Modernity and Religiosity of Korean People Today

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Traditional Korean thought is, for the most part, based on Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism as they have been received and interpreted according to the Korean world view. Each generation has taken its inspiration from these same sources.

The present generations in contemporary Korea, however, share many experiences which differentiate them from all preceding ones. The sudden changes that have occurred since liberation, the Korean War, and the beginning of industrialization have brought about a hiatus separating this generation from the past.

How do the generations differ from one another? Are generational differences particularly pronounced in Korean society and, if they are, is this a result of the importance that Confucian societies attach to age stratification? How do shifting societal roles alter the attitudes of each generation? Lastly, to what extent is religion responsible for the changes in a given society?

The following discussion addresses itself to the above question. Some considered and tentative answers will be offered on the basis of the result of a nation-wide survey conducted in 1983.

1. Theoretical Observations

1—1. Religion and Change within Korean Society

When discussing religion and societal change, it is impossible to ignore

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the contributions of Max Weber. Using Weber's theoretical framework, the question has often been asked: Can the ideological framework of capitalist societies—in particular, Calvinist self-denial and the Protestant work-ethic—be adopted to the traditional Confucian ethical system?

Korea, almost everyone has followed Weber's theoretical approach and concluded that Confucianism has led to an inevitable weakness in industrial capacity. Confucianism has been deemed an anti-rational and authoritarian orthodoxy that looked down on physical labor and military preparedness. The aristocratic scholars of the Confucian system have been thought of as an idle class which wasted all of its time indulging in empty scholasticism.

This attitude underwent a 180 degree turn in the 1960s and 1970s as East Asian nations achieved remarkable economic growth as the result of intense industrialization. The Asian genius for organization in combination with a strong emphasis on education and rationalism was seen as the reflection of the Confucian attitudes that were common to all of the emerging industrial nations in East Asia. Whatever one may conclude, Weber's assertion that religion is key factor determining societal change still rings true. The problem lies in ascertaining the particular religion(s) and belief(s) that influence members of a given society and the type and degree of change that these beliefs produce.

In 1948, Hyŏn Sang-yun pointed out some of the ways that the Confucianism of the Chosŏn Dynasty was responsible for the low level of industrialization. Hyŏn tells us that, although Confucianism contributed significantly to the development of a sense of human dignity in the people, it must also be held accountable for much of the corruption of the time. Some examples he lists are: flunkeyism, frequent factional disputes, excessive favors for family members, the division of society into classes, disrespect for women, excessive emphasis on scholarship to the neglect of the military, emphasis on form and name rather than reality, excessive conservatism and a low level of production.1

In the sixties, Professor Yi Sang-ŭn shifted the blame for Asia's slow economic development to Asian culture.

... In short, Confucianism, as far as its economic policies are concerned, did not strive to increase national wealth through industrial advances and profit-making enterprises, rather it sought to provide

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1 Hyŏn Sang-yun, Chosŏn Yuhaksa (History of Korean Confucianism) Seoul, Minjung sŏgwan p. 8 et passim
people with an ample livelihood, giving to each his share while ensuring that each person do his share of the work...

...Confucian political ideology did not have the same goal as Western modernization with its emphasis on competition; rather, it came forth from the fountain of Asian culture—a culture that aspires to peace and harmony...²

As the non-communist East Asian nations achieved rapid economic growth, the evaluation of the role of East Asian thought in modernization began to change. Roderick MacFarquahur, a professor of government at Harvard, previously a British MP, pointed out how traditional Confucian rationalism contributed to group cohesiveness. He noted that the new Asian economic powers could succeed even though they did not follow the Western model for economic growth that was based on individual initiative.³

In 1983, I worked with the Korean Gallup Research Center in conducting research analyzing the relationship between religious preference and modernity. Surprisingly enough, the religious trends of Koreans did not seem to have much influence on the degree of modernity of Korean attitudes. There was little difference between those who professed a religion and those who followed no religion.

It also did not seem to matter what particular religion a person followed. The findings showed that the degree of modernization was affected solely by the

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² Yi Sang-ūn, “Han’guk-e issŏsŏ-ŭi chonggyo-ŭi kongjoerom(On the merits and demerits of Confucianism in Korea),” Asea yŏn’gu 9/4 Asia Research Institute, Koryŏ University, Korea (1966 Dec.) pp. 1-23


"Of the rapidly growing newly industrialized countries" pinpointed by the OECD because their competitiveness is causing concern to the developed world, the only ones with non-European cultural origins are the post-Confucians. South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. These 58m post-Confucians have a share of world exports of manufactures one third larger than that of the 247m Brazilians, Mexicans, Spaniards, Portuguese, Greeks, and Yugoslavs who make up the rest of the OECD list.

