. At this time, it apparently developed the principles of administrative organization and personnel administration under German influence, such as defining personnel administration according to the definition of German publicist Otto Mayer. For more details, see Han (2016).

3 TO management stands for table of organization, as opposed to PO (present of organization), and can be seen as a Koreanized position classification (Cho & Im, 2019, p. 619).

successive governments regardless of their political ideologies (see Annex 1 for a summary).

H2 bureaucrats in South Korea had already been concerned with internal challenges related to efficiency and effectiveness. Academic discourse on public administration emphasized the need for bureaucratic reforms to improve responsiveness, streamline processes, and optimize resource allocation. NPM, with its focus on performance-based management, decentralization, and market mechanisms, provided a theoretical framework to address these concerns (Im, 2009). Performance-based management, a core principle of NPM, was introduced to improve the measurement and evaluation of bureaucratic performance. This academic rationale is consistent with the broader discourse on improving governance through result-oriented approaches.

The financial crisis that hit South Korea in December 1997 triggered a massive application of NPM reform in the country. The IMF program imposed conditions that required substantial structural adjustments, similar to what the Washington consensus proclaimed, on the South Korean government. In this context, NPM, with its emphasis on efficiency, effectiveness, and market-oriented principles, was seen as an appropriate framework for adapting the public sector to the demands of economic restructuring.

It was in this context that market-oriented mechanisms were introduced to the South Korean bureaucracy due to the need to improve public service delivery. NPM's emphasis is on developing a small government via the radical restructuring of the public sector and the privatization of many government functions. The country paid a high cost for the market-oriented reforms, as it witnessed numerous bankruptcies and suicides due to the economic crisis. During this, various attempts were made to make the public sector more efficient and transparent based on NPM principles. According to Lee (2004), the NPM reform measures introduced by the South Korean government between 1992 and 2002 can be classified as (1) the "transfer of government functions and tasks," (2) "internal rationalization," and (3) the "downsizing of government." Certain functions were eliminated through reorganization and deregulation. In addition, many responsibilities were transferred to QUANGOs, non-governmental organizations, and private organizations, and the central government transferred several functions to local governments to promote decentralization (D. Lee, 2004).

Furthermore, the economic crisis, which severely challenged the traditional model of industrialization, called for a reassessment of the state's active involvement in economic growth. South Korea's democratization was fueled by strong social movements and active citizen participation, resulting in the emergence of numerous civic organizations advocating for greater citizen oversight and participation in politics (S. Kim & Han, 2015). The Roh Moo-hyun government, which came to power after Kim Dae-jung's government, embraced these social demands and sought to build "networked governance." President Roh established the Presidential Committee of Government Innovation and Decentralization (PCGID) as a key driver of public sector reform. This committee was composed of 28 members, including 8 cabinet ministers and 20 civic experts and scholars (PCGID, 2008). The PCGID developed a reform roadmap centered on the theme of "competent government with people" (C. Han & Kim, 2017).

In sum, the rationale for adopting NPM in the South Korean bureaucracy is rooted in the need to address economic challenges, align with global administrative trends, and respond to internal concerns about efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, and accountability. South Korea's bureaucracy has undergone a wave of NPM, resulting in a sophisticated evaluation system for fiscal operations, government performance, and human resource management that has left positive legacies for the government. Thus, H2 evolved in the direction of actively incorporating NPM principles.

IV. The New Weberian State in Action: H3

1. The Limitations of NPM in the Wicked Problem Era

After the strengthening of NPM and network governance under President Roh, there was a shift in the mode of governance under President Lee Myung-bak. There were still areas in which NPM principles were applied and strengthened, but a bureaucracy that had learned NPM and incorporated its principles into its institutional operations emerged. For example, restructuring and performance management and evaluation systems have become more NPM-oriented, while agencies such as the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs (MOGAHA), the Ministry of Strategy and Finance (MOSF), and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) have acquired more hierarchical authority and status. This change is interpreted as a bureaucracy that emerged due to the inertia of the existing South Korean traditional bureaucracy (e.g., Im, 2003; S. Kim & Han, 2015).

