

Teaching Korean Religion

By Don Baker

With more and more Korean-Americans and Korean-Canadians in North American classrooms, more students are asking that Korea be included in surveys of non-Western civilizations and world history. This request is often answered with a few short paragraphs saying that Korea was traditionally very close culturally and politically to China, was colonized by the Japanese during the first half of the 20th century, and then split into antagonistic Communist and non-Communist halves after liberation in 1945. Such a cursory outline of Korea's history gives students a broad picture of what happened to the Korean people over the last 2,000 years, but it risks making the Korean people passive objects of history, a

people to whom things happen, rather than a people who have shaped their own history. While much of Korean history has been influenced by non-Korean forces, much in Korean history is a result of Koreans taking matters into their own hands.

Adding Korean religion to a broad survey of Korean culture and history will help students better understand the role the Koreans have played in shaping Korean history, culture, and civilization. Religion has generated, nurtured, and preserved many of the beliefs and values that inspired Korean behavior over the centuries and into the present. Understanding the values Koreans hold, or assumptions they make about the purpose of life and the nature of ultimate reality, will make it easier for students to identify and appreciate some unique features of the culture the Korean people have created.

The Various Threads in Korea's Religious Tapestry

However, teaching Korean religion is not easy for a couple of reasons. First of all the complexity of Korean religious culture makes it difficult to describe succinctly. A number of overlapping religious currents flow in the river that constitutes Korea's unique culture, and some do not fit the usual Western expectation of what a religion should look like. According to the most recent South Korean census, taken in 1995, there are a little over ten million Buddhists in South Korea, along with almost nine million Protestant Christians, and about three million Roman Catholics. Census takers also found about another half million willing to tell the government they had a specific religious affiliation, including Confucians and followers of Korea's over 200 new religions. However, that still leaves half the population with no specific religious affiliation, and leaves unexplained the clients of the estimated 50,000 to 100,000 shamans and religious fortune tellers whose offices are sprinkled throughout Korea's cities and towns. It also leaves unexplained the



A folk religion practitioner in prayer before a village shrine. Courtesy of the Korean National Tourism Organization.

large number of Koreans (substantially more than a majority of the population) who do not identify themselves as Confucians, yet espouse Confucian values and continue to honor their ancestors with Confucian rituals.

A second reason teaching about religion in Korea is not easy is that many students will bring to class preconceptions about both the nature of Korean religious culture and the nature of many of the religious traditions within it. For example, approximately 80 percent of Koreans in North America are Christians, the vast majority Protestant Christians. Students may assume that Koreans in Korea are as overwhelmingly Christian as they are over here and will object if Buddhism or shamanism is presented as an important component of contemporary Korean culture.

Some students may challenge descriptions of Korean Buddhist beliefs and practices that do not coincide with what they have read or heard about Buddhist philosophy, or are different from the variety of Buddhism they or someone they know practices. For example, students who believe that all real Buddhists want to become detached from the things of this world may question a description of Korean lay Buddhists visiting temples to pray for such worldly delights as a beautiful and dutiful daughter-in-law or a high score for their son on the university entrance exam.

Discussion of shamanism and the folk religion in which it is embedded may be hindered by the insistence of some that folk religion is not really a religion, since it has no scriptures or clerical hierarchy to ensure uniformity in its rituals. Nor do its practitioners all address and depict the same gods the same way. Students who have not experienced Korean shamanism firsthand often dismiss as fraudulent the claims of shamans that they can channel the voices of spirits and recently deceased relatives, or can influence the mood and behavior of spirits and the dead with songs, dances, and bribes. Since, these skeptics insist, a real religious leader must be sincere,

and shamans are in their opinion charlatans, shamanism is more superstition than religion.

Inclusion of Confucianism in a discussion of Korean religion can also raise eyebrows. Confucians, who dominated Korean elite culture for the five-hundred-plus years of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), did not believe in a god. That would seem, to many North Americans, to deprive Confucianism of the right to call itself a religion. Indeed, Confucianism is often presented as a secular philosophy and ethical system rather than as a religion. Yet if Confucianism was not a religion, it at least served as the functional equivalent of one for those who believed in it. Confucianism told Chosŏn dynasty Koreans why they were on this earth, what would happen to them when they died, and how they should behave between birth and death. It provided rituals designed to encourage feelings of reverence and discourage selfishness, and taught techniques for developing a more moral character. Moreover, Confucianism provided and does still provide the basic vocabulary, terms such as filial piety, sincerity, trust, and reverence, that permeates the ethical discourse of all Korea's various religious traditions. To describe Korea's religious culture without mention of Confucianism is like painting a landscape that includes islands off a sandy coast without including the water that surrounds them.

