

Cultural Identity and New Religions in Korea

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ABSTRACT: The fact that in modern Korea several religions co-exist, and none of them is hegemonic or dominant, has created problems for the country's cultural identity. The three main symbols of this identity are ambiguous. The national flag includes symbols derived from the Confucian interpretation of the Chinese *I Ching*. The national anthem, composed by Protestants, has a reference to the Christian God. Dangun, the mythical progenitor of the Korean people, is interpreted alternatively as a historical character or a god. These symbols do not talk to each other, and their very status as national symbols is being eroded. New religions are successful in Korea, because they address the problem of national identity and offer new solutions to it that many Koreans find persuasive.

KEYWORDS: Religion in Korea, Korean Cultural Identity, Korean New Religions, Dangun, *Taegeukki*, *Aegukga*.

The Status Quo of Korean Religions

The number of people who identify themselves as religious comprises about half of the entire population of Korea. Those who claim not to be interested in any religion are about 30%. This percentage may include those who are satisfied with their own lives, or try to have a better life through something similar to religion, although they prefer to call it with another name. The number of Buddhists in Korea is about 21% of the population, with 7% of Catholics and 20% of Protestants (called “Christians” in Korea, a designation that does not include Catholics). The number of Protestants now appears as more likely to decline or stagnate, while that of Catholics tends to increase (Goh 2012, 15–25).

The current condition of Korean religions can be summarized in four propositions. First, there is no leading religion in Korea. It would not be an

exaggeration to say that Korea is a religious museum, where almost all religions, including Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and new religions are actively propagated. In addition, Korea may well be the only country in the world where Western and Eastern religions co-exist with similar numbers of followers. Most countries in the world, including China, Japan, West Asia, and the nations in Europe and the Americas, are likely to have one or more leading religions. There is no other place like Korea, in which Eastern religions based on Buddhism and Western religions based on Christianity have almost equal power and interact actively with each other. Accordingly, Korea has been described as a unique country, where no religion takes the lead in social, political, and cultural matters (Kang 2011, 30–5).

Religions and Cultural Identity

The cultural identity of each country is usually created and maintained by a leading religion. For example, some countries whose leading religion is Christianity have a national flag with a cross, while an Islamic country would have a crescent on its flag. And, regardless of what the leading religion is, it is natural that the national flag of a socialist country would have socialist symbols. In Korea, however, as an environment where different religions coexist, it is somewhat difficult to establish or maintain a cultural identity. The Korean flag alludes to Confucianism. Yet, Korea cannot establish or maintain any longer a cultural identity based on its Confucian past (Kang et al. 2016, 213–39).

Second, there is a tendency among Koreans towards indifference about religion in general. The current Constitution of Korea expressly embodies the principle of separation of religion and politics, which implies that national or public schools cannot teach a specific religion. Although students may learn about religion in general while studying history, such knowledge is very unsystematic as well as superficial. In addition, the media tends to emphasize negative aspects of religion, only to distort its image. Additionally, many largely and erroneously perceive other religions based on their own. In this context, most Koreans are ignorant of religion in general, and those who claim a religious knowledge usually mean they know their own religion.

In other words, Korean believers are generally ignorant of religions other than their own. For instance, only a few Buddhists have read the Bible. The difference

between the Old and the New Testament, or Judaism and Christianity, may be very unfamiliar to Korean Buddhists. This gap among religions is not specific of Buddhists, and is found among devotees of all faiths. Sometimes, we are criticized for not knowing literature, arts or economy, however, we are rarely blamed for not knowing religion. There is even a perception that those who are most ignorant about religion constitute the most intellectual part of the population.

Due to both the co-existence of many religions and ignorance of religion, Korea is more likely than other countries to be entangled in conflicts among religions. Religious feuds are worse than conflicts caused by regionalism, schools, personal relations, or kinship. To establish a truly human society, one must cherish oneself and the others. In addition, one should not be self-absorbed, and realize that others have something to cherish as well. In Korea, the wedding ceremonies or funerals held in religious facilities are usually attended only by devotees of that specific religion. Many Koreans tend to be indifferent to what others regard as very important.

Third, while the separation of politics and religion is clearly affirmed in the Constitution of Korea, the government has implemented a religious policy that focuses on Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. From the epoch of the Three Kingdoms (57 BCE to 668 EC) to the era of the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), Buddhism had been the official religion of Korea. In the era of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897) the official religion was Confucianism. Japanese Shintoism, Buddhism, and Christianity became in turn official religions during the colonial period. At that time, these three religious groups were controlled by the Department in charge of religions, but other groups were designated as pseudo-religions and dealt with by the Department of Security Maintenance.

After the independence of Korea (1945), the U.S. military government implemented a Christianity-friendly policy. The number of Christians reached about 2% in those days. Christmas became an official holiday. Korea offered Buddhist worship services in the army during the Vietnam War in 1967, which enabled the propagation of Buddhism among the military. Buddha's birthday was first publicly celebrated in 1975. But the truth is that there are more than three religions in the Korean religious landscape. Other religions tend to be more neglected politically than the three main ones.