Upon reviewing the process of bureaucratic reform in South Korea so far, it seems that many elements of the critical consciousness[4] raised when the powerful bureaucracy driving economic growth had run its course exploded during the economic crisis, leading to aggressive NPM reform; however, the inertia of the powerful bureaucracy in South Korea has created a multidimensional mode of governance. The Lee Myung-bak administration in particular, even when it took NPM measures, created a hierarchical bureaucracy in the way it made decisions and operated. This

4 The structural contradictions inherent in the government's financial control, support for strategic industries, and the embeddedness between the state and the capital were pointed out, and the moral hazard of the "too big to fail" (大馬不死) myth was criticized as being shaped by the guidance system of the developmental state (Yang, 2005).

tendency has become a reason to criticize the hierarchical bureaucracy, which has been reformed since the economic crisis but still exerts influence. However, it is the interaction between the hierarchical bureaucracy and the NPM reform measures that has led to this outcome. Just as the NPM ideology was used as a prescription for the South Korean government and its hierarchical bureaucracy,[5] it is now time for a diagnosis and prescription for NPM.

"Wicked problems" are complex, multifaceted issues with no clear solutions, and they often involve many stakeholders with conflicting interests. More and more wicked problems are arising in South Korea and other countries these days. The NPM approach, while effective in certain contexts, has limitations in terms of responding to wicked problems. NPM may not be well suited to addressing wicked problems for several reasons.

NPM tends to rely on a reductionist approach, breaking tasks down into manageable components. However, wicked problems are complex and interconnected. Furthermore, NPM places a strong emphasis on efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and measurable outcomes, but many problems may not have simple metrics, and the focus on efficiency may overlook the need for innovative and holistic solutions. In addition, wicked problems require the engagement of different stakeholders to understand the problem from different perspectives. NPM, with its managerial focus, may not inherently encourage the level of participation and collaboration needed to solve wicked problems.

Most importantly, NPM often prioritizes short-term results and quick wins. Wicked problems require sustained, long-term efforts, and solutions may take time to materialize, requiring patience and persistence. Since NPM is driven by principles of performance measurement constrained by short-term regularity, it discourages experimentation and risk-taking. Wicked problems often require innovative and adaptive strategies that may involve a degree of uncertainty. Furthermore, wicked problems evolve, with their dynamics changing over time. NPM structures may lack the flexibility required to adapt to changing circumstances and may struggle to keep pace with the dynamic nature of wicked problems. For policy issues normally involving multiple agencies, sectors, and levels of government, NPM's emphasis on the performance of individual agencies can hinder the cross-sectoral and collaborative efforts needed to tackle wicked problems.

The inherent effects of NPM, characterized by "customization" and 'marketization," appear incompatible with the demands of disaster and crisis response and management, which are beyond the scope of the market. In particular, organizations dedicated to crisis response face the challenge of assessing their "effectiveness" in periods when crises do not occur. However, the logic of NPM subjects these organizations to "evaluation restraint," in which performance metrics unrelated to their original purpose and mission are scrutinized. Consequently, problems that undermine the fundamental purpose and existence of public organizations may manifest (Kwon, 2020). A scenario in which a public organization only adheres to a narrow focus on efficiency or only caters to the specific interests of a particular clientele has the potential to reduce the organization's public profile and undermine the overall quality of the public sector.

NPM's tendency to focus on short-term performance targets may not be compatible with the protracted nature of disaster management, as being prepared, building community resilience, and addressing root causes require sustained efforts that may not be adequately captured by the NPM approach. The world experienced the impact of such a disaster during the COVID-19 pandemic, with its effects depending significantly on socio-economic status (Williams & Cooper, 2020). Consequently, critics argue that NPM's market-driven approach may inadvertently overlook social equity considerations, as vulnerable populations are disproportionately affected by disasters. The pursuit of cost-effectiveness may sideline social welfare concerns in favor of efficiency. The effectiveness of disaster management depends on situational variables, the specific characteristics of the disaster, and the nuanced implementation of NPM principles. While recognizing the potential benefits, it is imperative to explore and address pertinent issues relating to the complex dynamics of disaster response and management and the compatibility of NPM. The NWS facilitates the judicious application of efficiency principles in disaster management. It has been found that, in the course of South Korea's response to the recent COVID-19 crisis, the selective application of this efficiency resulted in innovation.[6] Below, the case of South Korea is examined to explain why the NWS was able to generate innovation in administrative services by prioritizing problem-solving.

