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Religion and Social Integration in Korea

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“Civilization” indicates a socially highly integrated stage of society. I will not discuss in what way it is highly integrated, because debate on the definition of civilization would unnecessarily narrow our discussion. I would, however, like to indicate that by integration, I am not merely referring to integration in terms of indigenous national culture, but rather deeper integration of various traditions. In this sense, an understanding of this integration requires a look at a systematic tradition that has a universal quality and moves outwards from centers of authority, that is centers transcending a region. With this in mind, I will focus on religious tradition in Korea and consider its relation to social integration.

Korea has been largely understood as a society within the cultural and political realm of Chinese civilization. Its distinct nature has not been given sufficient attention. If we consider civilization as a large process, certainly Korea has continually been under the influence of Chinese civilization. Even restricting the field to religion, Korea's indigenous tradition and Chinese-derived tradition, including Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and Yin-Yang thought, have had a complicated interaction and formed a complex national culture unique to Korea. The Korean peninsula, with its mixed indigenous and foreign tradition, is a part of the continent and as such was related to powerful Chinese kingdoms such as the Han and Tang. It can, though, be said that Korea, as a peninsula, was blessed with conditions allowing for the creation of a stable and original society distinct from the mainland regions. The formation of a national culture cannot be understood apart from the process of political integration of the authority of the indigenous kingdoms. Korea called itself “East Country” and “Small China” and identified itself with the Chinese “side” of East Asia. In the sense that Korea advanced a complicated cultural mixture with its indigenous national tradition, it is very different from Japan which was separated from the continent by sea. Located at the corner of the continent where nations' fortunes have risen and fallen and large scale migration has occurred, it is amazing that Korea has stayed in place for such a long time, maintaining itself as a state—a highly integrated and advanced political form.

Korea will be discussed here from two perspectives. First I will consider the

grand perspective which looks at Korean society within the domain of Chinese civilization in East Asia. This view observes how the Korean kingdoms incorporated the "Great Tradition" of Chinese civilization into its state system. That is, it looks at the processes of state institutionalization and systematization. The second perspective focuses on the incorporation of the Great Tradition in the formation of popular religious practices.

Noteworthy in terms of the first perspective is the "protect the nation thought," the belief that religions defend the kingdom or rising nation from foreign enemies. This belief aims at national security by super-natural authority. Also for Korea, located in the environs of China, the maintenance of the same religious tradition was a cultural foreign policy for keeping basically good relations with China. The stability of kingdom and nation is based on the king or kingdom's internal legitimacy. It should be noted that the authority of a foreign great tradition can have a symbolic function for this legitimacy. The systematization of the administrative structure in the country was advanced in accordance with cultural assimilation based on the authority of this Great Tradition.

1. THE STATE'S RECEPTION OF THE GREAT TRADITION

The Korean kingdom, from the period of the Three Kingdoms, had a policy of selectively importing Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc.—traditions which had already been systematized in China. These religious traditions and philosophies, in conjunction with Chinese writing and technology, became the basic requisites for the social integration of Korean society, thus placing its state firmly in the domain of Chinese civilization. Especially in Koguryō, Paekche, and Silla, Buddhism played an important role. As for Confucianism, in its early period it functioned like a classic law or culture for the ruling intellectuals, as opposed to a religion or ideology. Similar to Buddhism in Nara Period Japan, Buddhism in the Three Kingdoms Period was characterized as a religion for defending the country. The Buddhist belief of the members of the royal family and the aristocrats was not only a means for demonstrating political authority, but also a device which reflected the strong state of consciousness at that time, demonstrating the hegemony of the dynasty over other countries. As one of the state projects, temples were constructed everywhere for prayer that the foreign enemy would surrender. Later during the Koryō Kingdom, which was often threatened by foreign enemies such as the Khitan, Mongols and Japanese Pirates, the carving of great Buddhist sculptures was twice commissioned. And again, from the perspective of state Buddhism it is fascinating to note that great Buddhist ceremonies were held either to console the souls of the war dead or to guard people from natural disaster.

