

Revitalisation of Korean New Religions in the 1970s

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Abstract

The 1970s saw a dramatic shift in Korean religious circles, when new religions founded in the 19th century but oppressed until then revitalized and spread rapidly. Why could Korea in the 1970s not adopt the smooth relationship between religion and modernity prevalent in the West? Instead, why did new religions based on tradition develop and flourish? The study aims to reveal the foundation of Korean new religions from a theoretical perspective. Furthermore, this empirical research will, from a socio-political point of view, clarify why industrialization of Korea in the 1970s increased dependency on religions and revitalized new religions, rather than diminish their influence.

Key words: Korean new religion, post-secularisation, modernisation, the 1970s of Korea

Introduction

In the late 18th and early 19th century, Korea was in the late stages of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), manifesting a culture based on Neo-Confucianism in addition to showing the beginnings of modernisation. However, this modernisation was the result of coercion by foreign powers such as Japan, Russia, the United States, Britain and France rather than a product of voluntary and self-serving efforts. As such, Korea developed a chaotic cultural milieu, under severe duress from outside forces. The influx of Western culture acted as a catalyst to dismantle the feudal society of Joseon, which led to an awareness of the dangers posed by Western imperialism. The public gradually became more politically enlightened, resisting the class system and gender discrimination prevalent in the Joseon era and coming to distrust the traditional religions of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism, as well as the newly introduced Christianity [1][2]. The chaos of this evolving Korean social structure, caused by modernisation, however, ironically led to the birth of new and influential religions instead of the decline of religion.

However, these new Korean religions seemed to contract under the oppression and control of various political powers; indeed, they seemed to be on a path to extinction throughout the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), Korean War (1950–1953), Rhee Seungman administration (1948–1960) and Park Chung-hee administration (1961–1979). However, a dramatic reversal began to take place in the religious sphere in the 1970s; the Korean new religions, born at the end of 19th century and almost immediately oppressed, were reborn and soon experienced rapid growth [3][4][5]. Given this explosion

of interest in new religions, the obvious question is why the inverse relationship between Western religions and modernity did not apply in Korea in the 1970s. Why did Korean new religions based on tradition flourish in the face of modernisation while Western religion declined under similar modernising pressures? This paper aims to shed light on this phenomenon.

Characteristics of Korean Religions

While the most prominent religion of the West is Christianity, religious diversity is a key characteristic of Korean culture (A. Kim 2002b). A 2015 study found that, of the 43.1% of Korean respondents who reported belonging to a religious denomination, 19.7% belonged to a Protestant Christian denomination, 15.5% to a Buddhist denomination, and 7.9% to a Catholic denomination [6]. However, there are hundreds of indigenous religions in Korea, and other studies have found their believers to total some 7 million [7]. Despite these differences in reported statistics, it is clear that modern Korean society supports a diverse range of religions. Although there are no clear statistics on the types of religion or the number of believers during the Joseon Dynasty, we may presume that this diversity also applied at the time. From the perspective of the dynasty's founders, establishing Neo-Confucianism as the Joseon state religion was a way to support the dynasty's systemic ideology and political thought. However, despite their use of Neo-Confucianism as a political tool, the elites, consisting of the royal family and *sadaebu*, were still largely adherents of Buddhism, the state religion of the previous era, and Daoism and various folk religions were still widespread [8]. Not only did these religions remain active during the Joseon Dynasty, but after the introduction of Roman Catholicism in 1784, various Christian sects also joined the late Joseon religious milieu. In light of this proliferation of religious options during a time of rampant modernisation within Korea, the secularisation theories stating that the adoption of reason or rationality will lead to the decline, and ultimately the demise, of religion, can be said to partially apply to the Korean experience. Indeed, reason and rationality were formally adopted in the guise of modernisation and Neo-Confucianism, but an abundance of alternative religious choices flourished at the same time, belying the notion that rational worldviews and religious devotion are mutually exclusive in all societies and contexts.