Adding indigenous new religions to a discussion of Korea's religious culture may be the most controversial step of all. To many people, Korea's new religions such as Reverend Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church are cults rather than religions. We can remind our students that a derogatory label such as "cult" is often not much more than shorthand for saying that a religion is new. After all, many of the major religions considered respectable today were considered cults themselves until they had grown a few centuries old.

Identifying the various strands in Korea's religious culture is a first step toward teaching Korean religion. Korean religion also should be integrated into a broader overview of Korean history and culture.

Placing Korean Religious Traditions Along a Timeline

The standard approach to integrating Korean religious culture into a history of Korean civilization is chronological. Such widely-used textbooks as *Korea, Old and New* (Carter J. Eckert, et al., Harvard University Press, 1990) and *Sources of Korean Tradition* (Yong-ho



A bell rung at dawn in a Buddhist temple in the mountains to awaken all sentient beings to the teachings of Buddha.
Courtesy of the Korean National Tourism Organization.

Ch'oe, et al., Columbia University Press, 1997, 2001) adopt that approach, focusing on one religious tradition for each historical era. Shamanism and the folk religion are always mentioned first, since it is assumed that they represent the original and indigenous religion of Korea and have existed on the peninsula since pre-historic times. However, the animism seen in such folk traditions as belief in mountain gods and respect for the lord of the roofbeam in the home usually attracts less attention than do the songs and dances of the shamans.

The rhythms of the songs and dances that shamans use to invite spirits to interact with them are now seen as manifestations of a unique Korean aesthetic that existed before Korean culture was altered by alien cultures. In addition, feminist scholars use the fact that in the modern world, 99 percent of Korean shamans are female to argue that shamanism and the folk religion are evidence that patriarchy on the peninsula is the result of the imposition of foreign values on a culture that originally showed more respect for its female members.

When history textbooks move beyond pre-history into the era of historical records, they introduce Buddhism, which entered Korea in the fourth century at a time when three separate kingdoms were competing for control of the Korean peninsula. Chinese and Central Asian missionary monks brought those kingdoms more than Buddhist doctrines and rituals. They also taught Koreans medicine, astronomy, writing, sculpture, painting, and formal architecture. That is why the cultural history of Korea during the Buddhist era, from the Three Kingdoms period through the Unified Silla (668–935) and Koryŏ (918–1392) dynasties, is nearly inseparable from the history of Buddhism over those centuries. Even today, the majority of material objects designated as national cultural treasures are Buddhist temples, paintings, sculptures, and books.

Confucianism does not take center stage until the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), which shifted state support from Buddhism to Confucianism in order to align itself with the latest developments in China. Since the Chosŏn dynasty forfeited Korean autonomy to the Japanese empire, its Confucian scholars and officials have been accused of being so concerned with the minutiae of ritual and with factional struggles for political power that they ignored more practical issues and left Korea unprepared for the challenges of the modern world. Nevertheless, history surveys usually



Temple Corridor. Courtesy of the Korean National Tourism Organization.

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point with pride to the philosophical sophistication of such Korean Confucian debates as the dispute between the followers of Yi Hwang (1501–1570) and Yi I (1536–1584) over the relationship between human emotions and virtuous sentiments. In addition, Confucianism is often credited with encouraging the Korean thirst for education and discouraging rampant individualism. It is also blamed, however, for promoting the patriarchal values which still deny Korean women full economic, social, and political equality.

In the modern era, Christianity is presented as the most important religious force on the peninsula. Christianity, particularly the Protestant version that entered Korea in the 1880s, is often identified with modernization, since Christian missionaries established some of Korea's first modern medical and educational institutions, including the first schools for

women, and promoted the use of Korea's own alphabet in place of the Chinese characters that had dominated Korean writing until then. Christianity also assumes a central role in narratives of Korea's nationalist struggle against Japanese colonial rule, since Christians constituted a large percentage of the leaders of that struggle; many Christian pastors went to prison rather than participate in Shinto rituals honoring the Japanese emperor.