Silla, unifier of the three kingdoms, was the latest to receive Buddhism because among the three it was last to receive Chinese writings, and also because there was some tension between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs. However, strong belief in Buddhism by the royal family left many heroes and Buddhist legends. The most

striking example of Buddhism's important role was the doctrine "Silla relates to Buddhist Land". This doctrine was stressed in Buddhism's indigenization process in Silla. It was the doctrine preached by monk Cha-jang who went to Tang to study. He preached that Silla was originally a Buddhist country and thus that Buddhism was not a foreign religion at all, and that if the people would believe in Buddhism again and obtain divine protection, the nation would automatically rise again. He also preached that the King of Silla was originally from India, and that Silla is a special nation where many Buddhas appeared. Furthermore, he taught that if nine-storey Buddhist towers were built in Hwangryongsa-ji Temple as symbols of divine protection following the revelation, that they would ward off the threat of surrounding countries and ensure the prosperity of Silla. He said that he had received miraculous virtue from the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī in the Five Mountains and had received revelation from a "god-person" during training.

In the Koryō Kingdom, which succeeded the Silla system, state guardian Buddhism reached its height and a Buddhist kingdom was achieved—a rare phenomenon in the history of East Asia. First, in the Koryō Kingdom, the ranking system for monks, introduced by the state to control Buddhism, was rearranged as an examination system for monks, a sort of official ranking system resembling the Chinese classical examination system. Through this system, the king-master who teaches the king and the country-master—who is thus the head of national politics, was set as the highest rank for monks. In this way, Buddhism as a national religion prepared a unique structure which merged with the structure of authority and the bureaucracy. At the time three hundred temples were concentrated in Kaesōng. Also, temple branch offices were built in each area. Understood economically, land owned by the temple increased as they were given special rights; industry and commerce conducted at temples flourished, and a tremendous amount of the state budget was used for offering meals or national undertakings or contributions made to Buddhist monks.

The idea of guardian Buddhism in Silla and Koryō is deeply connected to indigenous beliefs in a mountain god of geomancy and famous mountains. Particularly after the Koryō Dynasty, when building Buddhist temples and towers, national geomantic considerations were carefully discussed, reflecting a strong national consciousness. People were very concerned with the selection of the capital; geomantic-thought determined that the location of the nation's center would affect the peace of the kingdom. The capital was arranged such that geomancy's protective mountain was positioned as the spiritual center of the nation as a whole, with the palace at the foot of the mountain. In the "legend of the First King Appointed by Heaven" it is written that a leader would appear at the Songak if a palace was built there. This Songak was related to Mt. Paektusan; there was a geomantic oracle that if a palace was built a sacred son who would unify the three kingdoms would be born in the following year. There was also an oracle that if the capital region was moved to the southern part of the foot of the mountain and pine trees were planted covering the rock, that a master who would unify the three kingdoms

would appear. Later when the Khitan invaded the king's capital, the god of Songak became ten thousand pine trees and screamed out. The Khitan army, hearing the voice, thought that Koryŏ had impressive military reinforcements and retreated. Another record says that when the Koryŏ Kingdom was destroyed, "a voice was heard at Songak." in this way, Songak became the guardian spirit of the king's capital, the kingdom and the nation; the royal family, for example, would hold its festival praying for rain in times of drought at Songak.

The Yi Chosŏn Dynasty moved its capital to Hanyang (today's Seoul) in order to refresh people's minds and ward off former establishments. At that time geomantic considerations in the location of the new capital, particularly focused on the spiritual power of the Protective Mountain which represented the authority of the kingdom. In this way, the so-called "theory" on the stability and fortune of the kingdom spread to common people as esoteric traditions during the Yi Chosŏn Dynasty. Because the theory was sometimes called upon to rationalize rebellions, it was at one time prohibited as a dangerous theory which mystifies the people. One of the most popular theories was the "Chŏnggamnok" according to which during times of disorder in the Yi Chosŏn Dynasty, a saint with the surname Chŏng would appear at the Mt. Kyeryongsan, the geomantic center of Korea, and build a city at the foot of the mountain. According to this prophecy, which may be called "heaven on earth", the kingdom will then prosper for eight hundred years. Even today there is a new religion with indigenous character based on this theory of a messiah's mountain descent.

Moving the capital, the Yi Chosŏn Dynasty shifted to an 'abolish Buddhism—respect Confucianism' policy promoted by the power of newly risen Confucianists. Various national Buddhist ceremonies and the privileges of temples and monks were abolished. Instead of Buddhism, Confucianism provided the exam content for bureaucrats. Thus the central government, and the political system in general, was controlled by bureaucrats who were Confucianists.

As for Confucianism's public system, in the center a central building with equipment for national festivals and ceremonies and which served as an academic institution was established. Under its supervision, schools were established in each region to serve as the center of Confucianism, education, and ceremony. Regional private Confucian academies (*sŏwŏn*) for educating the children of *yangban*, and at the village level *sŏdang* became widespread for commoners.