5 NPM measures such as open positions, MBOs, and 360-degree feedback appraisal systems have been introduced to address the inefficiencies of traditional bureaucracy and ensure accountability. While these measures are generally considered necessary, their application in South Korea is considered immature (e.g., C.-O. Park & Joo, 2010).

6 In addition to responding to unprecedented disasters such as COVID-19, recent efforts to improve the responsiveness of South Korea's livestock disease control system illustrate the role of bureaucrats in the NWS model. In 2018, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs built a platform within its work system to manage suggestions within seven days, with ministry officials conducting field visits to identify policy improvements and check the implementation of suggested ideas (J. Lee et al., 2019). Various improvement cases have been identified through the system, which records and manages the results of street-level bureaucrats listening to ideas from policy users, reviewing them, and checking whether they can be realized. The NWS model would be useful in areas such as disaster management, where effective results are essential in the real world, as such improvements and innovations can lead to concrete change only if they are led by the government.

2. Case 1: The Introduction of Drive-Through Testing Centers

COVID-19 was undeniably a wicked problem that severely impacted the entire world. At its outbreak, when nothing was known about the virus, the most certain remedy was to detect the confirmed cases and isolate them from others. Measures for slowing down the spread had to be implemented under extreme time constraints, and the idea of running drive-through testing was introduced at the very early stages of the COVID-19 crisis in South Korea, paradoxically owing to the H bureaucracy. Traditional infection control measures, such as visiting clinics and testing procedures that required medical staff to change their protective clothing, proved prohibitively expensive and hampered the screening process. Preventing disease spread required the confirmed cases to be isolated in negative-pressure rooms and the place to be disinfected.

This challenge was met by transitioning from "segregating fixed spaces" to "moving already segregated spaces" using mobile vehicles. This strategic shift was facilitated by the rapid dissemination of local expert knowledge and decisive decision-making, leading to the standardization of testing clinics.[7] The government promptly embraced expert perspectives during the widespread dissemination phase of COVID-19 and incorporated their insights into rapid decision-making processes(J. H. Kim et al., 2020). South Korea introduced screening clinics to mitigate the potential spike in infection rates resulting from the mixing of infected and uninfected individuals.

Notably, Kyungpook National University Hospital in Chilgok (February 23, 2020) and Yeungnam University Medical Center in Daegu (February 26, 2020) pioneered drive-through screening clinics at the street level. The concept of drive-through screening clinics was gradually adopted by private clinics, hospitals, local governments, and the central government successively. Among local governments, Goyang City and Sejong City (February 26, 2020) as well as Incheon Metropolitan City (February 27, 2020) successively implemented drive-through screening clinics. Central government agencies, particularly the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters, developed and disseminated a standardized operating model for drive-through screening clinics nationwide. Subsequently, concerted efforts were made to secure hospitals, equipment, and screening centers capable of handling rapid sample collection and large-scale testing. Following the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) outbreak in 2015, the emergency response system in South Korea had undergone restructuring, and examination equipment and manuals from that crisis were utilized to enhance testing networks in public and private hospitals and related institutions, thereby augmenting the country's diagnostic testing capabilities(J. H. Kim et al., 2020).

Therefore, using the lessons learned from the 2015 MERS outbreak, the South Korean government adeptly responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by adhering to systematic guidelines for public health emergencies (Im, 2021). The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC), a bureaucratic unit at the Ministry of Health and Welfare, played a pivotal role in establishing the groundwork for the emergency approval of COVID-19 diagnosis reagents, and the expansion of COVID-19 testing centers facilitated rapid sample collection and testing. This extremely rapid decision-making, starting with street-level practitioners and eventually being adopted by the central government, may not have been possible if the South Korean bureaucracy had been trapped in the bureaucratic inertia notorious for delays in vertical communication. On the contrary, the South Korean H bureaucracy is good at bottom-to-top communication.

According to Kim et al. (2020), this method minimized the exposure of medical staff to infection and reduced the transmission of the virus by reducing the mobility of visitors. Safe and rapid testing procedures were ensured by minimizing the risk of cross-contamination between respiratory patients and medical staff and by limiting testing time to a maximum of ten minutes. In addition, public exposure to the virus was reduced by encouraging visitors to use private cars rather than public transport, thereby minimizing contact between potentially infected visitors and the general public(J. H. Kim et al., 2020).

