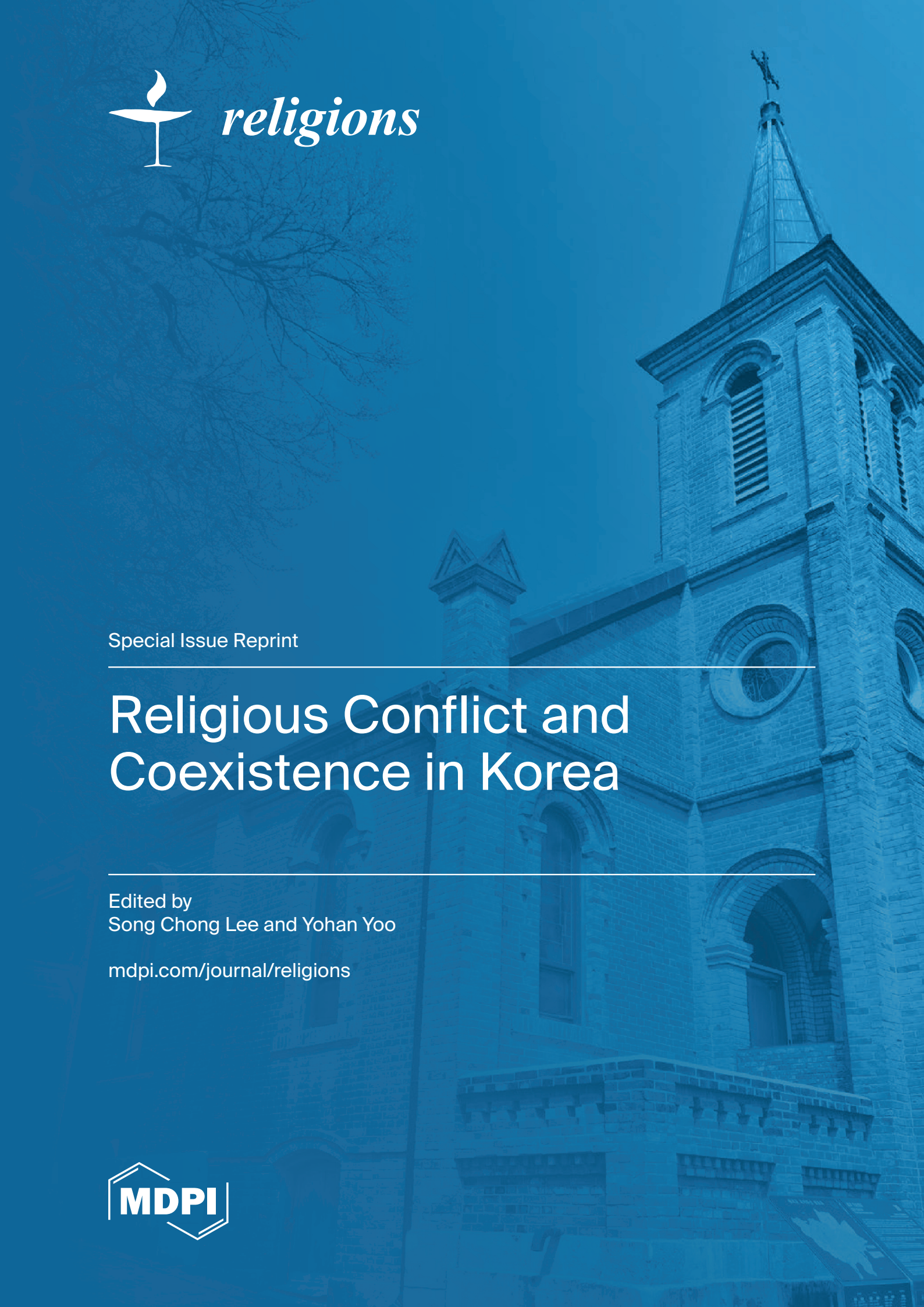
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Special Issue Reprint

Religious Conflict and Coexistence in Korea

Edited by
Song Chong Lee and Yohan Yoo

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Guest Editors

Song Chong Lee
Yohan Yoo

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About the Editors

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Song Chong Lee is Professor of the Department of Religious Studies and currently serves as the director of the Kyujanggak International Center for Korean Studies at Seoul National University. His research focuses on the intersection of religion and society, with particular attention to church–state relations, the evolving definition of religion, and new religious movements. He is the author of *Ham Sok Hon's Ssial Cosmopolitan Vision* (Lexington Books, 2020). His scholarship has appeared in leading academic journals, including "Ssial, Jeremiad, and Civil Religion" (*Journal of Korean Studies*, 2026), "Bringing Back the Old Religiosity: Interfaith Cosmopolitan Civil Religion" (*Journal of Church and State*, 2024), "The Violence of New Religious Movements and the Entrepreneurial Model: With a Focus on the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Korea" (*The Journal of Religion*, 2023), and "Homo-Historicus of Wilhelm Dilthey and Ham Sok Hon" (*Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History*, 2023). In addition to his research, he contributes actively to the field through professional service: he sits on the steering committee of the Korean Religions Unit of the American Academy of Religion, serves on the board of the North American Korean Philosophy Association, and is a member of the editorial board of *Religions*. He is also co-editing, with Professor Yohan Yoo, the *Palgrave Series in Contemporary Korean Studies*.

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Editorial

Editorial for the Special Issue "Religious Conflict and Coexistence in Korea"

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This Special Issue expands on the previous volume, "Religious Conflict and Coexistence: The Korean Context and Beyond" (https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/Korean_Religion, accessed on 10 December 2025), which juxtaposed Korean cases with those of other contexts, probing shared concerns across religious cultures variously situated in history, text, geography, and philosophy while foregrounding the particularity of Korean cases. The present collection of eleven articles sharpens that focus considerably, centering squarely on the situation around religion in Korea. The contributions address the role, fate, and power of religion through a wide range of thematic concerns, including the mediation of the sacred in a secularizing world, strategic survival and modernization, the tension between orthodoxy and pragmatic governance, political polarization in the face of social tragedy, esthetic synthesis and universal dialogue, and the deep functional role of religion in shaping and reshaping human cognition and political consciousness. Their diverse methodological approaches draw on a whole host of academic disciplines, including religious studies, history, cognitive science of religion, anthropology, sociology, art history and visual culture, theology, political philosophy, and even geography and urban planning. To build a coherent whole from these individual contributions and to orient our specialized concern with Korean religion, let me thematically map them to four pillars, each of which meaningfully illuminates the broader discourse on religious conflict and coexistence in Korea: (1) strategic adaptation to modernity and internal transformation; (2) intersubjective dialogue and harmony; (3) religion and social accountability; and (4) the analysis of deep cultural and cognitive structure.

Under the first thematic pillar, Yohan Yoo's article, "A Study of the *Aekmagi* Ritual in Jeju Shamanic Religion", examines the ritual's historical procedures, the distinctive status of its practitioners, and the recent transition from animal sacrifice to bloodless offerings. Drawing critically on a range of theoretical frameworks, including the concept of *homo sacer* and a pointed critique of Agamben's reading thereof, a reappropriation of Turner's liminality with the idea of "perpetual liminal state," a re-evaluation of classical and contemporary theories of sacrifice, and an articulation of the malleable, transactional character of sacrificial ritual, Yoo illuminates the religious and cultural rationale behind the modern shift, specifically from the killing of live animals (chickens, in the case of the *Aekmagi*) to the use of market-purchased boiled chicken meat or, alternatively, offerings of money and rice. This transition has been driven by the recent impact of avian influenza, pressure from contemporary audiences, and a broader effort to preserve Jeju shamanic rituals as a vital cultural heritage. Critically reading Smith (1987) and Loften (2017), his discussion compellingly demonstrates that religion and religious ritual are not static phenomena but dynamic systems that adapt to shifting social, ethical, and logistical realities in order to negotiate and ultimately avoid conflict, while preserving the ritual's symbolic

and spiritual core intact (Yoo 2024, p. 19). A similar thesis underscores "The History of the Myeongjin School (1906–1910)" by Cheonghwan Park and Kyungrae Kim, which traces religion's natural and considered response to incoming challenges as a means of both surviving and growing. It focuses on Korea's first modern Buddhist school, the Myeongjin School, which would later become today's Dongguk University. On top of nearly five centuries of state oppression during the Joseon Dynasty, Korean Buddhism at the turn of the twentieth century had to contend with a host of existential challenges, including social stigma and isolation, competition from Western missionaries, colonial encroachment, and educational obsolescence. Instead of further withdrawing into itself to preserve purity and tradition, Korean Buddhism, as this case study demonstrates, proactively responded to these pressures through the establishment of the Myeongjin School and a series of strategic moves: alliance-building for institutional support, most notably a partnership with Japan's Jōdoshū (Pure Land) sect; the implementation of modern pedagogy and curricular diversification (Park and Kim 2024, p. 7); institutional expansion through branch schools; and the preservation of doctrinal identity throughout. Dongkyu Kim transposes this dynamic into the contemporary context of Korean shamanic practice in his essay "The Conflicts and Compromises of the Two Cosmologies Making Korean Shamanism". His discussion demonstrates the same creativity and adaptability that the preceding studies in this pillar highlight, now operating at a cognitive and interpersonal rather than a cultural and institutional register. Facing distinctly modern challenges, including clients' financial suspicion and ambivalence toward shamanic services, heightened scepticism toward supernatural entities, and a prevailing cultural emphasis on personal agency and self-determination, Korean shamanism has, according to Kim, generated a negotiated symbolic framework he terms symbolic transpositionality. This framework mediates between "the patronal universe" of the shaman and "the optimal universe" of the client and in doing so resolves the recurring tension between the shaman's mystical experience and vocational calling and the client's modern worldview and practical demands (D. Kim 2025, p. 2).

The second thematic pillar concerns intersubjective dialogue and harmony. Eunsil Son, Haeyoung Seong, and Mina Kim each present cases showing how mutual understanding, collaboration, and harmony may be achieved, whether through theological conversation, sociological understanding, or esthetic communication. All three begin from a shared conclusion that traditional religious interactions have reached a point of stagnation or entrenched tension and that something deliberate must be done to move beyond it. Son's answer is theological, seeking to dissolve century-old doctrinal divides through rigorous scholarly dialogue. Seong's is sociological, arguing that interreligious conversation cannot remain a purely religious affair and must open itself up to the secular public. Kim's is perhaps the most expansive, turning to art and the concept of "consilience", the integration of knowledge across disciplines, as a vehicle for transcending human conflict through Buddhist-inspired esthetic practice. Responding to the centuries-old interdenominational conflict between the Catholic Church and conservative Protestantism in Korea, Son's article "Bridging Doctrinal Divides: Analyzing Ecumenical Dialogue" identifies persistent patterns of misunderstanding and misinterpretation surrounding core theological commitments on each side. These include questions of ecclesial legitimacy and authority raised by Catholics and charges of idolatry and Mariology raised by Protestants. Son traces all of these to a shared intellectual negligence, whether deliberate or not. She cautiously proposes several strategies for moving beyond these impasses, among them the unification of theological terminology and the utilization of global ecumenical frameworks (Son 2025, pp. 14–15). In "The Rise of Religious Nones and Its Impact on Interreligious Dialogue", Seong addresses a markedly different dimension of the problem of interreligious dialogue. He draws attention

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to the rise of the Religious Nones in Korean society and their distinct forms of religiosity and spiritual sensibility, a constituency that has rarely been taken seriously within religious literacy and interreligious dialogue discourse. To overcome misunderstanding of religion and forestall potential conflict, Seong proposes a series of practical measures, including the implementation and enhancement of civic education integrated with religious literacy, the active inclusion of the religiously unaffiliated in dialogue, and the utilization of practices, such as meditation, that can be embraced by both religious and non-religious participants, all in the service of fostering mutual recognition (Seong 2025, pp. 9–12). Kim shifts attention from doctrinal and institutional disputes to the realm of esthetic practice and visual culture in her article "The Intersections of Buddhism and Contemporary Korean Visual Culture". Taking Buddhism as her primary case, she introduces consilience as a discursive anchor, understood as the harmonization of diverse systems of human knowledge through art and visual culture. In her framework, religion does not exist independently of other domains of human knowledge but is always already in dialogue with them. The Buddhist philosophy of inclusivity, tolerance, and creativity, as embodied in the traditions of Hwajaeng and Hwaeom, for instance, finds a natural resonance with contemporary art's role as a venue for dialogue and communication. Uisang's Hwaeom ideology, with its emphasis on interconnectedness and non-duality, speaks compellingly to Nam June Paik's "Electronic Superhighway" and Michael Joo's artistic reversals, while the concepts of emptiness and simultaneity find their visual counterparts in the work of contemporary abstract artists Suh Seung-Won and Cho In-ho (Mina Kim 2025, pp. 10–12).

The two articles comprising the third thematic pillar both explore the entanglement of religion and politics, refusing the comfortable assumption that the two can be neatly separated. What makes them particularly interesting to read together is how differently they approach this entanglement. Song Chong Lee works from the inside out in his article "Ham Sok Hon: Bridging Spirituality and Politics", attending to the philosophical pathways through which religious interiority shapes political consciousness at the level of the individual. Minah Kim works in the opposite direction in her essay "Superstition or Culture", turning to the institutional and public face of religion to show how a single national tragedy, the 29 October Itaewon Disaster, became a flashpoint for polarization. Looked at more closely, at the heart of Lee's reading of Ham Sok Hon is the proposition that religion, or more precisely the experience of transcendence that genuine religiosity makes possible, is not incidental to politics but foundational to it. What drives political division and conflict, Ham insists, is not really ideological differences or competing policy positions. It runs deeper than that, reaching into the way people perceive and relate to one another on a fundamental human level. True religious transformation, which Ham calls the Revolution of Spirit or *Jeongsin Hyeongmyeong*, reframes the individual through the concept of *ssial*, a vision of all people as sharing a common divine origin, and in doing so lifts political consciousness out of the gravitational pull of parochialism and nationalism toward something genuinely cosmopolitan, creative, and humane (Lee 2024, p. 8). Kim's case, in contrast, brings the institutional dimension of this entanglement into sharp focus. What her analysis shows is how a single public disaster can fracture the theological logic of religious communities and expose it to scrutiny, pushing them to act, speak, and take sides in ways that reveal what they actually believe. The conservative Protestant church reached for the disaster as a regulatory framework, deploying it not only as an apologetic opportunity but as a means of drawing boundaries, identifying a perceived enemy, and consolidating their community's sense of who belongs and who does not, going so far as to label the Halloween crowd crush site a "ghost festival" and "satanic practices" (Minah Kim 2025, p. 10). The progressive church responded very differently, treating the same tragedy as an opportunity to enact their theological commitment to social participation through

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liturgical practices, public statements, and direct challenges to government narratives. What is striking about both responses is not simply that they differed but that both felt driven to respond at all. Taken together, Lee's and Kim's discussions argue persuasively that religion is central to public life, woven into the very fabric of collective consciousness and institutional engagement with public affairs.