Confucianism does not admit the existence of super-natural power, but rather stressed only the ethics of human life. It is very worldly in its nature. Since Confucianists were organized through the administration, it was able to effectively permeate the state more intensively than Buddhism had.

Finally, Taoism must be mentioned, although the materials remaining are insufficient for knowing what it was like during the Three Kingdoms Period. There are records, such as the Koguryŏ "Ritual of Heaven" or "The Worship of the Spirit Star and the Agricultural God" and the Paekche "King set up the Ritual Altar," and "Worship Heaven and Earth" but there is also the Paekche "There are many

Buddhist Monks and Nuns, but no Taoists.” Taoism stands in interesting contrast to the prosperity of Buddhism.

During the Koryŏ Dynasty, we can find records of national Taoist ceremonies at court in “The Koryŏ History” and other documents. Constellations such as the elderly star were enshrined and celebrated, for example when praying for rain or healing, at Taoist shrines.

Furthermore, the office of the *songyŏk* was organized, and Taoists in the office were given official rank. There was, however, no centralized bureaucratic system of control for Taoism in the countryside, and protest by newly risen Confucianists limited Taoist public ceremonies to the capital and court. Confucian officials’ objection to Taoist ceremonies led to political strife in the central government. Although the royal family persisted in holding some of the ceremonies, they were abolished when the Taoist Office was burnt down during Hideyoshi’s invasion (late sixteenth century) and never revived again.

2. THE PROCESS OF INDIGENIZATION

It is clear that Buddhism during the Three Kingdoms Period and the Koryŏ Period, the era of State-guardian Buddhism, incorporated indigenous and Taoist elements such as belief in the mountain god and seven stars, but we can only guess at the integration of Buddhism among the common people. It seems, though, that Buddhism did not spread among the people until it was deprived of its position as a national religion during the Yi Chosŏn Dynasty when it was integrated with indigenous beliefs and shamanism. After monks lost various privileges under the abolish-Buddhism and worship-Confucianism policy, they went to the people in cities and villages who believed in profit in the world. In their religious rituals, they extensively employed Taoist and other scriptures alongside Buddhism. It is probably at this time that chanting gained the character of incantation. In addition to Buddhist monks, so-called Taoist monks who used popular Taoist scriptures among the people became widespread. Also, shamanism which was despised and prohibited by Confucianists, was incorporated. There were monks who had a style similar to that of Buddhist monks, but managed direct shamanistic contact with gods for fortune telling and rites for curing. The popularity of these various Buddhist rites among the people also was strongly related to the Confucianism that spread from the center to the countryside and from the high classes to the common people as a new national religion. In a word, Confucianism denied the existence of the super-natural and denied all shamanistic and incantationistic approaches with spirits or superstition. Confucianism, though, when it came to this-worldly matters, such as asking for good luck or the prevention of disaster, could not answer with its rites of ancestor worship. Buddhism, Taoism and shamanism had to attend to the this-worldly matters. For example, prayers for children, long life, the cure of disease, or consoling the souls of the dead were the most important thing in the world of women. Today’s scriptures and notions of

god in popular religious practice have emerged from intense mutual influence and integration of Buddhism, Taoism and shamanism. Still, though, each of these traditions has a peculiar style of rites, theory and practice, and maintains some separate existence while also constituting the complicated nexus of Korean popular religion. Consequently, when people seek to overcome problems such as sickness, they can choose from a broad range of solutions based on various geomantic, fortune telling, and other techniques.

Next, let us consider how the Confucian tradition penetrated into peoples' lives. We will look at the process in terms of first, the existence of educational institutions and special cultural people; second, the diffusion of texts; third, Confucian rites; and finally, the rites of daily life.

The central government established the Songgyungwan as a national headquarters of education policy, while there were local public schools in each country, private institutions built by powerful *yangban* families for their children and *sōdang* were established by farmers. As well as serving as educational institutions, these local schools were also a place for the socializing of the Confucian gentry class in the region. Villages with *sōdang* known as villages enthusiastic about Confucianism and the villagers were proud of it. Generally, the most learned man in the village was selected to be the teacher at the *sōdang*, but sometimes scholars were invited from other villages. Students also were not necessarily from that village, they would come from near by villages and sometimes even from far off villages in which case they would board in the *sōdang* village. Those who were asked to teach in other villages became celebrities, well-known scholars who would also represent the local schools at large Confucian meetings. In this fashion, the relationship of master and pupil in *sōdang* and local schools extended beyond a single village, weaving together the region. Also these relationships would extend for many generations. Villages which had *sōdang* formed student organizations for memorializing the academic virtues of their lineage of teachers' rites for deceased masters. Monuments were built at the entrance of villages. Such teachers functioned as "cultural brokers," spreading official Great Tradition of the center to local people. They also constituted a class of moral leaders (*ōrun*).