Bureaucracy bounded by rules and procedures operates slowly, as commonly pointed out by its critics, but the case of South Korea shows that it can function extremely swiftly under the pressure resulting from time constraints. There were only a few days between the bureaucracy understanding the problem and making and implementing decisions, which likely contributed to flattening the curve of confirmed cases (see Im, 2021, for details).

3. Case 2: The Payment of the Economic Stimulus Grant

Since the pandemic was threatening the country on all fronts, minimizing its economic impact became the priority as vaccine and medicine invention would take time. Many governments considered an economic stimulus package, but various factors could impede its full effect.

First and foremost, the guiding principle was that the money should not be provided as liquid currency. The rationale behind economic stimulus funds was to increase the contracted level of domestic consumption. The disbursement of funds in cash was avoided on the grounds that such an approach might induce the recipients to engage in substantial savings, thereby jeopardizing the expected economic revival. Consequently, the primary condition for the allocation of funds was conceived as the provision of stimulus funds in a non-monetary form.

7 Dongailbo (2020, April 19, https://www.donga.com/news/Opinion/article/all/20200415/100657908/1)

Second, the imposition of restrictions on the sectors eligible for the use of stimulus funds was enshrined as a secondary principle. To prevent the deterioration of local micro-economies due to the ubiquitous spread of COVID-19, the directive sought to encourage the allocation of funds within street markets. Third, a restriction on the geographical scope of the use of these funds was considered—namely limiting it to the immediate vicinity of the recipients' residences. The funding for COVID-19 stimulus funds was decided to be 80% from national coffers and 20% from local sources. There were concerns that, if the funds were not used in a particular region, the local taxes of that region might be used for other areas. In particular, one regional administration expressed its intention not to use local taxes as a source of funding unless the geographical restriction of use was defined.

The initial proposal considered was to issue local vouchers as a means of meeting the first and third conditions. The use of these local vouchers was to be restricted to specific geographical regions. However, issuing such certificates was expected to involve costs associated with their production, issuance, and distribution. Assuming a production and distribution cost of 100 KW for a 10,000 KW gift certificate, the total expenditure for the issuance of gift certificates would be 100 trillion KW.[8]

The idea of distributing subsidies through credit card points was proposed by a bureaucrat working at the Ministry of Public Administration and Security (MOPAS). This method satisfied the second and third conditions, as well as the first condition of not paying in cash. Furthermore, credit card transactions offered the advantage of readily available data for evaluating the impacts in the future; this, given the existing classification of merchants, would facilitate the restriction of the types of businesses eligible for the funds. In addition, the use of preexisting information on the geographical location of credit card merchants allowed the use of both sectoral and regional data.

This groundbreaking idea, proposed by a fifth-grade officer,[9] was quickly communicated to the decision-making system, known as *pumyui*, and forwarded to the vice minister of the MOPAS for immediate implementation. Remarkably, only 24 hours elapsed between the officer's conceptualization and subsequent presentation of the idea and its approval by the vice minister.

Once the method of payment for the COVID-19 stimulus grant had been determined, the next imperative was to quickly identify the payees in accordance with the prescribed conditions for the disbursement of credit card points. The Health Insurance Corporation quickly organized health insurance premium data, which served as a proxy for income verification, and created a comprehensive database of eligible payment recipients. This database was seamlessly integrated with the dedicated infrastructure of credit card companies. After this integration, the testing phase was completed within a week, owing to the critical role played by telecommunications companies.

The COVID-19 economic stimulus grant policy was first announced by the government on March 30, 2020, and the National Assembly's supplementary budget was adopted on April 30. From May 4, cash payments to economically vulnerable groups were made in stages, starting on May 11 for credit and debit card applications and on May 18 for prepaid cards and gift vouchers, through community centers. The MOPAS decided to disburse the economic stimulus package to the population as a measure to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the convenience of the guidance and disbursement process was enhanced with the introduction of the public secretary's advance notification service in 2021, using internet platforms such as the Naver app, Kakao Talk, and Toss. To see the intended effects, the money distribution was subject to certain conditions decided by the South Korean bureaucracy; it took only a few days until the package was fully implemented.