The fourth and final thematic pillar examines deep cultural and cognitive structures. For the three authors gathered here, religion is best understood as a dynamic product of human cognition, spatial perception, and cultural negotiation, all of which directly influence the question of religious conflict and coexistence. In "Negotiating Wonhan: Cognitive Frameworks and Ritual Responses to Unresolved Grievances in Joseon Korea", Yuri Kim explores religion as a medium of cognitive negotiation. Drawing on meticulous historical and textual analysis of sources including the *Joseon Wangjo Sillok*, the *Yeoje Deungnok*, and various prayer texts, Kim investigates how communal disasters and crises, understood in this context as manifestations of *wonhan* and *wonhon*, the unresolved grievances of the dead, were interpreted as conflicts and addressed through carefully negotiated ritual practice. Grounding her analysis in the Theory of Mind (ToM) and the Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD), she constructs a persuasive rationale for the enduring logic of the Joseon state's approach to resentment rituals. Through the historical case of the 1451 Sinmi Year Rituals, she shows that the attempt to balance a broad moral and cosmological framework alongside devotional and theistic belief was not merely pragmatic. It was perennially responsive to the deeper needs of the people (Y. Kim 2025, pp. 8–12). Similarly, utilizing the cognitive science of religion, Hyung Chan Koo argues in "Why Sink a Tiger Head into the Water?" that religious practices are shaped more fundamentally by innate cognitive mechanisms and evolved cognitive systems than by official doctrines alone. As in Kim's analysis, multiple and seemingly incompatible meanings and modes of reasoning can coexist within a single ritual context. Practitioners do not necessarily experience these contradictions as a "crisis of faith", Koo argues, but rather as a "semantic multiplicity" that enriches the cultural significance of the ritual (Koo 2025, pp. 4–6). There is an enduring tension between idea and practice and more specifically between the demands of state orthodoxy and those of popular belief. But the absence of official theoretical guidelines is not simply a vacuum. It creates room for divergent interpretations to coexist. In the case of the Tiger Head Sinking ritual, both the coercive interpretation and the offering interpretation find their own grounding in innate human cognitive systems, particularly agent detection and social–interaction inferences. What both discussions ultimately argue is that conflicting interpretations within ritual contexts do not simply cancel each other out. They can coexist and even draw strength from one another precisely because of how human cognition is wired. Ho Young Lee brings a geographic sensibility to the same set of questions in his essay, "The Distance Between Residences and Cemeteries", examining how the uneasy distance between residences and cemeteries reflects the deeper tensions of religious conflict and emotional negotiation in Korean society. Where Kim and Koo focus on the tension between Neo-Confucian orthodoxy and popular ritual practice, Lee explores the conflict between modern and colonial "burial rules", concerned primarily with sanitation and land use, and traditional Korean understandings of graveyards as sacred ancestral spaces. In all three cases, the official system, whether the Joseon state's Neo-Confucian orthodoxy or modern colonial and urban planning, attempts to regulate or push to the margins elements that the public continues to engage with through lived religion, whether restless spirits, magical rituals, or the physical dead. Just as Kim's ritual canopy and Koo's "semantic multiplicity" provide frameworks for negotiating contradictory reasoning modes and folk theories, Lee argues that spaces such as Mia-ri functioned as heterotopias where the sacred and the profane occupied the same ground, reflecting the coexistence

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of intention-based and system-based reasoning in Kim's analysis and of the coercive and offering interpretations in Koo's (Lee 2025, pp. 8–10). For all three authors, coexistence in a fractured society is a managed symbolic construct rather than a spontaneous occurrence, one that requires the experience of conflict or disaster (what we might call a lived dystopia) to be reinterpreted or overlaid with new systems of order, whether standardized state ritual sequences or the "concrete paradise" of modern urban infrastructure.

These four thematic pillars are, of course, far from exhaustive in identifying, let alone resolving, the major problems surrounding religious conflict and coexistence in Korea. They may, in fact, complicate our current diagnoses and raise more questions than they answer. Even so, we believe these collective efforts represent a meaningful step forward, drawing together diverse insights, perspectives, and scholarly imaginations in service of a more informed and expansive future conversation.

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Article

A Study of the *Aekmagi* Ritual in Jeju Shamanic Religion: Focusing on the Sacred Status of Shamans and the Significance of Sacrifice

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Abstract: In the Jeju shamanic religion, chickens have been sacrificed for *aekmagi*, a ritual to prevent *aek*, a looming misfortune that may cause death. Whereas ordinary participants are thought to be at risk of harm when possessing or eating chickens or other offerings made to prevent *aek*, the *simbang*, Jeju shamans, are thought to be immune to it. *Simbang* are believed to be permanently on the threshold between the human and the divine realms. They help remove *aek* but are not harmed by it, because it only harms humans in the human realm, not the person on the boundary. While the other participants are temporarily placed in the liminal state during *aekmagi* and come back to the ordinary living human realm after the ritual, *simbang* remain in the perpetual liminal state. Chicken sacrifice has been omitted from *aekmagi* since around 2010 in most places in Jeju-do. Though ritual killing is no longer practiced, adherents still think that *aek* is prevented by *aekmagi*. The Jeju people believe that gods are the main agents of preventing *aek* and that they can persuade the gods to do the work without receiving chickens' lives. In addition, due to the change in people's view on killing animals, *aekmagi* without chicken sacrifice has become a more efficient ritual system for nourishing social sustenance by following the new social prescription.

Keywords: Jeju shamanic religion; sacrifice; *aekmagi*; *simbang* (Jeju shaman); sacred status of *simbang*

1. Introduction

Though *aekmagi* was performed almost all over Korea in various ways for at least a hundred years (Kim 1991), now this ritual is only conducted regularly in some villages of Jeju-do.[1] The first part of the word, *aek*, refers to looming misfortune or evil influences that may cause death, and the second part, *magi*, means preventing. *Aekmagi* can therefore be roughly translated into English as "apotropaic ritual". In Jeju-do, chickens have been killed and offered to gods for the *aekmagi* ritual, which is necessarily included in every regular *gut*, a shamanic ritual for propitiating and supplicating gods, whether it is for a village community, a certain family, or an individual. The Jeju *simbang* most commonly use red roosters for the sacrifice.[2] Sacrificed chickens are boiled and eaten by participants while the ritual is being conducted. After the *gut* is over, however, only *simbang* can take the chickens and eat those that were not consumed during the *gut*.

Since around 2010, *aekmagi* in Jeju-do has undergone a radical change, with chicken sacrifices ceasing in most areas of Jeju-do and persisting only in the southeastern part.[3] Urgent research on *aekmagi* is needed, considering the current situation of the Jeju shamanic religion in which chicken sacrifice is rapidly disappearing. When I observed and video-recorded the whole process of *yeongdeung-gut* performed in Jocheon-*eup* Bukchon-*li* village, Jeju city, in March 2011, a sturdy red rooster was sacrificed for *aekmagi*. But, the *simbang* who conducted the chicken sacrifice in 2011 do not kill chickens any longer. I recognized that chickens were not sacrificed when I observed and video-recorded *Jamsu-gut* conducted in Gujwa-*eup* Gimnyeong-*li* village, Jeju city, in April 2013. The *simbang* in charge of the

Jamsu-gut, which is a ritual for female divers of the village, Sunsil Seo, one of my interviewees for this research, said that she stopped chicken sacrifices a few years before the *gut* I observed.

The *simbang* who ceased sacrifice suggest several reasons for it. First, many *simbang* came to be reluctant to kill chickens, especially young novice *simbang*, who began the work after 2000, were unwilling to kill chickens. Since around that time, many people in Jeju have shown interest in Jeju's indigenous shamanic religion, including *gut*, regarding it as Jeju's cultural heritage. Shamanic rituals began to receive heavy coverage in the local media. A wider audience, many of whom were not adherents of the Jeju shamanic religion, visited the ritual place to watch the process. *Simbang* felt burdened to kill chickens in front of nonadherents, some of whom criticized *aekmagi* for cruelty toward animals. Second, Jeju shamans and adherents were forced to experience *aekmagi* without chicken sacrifices when avian influenza spread in Korea in 2003 and 2005. At that time, importing chickens from mainland Korea to Jeju-do and the trade of live chickens within Jeju-do were prohibited. Some *simbang* thought that they were able to prevent *aek* without chicken sacrifices and satisfy the gods by using other offerings.[4] According to *simbang* Seo and Kim, after the flu pandemics were over, they were emboldened to persuade the gods to prevent *aek* without receiving sacrificed chickens, and the gods accepted their suggestion.

Scholars of Korean religion have dealt with Jeju *aekmagi* only tangentially in their research. Yongjun Hyeon, one of the most prolific scholars of the Jeju indigenous religion, in his representative and comprehensive book on Jeju religion, briefly mentions it as one of the Jeju rituals but does not explain it in detail because, even though they used to be performed frequently, at the time of writing they were disappearing rapidly (Hyeon 1986, p. 240). When Hyeon says that *aekmagi* is disappearing, he means the stand-alone *aekmagi* ritual. While independently conducted *aekmagi* is diminishing, it persists as a vital element within the *gut*, serving as an indispensable component in *dang-gut*, rituals for the village shrine god (or gods), and *keun-gut*, full-scale comprehensive rituals performed in the house of a shaman or a community member. It is commonly observed even today in many villages as part of two *dang-gut*: *singwaseje*, the new year ritual performed in January by the lunar calendar, and *yeongdeung-gut*, a ritual for wishing abundance performed in February of the lunar calendar (J. Kang 2007, pp. 89–90).[5] In the *gut* conducted for individual persons to pray for abundance or for recovering from illness, *aekmagi* is performed before the last stage of sending back the gods, who were invited to the ritual place, to the divine realm (J. Kang 2015, p. 356).

This article focuses on the Jeju *aekmagi* ritual, exploring it in all its facets. I will examine each aspect of the ritual to articulate its significance by combining preexisting materials related to the ritual with my interviewees' explanations. On the basis of this thorough analysis of *aekmagi*, I will redescribe two academic categories of the comparative study of religions. First, the notion of sacred people will be explored by paying attention to characteristics of the shaman's sacred status revealed in *aekmagi*. *Simbang* are human beings who, at the same time, have a sacred status that is regarded as separate from, or superior to, ordinary human beings. The name *simbang* is said to have come from *sinui-seongbang*, a petty official of the gods, which Jeju shamans call themselves when they recite myths while performing *gut*. They are descendants of gods who have different genealogies from ordinary people, which begins from the shamanic progenitor gods in myths. This distinguished status is clearly seen in the process of disposing of sacrificed animals in *aekmagi*. Unlike ordinary people, they are not harmed by eating or possessing sacrificed animals after the *gut* is over. While the sacred status related to the gods allows them not to be damaged by the *aek* that the killed animals received from clients, they must abide by rules that protect themselves from *aek* because they are human beings also. As sacred people positioned on the boundary between the divine realm and the human realm, *simbang* constitutes an important example that religion stipulates the cosmological location of human beings.

Second, I will examine the characteristics of sacrifice by comparing the old-style *aekmagi*, in which ritual killing is central, with the changed *aekmagi* which leaves out sacrificing

animals. *Aekmagi* involving the killing of animals is obviously an expiatory sacrifice and, at the same time, a communion in which gods, shamans, and clients eat together. It is noteworthy that *aekmagi* without the process of ritual killing still has the character of an expiatory ritual, not to mention a communion. The expression *daemyeong daechung*, which the *simbang* repeats during *aekmagi*, means "some [life] should be offered in place of someone's life". The value of the life replaced with something else is not fixed. But, it should satisfy the gods who would accept the offering in *aekmagi*. In order to replace someone's life, another's life was believed to be required. Chickens are most commonly used because they are affordable and easy to sacrifice on the spot. After the sacrifice, the *simbang* makes a divination to find out whether the gods are satisfied, and *aek* has been averted by toasting grains of rice and by casting some *mengdu*, a set of shamanic instruments. If he or she receives a bad divination sign, the client should bring more offerings. In case the *simbang* decides that *aek* fails to be prevented by chicken sacrifice and other offerings, more gifts including money are presented nowadays. In the past, very occasionally even a horse or a cow could be offered. As chicken sacrifices are vanishing in many areas in Jeju, expiatory practices and characteristics of sacrifices, manifested in the word *daemyeong daechung*, including destroying animals to redeem human life, are not to be seen in *aekmagi* any longer. However, the communion aspect remains. Along with rice and rice wine, boiled chicken meat, which is purchased at the market, is offered to gods, and then eaten by the participants in the ritual place. Gifts are still presented to the gods by being burnt or passed through the fire; only the animal sacrifice that was conducted to redeem human life is left out. *Aekmagi,* as before, remains a ritual performed to prevent *aek*, that is, looming misfortune, evil influences, or death, by propitiating and making peace with the gods, who are believed to deliver *aek* to people but to withdraw it after the ritual, which is now believed to be possible without animal sacrifice. I will demonstrate how and why animal sacrifice is gradually disappearing and explain the reason *aekmagi* is still believed to redeem human life. I will note that a chicken sacrificed in *aekmagi* is neither identified with deities nor represents the society, though it can be said to be consecrated in the sense that it is offered to gods. *Aekmagi* is a ritual conducted for peace and order in society and individual minds, for which animal sacrifice has come to be considered not necessary.

2. *Aekmagi* Ritual Process

Though Hyeon says *aekmagi* as an independent ritual is disappearing, he also writes that it is performed as part of various *gut*. In *Dictionaries of Sources on Jeju Shamanism*, Hyeon defines it as follows.

> [*Aekmagi* is] the name of a ritual process that is performed as part of various *gut*. It is conducted to prevent *aek* and bring good fortune. During *aekmagi*, *Samani-bonpuri* is recited. A *simbang* says that *aek* is prevented based on the fact [that in the myth] Samani enjoyed longevity by treating messengers of the netherworld (or psychopomps) well. *Aek* is prevented by killing a rooster and throwing it to the outside [of the ritual place] to ask [gods] take the rooster instead of human life. It is performed in many *gut* including *siwangmaji*. (Hyeon [1980] 2007, pp. 763–64)

As quoted above, *aekmagi* is necessarily conducted during the *siwangmaji gut*. Hyeon does not place *aekmagi* as an independent entry in *Dictionaries of Sources on Jeju Shamanism* but includes it in the "*siwangmaji*" entry (Hyeon [1980] 2007, pp. 230–38). *Siwangmaji* is a ritual in which Siwang, ten gods of the netherworld, are invited and propitiated. These ten gods, who took root in the shamanic cosmology, which is influenced by Buddhism, are believed to stay in the netherworld and take charge of the lives of living people in this world and the souls of dead people (J. Kang 2015, p. 190). They also manage the netherworld book of the predetermined length of human lives, have messengers deliver the soul of the person whose lifespan is over, and send the soul to hell or paradise according to what the person did while living. *Siwangmaji* is a necessary part of *keun-gut* and is also performed independently if needed. If a person gets a serious illness and the *simbang*

in charge of the person's family and village interprets it as the Siwang summoning the person's soul to the netherworld, *siwangmaji* is conducted to pray to Siwang and other gods to withdraw this illness and prolong his or her life span. Otherwise, it can be performed to pray for the sins of a dead person to be forgiven and his or her soul to be accepted into paradise because it is believed that the soul may become an evil spirit and do harm to living persons if it stays in this world without going to the netherworld. In brief, *aekmagi* is performed during *siwangmaji* for the purpose of healing a deadly illness or preventing harm that may be caused by a dead person.