Common elements are that the post-Confucian economic man works hard and plays hard, buys much, but save more. He accepts society stratified by age as well as ability, perhaps partly because income differentials are insufficient to arouse resentment. He perceives that his prosperity is inseparable from the good of the community and he accepts guidance as to where that lies.

The non-communist East Asian states have already demonstrated that their post-Confucian characteristics—self-confidence, social cohesion, subordination of the individual, education for action, bureaucratic tradition and moralizing certificate—are a potent combination for development purposes."
amount ofation a given individual had received.

1–2. Religion and the Value Systems of Contemporary Koreans:
The Role that Religion Plays in the Formation of the Value Systems of Contemporary Korean

When I speak of a generation, I do not refer to the ten year intervals used by population specialists and biologists. Instead, I use the term ‘generation’ to indicate a group of youth distinguished from their predecessors by the need to adapt to new challenges. If we look at Korean history during the last century, instead of a steady and peaceful society where the young are educated and prepared by society to enter the previous order, we find that each era has presented each generation with sudden changes: As each generation has had to adapt to the historical conditions of their time, they have developed different values that differentiate them from their predecessors.

Hūi-sŏp Im has divided present-day Korean society into three generations:

(1) those over 60 who are the vestiges of Japanese imperialism,
(2) the middle-aged generation which experienced the Korean War and are now between the ages of thirty and fifty, and
(3) the generation which grew up in a society transformed by industrialization and urbanization.4

Tony Michell characterized Korean society as sub-Confucian and post-Christian. “Sub-Confucian” refers to the influence that Confucianism still has on Korean society. Even though people no longer receive a formal Confucian education involving the “three major and the five minor human relationships”, the society is still strongly patriarchal and is divided into age groupings. Michell, however, takes fifteen years to be the span of one generation.5

As a matter of fact, the stratification of Korean society according to age is apparently due to the influence of Confucianism. According to Confucius, the individual growth process occurs in stages. Confucius characterized his own growth process with his famous dictum, “At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts, etc.”

To arrive at the point of having no doubts, each generation of youth must undergo a long process that inevitably involves a great deal of suffering and soul-searching. According to developmental psychology, the formation of a system of values is necessary at this time if a youth hopes to cope during periods of crisis. Such values are also needed for the establishment of a sense of independence. The development of a system of values usually parallels the degree of conviction with which an individual holds certain religious views. Here, we are using the word "religion" in its widest sense to include doctrine, myth, ethics, rites, and religious experience.

However, the process of development is also determined by the specific historical challenges that each generation must face. If we look at the previous century in Korea, we find that the following periods are representative of the general focus of the national consciousness.

1850~1910 : Patriotic ideology prevailing
   Period of struggle for establishing national identity
1910~1945  : Anti-Japanese Colonialism
   Period of fight for independence against Japanese colonialism
1945~1960  : Anti-Communist Ideology prevailing
   Period of trying Western democracy under Rhee regime
1961~1980  : Post-ideological period
   Period of economic development and industrialization

2. The Religious Preference of Koreans:
Research Analysis and a Brief Review of the Findings

2-1. Introduction and Evaluation of Previous Research

Credit for the first research on Korean values, particularly material on the generation gap as it existed during the 1960s, must probably be given to the professors Kim T’aeg-il and Hong Sùng-jick.6

In 1970, a study was done comparing the religious values of Korean university students with those of their Japanese counterparts. In the study, the pollees were asked whether each Korean religion contributed to modernization and economic development or hindered it. The study yielded interesting results.

Many people considered Christianity to be a contributing factor. When asked about Buddhism, Confucianism and Shamanism, the male students were split between advocates of both views. The female students, however, tended to think that these three belief systems were hindering factors. The majority of both male and female students thought Confucianism was a hindering factor. It must be pointed out that less than one-third of the students who answered the poll thought that Christianity was a contributing factor. This fact must, of course, be kept in mind when comparing the results of the ensuing survey.

