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UNDERSTANDING SOUTH KOREA'S RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE, PATIENT 31, AND COVID-19 EXCEPTIONALISM

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Following its first COVID-19 case on January 20, 2020, South Korea underwent a dramatic shift in its pandemic record. By mid-March, South Korea reported the largest number of confirmed cases—8,236 as of March 15—outside of China. The world watched the exponential increase of the country's patient numbers with anxiety while gauging the threat of the new virus. South Korea, however, succeeded in “flattening the curve” in April. Since then, the country has contained the spread of the virus more effectively than the United States, Italy, Spain, and many other places. As of July 10, 2020, South Korea only added approximately 5,000 confirmed cases over the course of four months while the number of cases in the United States increased from 3,510 (March 15) to 3,233,462 (July 10) in the same period.¹ Considering that the United States has a population approximately 6.4 times greater than that of South Korea, the difference is exceptionally disproportionate. Thus, radically different accounts of South Korea and COVID-19 began to circulate, referring to South Korea's success as “Korean Exceptionalism” in the containment of the pandemic.²

The dramatic record of South Korea, including the exponential spread of COVID-19 until March and then the successful control of the virus in the following months, has received a good deal of international attention. Why did the virus spread so rapidly in the beginning, and how did South Korea manage to



Figure 1: A car is parked to protest against shincheonji in Wonil-ro 115beon-gil, Wonju-si, Gangwon-do. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

quell the spread so quickly when other developed countries were still struggling? Within the narratives about South Korea and COVID-19, interestingly, at least two religions were highlighted. First, the Shincheonji Church of Jesus was blamed as a super-spreader during the initial phase of the virus; second, Korean Confucianism was suggested to be the reason for successful containment of the virus.³

This essay critically analyzes how national and international observers described and portrayed these two religious traditions of South Korea during the pandemic, while also discussing the implications this has for educators. Popular accounts of both Shincheonji and Confucianism involve perspectives that essentialize the differences between South Korean culture and Euro-American democratic modernity. Within South Korea, media outlets highlighted the irrationality of the Shincheonji “cult” that prioritized religious practice over secular governmental health policy. In doing so, they sought to reassure citizens that their country was a modern democratic nation. Outside Korea, observers frequently offered simplified versions of Confucian “Koreanness,” which they claimed promoted conformity and, thus, authoritarian governmental control. Both accounts of South Korea’s COVID-19 experience fail to provide a productive discourse on solutions to the global pandemic. Nevertheless, the way in which these

religions are portrayed provides educators with an important teaching moment for Korean Studies specifically and Asian Studies generally. By problematizing and scrutinizing popular accounts of South Korea and COVID-19, educators can teach the importance of accurate knowledge and the historical contextualization of the Korean religious landscape. In addition, it is an important case study in which education in Asian Studies and religious literacy translate into student competency in media and information literacy.

Modernity Lagged Behind? Patient #31 of Shincheonji Church

In mid-March 2020, “#patient31” of South Korea trended on worldwide social media platforms, including Twitter. Users inside and outside of South Korea were astounded by the news that patient 31 and her Shincheonji Church of Jesus were responsible “for at least 60% [as of March 18th] of all [COVID-19] cases in South Korea.”⁴ Called a “super-spreader,” patient 31 attended a Shincheonji church service in the city of Daegu with 460 congregants when she had symptoms of the virus. By late February, officials had identified 2,022 cases with ties to Shincheonji churches in the region.⁵ Shincheonji church, founded in 1984, is a comparatively small new messianic religious group with origins in South Korean Protestant Christianity. Renowned for its aggressive recruiting methods, secretive membership, and “heretical” doctrines centered around its founder and “messiah,” Man-hee Lee (b. 1931), the church has been criticized as a “cult” separate from the mainstream Protestant denominations in South Korea.⁶ When the coronavirus cases spread from within the church, South Korean media were quick to condemn the church and its members as symbols of religious irrationality responsible for the rapid spread of the virus.

Based on the church’s doctrine that the illness signifies sin, members of the church avoided testing and provided false information to contact tracing officers. In addition, due to strong social disapproval of the church, individuals hid their membership from nonmembers, resulting in more difficulties in contact tracing and testing. The social stigmatization of Shincheonji church members intensified even after the founder, Lee, sent out a message to his followers to cooperate with the health authorities to prevent COVID-19 from further spread. Instead, the media focused on Lee’s comment that the virus was caused by “Satan . . . trying to sabotage the growth of the church.”⁷

After the South Korean CDC identified Shincheonji church members as the main culprits spreading the virus, criticism of the church went beyond social stigmatization and began to include discussions of banning the Shincheonji church’s services in the name of public safety. This in turn initiated a heated debate regarding whether the ban was a violation of the church members’ religious freedom as stipulated in the South Korean Constitution. Individuals publicly

condemned patient 31 and the church's unenlightened, “fanatical” nature, which threatened South Korea's modern national identity. Here, the mainstream religions of South Korea, including Protestant Christians, Catholics, and Buddhists, highlighted their own modern nature relative to Shincheonji. Unlike the “cult” of Shincheonji, other religions were seemingly well-adjusted to the secular modern national system, particularly in the time of COVID-19, and voluntarily canceled religious gatherings in line with governmental guidelines. Shincheonji quickly became a religion of lagged modernity in South Korea, which had to be revised and subsumed under the banner of modernity.