To understand further discussions that will be made in the following sections, it is necessary to have a general idea of how *aekmagi* is conducted. We can find a representative sequence shared by many *simbang* in most areas of Jeju-do outlined by Hyeon on the basis of the *aekmagi* process carried out by *simbang* Sain Ahn in Jeju city in the 1970s (Hyeon [1980] 2007, pp. 230–38). By summarizing Hyeon's record, I am providing the outline of the whole process of *aekmagi*, which was included in *siwangmaji*, as follows.[6]

1. A *simbang*, who is dressed like a soldier of the Joseon Dynasty, is ready to begin, standing beside the "*aekmagi* table," which is set in front of the gate of the client's house. The things placed on the table are three Korean traditional style jackets; three bolts of broad cotton cloth whose length amounts to the multiplication of the client's age and his or her foot length [or/and, whose length amounts to the multiplication of the client's age and his or her reach]; three spools of thread; a bowl filled with grains of millet, barley, and rice; ceremonial paper money made for shamanic ritual; coins [nowadays real paper money]; and three cups of rice wine. Three pairs of straw shoes are placed under the table, beside which a rooster is standing tethered;

2. Shaking the *yoryeong*, a shamanic bell, the *simbang* says, "[I] intend to prevent *aek*," then sings to report to the gods the time and place of the *gut*'s performance. Then, the *simbang* explains to the gods, by singing, the reason why *aekmagi* is to be conducted. The *simbang* usually says that he or she is trying to prevent *aek* in the same way Samani did a long time ago because the person of this house is now threatened by misfortune. Samani is the main character of the Jeju myth named *Samani-bonpuri*;

3. The *simbang* recites *Samani-bonpuri*, which suggests the mythical basis of *aekmagi*. The myth can be summarized as follows.

Once upon a time, a man named So (family name) Saman (given name) lived very poorly in the land of Junyeonguk (a mythical land). He married and had children. His wife barely managed to feed the family by needlework, but the family fell on even harder times. The wife cut her hair and gave it to him, asking him to sell it in the marketplace and to buy food for the children with the money. Samani sold his wife's hair at a good price. But he bought a firelock instead of grain because he was persuaded by its seller, who said that he would be able to earn money and buy more food by hunting with the firelock. Samani tried to avoid his wife's anger by hunting many big animals, but every day he failed to do so. One day, he found a one-hundred-year-old skull while roaming around the fields. He came to think that it was the ancestor god of his family and brought it to his house to revere it. Since then, the hunting was very successful, and he became rich soon. In the year Samani became thirty-three years old, the skull appeared in his dream in the shape of a grey-haired old man and advised him on how to avoid his looming death. He said, "Your predetermined lifespan is thirty-three years and is now drawing to a close. Three messengers of the netherworld are coming to capture your soul. The *aek* can be prevented by exerting yourself in treating them. You must prepare three pairs of jackets, three pairs of shoes, three waist belts as gifts for them, and set the table with various dishes in the three-way intersection of the village. At your house, a *keun-gut* should be conducted". ("Forty-thousand and three bulls" are included in the list of the gifts to the messengers. "Forty-thousand and three" is an unreal number, which represents the utmost that Samani can offer.) Samani prepared everything just as the old man said and lay with his face down. Three messengers, who came to the village from the netherworld, felt hungry and ate food at the table. Then, they changed clothes, belts, and shoes. The messengers got to know that

Samani prepared all the gifts and food. And they (along with other gods) were propitiated at the *gut* conducted at Samani's house. After all these, they could not take Samani to the netherworld. They just went back to the netherworld and changed the number of the predetermined age of Samani recorded in the netherworld book, from thirty-three to three-thousand and three, by adding one stroke. (Thirty is written 三十 (three ten) in Classical Chinese. If one adds one stroke to 十 (ten), it becomes 千 (thousand).) In this way, Samani could live three thousand years.[7]

In this myth, we can see the shamanic view that, though the human lifespan is predetermined, it can be extended by performing rituals (J. Kang 2015, p. 203);

4. Following the example of the myth, the *simbang* offers messengers and other gods food, rice wine, and gifts. The *simbang* prays that the gods prevent *aek* and have the client live in peace as *simbang,* and the family did their best to please them. Then, the *simbang* says that he or she will prevent *aek* by offering the life of a rooster, which is called "*gi-dongcheollijeoksongbeugi*," instead of that of the client.[8] Ceremonial paper money and straw shoes are burnt. (Other offerings are passed through the fire or exposed to smoke.) The rooster is killed by twisting its neck, and it is thrown outside of the gate.

5. The *simbang* recites the names and ages of the client and his or her family members, shaking *yoryeong*, and praying that their *aek* be prevented. The simbang divines by tossing and grasping rice grains (and tossing *sinkal* and/or *sanpan*, which constitute a set of *mengdu* along with *yoryeong*) to find out if *aek* is prevented. (Rice divination is made to know what messenger gods say about the result, and *mengdu* divination is made to know what the *mengdu* god says about the result.)[9]

As we have seen, *aekmagi* is a ritual that is performed to treat and bribe messengers of the netherworld, to prevent misfortune and death by transferring them to the sacrificed chicken. However, the record Hyeon compiled from what *simbang* Ahn recited and performed fifty years ago, which I use for the summary in this section, is just one version of *aekmagi*. Though *simbang* Ahn was a very famous and representative shaman in Jeju in the 1970s, *aekmagi* have not been conducted in the exact same way in Jeju-do. *Aekmagi* rituals may be performed differently according to the regions in Jeju where it takes place and depending on the individual shaman's approach.[10] It is regrettable, as I wrote above, that no other comprehensive records, not to mention research, of Jeju *aekmagi* have been provided. In the following section, therefore, I will redescribe the *aekmagi* ritual by using my interviews with four *simbang*, which were carried out in 2022, along with my own observations of *aekmagi*, both with and without chicken sacrifice, on top of pre-existing records and research. It will help in understanding chicken sacrifices more clearly.

3. Chicken Sacrifice Explained by *Simbang*

Currently, the administrative districts of Jeju-do are composed of two cities, which are Jeju city and Seogwipo-city. The former covers the north side of Mt. Halla, while the latter covers the south side of the mountain.[11] But for most of the Joseon Dynasty, since the early 15th century, Jeju-do was divided into three towns. The north half was the Jeju-*mok* district, which was under the jurisdiction of the Jeju magistrate and now corresponds to the Jeju city area, while the south half was divided into two towns, which are Jeogui-*hyeon* on the east side and Daejeong-*hyeon* on the west side. Shamanic practices and beliefs are known to be very weakened in the old Daejeong area, the southwest part of Jeju-do. It is regrettable that there are not enough materials available to expound *aekmagi* that have been conducted in the old Daejeong area. On the other hand, shamanic practices have remained quite strong and conservative in the old Jeongui area, the southeast part of Jeju-do, where there are about ten *simbang* who still perform chicken sacrifices for *aekmagi*, among whom *simbang* Yongbu Oh is the most well known in Jeju-do. The other three interviewees, Yongok Yi, Sunsil Seo, and Yeongcheol Kim, work in the old Jeju-*mok* district and share a similar view on Jeju *gut* and *aekmagi*. *Simbang* Oh, however, has very different opinions in several respects, though he actively interacts with the *simbang* of the Jeju city area, including the other three interviewees. Most of all, the three *simbang* of the Jeju city area have

not conducted chicken sacrifice since ten to fifteen years ago, while *simbang* Oh regards it as important and keeps performing it.

All four interviewees had the same view on the purpose and efficacy of *aekmagi*, which is performed to prevent *aek*. They agree that the purpose of chicken sacrifice is to shift the *aek* of the client onto the chicken, through which the life of the client can be replaced by that of the chicken. They think that the chicken is mainly offered to three messengers of the netherworld and is shared by all the other gods invited to the ritual place. They believe that gifts and food should be prepared for three because three messengers still come from the netherworld just as in *Samani-bonpuri*. However, while Oh still believes that the chicken's life should be offered in place of the client's life, the other three say that it is not necessary anymore. In the rest of this section, I will provide further explanation, covering what Hyeon's records do not articulate, on the procedures and methods of *aekmagi*, the characteristics of chicken onto which *aek* is shifted, the sacred status of *simbang* to whom *aek* does not do harm, and the reasons the *simbang* suggest for continuing or discontinuing chicken sacrifice.

3.1. A. Aekmagi Sacrifice Procedure

When a chicken sacrifice was conducted in the Jeju city area, until ten to fifteen years ago, one chicken was killed and offered to prevent *aek* of the village in *dang-gut*.[12] According to *simbang* Oh, in most villages of the southeastern part of Jeju-do, three chickens were sacrificed for *aekmagi* during the *dang-gut* until twenty years ago because they wanted to treat each of the three messengers of the netherworld with one whole chicken, though only one chicken is sacrificed now. In most villages of Jeju-do, *simbang* killed, or still kill, chickens by twisting their necks and hurling their bodies down to the ground while holding the legs. *Simbang* Oh has sacrificed chickens in this way in the *dang-gut* of Susan-*dang*, a village shrine of a fairly large community in the southeastern part of Jeju-do. According to Oh, in Pyoseon village and with the participating families there, chickens have been killed in a peculiar way, by spinning them in the air while *simbang* grasp their necks.

In the *keun-gut* performed in the house of a *simbang* who wants to confirm his or her will to serve the gods, one more chicken is killed for *Jetbugi*—three brother gods, who are shamanic progenitor gods called Chogong or Samsiwang. While ordinary people are believed to be judged after their death by Siwang, ten gods of the netherworld, *simbang* are thought to stand in front of the three brother gods. To invoke blessings for *simbang*, offerings should be made to the three brother gods before any other gods. This additional chicken sacrifice is remarkable because it manifests the exceptional status of the *simbang*, who are at once human beings and officials of the gods.

The dead chicken is thrown from the yard towards the outside. *Aek* is believed to be prevented when the thrown chicken's head faces to the outside, not to the yard. *Simbang* may throw it again to make it face to the outside. Otherwise, he or she may warn the client and participants to watch themselves because *aek* may come again, though it is prevented by the chicken sacrifice. Then, *simbang* cast a small handful of rice in order to ask the gods, especially messengers, if *aek* is prevented. They repeatedly want to check if the messengers are pleased by the offerings and are willing to take the chicken's life instead of that of the client. They try to confirm the result again by tossing *sanpan* and/or *sinkal*, two constituents of *mengdu*, to ask the shamanic progenitor gods and the tutelary god of the *simbang*.[13] After divinations, the *simbang* invokes favors of gods for the client and other participants.[14]

The chickens sacrificed in *keun-gut* or *dang-gut* are boiled and cut up. The meat of the wings, along with cooked rice and rice cakes, are placed on the table for *Siwang*, the meat of the legs is on the table for the village shrine god, the meat of the breast, with bits from other parts and the gizzard, is on the "*gongsissang*," which is the table for the shamanic progenitors and other ancestor gods.[15] Chicken meat is first placed on the tables for the gods, and then, it is eaten by all the participants. The most favored chicken for sacrificial offering is a red rooster, rather than white or spotted ones, though other chickens are permissible. It is ideal to prepare a red rooster that has been raised in a happy family

with many children, in which no member died for a few years. *Simbang* Oh testifies that, in the southeastern part of Jeju-do, chickens and rice for *aekmagi* were washed with water in which part of a juniper tree was boiled before being offered, though this ritual purification is not conducted even in that area anymore (for purification by washing with water in which part of a juniper tree was boiled, see Yoo and Watts 2021, pp. 84–85).

The chicken is not the only animal that can be sacrificed for *aekmagi*. In principle, more expensive and bigger domestic animals seem to have been preferred. Just before killing the chicken, the *simbang* narrates, "I cannot offer a horse because I do not have [cannot afford] one and I cannot offer a bull because I do not have [cannot afford] one. Therefore, I replace the life [of the client] with that of *gidongcheollijeoksungbeugi* [a red rooster]". Though it is ideal to offer more valuable and bigger animals, such as a horse or a bull, the *simbang* sacrifices a chicken because he or she cannot afford to offer a horse or a bull. But there are cases in which more valuable offerings, including bigger animals, are asked. First, if the *simbang* continues to have bad divination signs after the sacrifice, more gifts are to be offered. Second, if *simbang* estimates, before performing the *gut*, that the *aek* of the client is too heavy to be prevented by ordinary offerings, more valuable offerings, including bigger animals, are expected.

My interviewees remembered that horses and bulls were offered for *aekmagi* a few decades ago, though not recently. But it was impossible for *simbang* to kill, cut, cook, and distribute the big animals on the spot. So, they were not killed but driven out of the yard of the house to the distant field, like the scapegoat described in *Leviticus* (16:10). While bulls or cows, which were extremely valuable in Jeju-do, were scarcely offered for *aekmagi*, horses were offered more often, though still on rare occasions, by the early 1980s, according to *simbang* Yi. She helped the late *simbang* Yunsu Kim, who was her husband, as an assistant *simbang* when he offered horses to the gods for Gunpal Ko's family, in Wasan-*li* (village), Jocheon-*eup* (town), Jeju city, in the early 1980s. When Kim divined that a horse must be offered to prevent *aek*, they were willing to offer one. The family could afford this because they owned many horses. I will explain further about the disposal of offered big animals in the latter part of this section. No interviewees directly experienced bull sacrifices, but they all have heard of it. *Simbang* Oh heard from his shamanic teacher that *simbang* Shin, who was the teacher of his teacher, prevented *aek* by offering a bull in the early 1940s, in Pyoseon village, Jeongui area. When a community member got a serious illness and seemed on the verge of death, *simbang* Shin conducted a *Siwangmaji gut*, in which *aekmagi* is included. First, the *simbang* tried to ward off *aek* by offering chickens and other gifts. However, whenever he tossed *sanpan*, he continued to have very bad divination signs, which notified that *aek* was still there. While he was taking a rest during the intermission of the *gut*, the ancestor god advised him to offer a bull that was raised in the house. *Simbang* Oh testified about a miracle that he heard from his teacher; *Simbang* Shin just had a bull tied on the way from the yard to the gate, the passage through which *aek* should go out. Though no one even touched the bull with a knife, the bull suddenly collapsed and died, because it received the *aek* of the dying patient. The bull, which was supposed to be expelled from the house to the field, died on the spot. And the patient recovered from the illness, according to Oh.

3.2. B. The Characteristics of the Sacrificed Animal and the Sacred Status of Simbang

For *aekmagi* conducted during *dang-gut*, which is performed to prevent the *aek* of a village, one chicken (three chickens in the southeastern area) was sacrificed and could be shared by any participant. But this was not all. Until several decades ago, when *aekmagi* for the entire village was over, *aekmagi* for each household was commonly carried out. Each family of the village brought a chicken and offered it to prevent *aek* of the family. The *simbang* was supposed to kill all the chickens during *aekmagi* and take them to his or her home. As I wrote above, chickens offered to prevent *aek* should neither be eaten by other participants after the gut is over nor be taken back by them. Dozens of chickens were usually sacrificed in the village *gut* and the *simbang* had serious difficulty in carrying them. *Simbang* Yi says that her husband and she brought up to fifty chickens with them after

Wasan-*li* village *dang-gut* by the 1990s. According to *simbang* Seo, her teacher, the late *simbang* Jungchun Yi (1937–2011), had to sacrifice about 60 chickens for *aekmagi* conducted in the Namdang shrine, Haengwon-*li* village. *Simbang* Oh testifies that more chickens were sacrificed in the Jeongui area, where he had to twist more than one hundred chickens' necks to kill for *aekmagi*, though one-third are still offered in that area nowadays.