Fourth, politics and religions have a closer relationship in Korea than foreigners may believe. Religions need politics to receive national subsidies,

while politics need religions to take advantage of their tacit support in the elections. The Constitution prohibits any direct connection between politics and religions, but they maintain a good and sometimes close relationship.

The government does not seem to follow a single strategy in terms of support for religious groups. A circle of religions tries to maintain a good relationship with the government and to receive funds. The government controls religious groups through the allocation of subsidies. Some religious groups deliberately and actively hold more events to get more governmental funds, although they should first advance the corresponding expenses. There is a serious risk of an unholy and utilitarian alliance of the government and religions. To a certain degree, the phenomenon would have a negative effect on the establishment of a Korean cultural identity, or at least this is my tentative conclusion (Kang 2008, 1–18).

Symbols of Cultural Identity in Korea

Some features should be examined to understand the cultural identity of Korea. First, the traditional culture has not been properly appropriated by the population. In all cultures, major rituals should be suitably transformed, to remain alive for a long time and sustain the culture itself. For instance, a wedding ceremony is an important rite for the couple, their families, and friends. In recent times, Korean wedding ceremonies have been classified into traditional, westernized, and religious. However, very few Koreans know precisely the ceremonies of wedding and their meaning. And only a few understand them. It is impossible to expect any improvement in this field, with a minority only knowing the wedding ceremonies and the significance of wedding. What should be a precious wedding ceremony degrades into a series of meaningless activities.

The structure of a common wedding hall in Korea is somewhat similar to that of a Christian church. Christian churches endow the ceremony of each wedding with symbolic significance. But common wedding halls lack the symbolic meanings of the Christian ceremonies, since there is a cross and a “clergy,” but they are out of their Christian context. Except for the rituals held in religious facilities, the Koreans just casually participate in wedding ceremonies.

Second, due to the lack of consistency in culture, cultural vitality also lacks.

How a culture negotiates the recreational factors in an appropriate manner is also important. Koreans are said to enjoy drinking, singing, and dancing from old times, even though those were perceived as typical of a decadent culture.

The farmers' dances involved both those who danced and a non-dancing audience. There were many groups of farmers dancing in traditional villages until the 1960s. Among the villagers, there were some who played the gong, the drum, or the pipe. They promoted a festive atmosphere in the village. When the music was played, all the villagers enjoyed themselves and danced to the music.

However, folk dances such as the farmers' dances just give us aesthetic experiences. Some religions can easily denounce such amusements as decadent. In a situation where many religions coexist, all amusements would be denounced as decadent by at least one religion. Amusements will slowly disappear, reducing the vitality of the culture.

Third, the major symbols of the nation lost their functions. The coexistence of religions is a root cause making it difficult to establish and maintain cultural identity. The major symbols related to Korean cultural identity did not create close relationships. In establishing the identity of a certain religion, there is a core symbol that usually plays a crucial role, until meaning is lost, and it becomes a broken sign. Only a living symbol can endow the members of a certain group with certain meanings. We all agree that a cross, or a swastika, is a special symbol for the members of certain religions.

From the modern age, the major symbols related to Korean cultural identity could vary according to the perspectives. I would like to suggest that the key symbols are the *Taegeukki* (the Korean national flag), the *Aegukka* (the national anthem), and Dangun (the legendary founding father of Korea). But there is a problem with each one of them.

The Korean national flag, the *Taegeukki*, was derived from the *I Ching*. Thus, there is controversy whether it is authentically Korean or not, as the *I Ching* is a Chinese book. On the other hand, it is a comprehensive symbol, in which a spatial-temporal perspective, i.e. a view of the history and the cosmos, is included at the same time. The symbol of *Taeggeuk* (Great Ultimate) and eight trigrams are often seen at Daoist temples in China. The traditional explanation of the four trigrams in the Korean national flag is based on the *I Ching* as interpreted by Confucianism, which means that the present flag is definitely a symbol that

embraces the Confucian perspective regarding history and the cosmos.

The national anthem pairs up with the national flag, because it is usually sung when the flag is raised. The lyrics and melody have been used as the national anthem since the establishment of the modern Korean state in 1948. The composers are said to have been Protestants. In examining the first verse of the lyrics, “God protects and preserves our country... until the East Sea’s waters run dry and Mount Baekdu is worn away,” let’s pay attention to the word “God.” Within the Korean religious landscape, Catholicism and Protestantism are the religions centered on the notion of a personal God. The lyrics of the national anthem were written by a Protestant, however, the God in the national anthem refers to a Lord of Heaven without mentioning the Bible, which makes the reference somewhat closer to Catholicism.