Even though they do not draw as many believers into their worship halls as do Christian churches, new religions merit attention in accounts of modern history, especially those of the common people. Tonghak, now known as Ch'ondo-kyo, inspired Korea's first large-scale peasant rebellion in 1894. The new religion best known outside of Korea is the Unification Church. Though the Unification Church emerged from Christianity after World War II, and the Tonghak religion has its roots in the shamanism and Confucianism of the Chosŏn dynasty, the Unification Church and Ch'ondo-kyo share one important common element: They both teach that God has chosen a Korean to be his designated messenger to humanity. (In the Unification Church, that messenger is Reverend Sun Myung Moon.) Other new religions go even further. Two new religions that appeared while Korea was under Japanese colonial rule, Chŭngsan-kyo and Taejong-kyo, preach that God is Korean. Such assertions of a special role for Koreans in the moral and spiritual development of the human race provide a religious outlet for the nationalism that has played so important a role in Korean history since the late nineteenth century.

This emphasis on the different roles various religious traditions have played at different times in constructing Korean civilization can give the false impression that older religious traditions such as shamanism and Buddhism are relics of the past and are no



Youngnak Presbyterian Church, one of Korea's oldest Protestant churches. Courtesy of the Korean National Tourism Organization.

longer an important feature of the religious landscape in modern Korea. The chronological approach, by treating each religious tradition in temporal isolation, also risks confusing students into thinking that Koreans follow only one religious tradition at a time, though shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are now and have been for centuries intermingled in actual religious practice. Even Christianity in Korea shows signs of influence from other religious traditions.

To avoid artificial separation of the various strands in Korean religion, it is helpful to examine the answers Korea's religious traditions have given for two seminal issues that have concerned Koreans for centuries regardless of their preferred religious orientation. For as long as there have been Koreans on the Korean peninsula, they have asked: How can we live in a harmonious world? How can we overcome human moral frailty? This is a particu-

larly vexing problem given that Koreans have traditionally assumed that human beings have the potential to reach moral perfection through their own efforts.

The Pursuit of Harmony and Moral Perfection

Harmony is traditionally associated with Confucianism. However, the prime concern of Confucians has been harmony between one human being and another and, to a lesser extent, harmony between human beings and the cosmos. The folk tradition, on the other hand, has focused on maintaining or restoring harmony between human beings, on the one hand, and spirits and ancestors on the other. As many spirits of the folk tradition are those of various natural objects that fill the cosmos, and since ancestors are among the human beings Confucianism strives to maintain harmony with, there is overlap in the goals of Confucianism and the folk tradition, though the means to reach those goals may differ. Buddhism focuses on harmony with ultimate reality, but since Buddhism teaches that ultimate reality resides within everything in the material world, including our fellow human beings, it overlaps with both Confucianism and the folk tradition. The new religions share this common concern for harmony within the human community as well as for harmony between humanity and the natural world, and between humanity and the multitude of spirits. Only Christianity resists integration into the traditional ethical orientation by giving priority to harmony between the thoughts and actions of individual human beings, on the one hand, and the will of one God Above on the other. Nevertheless, Korean Christians share the traditional Korean concern for harmonious relations within family and society, as well as the traditional reverence for the natural order, which they respect as God's creation.



The Tosan Academy honoring Yi Hwang, one of Korea's most respected Confucian scholars.

Courtesy of the Korean National Tourism Organization.

We can see similar overlapping in the various approaches Koreans have adopted to overcome feelings of guilt and shame they experience when they fail to achieve the perfection their tradition has told them they are capable of. The folk tradition is the least concerned with explicitly moral issues. Nevertheless, its practitioners feel guilty and ashamed when financial difficulties or health problems they or family members encounter tell them that they have not honored the spirits properly. Some seek a powerful shaman to restore proper relations with the spirits. Others turn to Buddhism, with its promise of supernatural assistance more powerful than anything the folk tradition can provide. Moreover, Buddhism promises that, through sutra study, chanting, meditation, and mental discipline, they can achieve a moral perfection that will lift them above the problems of this world.