Though the chickens brought by each family can be offered to the gods and can then be eaten by participants at the ritual place in principle, it is impossible to pluck, cut, and boil so many chickens while the *gut* is performed. It is, therefore, that sacrificed chickens are taken by the *simbang* to their home. Other participants should not have or eat the sacrificed chicken once they leave the ritual place, because it received *aek* that they must prevent. The *simbang* and their family members are not harmed by possessing or eating. They can sell it also outside the village where chickens were sacrificed for *aekmagi*. Once the *simbang* come to have it, it becomes harmless meat outside the place from which *aek* was removed. The chicken meat was a valuable source of protein for *simbang* and their family, especially in January and February of the lunar calendar when important village *gut* like *singwaseje* and *yeongdeung-gut* are performed and *simbang* must avoid pork to maintain purity for quite a long time (for pork impurity in Jeju, see Yoo and Watts 2021, pp. 89–92). Because expensive beef was often beyond the budget of most *simbang*, the chicken taken home after *aekmagi* was very helpful. However, it was never easy for *simbang* to kill so many chickens and take them home. *Simbang* Oh says that he used to lie sick in bed when he had to twist the necks of more than a hundred chickens. Because *simbang* and their families could not eat up the chickens, they either buried the rest or sold them at the market outside the village. In the Jeju city area, some *simbang* did not kill all the dozens of chickens but threw some live chickens having their heads face to the direction of the outside of the house. Thrown chickens were called "chickens belonging to nobody". *Simbang* had to take the chickens home alive. Though some needy families uncommonly took the offered chicken back home, only *simbang* basically could have and eat chickens offered to prevent *aek*.

In both the old Jeongui area and the Jeju city area, it has been believed that sacrificial animals for *aekmagi* can do harm to people because they assume the *aek* that was originally about to influence people. Only the *simbang* is not influenced by possessing or eating them.[16] *Simbang* should possess exclusively other offerings made to the gods also. As I mentioned above, gifts, besides chickens, are presented to the messenger gods by being placed on the *aekmagi* table, commonly traditional style jackets, broad cotton cloth, three spools of thread, a bowl filled with grains, ceremonial paper money, real money, and rice wine. Depending on the region, or sometimes the customs of the individual *simbang*, some other gifts, such as rice cakes, cooked rice, and cigarettes, are placed. What can be consumed on the spot, such as food, is shared by participants during the *gut*. What cannot be consumed immediately, like money or grains, is taken back by the *simbang*. Rice and other grains are offered to the gods by tossing a small handful of them into the air, and then, the *simbang* takes the rest. Ceremonial paper money and straw shoes are consumed by being burnt, while real money and cloth are taken by the *simbang*. All the offerings, including money, placed on the *aekmagi* table can harm people because they have the *aek* of the client. Just as *simbang* is not damaged by taking or eating the sacrificed chicken, he or she is not harmed by possessing money used for *aekmagi*.

As I wrote above, horses or bulls, which were offered instead of chickens, were sent to a field distant from the house in which *aekmagi* was conducted. The animal could belong only to the*simbang*, who would find the animal within a few days and take it home. The donor was never allowed to have it back. *Simbang* Yi and her husband bred horses that they took after *aekmagi*. But they had to sell them a few years later because the animals became venomous due to the *aek* they received. Nowadays, when the gods ask for more offerings through divinations, they prefer more money to bigger animals. According to the client's economic situation, the amount of additional money varies, from 50,000 Korean won to 1,000,000 won or more.

The *simbang* I interviewed say that they can possess without trouble sacrificed animals or offerings made for *aekmagi* because they have close relationships with the gods who help prevent *aek*. Their teachers taught them that *simbang*, the petty officials of the gods, are not harmed by *aek*, which the messenger gods help avoid, while it can bring about disaster for lay people. In addition, they are almost never harmed by the influence of spirits, lower deities in the Jeju pantheon, who often inflict harm on people. The lower deities can cause big trouble if they do not leave the house where they visited to be treated in *gut*. But it is alright for *simbang* who conducted *gut* to have them attached to him or her. Even after *dojin*, the last sequence of the Jeju *gut* is carried out to send all deities back to the divine realm, some deities may linger in the ritual place. It is for this reason that the *simbang* entices them to leave the house with him or her lest they should harm the family. The client and family members should not say goodbye or thank you to the *simbang*, or make eye contact with him or her when the *simbang* goes back home after the *gut* because the spirits who are attached to the *simbang*'s clothing or body may not leave the ritual place but stay.

For all that, *simbang* do not think lightly of the bad influence of *aek*. They are relatively safe from the harm of *aek* due to their position in between gods and human beings. They are separate from ordinary people, as can be seen from the belief that they have their own genealogy which begins from the shamanic progenitor gods, Chogong, and that their place in the netherworld is different from that of ordinary people. However, *simbang* must be careful to maintain their in-between position; they are obviously human beings, as well as the officials and friends of gods. They must keep stricter purity rules than ordinary people and conduct more purifications before performing *gut*. If a *simbang* perform *gut* while being polluted, they would be punished by the gods more severely than ordinary people would. *Simbang* employ a kind of safety feature to avoid the bad influence of *aek* during the *aekmagi*; when a *simbang* who takes charge of *aekmagi* writes down the names of those whose *aek* should be prevented on a piece of cotton cloth, the *simbang* writes his or her own name also, praying, "May the *simbang* not get despondent [over the influence of the *aek* of the client]". When the *simbang* offers the cloth to the gods by burning it away, the cloth on which the *simbang*'s name is written is burnt first. The cloth of the main client is burnt next, and then, those of family members are burnt. This is carried out to prevent *aek* that may harm the *simbang* during *aekmagi*. When *simbang* conduct *gut*, they do not directly face the tables set for the gods, but twist their body to the left or right, which is also a safety feature to make any bad influence, which the gods remove from the client, deflect from them.

3.3. C. The Cessation and the Survival of Chicken Sacrifice

Three *simbang* from the Jeju city area emphasize that they ceased sacrificing chickens because times have changed. They and others in the area have tried to persuade the gods to understand the situation in performing *aekmagi* by narrating "though we used to replace the life [of the client] with that of a red rooster, now we are in a different age (or, literally, this is not the time like that)". Those *simbang* think that the era in which killing chickens was taken for granted has passed. The first change is the negative perception of killing animals that spread in Korea, including Jeju-do. As some Jeju *gut* were designated as intangible cultural assets, not only community members or adherents but also visitors from the outside of the village came to observe the ritual, many among whom criticized *aekmagi* for its cruelty. In addition, many of the younger generation among the community members felt uneasy about killing and eating the live animals they raised. Younger *simbang* came to be reluctant to kill chickens during the ritual. Even elderly *simbang* who had done it for a long time came to feel hesitant about taking chickens' lives, especially in front of large audiences.

Second, as the skillful, experienced *simbang* grew old and died, there were not many young people who wanted to become *simbang*. More and more young Koreans lost interest in their parents' religion, and more people came to regard shamanism as a superstition. When respected old *simbang* could not have enough assistants, usually novice *simbang*, they

had to give up sacrificing chickens for individual families during the village *gut*, though they maintained the chicken sacrifice to prevent *aek* of the village. *Simbang* Seo says that it was her teacher, *simbang* Yi, who dissuaded the community members of the Namdang shrine, Haengwon-*li* village, from bringing their own chickens for the *aekmagi* of each family, in the late 1990s, when *simbang* Yi grew old and had trouble sacrificing about 60 chickens. He asked villagers to offer rice or money instead of chickens to prevent the *aek* of their family during the village *gut*.

Third, it became difficult to prepare live chickens, especially red roosters. Chickens were raised in the yards or gardens of many houses until thirty years ago. But as Western-style houses and apartments became more common in Jeju-do, most families did not raise chickens. In Gimnyeong-*li* village, according to *simbang* Seo, already in the early 2000s only one family that ran a chicken farm was able to bring the chickens they raised. When avian influenza spread in Korea several times in the 2000s, it became more difficult to prepare and sacrifice chickens for *aekmagi*. In order to contain the bird flu, the local government restricted the movement of live chickens for weeks. For the *gut* that were supposed to be conducted during this period, naturally, no family was able to obtain a chicken to prevent *aek* of the family. When it became legally impossible to bring live chickens, tie them under the table, and kill them to prevent *aek*, the *simbang* and community members purchased chicken meat from the market and cooked it to offer to the gods with other gifts. The process of sacrificing chickens to replace the lives of people simply had to be omitted.

These practical difficulties in performing chicken sacrifices were caused by changes in the living conditions of community members, whom Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss call "sacrifiers," along with changes in the situation of *simbang*, whom they refer to as "sacrificers".[17] The situation of sacrifiers is evidently changed, seeing that they do not raise chickens at home anymore, which clearly influenced omitting chicken sacrifices for *aekmagi*. However, it was *simbang*, sacrificers, who took the lead in changing the way of the ritual. I am aware that, as Jongseong Choi points out, the importance of the sacrifiers, who are supposed to enjoy the benefits of the sacrifice ritual, should not be neglected in understanding sacrifice (Choi 2022, p. 142). But, I would like to emphasize that the interests and focuses of these two groups are often different. While sacrifiers are more interested in the benefits they get from the ritual, sacrificers are more serious about the way of performing the ritual. Lay members, or sacrifiers, of shamanic communities in the Jeju city area, whom I have met, think more highly of the result of *aekmagi*, of which the gods inform them through the *simbang*'s divination, than the way it is conducted. The three interviewees from the Jeju city area say that *simbang*, including themselves, first agreed not to sacrifice chickens for *aekmagi* around the early 2010s and then asked villagers for their understanding on this. As I wrote above, already in the 1990s *simbang* Yi, a respected senior *simbang* at that time, stopped the massive killing of chickens, which had been conducted to prevent the *aek* of each family, in Haengwon-*li* village. On a practical note, *simbang* cannot help but feel overburdened in disposing of dozens of chickens in this age of the nuclear family. In contrast, all that lay members have to do is to bring one chicken per family. In addition, the *simbang* were responsible for killing animals on the spot and blamed for the cruelty by the audience, especially nonadherents. According to the three *simbang*, they started thinking about stopping the sacrifice of chickens because they felt reluctant to kill living beings.

The *simbang* who stopped chicken sacrifice say that they could decide not to perform sacrifice any longer because the gods agreed. They persuaded not only community members but also the gods to accept their decision. They believe that the gods agree when they say to them "now we are in a different age", and that the gods are satisfied by other offerings that are made instead of live chickens. It was the gods, according to these *simbang*, that give positive divination signs when they divine to ask if *aek* is prevented without killing chickens.

Simbang Kim, among the three interviewees from the Jeju city area, tries to suggest the rationale he finds from the myth of *Samani-bonpuri*. He emphasizes that, though Samani

offers bulls in the myth, it is not articulated that the bulls are butchered. If bulls are just offered, chicken meat purchased from the market also will do without killing live chickens. He tries to support the decision not to kill chickens on the spot with the evidence from the text. It is true that *simbang* should treat the gods with chicken because the client cannot afford bulls. But it does not have to involve killing the animal by their own hands. By preparing and cooking chicken meat for the purpose of treating gods with it and sharing it among participants, what is stipulated in the myth is satisfied. By treating the gods with cooked chicken, along other gifts, such as cotton cloth, jackets, ceremonial paper money, real money, rice, and rice wine, *aek* can be prevented.

However, *simbang* Oh, who keeps conducting chicken sacrifice, points out that offering bulls to treat the gods in the myth cannot avoid killing the animals. Therefore, he and about ten *simbang* working in the southeastern area still carry out *aekmagi* by sacrificing chickens. It is the *simbang* that have upheld the tradition. But it is also true that they could maintain their shamanic beliefs and practices thanks to the conservative villagers of this region. While *simbang* Oh actively cooperates with and contacts *simbang* from other regions, he is confident that his decision to keep performing chicken sacrifices is right. He thinks that it was not impossible to prepare chickens for *aekmagi* in the 2000s though it was very difficult. If *simbang* and community members tried their best to follow the tradition, he points out, they could manage to obtain at least one red rooster despite the difficult situation. *Simbang* Oh still believes that it is necessary to offer the lives of sacrificed animals to prevent *aek*. Because it is the responsibility of *simbang* to follow the rules based on *bonpuri*, Jeju myths, they must maintain the original way of performing *aekmagi* as they learned it from their teachers.

Simbang Oh says that he once complained to his teacher, the late *simbang* Geumja Kang, because he himself felt tired and reluctant to kill more than a hundred chickens for *aekmagi* during *dang-gut*. But his teacher firmly told him to maintain the old way of *aekmagi*, saying "*simbang* must become a *baekjeong* [butcher, a person of the lowest class in pre-modern Korea] and also become a *yangban* [aristocrat]. A petty official of the gods is someone who should kill if it is the will of the gods and who should feed if it is the will of gods. If the *simbang* does not fulfill his or her duty, the *simbang* will be hit by *aek*". Agreeing with his old teacher, *simbang* Oh still conducts chicken sacrifices to prevent *aek* in *gut* for villages and families.

In this section so far, I organized the views of the *simbang* I interviewed on whether to abolish or maintain sacrifice during *aekmagi*, trying to complement preexisting research and records. From these conflicting views and their rationales, I could identify two issues that should be explained further. First, the exceptional status of a *simbang*, who is not, or is scarcely, influenced by *aek*, should be the focus. It is believed that all offerings made for *aekmagi*, not only the animals killed to replace human lives with theirs but also any gifts presented to gods to prevent *aek*, can do harm to the other participants but not to the *simbang*. *Simbang* stand on the boundary between humans and gods, as both a human being and friends and assistants of the gods. This ambiguous location makes *simbang* a sacred person, *homo sacer*, which I will explain further in the next section. Second, the characteristics of *aekmagi* without chicken sacrifice should be investigated. While chicken sacrifice was believed to be a central and necessary process of *aekmagi*, this process is now omitted in most areas of Jeju-do. The ritual that used to center on sacrifice now became one without sacrifice. I will demonstrate that the role and function of this ritual are believed to be the same as before, and how and why a ritual without the central process can maintain the same function.

4. *Homo Sacer* and Jeju Shamans

Aek is apportioned to human beings like destiny. If a person is believed to be in trouble due to *aek*, he or she must prevent or remove it by having a *simbang* perform an *aekmagi* ritual, which is composed of actions and words that propitiate the messenger gods of the netherworld who would take the person's soul. Offerings are made to the messengers and

other gods. To replace the person's life with that of an animal, a chicken, or other animals on rare occasions, has been killed or expelled to a distant field. In Jeju-do, there has been the belief that an animal life can substitute for that of a human. The *simbang* is not harmed by eating or possessing the animal that received human *aek*, while the client and all the other participants may be if they possess it or eat it outside of the ritual place.[18] There are some concerns that *aek* might pose a threat to *simbang*, considering the prayers for *aek* not to affect *simbang*. However, these and other processes cannot allow other participants to eat or possess sacrificed animals. Only *simbang* can have the animal and other gifts offered to the gods to prevent *aek*. Though all offerings made to gods are supposed to belong to the *simbang* after the *gut*, other community members can have them if given by the *simbang*. But offerings made for *aekmagi* cannot be given to lay participants because of the threat of misfortunes, including death, they pose. The *simbang*, who can connect people to the gods, is not harmed by the *aek* that he or she prevented. This exceptional status revealed in the *aekmagi* ritual should be explained further.

The status of *simbang* in Jeju-do has been formed by multiple elements, including religious, political, social, economic, and psychological aspects. If we specify one of many elements as the essence and try to explain the status only by it, we will miss its complexity by oversimplifying it. To understand the *simbang*'s exceptional status, we should note that the *simbang* was a religiously important person who nevertheless socially belonged to the lowest class during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), which revered Confucianism and suppressed Buddhism and shamanism. This huge gap between the *simbang*'s religious status and their social one remained after the end of Joseon. The social contempt for shamanism in Jeju-do lasted until recently, when traditional Korean culture began to be respected as valuable and worthy of preservation. Under the influence of the modernization movement in Korea that began in the 1960s, shamanism was branded as a premodern superstition that should be discarded even in Jeju-do, where shamanism had been the strongest in Korea. *Simbang* were especially the target of criticism because they were thought to live off the support of community members without being active economically while enjoying religious authority over other people. *Simbang* have an ambivalent sense of identity, at once proud of being petty officials of the gods yet also ashamed of the social contempt.