The disbursement of stimulus funds was completed on August 24, and the availability period ended on August 31. By the application deadline, a total of 14,235.7 trillion KW had been disbursed to 22.16 million households nationwide. Payments were processed quickly, with the majority of households (approximately 21.32 million) receiving funds within one month of the application opening at the end of May. Moreover, leveraging the successful administrative framework established for the first payment, a similar mechanism facilitated the rapid disbursement of the second COVID-19 economic stimulus grant payment in June 2021. This rapid process not only encouraged consumption but also resulted in an excellent utilization rate of 99%.

Furthermore, this rapid implementation had the intended effect. The disbursement of the first COVID-19 economic stimulus grant in May played a key role in reviving household consumption, which had decreased due to the impact of COVID-19. In subsidized sectors, sales increased significantly, ranging from 26.2% to 36.1% of the total input budget.

4. The Openness and Rapidity of the South Korean Bureaucracy: H3's Prerogatives

In the implementation of drive-through screening clinics, success was attributed to a flexible decision-making system (J. H. Kim et al., 2020). In particular, the government actively embraced creative ideas from experts in the

8 1 USD is approximately a little more than 1,000 KW.

9 Government employees of the central government are classified into nine grades, with Grade 1 being the top manager. Those who pass the high civil service examination start their public service career from the fifth grade, which means that they are considered to be the elite group, but within the central government's departments, they work at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder, similar to the street-level bureaucrats in local governments.

field. This proactive acceptance of expert input led to quick decision-making, the rapid implementation of measures, and the dissemination of a standard operating model by the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters. Furthermore, civil servants, including health professionals, demonstrated rapid and accurate decision-making as well as effective communication with private experts, facilitated by the involvement of medical experts in the KCDC, who took a leadership role during the crisis and worked effectively with private experts.

The administration of COVID-19 economic stimulus payments exemplified a successful implementation facilitated by a flexible decision-making process and a high level of understanding of the law and regulations on the part of bureaucrats. The government actively reviewed the ideas of working-level employees and swiftly decided on a plan to utilize both public and private resources to realize them. This decision, made at the vice-ministerial level, triggered rapid action by both public institutions and private partners, owing to the hierarchical work structure and family-like organizational culture characterizing the decision-making system, *pumyui*.[10] The efficient vertical communication within the hierarchical bureaucracy, which contrasts with the stratification of the bureaucratic phenomenon in France as theorized by Crozier (1964), played an important role in encouraging quick policy experimentation, particularly regarding the application of novel ideas in exceptional circumstances. Moreover, the rapid facilitation of a public–private cooperation agreement and the efficient confirmation and fulfillment of the necessary conditions were promptly advanced. Legal considerations essential for compliance with the Personal Information Protection Act were carefully addressed as well. Establishing a personal information identification system and obtaining the consent of each citizen, which is essential for the fulfillment of certain conditions, were actively promoted. This rapid progress was made possible by the involvement of a bureaucrat with an in-depth understanding of the legal framework. Extensive knowledge of the legal system enabled this bureaucrat to quickly identify the necessary legal foundations for the policy experiment and to decisively define measures to ensure procedural rationality.

V. Conclusion: The Attributes of H3

Similar to the structure of state–society relations, the hierarchical bureaucracy of present-day South Korea possesses several features derived from the country's Confucian heritage. South Korea has traditionally been run by a hierarchical bureaucracy, known as the first H, with societal trust in the competence, virtue, and effective role fulfillment of its members influenced by Confucian ideology. The first version of H (H1), characterized by a meritocratic composition even in the premodern era, underwent a transformation and evolved into a more efficient second version (H2) by assimilating a military-style pursuit of efficiency and detailed job specification methods.

The emergence of South Korea's third H (H3) during the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis further underscores the contemporary relevance and necessity of the NWS paradigm. The achievements of H3 serve as empirical evidence of the imperative nature of the NWS in contemporary times.

Many scholars, including supporters of NPM, have severely criticized the bureaucratic inertia. This paper raises the question of whether the hierarchical structure of the bureaucracy is obsolete in the era of uncertainty exemplified by wicked problems. More specifically, the agile structure may be considered an alternative to the bureaucracy in the future government. South Korea's H3 indicates that the bureaucracy may evolve into a more adaptable model in the future.