Despite the alleged dichotomy between Shincheonji and other religions, it is important to note that Shincheonji would not have existed without Protestant Christianity, particularly in the context of Pentecostalism and the evangelical prosperity gospel from the United States. The founder of Shincheonji, Man-hee Lee, was a member of Cheonbugyo (天父教), another Korean new religion founded by former Presbyterian preacher Tae-son Park (1917–1990). Park's Protestantism-derived messianic revivalism influenced the foundation of not only Shincheonji, but also the Unification Church (so-called “Moonies”), leading to the development of rich new religious movements in postwar South Korea. The appeal of these new religions, besides their unique doctrines of salvation based on the Bible, was the promise of spiritual and economic prosperity through religious faith.

The narrative of progress, or what anthropologist Nicholas Harkness calls the “aesthetics of progress” in Korean Protestant Christianity, is associated with a specific form of Western Protestant modernity and economic progress.⁸ The backdrop of this Protestant notion of progress is inextricably entangled with the transnational history of South Korea as a peripheral proxy of US hegemony in the twentieth century.⁹ Protestant Christianity in Korea was first established in the 1880s through the efforts of Presbyterian and Methodist missionaries from the United States whose theology was founded on conservative evangelicalism.¹⁰ After World War II, the Japanese Occupation came to an end, and Korea was subjected to three years of US military rule (1945–1948). During this period, American missionaries and Korean American Protestants played pivotal roles in the formation of the modern South Korean nation.¹¹ Syngman Rhee, a Korean Methodist deacon who had lived in the United States for nearly three decades, returned to Korea and became the first president of the South Korean government in 1948. At that time, Christians—Protestant and Catholic combined—represented only 5 percent of the Korean population, but 24 percent of parliamentarians were Protestant Christians.¹²

Protestant Christians in South Korea, a powerful minority, obtained their leverage through their connections to the United States, which aided South Korea



Figure 2: A Notice announcing reduced operation of Seoul Metro due to COVID-19, April 1, 2020.

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

both financially and politically. These connections helped South Korea become a participating member nation of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1996. Connections to US-based theological seminaries, Korean American churches, and an affinity for the English language became indispensable for Korean Protestants. As a result, contemporary South Korean Protestant churches have enjoyed unprecedented growth in their scale and sociopolitical influence, signaled by Yoido Full Gospel Church, one of the largest Protestant churches in the world, and its direct connection with Billy Graham (1918–2018).¹³ In addition, many scholars of Korean religion boldly and justly argue that Korean/American Protestant Christianity is mostly evangelical.¹⁴

After considering the historical context of Korean evangelicalism and the Shincheonji church, it is difficult to argue for the clear distinction between

“mainstream” evangelical Protestant Christianity and Shincheonji regarding their conformity to secular modernity. For example, on February 22 and 23, in front of Seoul City Hall, amidst the early COVID-19 outbreak, religiously inspired political rallies were held and respectively attended by approximately 5,000 protestors. They were led by Rev. Kwang-Hun Jun, an unwavering evangelical pastor who upholds an ultraconservative political ideology and theology. On February 23, Rev. Jun proclaimed before the crowd: “God will cure us from the virus. You should come out here more often.” In the same vein, Shincheonji can also be juxtaposed with conservative evangelical Christians in the United States, who defy social distancing and quarantine guidelines for their religious gatherings.¹⁵ After observing an Ohio evangelical woman’s answer to a CNN reporter that she wasn’t worried about COVID-19 infection because she is “covered in Jesus’s blood,” Robert Orsi, an American scholar of religion, called for the exigency of new ways of understanding different religious realities within the contemporary United States.¹⁶ After all, overlooking Shincheonji, evangelical Christianity, and other religious worldviews to be a remnant of an unenlightened past or a “lagged modernity” would be unrealistic, given their durability and prominence in the modern world. Rather, acknowledging the existence of contending worldviews within global contemporary modernity and considering how to achieve dialogues and social consensus provides a much more productive starting point for seeking solutions in a time of pandemic.