For texts, they used: classics of Chinese writing such as the four classics, classics excerpted and re-edited Korean, so-called proverbs with explanation in *hangul*, and pieces written in song. Students began with *Qian zì wén* (book of one thousand characters) and continued with the Lesser Learning, the Analects, the Mencius, and so on.

As for Confucian rites, there were four main ceremonial occasions. These are all life cycle rites, the symbolic base of Confucian ethics and norms. By participating in these rites, people learned Confucian ethics through direct experience. Funeral rites and memorial rites for the deceased were especially regarded as the most well-condensed form of showing respect and filial duty towards parents and ancestors in everyday life. For this reason, people worked hard to follow the style in order to maintain not only individual or family social dignity, but also that of the

lineage.

The exercise of rites in everyday life has always served as a standard for objectively evaluating individual's inner "virtue".

There are strict requirements for everything from greetings to one's parents and the ancestral altars after getting up, to manners during meals, greetings to guests, hosting, the use of language, and proper action in front of elderly people. Also, social separation of women and men (inner and outer domains) was also expected to be conducted in a particular fashion. The birth order (elder/younger), distinction among generations and the gender separation are all reflected in the physical structure of living quarters. When it comes to language usage, younger people refrained from speaking to elders before they were encouraged to speak, and it was considered good etiquette to keep one's voice down, one's facial expression constant, and in general to keep the contact reserved. It was strictly prohibited to speak against the word of an elder. In terms of dress, people had to dress properly in accordance with their age and generation. One by one, the practice of manners was understood as the basic condition for achieving worthy inner human character. In this way, the lifestyle of the *yangban* class with its ideal of Confucian ethics spread among the common people, although there were some differences of degree. As a result, as the Yi Chosŏn Dynasty progressed from its middle to late era, Korean society became an authentic Confucian society, extending and excelling beyond the Chinese prototype. The Confucian life-style actualized by the *yangban* class not only emphasized the ethics of Confucianism, but also uniquely Korean value systems that were not always directly related to Confucianism.

Confucianism introduced a tendency to emphasize the completion of inner personal character over external character. In other words, there was a tendency to devalue the techniques for making and using things and to value people's ability. There was little interest in or value accorded to tools or practical matters. It is surprising, for example, that there was no folk knowledge of the natural history of animals, plants and nature. They aspired to conceptual, abstract thought and logic gained through a life of reading books, while they were weak in concrete ideas and expression based on reality. By looking down on skills, techniques and specialized knowledge, a tradition of despising handicrafts and the arts developed. Other than farming, most labor was despised. Whenever possible the *yangban* class even avoided farming; the ideal life-style was considered to be one devoted only to reading. Thus in agriculture, ideas and efforts for technical advancement or increases in productivity were ignored. Also, as it was said that *yangban* should never know the price of goods, they also looked down on business. Even today artisans are called "such-and-such *chengyi*," a derogatory term, and those who are in business are called *changsakkun* and there is a strong tendency to despise those jobs. There is still a tendency not to hand down these jobs to one's children. I would like to point out that in Korea not only does the "household" lack the background of social organization, but also Koreans despise passing down special techniques and occupations; this stands in sharp contrast to the Japanese "family business". Confucian values

and behavior style idealize the literary man's life and despise menial work. The tendency to avoid menial work, leaving it to others, is expressed by the word "*yam-ch'e*". The life-style of the *yangban* class was actualized by the labor of servants. If the *yangban* life-style is that of leaders and saints, that of servants was a life-style without virtue or culture. The differentiation of leaders and lower classes, particularly in the Chu Hsi School of Confucianism established class relationships in society where self and other were always in relative status positions, with *yangban* and common people on the opposite ends of the spectrum in Korean society. Thus, the ideal *yangban* life-style was based on class distinction.

If we look at Confucian *yangban* life as a process of assimilating the people, it is clear that Confucianism and especially Chu Hsi thought was based on the assumption of the existence of an uncultured people constituting the lowest class or periphery sector of the society. We can say that the society as a whole was integrated through chains of *yangban*-commoner-like relations, with the king at the top as the symbolic figure of virtue and the lowest common people at the bottom. Thus, the Confucianization process was not entirely uniform, and from a different angle we can say that Confucianism took the path of the other great traditions as it too was indigenized by Korean society. In this way, through the Yi Chosŏn Dynasty assimilation of the common man through Confucianism, the most Confucian society in the history of East Asia was formed; although there were some local divergences, under a strong central government the people of this small nation were saturated with Confucianism.