This paper argues that the implications of the COVID-19 response cases show the form of H3 in South Korea. First, South Korean officials consider meticulous adherence to legal protocols in various public procedures, which is essential for public–private cooperation, to be crucial for preventing potential problems in the future. While this approach may be perceived as "bureaucratic," it is not seen as red tape but as a way to move forward quickly without hindering subsequent procedures. The rapid identification of the necessary procedures to address issues and achieve objectives by officials with a nuanced understanding of laws, regulations, and procedures is emerging as a key factor in the successful implementation of policies. Furthermore, the affirmation of procedural legitimacy not only mitigates the time and budgetary costs associated with policy experimentation but also accelerates its implementation. Consequently, this approach produces highly effective results while maintaining the speed that characterizes the strength of South Korea's hierarchical bureaucracy.

In a democratic society, the difference between the original Weberian ideal of bureaucracy and South Korea's third hierarchical bureaucracy is that it sets the public values that the administration must pursue on its own, such as openness and inclusiveness, and tries to ensure rapid procedural legitimacy as well as execution speed.

The South Korean example supports Kettle's (2015) view that risk and disaster management is one of the five roles[11] a government should play, even after transferring several of its administrative duties to the private sector. Moreover, if these government roles are viewed from the perspective of government regulation theory and policy instruments, the effectiveness of the hierarchical bureaucracy can be maximized in the enforcement of direct instruments suitable for social regulation.

10 For details about the *pumyui* decision-making system, see Im (2017), *Public Organizations in Asia*, Routledge, pp. 175–176.

11 These comprise defining values on behalf of the community; providing basic infrastructure, such as defense and security; ensuring equality; providing incentives to achieve social and economic goals; and managing risk and disasters (Kettle, 2015, pp. 226–227).

Extending this discussion, it can be said that the capabilities of bureaucrats that are enhanced by hierarchical bureaucratic management will be effective in areas where the government must intervene directly. The number of areas where direct government intervention is more effective will always be limited. NPM's expansion of market-friendly management and policy interventions has expanded the scope of government "services" to all areas where citizens can be "customers," but paradoxically, it has also identified areas of market failure. Ultimately, each country will have to identify the areas where bureaucrats can exert their capabilities in a hierarchical bureaucracy (NWS).

This can be understood in the context of the three-dimensional concept of "government" proposed by Im (2022), who identifies three government dimensions: the extent to which the government intervenes (horizontal), how it intervenes (vertical), and the extent to which it actually has the ability to implement policies (capacity). In the figure below, the shaded area shows where government capacity can be formed. Within these three dimensions, policy instruments can be categorized based on the degree of vertical intervention: direct instruments are primarily used to perform essential and basic government functions through the hierarchy, whereas indirect instruments are more dependent on civil society networks or the market order and are used to perform a range of government functions, including expanded public services. In essence, the three government dimensions can be understood as Bouckaert's (2023) HMN governance space, in which the dimension of capacity is explained by the proportions and capacities of HMNs.

Understood in this context, South Korea's H3, with its ability to minimize all costs (including time) by considering all direct and indirect policy instruments based on the efficiency of laws and regulations, serves as "green tape" (DeHart-Davis, 2009)[12] in areas of essential functions that the government must undertake and can be seen as a positive NWS type with an enlarged H. If this is the case, the challenge for South Korea will be to maintain the competence of its green-taped, hierarchical bureaucracy.

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12 Bozeman referred to it as "white tape" in a similar context (Bozeman, 1993, p. 276). Moreover, Bozeman and Scott (1996) argue that rules and procedures can also serve a positive function, which they termed good red tape (Bozeman & Scott, 1996, pp. 2–3). Similarly, Brynard (1995) argues that one person's red tape is another person's green tape and that bureaucratic rules are safeguards that emphasize responsible behavior in the public sphere (Brynard, 1995). Bozeman (1993) argues that not all bureaucratic rules are ineffective red tape; rather, they are rules that provide some benefit (Bozeman, 1993, p. 276). DeHart-Davis (2009) uses the green tape conceptualization and describes green tape as a counterpart to red tape, which refers to ineffective regulations as a bureaucratic pathology (Song & Ahn, 2012).