Viewed from the Western perspective on religion, Confucianism appears to emphasise rationality, and thus the decline of 'religion' in Korea during the Joseon Dynasty should be expected; Neo-Confucianism categorically rejected the

supernatural and divine worlds, while paradoxically uplifting Confucius as a divine entity and maintaining the structure of the religion, making its status as Joseon's state religion possible. This internal paradox, however, may have been what enabled other religions to flourish in Korea during its modernising period—rather than witnessing the decline of Neo-Confucianism as the state religion in conjunction with modernisation, the majority of people shared suspicions regarding the authority of Confucianism and turned to other religions rather than rejecting religiosity on the whole. Neo-Confucianism's reliance on rationality undermined its appeal as a state religion and the reactionary turn by the people was instead to more spiritual religions, rather than to secular practices as in the West. The Neo-Confucian rationalism, which rejected supernatural beings, could not 'fully satisfy' the religious needs of the common people [4]; this suggests that existential reflection and the desire to belong to something beyond the self is fundamental to the human condition [9].

Emergence of Korean New Religions

In 1948, Rhee Seungman was elected to take over from the U.S. military government. Rhee, a Methodist, strengthened favourable relationships with Protestants and Roman Catholics from the beginning of his rule, continuing the Protestant-leaning policies of the U.S. military government [10]. As a result, Christianity moved beyond the perceptual category of religion, becoming seen as a group representing Western civilisation on a broader scale. This led to the perception among the Korean elites that to espouse Christianity was to accept advanced culture. Park Chung-hee's military regime, which took power in a 1961 coup, promoted rapid industrialisation and urbanisation under the banner of anti-corruption, anti-communism, and economic development activity [11][12]. Notably, the Park Chung-hee administration wielded almost unlimited power over all facets of society under the guise of fulfilling its goal of promoting economic development. Ultimately, although the active involvement of the state in the economy may have contributed to Korea's economic development [13][14], such interference was bound to lead to various problems and changes. Specifically, Park's industrialisation policies facilitated Korea's rapid economic growth and Western-style modernisation; however, behind the scenes, Korea's civil society dwindled, and the authoritarian political system was legitimised. Moreover, as expressed by Song and Kim (2014), the government was seen as a 'de-facto religious figure.' The Korean people gradually began to resist the Park administration's totalitarianism. As a response, Park announced a state of emergency in 1971; the following year, he began his dictatorship in earnest by introducing the Yushin ('revitalization') Constitution, which justified his permanent rule. Thus, in the 1970s, Korea began to take the typical form of the 'authoritarian developmental state', which was a mixture of political totalitarianism and economic development [15].

The rapid industrialisation and urbanisation of the 1970s weakened the values, norms and authority that had sustained Korean society in the past, beginning to dismantle the traditional bonds based on regions and relatives. In this process, the incestuous relationship between power and economy—in other words, influential political figures and

businessmen—became increasingly pronounced, and corruption was institutionalised. Political leaders of developing countries tend to defend a growth-oriented ideology and often delay advancing political democracy and economic distribution until attaining their growth targets [16], and Park was no exception. As such, alienated groups such as workers, farmers and the urban poor grew, and many Koreans began placing a higher priority on capitalism, growth and social stability amidst an imbalance of opportunities.

Jae-hun Lee (2000b) asserted that the dysfunctions arising from the industrialisation process in Korea in the 1970s, such as moral degradation, extreme selfishness, opportunism and get-rich-quick mindsets, have led to demands for spiritual pursuits that would soothe the empty and dejected mind [3]. In contrast, Seung Gil Park (2016) has argued that economic development led people to demand a spiritual aspect to their lives that would provide a strong hope for success, and that the demand for religious institutions grew as they asserted themselves as providers of networks that could aid in the quest for that success [17]. Despite these contrasting positions on the relationship between industrialisation and religion, the basis of both claims is the common perception of unequal wealth distribution. With wealth becoming focused on a very limited group of people, the majority of Koreans grew disappointed by the loss of wealth on one hand and cultivated the desire to obtain wealth on the other. As secularisation is a dominant process, it is possible to predict that new religious adherents will emerge within economically vulnerable societies; the economically insecure seek help from religious institutions [18]. Religiosity continues to appeal strongly to economically unstable individuals—the uneducated, poor, old, and lower-class individuals. Thus, of the major contributing factors behind the revival of Korean new religions in the 1970s was the economic inequality resulting from the modernisation process.