For those who find Buddhahood out of reach despite their best efforts, Confucianism offers an alternative. Confucianism promises sagehood, a secular counterpart to Buddhahood, to those who read its revered texts and apply the principles found therein. The new religions similarly promise their followers that, by following their prescriptions, modern Koreans can achieve the perfection that eluded their ancestors. For example, the Unification Church promises that a marriage blessed by Reverend Moon will cleanse the newly married couple of the legacy of original sin, the cause of human moral frailty. Of Korea's major religious traditions, only Christianity denies that human beings can achieve perfection through their own efforts, though it too offers a way to overcome the guilt and shame human beings often feel when they fail to act the way they know they should act. Christianity promises that God will forgive humans for sinning, relieving them of the guilt and shame that has been such a powerful motivating force in Korean religious culture.

Korean Religion in Practice

Focusing on the common problems Korea's various religious traditions address, or on the order in which the various threads in Korea's religious fabric have appeared, will not provide a complete picture of Korea's religions. After all, religion is more than doctrines and beliefs. The religion of a people is revealed as much in what those people do as it is in what they believe. While we cannot send many students to Korea to view first-hand Korean religion as actually practiced, we can give them access to some first-hand accounts.

Robert E. Buswell, Jr., shares his experiences as a monk in a Korean monastery in *The Zen Monastic Experience* (Princeton University Press, 1992). Laurel Kendall gives us the autobiography of a Korean shaman in *The Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman: Of Tales and the Telling of Tales* (University of Hawaii Press, 1988). Nansook Hong in *In the Shadow of the Moons* (Little, Brown, 1998) tells what life was like in the Unification Church from the standpoint of someone who has left that organization. A less personal account of the Unification Church is available in George D. Chryssides, *The Advent of Sun Myung Moon: The Origins, Beliefs and Practices of the Unification Church* (Macmillan, 1991). Buswell, Kendall, and other observers provide more first-hand accounts in two volumes of essays published by the Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of California at Berkeley (Lewis R. Lancaster and Richard K. Payne, eds. *Religion and Society in Contemporary Korea*, 1997, and Laurel Kendall and Griffin Dix, eds. *Religion and Ritual in Korean Society*, 1987). A reliable and succinct survey of both belief and practice in Korean religion can be found in *Religious Culture in Korea* (Ministry of Culture and Sports in the Republic of Korea, ed. Yunn Seung-Yong, 1996).

For those who find books too dry, even books that recount personal observations, there is an informative and entertaining video introduction to shaman ritual titled *An Initiation Kut for a Korean Shaman* by Laurel Kendall with Diana Lee, videographer. (VHS. 33 minutes. University of Hawaii Press, 1991. <http://www.wlu.ca/~wwwav/WLUCollection/II/v725.htm>). Unfortunately, there is nothing comparable in English on Korean Buddhism, Confucianism, the new religions, or Christianity. However, there are web sites that include photos of various religious rituals. The best overall survey of Korean religion available on the web is <http://korea.insights.co.kr/english/religion/index.html>. Another informative site can be found by going to <http://www.korea.net/> then clicking on "society and life," then on "religion." Photos of shaman, Buddhist, and Confucian rituals and structures can be found at <http://www.lifeinkorea.com/cgi-bin/pictures.cfm>. For the best survey of Korean Buddhism on the web, try Charles Muller's <http://www.human.toyogakuen-u.ac.jp/~acmuller/Buddhism-Korean.html>. For those interested in some of the more popular, and ubiquitous, gods of the folk tradition, check out Dave Mason's site on mountain gods, <http://www.san-shin.org/>.

The information in these books and web sites is, of course, only a start at understanding Korean religion and the role it has played in shaping Korean civilization and culture. Nevertheless, it should provide enough for you to introduce your students to the unique mixture of religious traditions, which is an important component of the distinctive culture the people of Korea take such pride in today. ■

DON BAKER is Director of the Centre for Korean Research and Professor of Korean Civilization and Culture at the University of British Columbia. He is one of the editors of *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization* from Columbia University Press and has published a number of articles on Korean history, philosophy, and religion. He is currently preparing a book-length survey of Korean spirituality for the University of Hawaii Press.