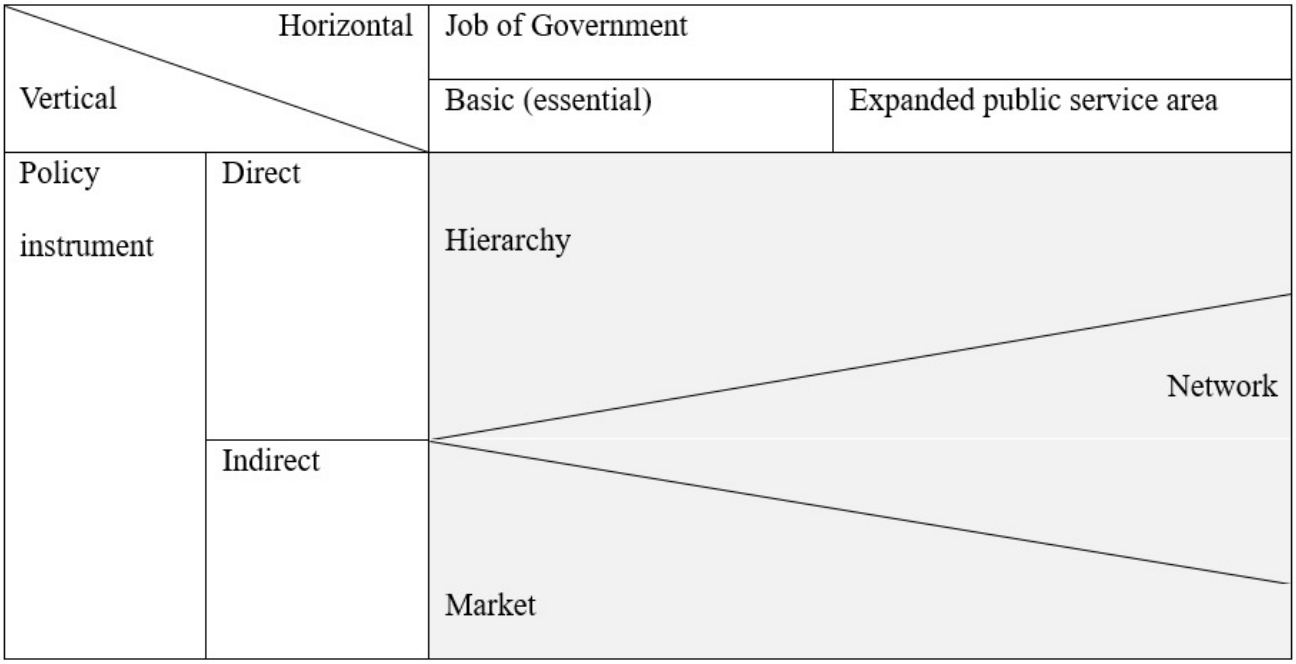

Figure 1.

Annex 1.

President	Year	Reform	Prevailing mechanism
Kim Young-sam	1993–1998	• Improvement of urban transportation and traffic • Improvement of the budgeting system • Enforcement of the real-name financial transaction system • Deregulation of authorization and permission processes • Disclosure of the property of high-ranking government officials	• Hierarchy (traditional PA)
Kim Dae-jung	1998–2003	• Government restructuring • Managerial reform • Financial management • Privatization of eight state-run enterprises • Performance evaluation of ministries	• Market (NPM proposals layered with a powerful bureaucracy)
Rho Moo-hyun	2003–2008	• Public sector reforms through organization, function, and work process remodeling • Civil service reforms by creating new administration systems and reforming culture • Decentralization reform • E-government to lead a knowledge-based society	• Network (reflective of NPM measures toward the emergence of post-NPM)
Lee Myung-Bak	2008–2013	• Lowering of the number of ministries from 18 to 15 • Privatization of three state-run enterprises • Restructuring and consolidation of 34 state-run enterprises, reducing them to 15	• Hierarchy (return to traditional PA with an eclectic mix of NPM and post-NPM)

Source: Revise Ko (2022, p. 235); Han and Kim (2017: 61; 63; 65)

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