There were other changes afoot within the administration of the time as well. Under the Park administration, policy towards religion shifted to favor Buddhism instead of Christianity [19]. The Park administration bestowed privileges on the Buddhists, who were alienated during the Rhee administration, reducing the gap between the two religions. The administration allowed Buddhism to be a military religion in 1968, an honour previously only allowed for Christianity; Buddhism was also represented in the 1974 national funeral of Yuk Young-Soo, Park's wife, alongside Protestant Christianity and Roman Catholicism, and Buddha's birthday was designated as a national holiday in 1975. With the granting of these privileges, Korean religion gradually reformed to include three major players: Buddhism, Protestant Christianity and Roman Catholicism. The Park administration gave various privileges to these dominant religions, helping them expand their influence; at the same time, it deprived non-mainstream religions of religiosity by stamping them as 'superstitious' and branding their differences as 'divisive', and through strict control [19].

The prevailing discourse that Korean new religions should be excluded from the religious market was based on the incestuous relationship between religion and political power, and particularly between Protestant Christianity and the Rhee administration. Under the Rhee administration, Protestant Christianity took the lead in the politicisation of religion by

intervening in state affairs and commanding absolute authority in the religious markets; by the end of Rhee's reign, the confluence of Protestant Christianity and state power fueled the corruption of state power [17]. The cosy relationship between Korean Protestantism and power continued into the Park administration. When Park's coup took place, founded on the goal of defeating the corruption and incompetence of the government prior to 1961, Korean Protestants quickly voiced their support for the effort [20]. They bolstered Park's capitalist industrialisation policies by focusing the blessing of God onto the generation of material abundance in support of the government's growth ideologies, rather than focusing on the less materialistic spiritual aspects of Christianity [19]. Protestantism, in conjunction with capitalist logic, soon warped into a temporal and uneven faith, and even among Protestants, those disappointed with the growing inequality in Korea began to flock to new religions with Christian overtones [17].

Some influential Korean Protestant churches count church offerings or tithes as a measure of devotees' loyalty to the church, increasing the burden of offering and weakening members' loyalty [21]. In particular, they emphasise or force religious participation, especially at Sunday worship services; however, other religious traditions in Korea are relatively free of formal norms. This material or immanent formalism of Korean Protestant churches emphasises a life of faith centered around the church, which in turn predicates its existence on the external growth of the church. Mainstream traditional Korean religions, such as Buddhism and Confucianism, experienced consistent internal conflict dating to the mid-1950s, which continued in the Park administration [12]. The Park administration attempted to control the entire religious community through manipulating the balance of power between Protestants, Catholics and Buddhists as the dominant religions, while outwardly providing preferential treatment for Buddhism. The Park administration unilaterally supported the Jogye Order, one of Buddhist orders, in organising its preferential treatment of Buddhism in the 1960s; however, in the 1970s, when the dictatorship began to take shape, it took a neutral stance and allowed other Buddhist orders to operate. This led to competition among the Buddhist sects seeking support and, overall, to broad support of the government by the entire Buddhist community. Notably, the community began to support Park as the presidential candidate in elections and defended government policies in Buddhist ceremonies [19]. Buddhism, much like Christianity, sought cohesion and solidarity with political powers.

Even those who do not regularly participate in religious activities often still maintain cultural and familial ties with religion [22]. In other words, they have a favorable view of religion as a concept and participate in many activities with religious significance under specific beliefs; this indicates that non-religious people often retain a traditional sense of faith, but distance themselves from organised religion, in line with assertions by Hout and Fisher (2002). This pattern is reflected in the situation in Korea in the late 1960s. The alienated classes, including workers, farmers and the urban poor, expanded in large numbers throughout the industrialisation and urbanisation process, and were subjected to harsh economic and social inequality with nowhere to turn for succor. Even the existing religions, which were supposed to provide a resting place for

the soul, displayed rigid and chronically pathological behaviours in their alliances with the dominant political powers, and failed to embrace people with diverse religious needs. In this context, the time was ripe for the Korean new religions, founded on Korean soil in the late 19th and early 20th centuries but subsequently forgotten for many reasons, to become active again. These new religions began to expand their influence by highlighting the contradictions and inequalities of the existing society, and criticising the limitations of existing religions that failed to dynamically respond to such degradations [3][4].