It is important to consider historical, social, and political factors to comprehensively understand a *simbang*'s status in Jeju society. However, it is also significant that their location on the boundary between the divine realm and the human realm is provided by religious ideas and practices. Jeju indigenous people have believed that *simbang*, as friends of the gods, play the intermediary role between the gods and ordinary people. Their position on the boundary and its characteristic of liminality had not changed by the influence of their social position; they were on the boundary when they were not socially despised but respected before the Joseon period, and likewise when they belonged to the lowest class during the Joseon Dynasty. *Simbang*, regardless of their social status being regarded as lowly or not, were considered high and noble by their community members (see Yoo 2020, pp. 87–90). The sacred status of the *simbang* should and can be understood by tracing their location in Jeju religious cosmology, which distinguishes the divine realm from the human realm.

Giorgio Agamben's examination of *homo sacer* provides useful expressions for explaining the state of exception of both *simbang* and other participants of *aekmagi*. Agamben's subject *homo sacer*, who he indicates may be killed yet not sacrificed, can be located in a similar position as the *simbang*. According to Agamben, *homo sacer* is "simply set outside human jurisdiction without being brought into the realm of divine law," while *homo sacer* at once "belongs to God in the form of unsacrificeability and is included in the community in the form of being able to be killed" (Agamben [1995] 1998, p. 82). Likewise, *simbang* are in a state of exception, in which he or she belongs to both the divine and human realms yet is excluded from both realms. The *simbang* is a human being and also a petty official working for gods. The name *simbang* is thought to originate from the title "*sin-ui seongbang*," which *simbang* use to identify themselves when performing *gut*. *Seongbang*, the standard

pronunciation of which is *hyeongbang*, designates one of the offices of petty officials under the magistrate of a town. During the Joseon period, these local petty officials belonged to *jungin*, literally meaning middle people, who neither belonged to the aristocratic class nor the common people. The name *simbang* itself implies a person on the boundary.

As I have mentioned, when a person becomes a *simbang*, he or she is supposed to get out of the human genealogy and be incorporated into the genealogy that begins with the three *Jetbugi* brothers, the shamanic progenitor gods, passes through shamanic teachers and leads to the *simbang*. When the *simbang* dies, it is believed, he or she will be judged by the shamanic progenitor gods, not by the king of the netherworld. *Simbang* stay close to the divine realm but are not in the divine realm, while living in the human realm yet not belonging to the human realm. *Simbang* are believed to be different from ordinary people, belonging to and simultaneously being excluded from both the divine realm and the human realm. The *simbang* is a sacred person, *homo sacer*. And all participants in *aekmagi* become *homo sacer* while the ritual is performed. During the ritual, their lives are consecrated to death, in that they are alive but pretend to be doomed to die soon, being in the state of latent death, which I will explain further soon.

I do not fully agree with Agamben when he seeks to find the meaning of the sacred outside the religious. He thinks the sacred should be found "before or beyond the religious" (9). If we consider religious meaning as secondary or collateral in understanding "sacred life," we will have difficulty distinguishing it from other exceptional states or statuses for which the word "sacred" is not used. We should not ignore why a certain state of exception has been expressed by using the word "sacred", while it is not used for other states. Agamben tries to "uncover an originary political structure that is located in a zone prior to the distinction between sacred and profane," by interpreting sacratio, or consecration, as an autonomous figure (74). He argues that, because *homo sacer* may be killed yet not sacrificed, the killing of *homo sacer* should be distinguished from ritual purifications and sacratio should be excluded from the religious sphere (82). "Life is sacred only insofar as it is taken into the sovereign exception. *Homo sacer*'s capacity to be killed but not sacrificed is a juridico-political phenomenon," which should not be confused with a religious phenomenon (85). He asserts that the sacred life was eminently political in character from the beginning (100). According to Agamben,

> An assumed ambivalence of the generic religious category of the sacred cannot explain the juridico-political phenomenon to which the most ancient meaning of the term *sacer* refers. On the contrary, only an attentive and unprejudiced delimitation of the respective fields of the political and the religious will make it possible to understand the history of their intersection and complex relations. (80)

I argue that the delimitation of the political and the religious is a very modern and Western way of understanding the world and people. We may delimit the political and the religious in order to articulate a specific trait of our subject of research. However, that hypothetical work should not exclude the generic religious category of the sacred, even if the category might look ambivalent. In spite of Agamben's critique of the "ambivalence of the generic religious category of the sacred," this ambivalence comes, at least in part, from generic ideas of the sacred, which religious people have developed as "the opposite of the profane," covering any objects, humans, characteristics, or relations that are conceived as different from, and so separate from, ordinary ones in the ordinary human world (Eliade [1949] 1996, pp. xviii, 12, 14, 17, 24, 459). The boundary made between the sacred and the profane is the most basic and primordial boundary human beings have ever made. And religious cosmologies have been developed through this boundary. "The act of tracing boundaries" and "their cancellation or negation" (Agamben [1995] 1998, p. 85) cannot be explained without considering a religious cosmology. I am aware that the act of tracing boundaries and their cancellation are not monopolized by the religious but accomplished by complex human situations including the political. However, it should not be neglected that religion has made and maintained the boundaries between realms in the cosmos, and has defined loci of beings in the cosmos, placing them within the realms that are comparted

by the boundaries. Jeju shamanic religion separates the divine realm from the human realm, and the realm of death from the realm of the living (see Yoo and Watts 2021, pp. 75–98, which is titled "Separating Realms"). And for the discussion of this paper, I emphasize that religions have also created an exceptional liminal situation, which does not belong to a specific realm but is placed on the boundary, such as that of Jeju *simbang*.

Still, Agamben aptly observes that *homo sacer* do not belong to a specific realm but are on the boundary, staying outside of the human realm while being humans, which is very useful for explaining exceptional states of *simbang* and other participants in *aekmagi*. First, all participants in *aekmagi* can be said to be temporarily in an exceptional state. They pretend to be in imminent danger and destined to die soon. They are temporarily outside both the realm of death and the realm of life. They are on the boundary between life and death, which is clearly an exceptional state. By using Agamben's term, they are temporarily regarded as sacred persons. This is the state that requires offerings to the gods, especially those from the netherworld, and that requires the killing of other animals in place of themselves. Participants can go back to the realm of living human beings by making offerings to the gods and by transferring their *aek* to animals and killing them (now restricted to the southeastern area of Jeju-do).

Aekmagi ritual locates a participant in the position of "the person that is consecrated to death and that, insofar as it occupies the threshold between the two worlds [the living and the dead], must be separated from the normal context of the living" (Agamben [1995] 1998, p. 98), then returns him or her to the world of the living.[19] The ritual removes the threat of death from the participant who is believed to be in danger of death and confirms that he or she belongs to the realm of life. A critically ill patient, for whom *simbang* prescribes *siwang-maji gut*, including *aekmagi*, can be said to be already on the boundary between the living and the dead. But in *aekmagi* performed regularly during seasonal *dang-gut*, when none of the community members are critically ill, every community member is temporarily forced onto the threshold between the living and the dead. The ritual says that we need to prevent *aek* in advance because none of us knows when we will die, just as Samani did not know he would die soon. Though we may not die very soon like Samani, we pretend to temporarily become Samani and die before long. While performing *aekmagi*, all participants become liminal entities who "are betwixt and between the positions" (Turner 1969, p. 94). In brief, *aekmagi* is conducted to confirm that we surely belong to the realm of life though we should recognize that we all are destined to die sooner or later.

We can compare participants in *aekmagi* with the devotus of Ancient Rome, who had "the status of the living body that seems no longer to belong to the world of the living" (Agamben [1995] 1998, p. 97). The devotus is the person "who consecrates his own life to the gods of the underworld in order to save the city from a grave danger" (96). The devotus can return to the world of the living by performing a ritual, in which he must bury an image of him "seven feet or more under the ground and a victim must be immolated in expiation" (97). "Until this rite is performed, the surviving devotee is a paradoxical being, who, while seeming to lead a normal life, in fact exists on a threshold that belongs neither to the world of the living nor to the world of the dead" (99). The devotus is the person who had to die but did not, who was consecrated to the gods of the netherworld but remained in this world. Samani in the Jeju myth is depicted as a person who is placed on the register of the soon to be dead but does not die. Like the devotus, Samani is a paradoxical being, one who has to die but does not. He manages to escape from death by offering gifts, including animals to propitiate the gods from the netherworld. All participants in *aekmagi* are identified with Samani and regarded as persons who are doomed to die soon. From this exceptional boundary state, they come back to the realm of life by offering gifts, including animals that would replace their own lives. In other words, they are temporarily placed in the state of the devotus, who are consecrated to the netherworld gods but successfully remain in this world.

Now let us return to the exceptional state of the *simbang*. Unlike other participants, the *simbang* who conduct this ritual are not temporarily forced to be on the threshold be-

tween the two worlds of the living and the dead, because they reside permanently on the threshold between the human realm and the divine realm. The *simbang*'s threshold is on a different level from that of other participants. Their exceptional sacred state lasts even if they are not placed in the state of latent death. As "the priest," in Hubert and Mauss' term, "stands on the threshold of the sacred and the profane world and represents them both at one and the same time" (Hubert and Mauss [1898] 1981, p. 23), *simbang* stand on the threshold of the divine realm and the human realm. Unlike other participants who stand on the threshold of the living and the dead only while the ritual is performed, *simbang* always stand on the boundary between the human and the divine. They are humans but are separate from other humans because they are consecrated to gods as their descendants, friends, and assistants. While other participants, sacrifiers, are temporarily placed on the threshold that the ritual provides, *simbang*, sacrificers, permanently stand on the threshold. They are *homo sacer*, who can remove *aek* but are not harmed by *aek*, because *aek* is supposed to do harm to human beings in the human realm, not the person of the boundary, who always stands on the threshold.

To demonstrate a *simbang*'s state of exception in this context, I would nuance and modify Agamben's explanation of the life of *homo sacer*. Agamben writes, "At once excluding bare life [the life of *homo sacer*] from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested" (Agamben [1995] 1998, p. 9). For Jeju *aekmagi*, I would put it as, "At once excluding *simbang* from and capturing them within both the divine and human realms, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire cosmological system of Jeju religion rested".

5. Sacrifice without Ritual Killing

As mentioned, animal sacrifice is rapidly disappearing in Jeju *aekmagi*. But, as quoted above, Hyeon wrote that chicken sacrifice was an essential activity to prevent *aek*. "*Aek* is prevented by killing a rooster and throwing it to the outside [of the ritual place] to ask [gods] take the rooster instead of human life" (Hyeon [1980] 2007, p. 264). I described in detail the social changes that caused chicken sacrifice to be left out of *aekmagi*. There were sufficient reasons why *simbang* decided to stop killing chickens. But those reasons do not explain why Jeju people still believe that *aek* can be prevented without killing chickens, though *aek* had to be prevented by killing chickens until just fifteen years ago. To answer this question in this section, I will examine how *aekmagi* is working for participants without animal sacrifice. I will also investigate how *aek* is believed to be removed; that is, how expiation is made without offering an animal's life in place of someone else's life.

We first look into the definition of sacrifice. For the definition of sacrifice, Hubert and Mauss postulated the victim, the object that is destroyed, whether it is an animal, vegetable, food, or drink. But Kathryn Lofton points out that this destruction of the victim can often be a metaphoric expectation rather than a literal one. Though their understandings of sacrifice may seem to be quite different, both agree that a sacrifice is made on behalf of society. As they point out, rituals involving animal sacrifice are conducted to help maintain the society, often by having its members believe their pending misfortunes or evil influences are transferred to the sacrificed animals. People need to feel secure and steady, overcoming restlessness, in order to maintain the society to which they belong, though they are destined to die someday and cannot but live restless lives. For this purpose of supporting society to be fulfilled more efficiently, as the Jeju example shows, rules and procedures of a ritual, which, it was believed, must be strictly followed, can be changed, or even given up. Animal sacrifices are omitted in the Jeju *aekmagi* ritual to make the ritual take better charge of "communication with, and thinking about, the legitimate social order" (Lofton 2017, p. 119) in the society where the thought about killing animals has been negatively changed. However, we can also witness that some people or some regions can put more stress on proper execution and strict traditional rules, while others may think more highly of better ways of communicating and thinking about the social order.

I am not revisiting *Sacrifice* by Hubert and Mauss, which was first published 125 years ago in 1898, for the purpose of applying their theory to Jeju *aekmagi* or criticizing it based on Jeju's examples. Rather, I would like to use their well-known theory as a benchmark against which to examine the chicken sacrifice in *aekmagi* and explain its characteristics clearly. First, I pay attention to their observation that "everywhere the piaculum [expiatory sacrifice] exists side by side with communion" (Hubert and Mauss [1898] 1981, p. 6), which is confirmed in the chicken sacrifice of Jeju *aekmagi*. Though I do not agree with their argument that the piaculum is performed to expulse a sacred spirit, which is not seen in the case of Jeju-do, it sounds persuasive that both the piaculum and communion are primordial components of sacrifice, while it is impossible to trace which of the two came first (Hubert and Mauss [1898] 1981, p. 7). Sacrifice as communion allows the sacrifiers to share and eat sacred offerings made to gods. In the Jeju religion, netherworld gods are the agents who are believed to remove *aek* from people. The animals that are killed for expiation are consumed by the sacrifiers for communion with the gods and among themselves. Animals sacrificed in place of human lives in *aekmagi* are used for communion, that is, used to treat the gods and shared by participants in the ritual.

As I implied above, Hubert and Mauss argued that the name sacrifice should be reserved for oblations in which the offering or part of it is destroyed (12). Then, they defined sacrifice as "a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned" (13). They asserted that the purpose of destruction like incineration and consumption by the priest was to eliminate the parts of the animal from temporal surroundings for the purpose of making it sacred (38). The evil influences or maleficent powers the victim contained had to be removed, often by returning it "to the world of maleficent powers" (38–39). They saw the scapegoat of the atonement (*Leviticus* 16) as the victim to be sent back to the world of maleficent powers. Likewise, the live bird, which was let go free over the open field in the purification ritual to cleanse the one who was healed from leprosy, was regarded also as the victim sent back to the evil world (*Leviticus* 14: 7; 53). After removing evil influences and consecrating the victim, the bad condition of the sacrifier can be modified. According to them, the sacrifier acquires the sacred state "thanks to the strength that the act of consecration has built up in the victim" (52).

However, their argument may make us overemphasize the consecration of the victim in the sacrifice. The sacrifier of *aekmagi* does not acquire the sacred state through the consecration of the offerings. Though the chicken sacrificed in *aekmagi* can be said to be consecrated in that it is offered to gods, for which it used to be purified by washing in some areas, it is neither identified with deities nor represents the society. Again, the gods are the agents who can prevent *aek*, which is not thought to be the result of human sin or impurity but what is given to humans. It can be prevented only by the intervention of gods who are originally supposed to enforce it. The animal sacrifice for redeeming the human life helps gods, the agents of removing *aek*, intervene in the human crisis. As *simbang* Kim points out, in the myth *Samani-bonpuri*, animals are offered to the gods in order to propitiate the gods, just like other offerings, not to use their consecrated strength. In addition, sacrifice animals in *aekmagi* are not eliminated for purification but presented to gods. In Jeju shamanism, it is gods who remove *aek*. Strictly speaking, animals are killed to persuade gods and to treat gods. Though animal lives are believed to replace the sacrifier's life, the replacement does not happen automatically just by killing animals. Ritual killing in *aekmagi* has been conducted to satisfy the gods with the animal's life instead of the sacrifier's.