Compared to Japanese students, Korean students generally had a much greater appreciation of religion. The Japanese students tended to look for happiness from within modern materialistic society, whereas Korean students tended to view religion with a sense of awe and respect.7

According to Ch'oe Pyong-gil's 1982 thesis, the number of Korean professing a particular religious faith has increased. The older generation of Koreans tend to believe in traditionally Asian religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism and Ch'ŏndogyo, while the younger generation, which happens to make up over half of the Korean population, tends to believe in religions that have been introduced from the West such as Protestantism and Catholicism.8

2-2. Analysis of the 1983 Nationwide Survey:
"Religion and the Religious Awareness of the Korean People"9

1) Religious Preference and the Modernity Indexes

In order to gauge the Korean people's disposition towards modernity, I have used Alex Inkeles' seven point modernity index. The points are as follows: (1) openness to new things, (2) independence from traditional auth-

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In his article written in English, "Religious Values and Modernization in Korea", he summarizes some tentative findings as follows: (3) Korean protestant ethics might be very much affected by Confucianism, (4) Korean protestantism may not be a motivation force to modernization, (5) Weber's protestant ethic thesis might not be applicable to the Korean society.


9 Han'gugin-in chonggyo-wa chonggyo úisk (Religion in Korea), 1984 surveyed and published by Korea Survey(Gallup) Polls, Ltd
ority, (3) trust in the efficacy of modern science/medicine, (4) the will to succeed/achieve, (5) definite sense of time/punctuality, (6) interest in political and social problems, and (7) the demand for new information. 10

According to (Table 1), Protestants belong to the group with the highest propensity towards modernity while the Buddhists belong to the group with the lowest propensity

(Table 1) Modernity and Religious Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Modernity</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total (1946)</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-believers</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yet, if we look at the relative modernity of respondents, using a table that takes into account each respondent’s relative level of education (See Table 2), we see that the above noted disparity between Buddhists and Protestants holds true only for those respondents who have not received more than an elementary school education. Such a finding shatters the common supposition that Protestants show a higher disposition for modernity than do Buddhists. Such a view, based on correlations like those found in (Table 1), is clearly found to be unwarranted once we take the respondents’ educational levels into consideration. Consequently, the key determinant of a Korean individual’s level of modernity seems to be education.

When we attempt to define ideological differences between the generations, “independence from traditional authority” might be selected as an indicator likely to delineate such differences. Indeed, if we only consider the age groupings, we find that, of the younger generation between the ages of thirty and thirty nine, only 6% favored an attitude of obedience. Amongst the older generation, on the other hand, over 60% praised the virtue of obedience. On these grounds, one might be led to speak of a “generation gap” forming an ideological gulf between the young and the old. How-

(Table 2) Modernity and Religion (Level of Education Controlled)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Modernity</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(517)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School</td>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Below</td>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>41.2(3)</td>
<td>43.3(2)</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-believers</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior High School</td>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-believers</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior High School</td>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-believers</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College and Above</td>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-believers</td>
<td>58.5</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ever, such an explanation loses all plausibility if we look again at the relative educational levels of the respondents. Individuals with only an elementary school education or less were 67.7% in favor of an attitude of obedience while middle school graduates were 50.7% in favor. The percentage in favor dropped significantly to 36.7% with those who had graduated high school and plunged to 30.4% with college graduates. It would seem that the more one is educated, the more one is willing to contend with the entrenched authority of tradition. In this instance, as in the last, we find that it is the level of education that determines a given individual's level of modernity—not the difference in age.

If we look at the differences between each generation, the relationship
between religious preference and age and the contrast between men and women are significant. 52.7% of all women follow religious faith in contrast to only 33.9% of all men. This tendency increases with the increase in age. Thus, 67.2% of women over fifty hold a religious belief. The correlation between age and religious preference, particularly when comparing Buddhism and Protestantism, is also significant. The lower the age or the level of education, the higher the percentage of adherents to Protestantism. For Buddhism, just the opposite holds true. In particular, the percentage of adherents to both of these beliefs shows reverse trends for the generation in their 30s and 40s (See Table 3). This might be explained by the sudden increase in the number of Protestants after the Korean War.