Stereotyping Korean Culture through Confucianism

While media outlets blamed Shincheonji for spreading the virus, international observers often turned to Confucianism to explain South Korea’s success in controlling COVID-19. As of July 12, 2020, South Korea had 289 cases per million residents, while the United States reported 9,986, the United Kingdom 4,359, France 2,546, and Germany 2,403. International media broadcasted South Korea’s comparative success in containing the virus with awe, even calling it “South Korea’s COVID-19 Exceptionalism.”¹⁷ Byung-Chul Han, a South Korean-born philosopher based in Berlin, claimed Confucianism was the basis of this exceptionalism. Han stated that “Asian states like Japan, Korea, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan or Singapore that have an authoritarian mentality which comes from their cultural tradition [of] Confucianism”¹⁸ are prone to obey the control of the government in a health emergency. In addition, Guy Sorman, a French philosopher of repute, in an interview praising the success of South Korea, mentioned that “[South Korean] Confucian culture also contributed to the selective confinement [of the virus]: they trust intellectuals and experts, the orders are respected, and the individual comes after the community.”¹⁹ Sorman also indicated that using mobile phone location data for contact tracing was accepted by South Koreans since “they live in a very surveilled society.”²⁰

Both arguments by Han and Sorman hinge on the contrast between Korean Confucian (and other East Asian) collectivism and Anglo-European individualism. These analyses are simplistic in that there is no consideration of historical context and the differences between the Confucianism in South Korea and other East Asian countries, and they also presume an inherent difference between East Asian and European cultures.

First, it is true that premodern East Asia was under the dominant cultural influence of Confucianism by way of the imperial Chinese tributary system. Nevertheless, distinctive developments of Confucian thought took place in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, and this should be taken into account in order to assess Confucian cultural influence in each society. Particularly in the case of Korea, the influence and development of neo-Confucianism propelled the political ideology of the Chosun dynasty (1392–1897), which led social reforms and transformations unique from other East Asian countries. According to Martina Deuchler, one of the decisive characteristics of Korean Confucianism was the reshaping of family norms based on patriarchal hierarchy, which is still prominent in South Korean culture.²¹ How can “Confucian collectivism” arguments accommodate the particular historical context of Korean Confucianism? How would the arguments explain the difference in the containment of COVID-19 between South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Japan if they are all susceptible to a “Confucian mentality”? It seems that attributing the success of East Asian countries to a general “Confucian mindset” is a recurring pattern in Western popular—and some academic—debates, as when Anglo-European media appropriated the narrative of “tiger economies” to explain the growth of these countries in the late twentieth century.

Second, the assumption that Korean Confucian culture prioritizes the community over the individual and easily conforms to authority is not only unsubstantiated, but also implies that Koreans do not value individual freedom relative to their Western counterparts, thus perpetuating stereotypes regarding East Asian culture and essentializing the difference between East and West. In this sense, Confucianism symbolizes the irreducible and fundamental differences between cultures. By highlighting the unique “mentality” of the country based on existing stereotypes, Han and Sorman reproduce the Orientalist fantasy of otherness: positing the East as qualitatively different from its observers, i.e., the West. South Korean success, in this context, is an anomaly realized by the odd mentality of Confucianism, which cannot possibly be replicated or learned by others, including Western countries of “proper” democracy. In these accounts, South Korea's robust democracy is readily dismissed.

Teaching Korean Religions in the Time of Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic continued well beyond the spring and summer months of 2020. In South Korea, religions such as Shincheonji and Confucianism played significant roles in attempts to understand the pandemic in the society. While it is a compelling reminder of the intertwined nature of religion and society, the discourses created by transnational media inside and outside of South Korea regarding these religions represent the superficial assessment of the phenomena based on a dichotomy between “premodern religions and secular modernity” as well as between “Confucian Eastern collectivism and democratic Western individualism.” By reconsidering these dichotomies, educators can foster a heuristic experience for their students. Instructors must consider the concrete historical context of modern Korean religious history and its connection with transnational evangelical Christianity, reexamine the particularity of Korean Confucianism, and lastly, problematize the assumptions of the popular Orientalist discourse. By doing so, they can help their students move beyond the caricatures of isolated incidents in South Korea. Teaching about Asia in a time of pandemic provides an occasion for reflection and analysis, which can lead to a more well-founded understanding of religion and Asian society in the twenty-first century.

Notes

¹ All COVID-19 statistics in this essay are based on the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center Website: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu>.

² Derek Thompson, “What’s Behind South Korea’s COVID-19 Exceptionalism?” *The Atlantic*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/whats-south-koreas-secret/611215/> (accessed September 8, 2020).

³ In this essay, all romanizations of the Korean language follow the Revised Romanization of Korean released by the South Korean government in 2000. The only exception is the name of the first South Korean president, Syngman Rhee, which is his personal romanization.

For a discussion of Confucianism as it relates to the Western category of “religion,” see Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1–14.