Hubert and Mauss manifestly regarded purity and impurity as two aspects of the sacred (60), which often causes confusion. As I pointed out in a former publication, conceptions of the sacred and the profane should be distinguished from systems of purity and impurity (Yoo and Watts 2021, p. 18; see also Smith 2004, pp. 107–8). In the Jeju shamanic religion, though sacrifice and purification may look similar and have much in common, they are clearly distinguished. Hubert and Mauss stressed that the essential thing in the scapegoat of the atonement, which was dedicated to Azazel in *Leviticus* 16, was to drive it

away without killing it (39). But we should note that animals driven away for purification are different from those offered to the divine. In *Leviticus*, the expelled animals should not be owned or eaten, not only by the congregation but also by priests. The bird that was set free for a person who was healed of leprosy was also not for communion or for the priests. It was just driven away. Unlike the scapegoat and the bird, animals used for *aekmagi* are gifts and bribes for gods, which can be eaten in the ritual place or possessed by *simbang*. For *aekmagi*, chickens, horses, and bulls may be driven away from the ritual place, the sacrifier's house, if it is difficult to kill them on the spot. But they are what is offered to the gods, both in the myth and in the real ritual, which are to be ascribed to the *simbang*. Driven away animals in *Leviticus* and in Jeju *aekmagi* have different characteristics.

In Jeju-do, all sacrificed chickens or other animals for *aekmagi* are shared in the ritual place or given to *simbang*. But there is a ritual process of Jeju *gut*, which is comparable to driving away the scapegoat or the bird. In *saedarim*, the purification ritual is included as a part of the *gut*, the *simbang* pretends to drive away birds so that they do not come back. As I wrote in one of my previous publications, *saedarim* is conducted to make the ritual place appropriate for the gods to be served. It is believed to clean not only the human participants and the place but also the invited gods who are thought to become polluted when they enter the human world. It is also supposed to drive out all the impurities that may be lurking around the passageway by which the gods reach the ritual place. During the *saedarim* ritual,

> *simbang* sings songs for washing away impurity accompanied by Korean shamanic instruments. Then the *simbang* sprinkles water from his or her mouth, or by using bamboo branches with green blades dipped in water, onto the people and around the ritual place, making gestures of driving away impurity or birds. In the name "*saedarim*," "*sae*" is equal to "*sa*" of mainland Korea, which means 'impure' or 'evil.' Jeju people have generally read "sa" as "sae," which has another meaning of 'bird' or 'birds.' In ritual, both meanings of "*sae*" are confused, often on purpose. *Segyeong-bonpuri* and *Jijang-bonpuri* include examples in which "sa," the impure or the evil, is expressed as "sae," birds … Therefore, removing impurity is pretended to be the same with driving away birds, as a pun, and a *simbang* makes gestures of scaring away birds while reciting ritual songs. (Yoo and Watts 2021, p. 85)

Simbang perform this purification ritual by pretending to expel birds and by sprinkling water. There is no evidence that shows the original form of pretending to expel birds, and we cannot tell if it originated from the real activity of driving away or releasing birds. But *simbang* always pretend to expel birds for the *saedarim* purification ritual, and birds are related to impurity in the myths. These birds, which are thought to be removed with all possible impurity, do not belong to the gods or the *simbang*.

While *aekmagi* is a ritual conducted to have gods intervene to eliminate dangerous misfortunes that may cause death, the *simbang* is the agent of *saedarim*, who cleanses and removes impurity of his or her own, all participants, the ritual place, and even the invited gods.[20] Purification rituals like *saedarim* are needed to maintain the purity, or the requisite condition of a specific realm in religious people's cosmology and to remove the negative influence of other realms (Yoo and Watts 2021, p. 79). For purification, animals are not offered to god/gods but removed by the sacrificer, as is the case of *saedarim*. On the other hand, sacrificed animals are offered to the divine along with other gifts, to change bad human conditions through divine intervention, as we can see in *aekmagi*.

The first reason that Jeju people can believe in the efficacy of *aekmagi* without chicken sacrifice is related to their cosmology in which the gods are important subjects and agents of religious activities. I argue that the role of gods as main characters of *aekmagi* makes it possible to prevent *aek* without chicken sacrifice. Though we easily forget, "in the view of its adherents, practiced religion may belong to the sphere of, and have its source in, the divine. The gods practice religion because religion in essence belongs to them" (Patton 2009, p. 17). Jeju *aekmagi* can be conducted without chicken sacrifice, because it is possible to successfully persuade the gods to prevent *aek* and to modify the bad condition of sacrifiers.

Because it is gods that decide to prevent *aek*, the lives of chickens are not necessary if gods accept offerings without chicken sacrifice. *Aekmagi,* after the recent radical change in Jeju-do, namely the omission of the ritual killing of chickens, still maintains other characteristics of sacrifices, *except* that the transfiguration or destruction of the offering is not involved. It is an oblation that modifies the condition of the sacrifier *without* the destruction of the victim or part of it. It is an oblation in which the communion is clearly left but from which the expiatory sacrifice is *not* included. Communion meals, through which sacrifiers can be assured of a peaceful relationship with the gods, are steadfastly maintained as before. All the other conditions except the destruction of the victim are met. Sacrificed animals and other offerings are consecrated in that they are offered to and come to belong to gods. Without the destruction but with communion with gods and participants, "the distinctive characteristic of consecration in sacrifice" is obviously left, by which Hubert and Mauss meant "the thing consecrated serves as an intermediary between the sacrifier… and the divinity to whom the sacrifice is usually addressed" (Hubert and Mauss [1898] 1981, p. 11).

Lofton does not rely on one authoritative definition of sacrifice but tries to catch its important characteristics from various theories, having a broader meaning of sacrifice than that of Hubert and Mauss in mind. Lofton examines "many of the theories of sacrifices," which are "irreconcilable with one another" (113). Quoting Nancy Jay's observation that "Not all ritual killings are sacrifice, nor do all sacrifices involve slaughter" (Jay 1992, p. xxv), she emphasizes that sacrifice "is exacting, it is controlled, and it is a strategy of managing something on behalf of something else (as a gift to something else)" (Lofton 2017, p. 113). But she does not argue for the definition of sacrifice without destruction or transfiguration of the offering. Some theories, to which Lofton pays attention, emphasize that "the word sacrifice does imply that something has been lost" (113), and she does not deny it. Instead, she thinks that destruction can be "as much a metaphoric expectation as a literal one" (113).

However, while the literal killing of animals used to be a necessary part, even "metaphoric" words about killing animals are missing in the *aekmagi* of the present time, though *aekmagi* without chicken sacrifice still contains important characteristics of sacrifice. Therefore, to explain this recently changed ritual, we should make optimal use of those theories of sacrifice, which do not emphasize that "the offering must be transfigured (ruined, shattered, parsed, plundered) to be understood as sacrificed," whether the transfiguration is metaphoric or literal (Lofton 2017, p. 113). Most of all, Lofton's understanding of sacrifice as an "alimentary ritual" (114) is very useful. Invoking Claude Lévi-Strauss's examination of "totemic classifications" that emphasizes "the conceptual systems" as "means of thinking," over and above "means of communication" (Lévi-Strauss [1962] 1966, pp. 66–67), she asserts that sacrifice "is nourishing our social sustenance, not a way of conveying ideas about our sociality" (Lofton 2017, p. 114).

The second reason that *aekmagi* is still believed to remove *aek* is sociological, of which the adherents are not aware. I argue that *aekmagi* without chicken sacrifice still works because *aekmagi* without killing animals can better nourish Jeju people's social sustenance while killing animals was not properly working any longer as a "means of thinking" that accords with what contemporary Jeju people think.

I agree with Lofton that the offerings made to gods are decided by societies. "Throughout history, societies have prescribed offerings to divinities" (Lofton 2017, p. 112). Society prescribes which offerings should be made and conducts the offering following the prescription. Hubert and Mauss would agree that sacrifice is nourishing social sustenance and that society prescribes offerings. They argued that sacrifices can invest individuals with the authority of society. "The sacred things in relation to which sacrifice functions, are social things. And this is enough to explain sacrifice … [The function of sacrifice] is a social function because sacrifice is concerned with social matters" (Hubert and Mauss [1898] 1981, pp. 102–3). The omission of chicken sacrifice from *aekmagi* can be understood as following a social prescription for social sustenance. Society prescribes what offerings should be prepared and how they should be made, while *simbang* work for society. The words a *simbang*

says to persuade gods to accept offerings without ritual killing, "now we are in a different age," confirms that he or she is following the social change, the changed prescription.

Finally, I argue that *aekmagi* shows that social decisions and functions may be prioritized over rules and etiquette. I am not saying that rules and etiquette are not important in *aekmagi*. As Jonathan Z. Smith emphasized, sacrifice obviously has a "transactional character," a transaction that accomplishes "not by sacramentalism, but by an etiquette of infinite degree and baroque complexities" (Smith 1987, pp. 201–2; Lofton 2017, p. 113). *Aekmagi* is surely a transaction that is accomplished by strict etiquette and complexities. However, rules and etiquette are not set in stone. We already saw that, even the ritual killing of chickens, which has been an essential part of *aekmagi*, is not performed any longer in most areas of Jeju. *Aekmagi* conducted according to the radically changed rules still contains the transactional character of sacrifice and seems to be better at nourishing social sustenance. Its transactional character continues by making offerings to gods and having communion with gods and among participants, without killing chickens.

Lofton also emphasizes the importance of rules in sacrifice, without mentioning the possibility that the rules can be changed. By using Fritz Staal's sentences, she points out that performers' "primary concern, if not obsession, is with rules" in sacrifice, emphasizing the importance of "the proper execution of their complex tasks" (113). In addition, quoting René Girard, she regards "sacrifice as a category of scrupulous, necessary repetition, a category that provided cookbook style to ritual killing" (114). However, it should also be remembered that scrupulous rules can be changed by the prescription of societies. Changes in rules can be caused by many factors, such as an unavoidable epidemic or newly spread animal ethics. While sacrifice was "a category that provided cookbook style to ritual killing," ritual killing itself came to be omitted from the cookbook.

To look into the mechanism of *aekmagi* without chicken sacrifice, we need to see it as a ritual in the broader sense, rather than as a specific kind of ritual, like a sacrifice or an oblation. Jeju chicken sacrifice is a religious ritual and so contains typical characteristics of ritual. To borrow Smith's expression, ritual is a "focusing lens" where "everything, at least potentially, is of significance" (Smith 1982, pp. 54–56), and to use Lofton's expression, "ritual is a controlled environment, a ring for spectatorship" (112). If one spectates through a focusing lens itself in a controlled environment, everything may seem to be of significance. Here, we should not neglect the matter of "significance". That is, we need to catch how significant are the objects spectated through the lens. Though everything is potentially of significance, some things may become less significant or lose significance in the environment that is controlled by society. In the *aekmagi* of Jeju-do at present, sacrificing chickens is no longer of significance in the new environment of 21st-century Korea.

Following Durkheim's view that the source and foundation of religious life is society (Durkheim [1912] 2001, pp. 43, 313), Lofton brilliantly analyzes Britney Spears's fall and rise at the mercy of the public as "a sacrifice made on behalf of a social body, a sacrifice that centralizes communication with, and thinking about, the legitimate social order (or relationship to divinities, to ideals, to higher principles)" (119). In the same context, Hubert and Mauss asserted that religious ideas, which may include divinities, ideals, or higher principles, are social facts (101). A transfiguration in a sacrifice like severing, ruining, burning, or destroying, can be metaphoric, as in the case of Spears. The more important thing in a sacrifice is "communication with, and thinking about, the legitimate social order". However, there can be changes in the communication with and thinking about the legitimate social order. Then, the ritual may not adhere to preexisting etiquettes or rules but become changed, corresponding to the change of the legitimate social order, just like the *aekmagi* of the Jeju city area. Whether agreeing with the Durkheimian view or not, in that *aekmagi* is mostly performed at the community level, the members' attention cannot help being under the influence of society. The case of Jeju *aekmagi* reminds us that recipes of cookbooks or prescriptions can be radically modified in this rapidly changing world.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I first tried to thoroughly examine the procedure of *aekmagi*, focusing on its recent radical change, that is, the omission of chicken sacrifice. Chickens have been killed and offered to gods for the *aekmagi* ritual, which is necessarily included in every regular *gut*. The lives of chickens have been thought to replace human lives. Gifts and food are offered to propitiate gods, especially the messenger gods from the netherworld who come to this world to take the life of the client, or the sacrifier, and then, gods and all participants have a communion by sharing food together. After the *gut* is over, only the *simbang* can own and eat chickens, which should not be taken back or eaten outside the ritual place by lay participants. Horses or bulls, which used to be very occasionally offered decades ago, also could not be taken back. Offerings made for *aekmagi* are thought to be payment for the gods' removing *aek* and are attributed to *simbang*. *Simbang* in Jeju-do are believed not to be harmed by possessing or eating offerings, including sacrificed chickens, which are made to prevent *aek*, while all the other participants are certain to be so affected, at least outside the ritual place. However, a drastic change began about fifteen years ago, and the ritual killing is not performed any longer in many areas of Jeju-do, though it is maintained in the southeastern part.

Then, I revisited two academic categories that have been developed in comparative religion. First, I illustrated the exceptional state of sacred persons to explain the *simbang*'s exceptional status. They are beings residing in between the divine realm and the human realm; they are humans but friends and petty officials of the gods; and they are neither gods who have the authority and ability to prevent *aek* immediately, nor ordinary people who are damaged by offerings for *aekmagi*. They are *homo sacer* who help remove *aek* but are not harmed by *aek* because *aek* can do harm to human beings in the human realm and not the person of the boundary or the threshold.

During *aekmagi*, all the other participants are temporarily placed under the influence of death, whose souls are soon to be taken by messenger gods from the netherworld. Lay participants are alive but consecrated to death, being in the liminal state, on the threshold between the living and the dead. This liminal state makes it possible for them to partake in the sacrificial meat. Then, they come back to the ordinary living human realm after this temporary exceptional state of the *aekmagi* ritual is over. However, *simbang* stay on the permanent threshold, in the perpetual liminal state. While the temporary exceptional state of the other participants is created to make them live well in the ordinary living human realm, the permanent exceptional state of *simbang* is devised to maintain the cosmos that is mainly composed of the divine realm and the human realm by tracing the boundary between the two realms and by sometimes canceling it in rituals.

Second, I investigated characteristics of animal sacrifice, both as an expiatory ritual and at once a communion, to explain why Jeju people still believe that *aek* can be prevented without killing chickens, though *aek* had to be prevented by killing chickens until just fifteen years ago. I point out two important reasons that participants still think that they can prevent *aek* by performing *aekmagi* without sacrifice.

The first reason that adherents of the Jeju shamanic religion still can believe in the efficacy of *aekmagi* without chicken sacrifice is related to their cosmology, in which gods are important subjects and agents of religious activities. The role of gods as main characters of *aekmagi* makes it possible to prevent *aek* without chicken sacrifice. People believe that the gods are the main agents of preventing *aek* and that they can persuade the gods to do the work without receiving the life of a chicken. Chicken sacrifice could be omitted without damaging the efficacy of *aekmagi* because the sacrifice was conducted for the purpose of persuading and treating gods.