(Table 3) Religious Population According to Age-Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Protestant</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18~24 yr.</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25~29 yr.</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30~39 yr.</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40~49 yr.</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 yr. and above</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2) A Comparison of the Old and New Generations and Their View of Life

When asked to respond freely to the question, "What do you think is important in life?", the top two answers were "health" (19.8%) and "money/being well-off" (16.7%). "Living in a true/sincere fashion" (13.1%), "love" (6.6%), and "faith" (5.9%) were also popular responses. Other responses included "raising children" (4.4%), "humanity" (2.1%), "happiness" (2%), "effort" (1.9%), and "interpersonal relationships" (1.5%).

One can generally deduce from the above that the over-riding concern of most Koreans, regardless of what faith they profess—if any, is to live a healthy and happy life. If we put the above findings in a graph showing the relation-
ship between age and the above responses, we find that the more worldly concerns such as health and material well-being are found more and more with the increase in the ages of the respondents. On the other hand, a religious or idealistic set of values, apparent in responses such as "love" and "faith", are more popular with younger people. However, the degree to which the different age groups disagree is actually quite trifling, as can be seen in (Table 4)

(Table 4) Matter of Primary Concern According to Age-Group

When asked the matter of primary concern in their everyday life, respondents usually gave one of the following eleven answers: (1) good friends, (2) free/spare time, (3) family life, (4) a good job, (5) money, (6) religion, (7) health, (8) helping others, (9) being respected, (10) peace of mind, (11) living according to some kind of faith.

Again, the findings show that the chief concern of all Koreans is health. In the graph below, we can see some differences in values according to religious affiliation.

3) Attitudes Towards Religious Organizations

The educated stratum of society has, for a long time, strongly criticized the rapid growth in religious organizations. 64% of the people polled said that a large number of the clergy lacked character and were unqualified. Only 17.5% felt that this criticism applied to none of the clergy or to only a few. Among those polled, the younger generation was particularly critical. There was some difference between the young and the old. Of those age 24 and below, 73% were critical of the clergy, while 53.2% of those over 50 were critical. However, the apparent difference between the generations was
largely one of degree rather than values.

66.1% of those polled agreed that the religious institutions had lost the original meaning of the teachings they professed. This was slightly higher than the number of American respondents, 55% of whom answered in the affirmative. Once more, we found that the higher the level of education, the more critical the attitude.

23% of the people agreed that it was not enough to merely believe in a faith and that attending a church or a temple was necessary, while 63.8% disagreed.

When asked to respond to the question, "No matter how good a person is, will they be unable to go to heaven/paradise if they do not believe in a religion?", 66.4% of the people disagreed. The poll indicated that modern Koreans have, by and large, a negative attitude towards organized religion. However, there was no significant difference according to age.

In order to find out the role that religious attitudes play in encouraging or discouraging the workers' and farmers' organizational activities, we asked each respondent, "Do religious organizations and religious people encourage workers and farmers to take part in strikes and demonstrations, or do they dissuade them?" Again, there was almost no difference according to age.
The vast majority (88.7%) said that they dissuade them from taking part, 12.8% stating that they lightly discourage them and 75.9% saying that they strongly discourage them.

The pollees were also asked whether religious organizations took an active part in solving political, economic, and social problems. With no difference according to age, 21.8% felt that they do not and 47.3% felt strongly that they do not. Our research was unable to uncover any particular religious organization or age group with a greater tendency to support or lead radical labor movements.

3. Summary

Our research definitely dispels many of our previous misconceptions.

Firstly, no matter how hard one tries to develop parallel between traditional Korean religious views and modernity, no significant correlation can be found. Modernity is found to be related to the educational level of the individual.

Secondly, the differences between the religious preferences of the older and younger generation are for the most part insignificant in light of the fact that the leading concern of all Koreans, regardless of age and religious affiliation, is their present well-being or health.

Thirdly, in spite of the radical tendencies of the younger generation, we find that, when it comes to religion, they are just as conservative as the older generation. Moreover, the popular view that young people, in contrast to the older generation, are demanding that religion be more active in attending to society’s problems is found to be completely groundless.

In light of the findings, I believe we need to focus more on the adjustment of the Korean character to the needs of the modern world, instead of getting bogged down with considerations of generational differences. I cannot help but feel that continued debate concerning the generation gap and the attempts to find a relationship between the generation gap and societal change are absolutely pointless. Continued focus on the generation gap issue only serves to divert attention away from many of the previously neglected factors which have a profound effect on societal change.

Thus, the questions remain: In what ways do the changes in our general awareness effect our society and the way we live? What is the chief motivator of societal change? Is it not our youth, our ideas, or our consciousness?