Our founding ancestor, Dangun, who is celebrated on National Foundation Day, deserves our attention as well. The faith in Dangun has been historically divided into two forms. First, there is an early part of the Dangun myth, which worships him as the founder ancestor of Korea. Second, a latter part of the myth worships Dangun as a mountain god who presides over droughts and epidemics. There are also new religions and forms of shamanism where the role of Dangun is central. If all Korean cultures and religions revere Dangun, they do it in different ways.

Contemporary Problems with the Symbols of Korean Identity

In modern times, although each of the main symbols regarding our cultural identity had some limitations, if they had close relationships and complemented each other, there would be no serious issues. However, our symbols are not in a complementary but in a mutual relationship, and sometimes they contradict each other (Kang 1992, 10–20).

The *Taegeukki*, the Korean flag based on the *I Ching*, has no room for any divine entity to perform a role. That is because the cosmology and the view of history in the *I Ching* developed according to their own logic, with no room for the intervention of a divine being. What has the Lord of Heaven in the national anthem got to do with the national flag? Let’s imagine a group of Koreans raising the flag solemnly, and worshipping the Lord of Heaven by singing the national

anthem. Did the Lord of Heaven create *Taegeuk*, the Great Ultimate depicted in the flag, or did *Taegeuk* create the Lord of Heaven? The positions of *Taegeuk* and the Lord of Heaven do not have any historical or cultural relation. And neither the *Taegeukki* (the national flag) nor the *Aegukga* (the national anthem) are related to the Dangun myth, either. There are no ancient documents identifying Dangun with the Lord of Heaven, and we cannot say that the Lord of Heaven mentioned in the national anthem is Dangun.

If the main symbols of Korean culture have such problems, perhaps we can conclude that these symbols as such do not exist at all. But, if the main symbols are unable to perform a key role, the establishment of a Korean cultural identity is impossible. And the background of this situation derives from the unique religious landscape of Korea, namely, the coexistence of religions.

From the previous analysis, the most likely conclusion is that Korea has lost its identity. This loss of cultural identity has been deeply influenced by the present condition of the religious field. Once formed, there is no guarantee that cultural identity will remain stable: it should be constantly reformulated or re-established. The loss of cultural identity in Korea leads to the question of religion. If this loss results from the present condition of the Korean religious field, then the religious groups should assume their responsibilities in the process of reformulating a cultural identity.

New Religions and Cultural Identity in Korea

The new religions of Korea do have a role in re-establishing the country's cultural identity. The questions of who we are, what we should do and what is right or wrong boil down to both cultural identity and religion. We can ask the question how a religion that proclaims universality tries to serve the interests of a certain nation. A parallel question is whether the Supreme Deity Korean religions mention is a god for the Koreans only. There is no reason why universality-oriented religions should neglect the interests of a certain nation. And the Supreme Deity is both the god for all humankind and the god of Koreans. These answers, of course, would also be true for other countries.

Korean religions pursue the goal of reaching out to all humankind based on their synthesis of different faiths, and negotiate their positions as answers to the

coexistence of several religions in Korea and the problem of the establishment of a cultural identity.

As a religious studies scholar who believes that religions are at the core of culture, and driving forces in producing culture, I would like to conclude by paying some attention to the main Korean new religions in connection with my research about cultural identity.

First, among new religions there is a tendency to restore the Korean tradition. This phenomenon can be compared to modern movements in Hinduism and Judaism, the restoration of holy sites in Buddhism, and similar revivalist trends in other religions. In Korea, this aspect can be easily witnessed in almost all the fields of religion, including architecture, costume, ritual, organization, and doctrine.

Second, in Korea some new religions tend to reinterpret or redefine history, focusing on ancient Korean past. Within the framework of the ancient history of Eastern Asia, Korean history is dominated by conflict with the neighboring countries such as China and Japan. For several reasons, however, there are only few documents in Korea of the ancient history of the country, compared to China and Japan. Professional historians prefer to study historical matters only if they have tangible materials to work on and present in a detached way. However, ordinary Koreans try to systematically understand their rich ancient history, and have confidence in traditional accounts even when documents are lacking. In this context, some of the new religions in Korea are very active by systemizing or redefining the ancient Korean history on their own (Kang 2018, 131–61).

Third, some movements claim to promote “national studies,” or try to define the notion of “national studies” in their own systematic way. The East Asian concept of national studies finds no parallels in the West. In East Asia, Confucianism is often identified with the national studies and the same role is played by Shintoism in Japan. In Korea, none of the traditional religions—Buddhism, Confucianism, Protestantism, and Catholicism—was able to take a leading place and define the national studies. Some of the new religions try to introduce themselves as promoting the national studies Korea needs (Kang 2013, 97–127).

Four, Korean new religions claim that Korea plays a crucial role in the salvation of humankind. They teach that all humans come from a common

progenitor. Koreans are direct descendants from this progenitor, while other people come from lateral branches of his family. This supports the claims that the history of the salvation of humanity will start in Korea, and that the Korean language will be the lingua franca of the future world.

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