College students who protested for the liberation of the oppressed and the liberation of the Korean people in the 1970s began to flock to new religions that presented solutions to class conflicts and weakened nationalist traditions.

Upon reflecting that modernisation does not equal westernisation, an interest in tradition exploded within the university community, strengthening academics' love and dedication towards folk culture, including mask dances and farming music. For example, mask dances were originally an art form in which clowns criticised the aristocrat class; liberal students in the 1970s expressed their anger and criticism of Park's military regime through mask dances. The rediscovery of folklore and folk culture by students was a fresh attempt at reinventing Korean culture, indicating that folklore could be revived for political purposes [2]. In this context, it may have been natural for Korean new religions to draw renewed attention, as these sects strongly maintained their original similarities to nationalist movements.

University communities saw the formation of student clubs relating to Korean new religions. In the 1970s, these included Jeung San Do and the Nine Gates to the Next Level; the early 1980s saw the establishment of the Collegiate Association of Daejin, and student clubs for Christian-influenced new religions such as the Unification Church's Collegiate Association for Research into Principles and the Church of Love of Heaven were also established during the same period. Some young elites attempted to find spiritual comfort in Korean new religions, turning away from Western-inflected modernisation and the influx of Western culture.

The time spanning the late 1960s to the early 1980s marked an unprecedented period in the history of Korean religion, during which the religious population unexpectedly grew [11]. The number of Korean new religions founded or stemming from existing religions was 31 before the liberation, 14 in the 1950s, 26 in the 1960s, 19 in the 1970s, 33 in the 1980s, and 1 in the 1990s. The establishment of a new religion or splintering of a new sect was strongest in the late 1960s and early 1980s [5]. Park Wudang (1917-1996) established the Daesoon Jinrihoe (Fellowship of Daesoon Truth) in Seoul in 1969, espousing the main doctrines of the Resolution of Grievances, Mutual Beneficence and the Grateful Reciprocation of Favors; at one time, the sect grew to 1.8 million members strong (Daesoon Jinrihoe; Wikipedia). As seen in the example of Daesoon Jinrihoe, the Korean new religions of the 1970s gradually transformed from rural sects into urban-style religions, influenced by industrialisation and urbanisation. These religions seeped into the broader Korean society through publishing scriptures, engaging in organizational restructuring and introducing aggressive apostolic policies [3].

In 1970s Korea, religion served as a social space that

facilitated the resurrection of tradition and furthered democratisation, rather than conflicting with modernisation [12]. In other words, as the new religions frequently shared their impetus for being with the roots of industrialisation, industrialisation did not reduce the influence of religion in the Korean context, but instead gave rise to a large populace that desired religion and increased social confidence in it. Grinell and Strandberg (2012) have argued that aesthetic, symbolic and religious experiences need to be recognised as non-reducible aspects of the human condition, since religious experience and meaning cannot be judged by reason or science [9]. The revival and growth of new religions in 1970s Korean society can be understood in this context.

Conclusion

Despite political policies of controlling and restricting Korean new religions, the Park administration, driving industrialisation as its first policy priority, began to inadvertently provide the background for the revival and growth of new religions. As a part of Western modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation processes touted reason and rationality, backed up by the pursuit of materialism and capitalism. Park's development-driven dictatorship provided the grounds for both young intellectuals and disenfranchised workers, farmers and the urban poor to reflect on the ideals of Western modernity. Marginalised groups, driven to the fringes of the society amidst industrialisation, demanded something to soothe their souls. Intellectuals, centering around young college students, began to rediscover the Korean new religions that had their roots in overlooked traditions, driven from view through both attrition and force. Meanwhile, the poor, uneducated people on society's periphery also began to turn to Korean new religions, which provided the familiarity offered by tradition and acted as an alternative to existing mainstream religions, which had begun to lose their spiritual authority through their cohesion with political powers. Modernity, as a hostile force promoting Western religions, led to the birth and revival of religion in Korea in the late 19th century and through the 1970s, when modernity was peaking. This is largely due to the fact that the relationship between Western religion and modernity is based on a single dominant religion of Christianity, whereas Korea has long been a multi-religious society; in Korea, modernity stimulated religion to adapt to or change in a new environment, and led to the substitution of existing religions with new ones when the existing religions abandoned their proper functions.

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