In the field of Confucianism, Korean Chu Hsi thought inherited the legitimate Confucian tradition rather than China, and developed to produce many great Confucian scholars represented by Yi T'oe-gye. Confucian schools other than Chu Hsi, however, were greatly alienated and threatened by the Chu Hsi school. In the 18th Century many Confucians, particularly politically alienated scholars stressed the Practical Learning School (*silhak*). It was a movement to solve basic problems of the state by making agricultural improvement and technological and economic reform through actively learning advanced science and technology of the Manchurian Dynasty of that time. Confucianism had neglected technology and economics which is the base of the life of the people. In this respect the Practical Learning School certainly attacked Chu Hsi thought at its base. The Practical Learning was considered as a dangerous school, heresy from the Chu Hsi School which was rooted in long isolated administrative and educational institutions. The Practical Learning School never had the real power of a reform movement and was politically banned. As a result, real economic, technological and scientific reform was greatly delayed, until Korea experienced tension on account of Russian and Japanese power.

The process of Confucianization during the Yi Chosŏn Dynasty denied religion and study outside of Confucianism and while abolishing heresies proceeded to purify the philosophy of Neo-Confucianism, while the Yi Dynasty proceed to simplify and standardize the theory of principle and ideal, its institutions and

organizations became increasingly rigid and elaborated. For example, the spread of *sōdang* and *sōwōn*, the rise of printed texts and Confucian related writings, the diffusion of lineage genealogy, and of the commendation system and so on might constitute the “involution” that Goldenweiser and later Geertz and Service refer to.

Confucian enculturation is a process whereby Korea identified with China in the Chinese-barbarian order. All that which was despised—technology, economy and the army—came to symbolize the mongol, the barbarian. The Ch’ing Dynasty was established by the Manchurians, who were outsiders, despised and called “*orangk’ae*” by the established *yangban* class in the Yi Chosŏn Dynasty. They thought it was Korea who had inherited the Chinese tradition (Ch’ing) from the Ming instead of the Ch’ing Dynasty, asserting the conquest-of-the-north. During a mission to Yen Ch’ing, the capital of the Manchu Dynasty, the delegations were composed of *yangban* of segregated descent social standing, excluded from personal advancement by government service, and marginalized from the mainstream of Confucianism. Koreans tend to be neglected in the mainstream of the Confucian world. Those on the mission were shocked after observing the advanced scientific technology of the Ch’ing Dynasty and preached for the importance of Practical Learning after returning to the country. So, they went the way of heresy and anti-government activity.

The norms of Confucian behavior have many codes and sometimes brought advanced and highly stylized life to the common people. On the other hand, though, other beliefs and religious traditions—although they did not have codes of systematized expression—gained strong support by directly connecting to the actual life and sentiment of the people in the unofficial realm. These traditions were never systematized or organized. They were not sufficiently systematic to integrate society. In this respect, in China Taoism was more systematized as a religious organization, and the Taoist gods were recognized as similar to national bureaucratic and military institutions. In contrast, in Korea the gods of popular religious practice extended beyond the practical social order, unrelated to the structure of rank and organization. Each god-spirit has a distinct character and function. Even if we consider those with expert techniques, most of the monks of popular Buddhism are married without particular religious character and without temple affiliation. Blind Taoist monks may have guilds in some regions, but basically deal with people as individual customers. Most of those who read sutras had the experience of practicing religion at a temple, but many of them were village people with regular occupations for whom it is a side job. And in the case of shamans, those north of the central region have had an individual experience with medium and so they can work individually; the organization of shamans does not extend beyond the mutual aid system based on the personal master/pupil relationship. In the South it is a so-called inherited shaman, like a caste it is inherited in the family. These shamans or rather priests, though, do not live together; they live diffused so as to maintain their patron-client relations with customers. In some regions there was a “*sinch’ōng*,” which resembles guilds, but other than that they only form “action group” based on

kinship network—both such systems are far from centralized national hierarchical style. Korea's highly socially integrated society should be understood as the mutual relationship between the indigenization based on the tradition of unsystematized folk religion, and the authority of systematically structured universalistic Great Tradition.

Translated by NOMIYA Akiko and Nancy ABELMANN