I wrote above that, in most villages of the southeastern part of Jeju-do, three chickens were sacrificed for *aekmagi* during the *dang-gut* until twenty years ago. Three chickens were needed to treat each of the three messengers of the netherworld with one whole chicken, just like the other gifts had to be prepared for each of them. If the sacrifice was conducted only for *daemyeongdaechung*, the principle that "some [life] should be offered in place of

someone's life," one chicken would be enough to replace the life of one client. Chickens were killed and offered to ensure that the gods from the netherworld were satisfied and persuaded.

Though animal lives are believed to replace the sacrifier's life, the replacement was needed to satisfy the gods. Chicken sacrifice has been conducted to satisfy gods with the animal's life instead of the sacrifier's. The transactional character of *aekmagi* without chicken sacrifice continues by making other offerings to gods and having communion among gods and participants. Without sacrificing animal lives, gods are still treated and bribed to prevent *aek*. To confirm that gods are pleased with the offerings, communion, which is regarded as one of the primordial components of sacrifice, is still performed by offering food to gods and sharing it with all the participants. As the Latin word sacrificium means "to make sacred, to sanctify, to devote," the more important action in the *aekmagi* offering is sanctifying and devoting some that may please the gods, rather than killing living beings itself (see Watts 2007, p. 175, fn. 6).

The second reason that *aekmagi* is still believed to prevent *aek* is sociological, of which adherents may not be aware. *Aekmagi* without chicken sacrifice became a more efficient ritual system for nourishing social sustenance better by following the new social prescription, while killing animals was not properly working any longer as a "means of thinking" that accords with what contemporary Jeju people think.

"Societies have prescribed offerings to divinities" (Lofton 2017, p. 112), and this prescription can be changed according to social conditions. The *simbang* of the Jeju city area ceased sacrifice due to the changed social recognition of killing animals, along with practical reasons that made it difficult for them to kill and dispose of the chickens. They persuade the gods by saying during the ritual, "now we are in a different age". This change of *aekmagi* in Jeju-do shows that the social prescription of the offerings to gods can be modified according to social changes and that the ritual may nourish social sustenance better without the omitted process that used to be regarded as necessary in it. *Aekmagi*, in which even a metaphoric destruction of animals, as well as a literal one, is not found, is "made on behalf of a social body, a sacrifice that centralizes communication with, and thinking about, the legitimate social order (or relationship to divinities, to ideals, to higher principles)" (Lofton 2017, p. 119). Of course, there can be some others who think more highly of rules and etiquette. Adherents in the southeastern area believe that the transaction between the gods and the community cannot be accomplished without chicken sacrifice. Hence the old prescription is maintained by the society in that area.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: As I articulated in FN 4, all four my intertviewees are bearers and instructors of intangible national assets. They are the presidents or vice-presidents of the two organizations that are designated as National Intangible Heritage by the Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea. Please exclude this statement.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created in this study other than my own observations. Most data presented in this study are available in Hyeon ([1980] 2007) and J. Kang (2015).

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

[1] In this article, I do not provide the historical and regional context of the Jeju shamanic religion because I have done it in my previous works. For a brief history of Jeju religions, including Jeju shamanism, see Yoo (2020). For the relation between shamanic tradition in mainland Korea and that of Jeju, see Yoo (2023). I am aware that the term "shaman" is very controversial due to the variety of people this term encompasses. As Michael James Winkelman adeptly demonstrates, the relationship of *mu* (巫) to shamanism is problematic. "Virtually all mentions of historical and contemporary" *mu* ritualists have been translated into English as shamans (Winkelman 2023). However, since this word has long been taken for granted for so long in academia, I decided to use it to translate *mudang*, which embraces Jeju *simbang*. Noteworthy scholars of Korean traditional religions, such as Laurel Kendall (1985), Boudewijn Walraven (2009), and Seong Nae Kim (2018), have translated the Korean *mu* into English

as shaman. Kim argues that Korean *mu* "can be seen as a category of shaman, Korean shamans who are active in the regional and religious-cultural context of Korea" (Kim 2018, p. 22). I also considered that most Korean–English dictionaries also suggest shaman for the Korean word *mu-dang* and shamanism for *mu-sok*.

2 I know that "sacrifice" is a highly controversial term. James W. Watts properly points out that "'sacrifice' is an evaluative term rather than a descriptive one" and that "the English term 'sacrifice' is itself problematic for cross-cultural comparisons" (Watts 2007, p. 175). But I decided to maintain this term in this article, because most scholars I referred to, from Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss to Kathryn Lofton, used it without reserve. I think a substituted word may cause a muddle and require more pages to clarify.

3 This southeastern part corresponds to Jeongui-*hyeon* town (or Jeongui-*gun* for some time) which was established in 1416, early Joseon period, and abolished in 1914 for reorganizing administrative districts.

4 I interviewed four *simbang* for this research. Three of them, Yongok Yi (b. 1955, interviewed 29 August 2022), Sunsil Seo (b. 1961, interviewed 2 September 2022), and Yeongcheol Kim (b. 1965, interviewed 28 November 2022) are working in the Jeju city area and do not conduct chicken sacrifices any longer. Yongbu Oh (b. 1963, interviewed 28 November 2022) is active in the southeastern part of Jeju-do and still does the ritual killing of chicken for *aekmagi*. The four interviewees are highly authoritative experts and public figures in the Jeju shamanic religion. Seo is the president of Jeju keungut bojonhoe, the Society for the Preservation of Jeju *Keun-gut*, of which the current vice-president is Oh. Yi is the president of Chilmeoridang yeongdeunggut bojonhoe, the Society for the Preservation of *Yeongdeung-gut* of Chilmeori-*dang*, of which Kim served as vice-president. The two societies are the only two shamanic organizations in Jeju that were designated as National Intangible Heritage by the Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea. My interviewees were aware that their interview would be used for academic publication.

5 *Keun-gut* is carried out by four to five *simbang* by using every kind of shamanic musical instrument for four to fourteen days. It is performed either in the house of a person whose *simbang* is in charge of his or her village and decides that the full-scale *gut* should be conducted for the person, or in the house of a *simbang* who recently began shamanic work and needs to pledge that he or she will work for the gods sincerely. *Dang-gut* is usually held seasonally to ask the village shrine god (or gods), and other gods revered in the village, for abundance and peace in the village and families. In addition to *singwaseje* and *yeongdeung-gut*, which I explained above, *mabullim* is held in July by the lunar calendar to pray for eliminating bad influences of the summer rainy season, like mold and mildew, and *simangokje*, which is conducted in September or October as a thanksgiving rite, are *dang-gut* (J. Kang 2007, pp. 89–95).

6 To help understanding, I provide additional information that is not included in Hyeon's work by using (parentheses).

7 For this summary, I referred to Hyeon ([1976] 2005, pp. 133–41) along with Hyeon ([1980] 2007, pp. 231–37).

8 *Simbang* call the chicken sacrificed for *aekmagi* "*gidongcheollijeoksongbeugi*," whose correct pronunciation is thought to be "gi-dongcheollijeokhyungbaekokgye". It designates the rooster, which is known to be great for health if eaten, and whose chest is red and other parts are white (Hyeon [1980] 2007, p. 237). As I will mention soon, *simbang* regard it as a sturdy red rooster.

9 For rice divination, see Yoo (2021, p. 342).

10 In addition, *aek* may be thought to be different according to the purpose of the *gut* in which *aekmagi* is performed. For example, in *aekmagi* included in *muhon-gut*, which is conducted to send the soul of a person who died by drowning to the netherworld, the most emphasized *aek* is related to water and drowning. In this ritual, *simbang* strongly prays that the other family members of the dead person may not be drowned (Hyeon 2002, p. 123).

11 Though the sizes of the two districts are not significantly different (Jeju city is 979 km^2 and Seogwipo city is 872 km^2), the population of Jeju city is three times larger than that of Seogwipo city (Jeju city 492,647; Seogwipo-city 184,163, as of July 2023).

12 In Jeju-do, live chickens have been killed during *gut* for some other processes besides *aekmagi*. In the Jeju city area, at least two chickens were prepared for village or family *gut*. One was killed for *aekmagi* and the other for *sangdangsugim*, which is carried out to send back the gods who the *simbang* invited to the yard, the main arena of the *gut*, for a specific segment of the *gut*, to their assigned seats in *dangkeul*, door leaves hung on the living room walls, like shelves, which are regarded as temporary divine realms prepared in the ritual place (J. Kang 2015, pp. 199, 219, 239). For smooth progress of the *gut*, the gods should move sooner rather than later to where they are supposed to be. But they are often unpliable, not readily following the directions of the *simbang*, the orchestrater of the *gut*. To send them back to *dangkeul*, the *simbang* need to propitiate them by offering a chicken. The *simbang* holds the neck of a living chicken with one hand and plucks its feathers one by one to throw them into the air with the other hand. The *simbang* calls each feather a hawk on which a god rides to go back. The gods are thought to come to this world from the divine realm riding on unseen divine horses and to go back to their world riding on the horses, while they ride on hawks to go back to *dangkeul* in the living room from the yard. The chicken is killed and distributed to the tables of the gods; usually, the meat of the legs and the liver are offered to the ancestor gods of shamans and the breast to the other gods, and then eaten by the participants. In *gut* conducted in mountainous regions, another chicken is killed for *sansinnori* to pray for an abundance of game from hunting. In *sansinnori*, several *simbang* perform a ritual play to reenact the hunting of the mythic time, in which the chicken is identified with a roe deer that Jeju hunters hope to catch more than any other animal. The killed chicken is eaten by the *simbang* and all other participants.

13 A set of *mengdu* is the necessary shamanic instrument of Jeju *simbang* and, at the same time, is believed to be the tutelary god of the *simbang*. It also represents the shamanic progenitor gods, Chogong. While most *simbang* usually divine twice by casting rice

and then *sanpan*, *simbang* Kim divines three times by casting, rice, *sanpan*, and, finally, *sinkal* to know the result of *aekmagi*. For *mengdu* as both an instrument set that is necessary for *gut* and an independent deity, see Yoo (2023, pp. 208–11).

14 In many cases in the Korean shamanic religion, all lay participants of the ritual can be the client. In *aekmagi* for healing a sick person, or in that which is conducted during *gut* for healing, *simbang* first tries to prevent the *aek* of the patient but he or she does so for all the other family members also. In a *dang-gut*, *aek* is prevented and blessings are invoked for the representative of the village and all community members.

15 While "*gongsissang*" means the table set for the shamanic progenitor gods, Chogong or Samsiwang, "*gongsi puri*" is a ritual, which is a segment of the Jeju *gut*, conducted to invite and treat all shamanic ancestor gods of the *simbang* performing *gut*, from Chogong, through distant "ancestor *simbang*" who made and used the *mengdu* of the *simbang* performing *gut*, to his or her direct teacher shaman who passed down the *mengdu* to the *simbang*. While the *simbang* narrates the genealogy and the purpose of the ritual, he or she offers the ancestor gods to eat chicken meat, which is thought to designate the chicken sacrificed for *aekmagi* (S. Kang 2007, p. 138). For *gongsi puri*, see Yoo (2023, p. 210).

16 I am aware that this belief has weakened in recent years, even in the Jeongui area. The taboo of eating chickens sacrificed for *aekmagi* is not as powerful as before. After the Seongsan-dang village *gut* is over, all community members cook and eat the chickens that were killed to prevent the *aek* of each family instead of giving them all to the *simbang*, though elderly members are still reluctant.

17 While the term "sacrificer" designates a ritual specialist or priest who performs the sacrifice, "sacrifier" is "the subject to whom the benefits of sacrifice thus accrue, or who undergoes its effect" (Hubert and Mauss [1898] 1981, p. 10), who correspond to the main client of the *aekmagi* or all community members in case of *aekmagi* in *dang-gut*.

18 Not only in Jeju but in many other cultures of the world, we can see cases where only priests can have and eat offerings made to gods. As Hubert and Mauss pointed out long ago, the share of the priest has been considered a divine share in many cultures (Hubert and Mauss [1898] 1981, p. 37). According to the Hebrew Bible, priests and their family members could eat their due out of sacrifices offered to the LORD (*Leviticus* 10:14). While my focus in this paper is on why offerings replacing *aek* can be possessed and eaten only by *simbang*, the sin offering as is described in *Leviticus* is consumed in a way that requires its own explanation. The sin offering had to be eaten only in the holy place, in the court of the tent of meeting, or in that of the temple, only by every male among the priests (*Leviticus* 6: 25–28).

19 By applying this interpretation of participants in *aekmagi*, Agamben's statement about the Nazi's consecration of the German people can be redescribed from the perspective of religious studies. Agamben argues that Nazi Germany tried to transform "the entire German people into a sacred life consecrated to death … through the elimination of the mentally ill and the bearers of hereditary diseases" (Agamben [1995] 1998, p. 180). I would argue that the Nazis tried to place the entire German people in a huge quasi-apotropaic ritual. In this ritual, people were temporarily or latently consecrated to death, by which they were placed in the sacred state. Through the elimination of the mentally ill and the bearers of hereditary diseases, the German people were supposed to come out of this latent state of death to the realm of life.

20 It should be remembered that both *saedarim* and *aekmagi* are mainly conducted as parts of the *gut*, rather than conducted independently. While each procedure of the *gut*, such as *saedarim* and *aekmagi*, has its own conspicuous goal, the *gut* is conducted to fulfill multiple purposes, like praying for abundance, healing, preventing tragedy, and inviting gods into *simbang*. For these purposes, *simbang* try to propitiate the gods and to intermediate between the gods and participants, through the complex processes of purifying participants and the place, entertaining the gods, making offerings to them, and having communion with them.

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Article

The History of the Myeongjin School (1906–1910): A Critical Examination of Korean Buddhism's First Modern Educational Institution within the Pre-Colonial Context

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Abstract: During the operation of the Myeongjin School, it not only employed many leading Buddhist progressives, but graduated key Buddhist reformers. Overcoming conservative opposition within the Korean Buddhist community, during its brief operation the Myeongjin School would open dozens of branches at temples throughout Korea, prompting a proliferating modern education throughout its Buddhist community. Over the century, the institute founded as the Myeongjin School suffered repeated closures during Korea's Japanese Annexation only to emerge from the Korean War as Dongguk University Seoul. As Korea's oldest and largest Buddhist university, Dongguk has produced over 350,000 graduates and, despite transitioning to a more secular approach to education, it remains a leading center for monastic education, Buddhist studies, and intellectual culture. This article examines, in detail, the origins, founding, and operation of the Myeongjin School within the dynamic political and religious context of Korea's early modern period, in addition to the school's impact, subsequent history, and legacy.

Keywords: Myeongjin School; Korean Buddhism; Buddhist Study Society; Weonheung Temple; Dongguk University

1. Introduction

Founded in 1906 as Korea's first modern Buddhist educational institution, the Myeongjin School (hereafter "MJS") played a pivotal role in pioneering modern pedagogy and the study of a general knowledge curriculum among Korea's monastic community. During the school's five years of operation, it not only employed many leading Buddhist progressives, but graduated key Buddhist reformers like Yongun Han, better known by his pen name Manhae (1879–1944; hereafter Manhae). Overcoming conservative opposition within the Korean *sangha*, during its brief operation the MJS would open dozens of branches at temples throughout Korea, prompting a proliferating modern education throughout its Buddhist community. Over the century, the institute founded as the MJS suffered repeated closures during Korea's Japanese Annexation (1910–1945) only to emerge from the Korean War (1953) as Seoul's Dongguk University. As Korea's oldest and largest Buddhist university, Dongguk has produced over 350,000 graduates and, despite transitioning to a more secular approach to education, it remains a leading center for monastic education, Buddhist studies, and intellectual culture (For more detail discussion on the monastic and postulant education, see Park and Kim 2023).

