Social Darwinism’s position in early modern Korea’s ideological history is unique. Unlike Neo-Confucianism in traditional Korea—or ‘liberal democracy’ and ‘Marxism-Leninism’ in South and North Korea respectively after 1948—Social Darwinism was not an ideology to which the Korean state officially subscribed. King Kojong, wary of the rumoured Russian plans to station troops in Hamgyŏng Province in the north of Korea, could confide to Japanese diplomats in Seoul on July 26, 1899, that he viewed the ‘racial and religious differences between East and West’ as irreconcilable and thought that in interstate competition, smaller Asian states like Korea had to ally themselves with the ‘racially close’ Japanese.¹ However, this was certainly not an official view. Many of the prominent Social Darwinism-influenced thinkers in Korea from the 1880s to the 1900s—Yun Ch’iho (Acting Foreign Minister), Yu Kiljun (Minister of Domestic Affairs), Só Chaep’il (Governmental Advisor), etc.—were in different periods entrusted with high governmental offices. However, the language of governmental promulgations remained essentially a mixture of an older Confucian rhetoric with the novel idioms of ‘civilization and progress,’ and ‘survival of the fittest’ was certainly not a part of it. The March 15, 1903, Royal Edict formally introducing conscription to Korea (mentioned at the end of Chapter Seven), for example, evoked the ‘old system in which the peasants also received military training’ and assured that the modern conscription systems as practised in ‘various countries of the world’ did not deviate significantly from this time-honoured standard.² ‘Dog-eats-dog competition’ was not explicitly given as the reason

² Pak Chit’ae (ed.) Taehan chegukki chŏngch’aeksa charyojip [Collection of Materials
for Korea to turn all of its able-bodied men into soldiers. But, even lacking official recognition, Social Darwinism had greatly changed the intellectual life of Korea’s educated urban society—and, consequently, also the thinking of commoners, to the degree it could be influenced at all by the new trends among their social ‘betters.’ In this way, it was, to a certain extent, comparable to Neo-Confucian ideology, which sacralised the governmental system and the ruling class’ mores from the end of the fourteenth century onwards.

In Chapter 1, I have already mentioned a definition of ‘ideology’ by Nigel Harris—a system of beliefs created by society to solve its problems, which evolves with time depending on the total organization of the society and especially its class dimension, since it is directly linked to the interests of various societal classes. Another passable definition of ‘ideology’ explains it as ‘beliefs, values, representations, discourses, interpretative repertoires and behavioural practices which contribute to the legitimisation and reproduction of existing institutional arrangements, power and social relations within a society.’

Taken as the system of beliefs and values propagated by the ruling classes, a (dominant) ideology is supposed to be essentially conservative, legitimising the status quo or, at best, suggesting how it can be gradually improved. In this respect, Social Darwinism presents an interesting case of ‘ideological radicalism from above’—an ideology popularized by a sizable part of the government office-holders and socio-political leaders (albeit without the seal of governmental approval), which, however, takes its starting point in a deep feeling of unease and discontent about the status quo. Far from legitimising realities, Social Darwinism in Korea from 1880 to the first decade of the new century denounces status quo in the strongest possible language, since it was obvious that Korea in its contemporaneous shape had no hope of ‘survival’ in an uncompromisingly brutal Darwinian world. Typical for Social Darwinist rhetoric in Korea from 1905–1910 were, for example, the lamentations of a well-known activist, Yun Hyojjong (whose biography and views were introduced in Chapter Four). According to him, ‘the rule that the stronger wins and the weaker loses is observed in our daily life and […] is acknowledged practice in our time’; thus, observations of Korea’s current situation could produce ‘only regrets’ (‘Strug-

---