⁴ Marco Hernandez, Simon Scarr, and Manas Sharma, “2019 Coronavirus: The Korean Clusters,” *Reuters*, March 20, 2020, <https://graphics.reuters.com/CHINA-HEALTH-SOUTHKOREA-CLUSTERS/0100B5G33SB/index.html> (accessed September 8, 2020).

⁵ Anonymous, “Ireon hwangdanghan . . . 31beon sincheonji hwakjinja (이런 황당한...31번 신천지 확진자),” *Donga ilbo*, February 22, 2020, <https://www.donga.com/news/article/all/20200228/99922875/1> (accessed September 8, 2020).

⁶Jeung-eun Lee, "A Study on the Converted Cause of Shin-Cheon-Ji Devotee," Master's Thesis, Seoul National University, 2013, 2–13. Lee's thesis is the only study on Shincheonji from an academic perspective of the sociology of religion. Other literatures on Shincheonji, albeit informational, are mostly produced from a confessional Protestant perspective that aims at debasing the religion.

⁷Dae-hee Lee, "Sincheonji gyoju imanhui "koronaneun magwi jit" (신천지 교주 이만희 "코로나는 마귀 짓")," *Pressian*, February 21, 2020, https://www.pressian.com/pages/articles/279465?no=279465&utm_source=naver&utm_medium=search (accessed September 8, 2020).

⁸Nicholas Harkness, *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 7–10.

⁹Ju Hui Judy Han, "Shifting Geographies of Proximity: Korean-led Evangelical Christian Missions and the U.S. Empire," in *Ethnographies of U.S. Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 194–213.

¹⁰Although a German Lutheran missionary, Karl Friedrich August Gutzlaff (1803–1851), who visited Korea in 1832, is said to be the first Protestant missionary to arrive in Korea, his one-month visit could not establish a continuous Protestant Christianity movement in Korea. Horace Newton Allen (1858–1932), a Presbyterian medical missionary from Ohio, entered Korea in 1884 and built a close relationship with the Chosun dynasty on the peninsula. Following Allen, pioneering figures such as Henry Appenzeller (1858–1902) and Horace G. Underwood (1859–1916) conducted systematic mission work throughout the country. Allen is an important figure not only because he was the first American Presbyterian missionary in Korea, but also because he mediated the first wave of immigration of Koreans to the United States. Su Yon Pak, *Singing the Lord's Song in a New Land: Korean American Practices of Faith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 3–4.

¹¹Wi Jo Kang, *Christ and Caesar in Modern Korea: A History of Christianity and Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 71–80.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Pew Research Center, "6 Facts about South Korea's Growing Christian Population." August 12, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/12/6-facts-about-christianity-in-south-korea/> (accessed September 8, 2020).

¹⁴Rebecca Y. Kim, *The Spirit Moves West: Korean Missionaries in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 2015); Timothy Lee, *Born Again: Evangelicalism in Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010); Sunggu Yang, *Evangelical Pilgrims from the East: Faith Fundamentals of Korean American Protestant Diasporas* (Berlin: Springer, 2016).

¹⁵Hailey Branson-Potts, "Pastor Who Refuses to Cancel Sunday Services Because of Coronavirus Greeted by Police," *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-04-05/pastor-who-refuses-to-cancel-sunday-services-greeted-by-police> (accessed September 8, 2020).

¹⁶ Robert Orsi, "Painted into a Corner by the Blood of the Lord," *Contending Modernities*, April 29, 2020, <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/painted-into-a-corner/> (accessed September 8, 2020).

¹⁷ Thompson, "What's Behind South Korea's COVID-19 Exceptionalism?"

¹⁸ Byung-Chul Han, "La emergencia viral y el mundo de mañana. Byung-Chul Han, el filósofo surcoreano que piensa desde Berlín," *El País*, March 22, 2020, <https://elpais.com/ideas/2020-03-21/la-emergencia-viral-y-el-mundo-de-manana-byung-chul-han-el-filosofo-surcoreano-que-piensa-desde-berlin.html> (accessed September 8, 2020). Translation from original Spanish by Patrick Wintour in "Coronavirus: Who Will Be Winners and Losers in New World Order?" *The Guardian*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/11/coronavirus-who-will-be-winners-and-losers-in-new-world-order> (accessed September 8, 2020).

¹⁹ Jérôme Béglié, "Guy Sorman : « Le confinement nous fait découvrir qu'avant, ce n'était pas si mal »" *Le Point*, April 27, 2020, https://www.lepoint.fr/debats/guy-sorman-le-confinement-nous-fait-decouvrir-qu-avant-ce-n-etait-pas-si-mal-27-04-2020-2373021_2.php (accessed October 28, 2020). Translation from original French to English is mine.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies at Harvard University, 1992).