Despite its impact, the MJS faced numerous challenges upon its founding while the school, itself, was a product of the issues facing Korean Buddhism at the turn of the twentieth century. With the lifting of nearly five centuries of Joseon legal suppression in 1895, scholar H.I. Kim observes that Korea's Buddhist community was struggling to "shake off their pariah-like identity… and reassert their relevance." (H. I. Kim 2018, p. 4). Yet, this agenda was complicated by the growing presence of Western Protestant missionaries, Japanese Buddhist sects, and the Meiji Empire (1868–1912), who many Koreans associated

with modern technology, knowledge, and material prosperity. As noted by scholar Jin Y. Park, Korea's "unique" colonization by a Buddhist nation produced "conflicting and sometimes contradictory responses" among Korean Buddhists, who often looked at Japanese Buddhism not only as a model of religious modernity, but as a provider of institutional protection and financial support. While this support came at a cost, it nevertheless enabled the growth of native Buddhist nationalism, which sought to assert an independent cultural identity and self-agency within the colonial context.

It was within this complex milieu at the dawn of the twentieth century that Korean progressives and reformers of the Buddhist Study Society (*Bulgyo Yeonguhue*, hereafter "BSS" or "the society") came to see the introduction of modern education as critical to their religion's survival. In partnership with Japan's Jōdoshū Sect, in the spring of 1906 the BSS thus launched the Myeongjin School at Seoul's Weonheung Temple. This article examines, in detail, the origins, founding, and operation of the MJS within the dynamic political and religious context of Korea's early modern period, in addition to the school's impact, subsequent history, and legacy. This paper closes with a discussion of the MJS's activities as complex, and occasionally conflicting expressions of cultural religious nationalism within the Japanese colonial milieu.

2. Background

Introduced to the peninsula in the fourth century C.E., Korean Buddhism thrived for over a thousand years as a state-sponsored religion patronized by a succession of dynasties. With the advent of Korea's Neo-Confucian Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), the nation's Buddhist establishment was progressively stripped of its material wealth, political power, and social privilege. Hundreds of prominent temples were disbanded, their properties confiscated, and their clergy either banned from Korea's cities or forcibly returned to the laity. At that time ranking among the lowest of the country's feudal castes, the surviving monastics retreated to remote mountain temples where they remained "virtually quarantined" for the next 500 years, supported by subsistence farming and the patronage of the illiterate peasantry. This "pitiable plight" did not improve until the tumultuous final decades of Joseon rule when these legal restrictions were finally lifted. Yet this transition brought new challenges for Korean Buddhism (Buswell 1992, pp. 23–24).

The period spanning from 1877 to 1910 was further marked by intensive cultural exchanges with Western civilization, both through direct contact with Western missionaries and Japan's Meiji Empire (1868–1912), whose growing political involvement on the peninsula culminated in Japan's formal annexation of Korea in 1910. The presence of Protestant missionaries of all denominations in Korean cities catalyzed this integration of Western cultural practices and values into Korean society, as evidenced by the establishment of Christian-run schools, hospitals, and charitable organizations, which produced a notable growth in native converts. During the same period however, Korean Buddhism embarked on a modern renaissance, fueled both by local Buddhist actors and stimulus from various Japanese sects, and later the Japanese government itself, who saw Buddhism as a tool in winning over the Korean populace to their cause (Sorensen 1993, p. 51).

In contrast to the low status accorded to Korean Buddhist monastics under Joseon rule, the Japanese Buddhist missionaries who began arriving after the signing of the Treaty of Ganghwa Island in 1876 were granted much greater respect and permission to enter Korean cities to establish propagation (*pogyo*) centers. The Joseon government soon signed similar treaties with Western nations, including the United States and Germany in 1882, England and Russia in 1884, and France 1886, which guaranteed foreign nationals the freedom to practice their religions in Korean. Viewed by the Joseon court as valued bearers of Western knowledge and technology, Western Protestants were granted tacit permission to proselytize as part of their medical and educational missions. By the century's end, the Joseon government's continued suppression of native Buddhism grew increasingly out of step with its growing religious tolerance. Following the Tonghak Peasant Uprising (*Donghak nongmin undong*) of 1894, the pro-Japanese politicians Younghyo Park (1861–1939)

and Hongjip Kim (1842–1896) petitioned the Joseon government to lift its long-held restrictions on Korean Buddhism. Yet it was pressure from the Japanese Nichiren Buddhist Sano Jenrei (1864–1917) the following year that finally ended nearly five centuries of legal suppression, an event that for many marks the dawn of modern Korean Buddhism (Sorensen 1993, p. 53).

Widely celebrated by Korea's Buddhist community, the event sparked a Buddhist revival fueled both by Korean Buddhists and support from Japanese missionaries. Buddhist temples across the nation launched reconstruction projects and the number of ordainees rose sharply, while monastic leaders conducted nation-wide lecture tours renewing interest in Buddhism among the wider populace. Unable to discern the intentions of Sano Jenrei and other Japanese missionaries, who hoped to assimilate Korean temples into their various sects, Korea's Buddhist community was initially filled with gratitude towards Japanese Buddhism. Such sentiments were expressed in a letter sent by Venerable Sangsoon in 1895 thanking Sano for releasing Korean Buddhism "from 500 years of resentment and humiliation." (Sorensen 1993, pp. 51–53).

Despite this renaissance however, Korean Buddhism's post-1895 recovery was slowed by competition from Western missionaries and increasing Japanese involvement. According to scholar Henrik Sorensen, the success of these foreign missionaries, both Western and Japanese, depended on several factors, including the Joseon Dynasty's corrupt and "moribund" government and the missionaries' association with modern culture and Western technological advancements. In addition, widespread disenchantment among the Korean intelligentsia with Confucianism, the Joseon Dynasty's official ideology, prompted them to seek inspiration from abroad, fostering sympathetic attitudes towards foreigners even among the staunchest Korean patriots. Xenophobia remained largely confined to conservative factions within the nation's declining aristocratic *yangban* class and traditional Buddhists, who nonetheless failed to present viable solutions to the nation's challenges (Sorensen 1993, pp. 51–52).

Nevertheless, the activities of these foreign missionaries provided Korean Buddhists with models for modernization and propagation that they could adapt as needed. Key among these were the modern foreign-run missionary schools rapidly spreading throughout Korea. The Joseon Emperor Gojong (1852–1919) had welcomed the introduction of Western education and culture, if not religion, and Korea's first mission school, Baejae Hakdang, had been founded by Methodist missionaries in 1886. Over the next two and half decades, nearly a thousand Protestant mission schools would open throughout the peninsula, promoting Western pedagogy along with the study of English and Korean *hangeul.* Such schools proved effective in propagating Christianity and, following the Great Revival of 1907, over 150,000 Koreans had converted to Protestantism (Ryu 2012, p. 182). Despite the growing involvement of converts in early Korean nationalism following Japanese Annexation in 1910, the Japanese Colonial Government generally tolerated these Western missionary schools, at least until the *Samil undong* (The March 1st Movement), the Korean Independence Movement of 1919 (T. Park 2013, pp. 54–62).

Japanese Buddhist missionaries were likewise involved in the establishment of temples, hospitals, and schools on the peninsula, in direct competition with Western Christians. Although most Japanese mission schools offered free tuition for Koreans, they failed to attain the same success as Christian schools and were predominantly attended by Japanese expatriates (Sorensen 1993, p. 53; Tikhonov 2010, p. 264). Nevertheless, these schools, and the activities of the Japanese missionaries in general, served as direct inspiration for native Buddhist reformers. By the end of the Joseon Era, Korean Buddhism already possessed nearly 50 "traditional" monastic seminaries, known as *kangdang*. However, as discussed by Uri Kaplan, the curriculum at these seminaries was highly variable and studies typically consisted of hand copying select Buddhist texts in an attempt to memorize them, often with little success (Kaplan 2020, pp. 44–45). As noted by scholar Jin Y. Park, education was thus a central issue for Buddhist reformers during Korea's early modern period (2010, p. 3) with progressive monastics like Manhae (1879–1944) lamenting the poor quality of educa-

tion within the Korean *sangha*. In his 1913 "classic," *On the Reformation of Korean Buddhism (Joseon Bulgyo yusillon)*, Manhae advocated for a new monastic curriculum introducing a wide base of general knowledge, the utilization of modern teaching methodologies, and the training of educators in modern pedagogy (Kaplan 2020, p. 43). Manhae's positions were undoubtedly informed by his personal experience as both a graduate and instructor at the Myeongjin School between 1906 and 1910. (For more on Manhae's "reformist thought" see J. Y. Park 2010).

3. The Myeongjin School

3.1. Political Context

The reformation of Korean Buddhist education was not the only pressing issue for the nation's Buddhist revivalists. The introduction of modern pedagogy to Korean Buddhism during the short-lived Korean Empire (1897–1910, K. *Daehan Jeguk*) was closely tied to attempts within Korea's monastic community to organize itself along modern lines, and the history of the MJS at Weonheung Temple, in particular, was intimately bound to these efforts. In contrast with the highly bureaucratic, state-run Buddhism of Korea's Unified Silla (668–935 CE) and Goryeo (918–1392) Dynasties, Buddhist temples under the Joseon Dynasty had devolved into an informal association of monastic lineages. With the lifting of legal restrictions in 1895, the nation's Buddhist leaders aspired to restructure Korean Buddhism after the organizational frameworks of Japan's Buddhist sects. Yet, as Korea's temples fought to recover from centuries of poverty and marginalization, the religion remained disorganized. In 1899, the Korean government intervened directly to centralize temple administration and protect Korean temples from "attempted power grabs" by various Japanese Buddhist sects (H. I. Kim 2018, pp. 4, 188). The government designated sixteen major temples around Korea as focal points for reorganization to be overseen by the Office for the Management of the Association of Temples (*Sasa Gwalli So*) at Kakhwang Temple, marking the first time in modern history wherein a Korean Buddhist temple functioned as an administrative arm of the government.

In early 1902, the Office for the Management of the Association of Temples moved to Weonheung Temple, a purpose-built temple just outside Seoul's East Gate and, on January 4th, over eight hundred Buddhists from around Seoul attended the opening ceremony. (K. Kim 2006, p. 334). In the same year, the Korean government enacted the Ordinance for National Temple Operation (*Guknae sachal hyunhaeng sechik*) emulating Buddhism's organizational structure under Japan's Meiji Regime (1868–1912). The ordinance united all Korean temples within a single sect, the Joined Order of Seon ("Meditation") and Gyo ("Doctrinal Study") (*Seongyo yangjong*) to be administered at Weonheungsa. However, this forced reorganization gained little support among the Korean *sangha*, as the sect's administrative powers were held by government-appointed officials, instead of monastics. This government-mandated attempt to centralize Korean temples was largely abandoned with the start of the Russo–Japanese War of 1904 and Japan's assumption of Korea as a protectorate the following year, leaving Korea's Buddhist community to again "fend for itself" (K. Kim 2006, p. 335; H. I. Kim 2018, pp. 188–89; Sorensen 1993, p. 53).

In the winter of 1906, a collection of younger, progressive Korean clergy from the wealthier monasteries around Seoul launched the Buddhist Study Society at Weonheung Temple. Led by Wolcho Hong (1858–1934), "one of the principal Buddhist activists of the period" (Tikhonov 2010, p. 265), alongside Bodam Lee and Wolhae, the BSS identified Japanese Pure Land Buddhism as the closest in practice to Korea's indigenous Buddhist traditions. Active in Korea since 1897, missionaries from Japan's Pure Land Jōdoshū Sect (hereafter JDS) had established nearly 200 propagation centers and amassed tens of thousands of Korean followers, prompting the BSS to seek an alliance with the JDS. In the spring of 1906, the BSS launched the nation's first modern educational institution for Buddhist clergy, the Myeongjin School, at Weonheung Temple under JDS auspices, with the Jōdo priest Inoue Kenshin serving as advisor (K. Kim 2006, p. 334; Tikhonov 2010, pp. 264–65); see Section 3.2 below for further details).

Despite the BSS's efforts, however, this alliance between the JDS and Weonheung Temple did not last. In 1907, Hoegwang Yi (1862–1933), another "leading reformist" and then widely respected for his doctrinal expertise (H. Kim 2010, p. 288), assumed the directorship of the MJS. The following year, a gathering of monastic leaders from 52 major temples around Korea formed Weonjong, or "Unified Order", to advance a "progressive agenda" within the Korean *sangha*, reunite the nation's temples, and protect their interests. Absorbing the BSS, the newly formed order selected Weonheung Temple for its administrative offices and elected Yi as its head. Yet the order lacked social or political influence, much to Yi's frustration. In an act earning Yi the lasting enmity of later generations of Korean nationalists, in 1910 he secretly negotiated a partnership between the Weonjong and Japan's Sōtō Zen Sect (J. Sōtōshū) in hopes of securing stronger legal protection for Korea's Buddhist temples. Adding to his infamy, Yi chose as advisor the Sōtō missionary Takeda Hanshi (1863–1911) (see H. Kim 2010 for further discussion), a former Japanese intelligence operative notorious for his involvement in the assassination of Joseon Queen Min (aka Empress Myeongseong) in 1895. However, Yi's attempted Weon–Sōtō alliance sparked protests among the younger progressive monastics at Weonheung Temple. Led by Yi's colleague Manhae, then an MJS instructor, the dissidents broke from Yi's Weonjong on "doctrinal grounds" and launched the rival Imjaejong, or "Linchi Order," which achieved some success in organizing itself as a pan-national organization. With the split, the MJS was dissolved (H. Kim 2010, p. 289; H. I. Kim 2018, pp. 190–91; Tikhonov 2010, pp. 268–69).

Both the Weonjong and Imjaejong Orders were again short-lived. Following Japan's formal annexation of Korea with the signing of the Japan–Korea Treaty of 1910 on August 22nd, the newly appointed Japanese Governor-General Terauchi Masatake (in office 1910–1916) became concerned over the growing schism within Korean Buddhism. In 1911, the colonial government passed the infamous Temple Ordinance (*Sachalryeong*, J. *Jisetsu Rei*), which remained in effect through the length of the Japanese Occupation, reconstituting the Joined Order of Seon and Gyo to be headquartered again at Gakhwang Temple. Sidelining the involvement of any Japanese Buddhist sects, the ordinance granted the Japanese Governor-General exclusive authority over the order, the temple properties, and the appointment of their abbots. Consequently, only monastics with pro-Japanese affiliations were granted appointments, leading to widespread discontent among the Korean *sangha*. Power struggles ensued between pro- and anti- Japanese monastics, leading to the latter's expulsion from prominent monasteries (H. I. Kim 2018, pp. 190–91; Sorensen 1993, p. 53). Despite its assumption of direct control, the Japanese colonial administration adopted a firm yet benevolent approach in their governance of Korean Buddhism, coupled with the provision of economic incentives to secure compliance. While the Korean *sangha* generally opposed these stringent government controls, it lacked the fervor and cohesion necessary to offer effective resistance (Sorensen 1993, pp. 55–56). It also set the stage for Korean Buddhism's post-war "Purification Movement" (*Jeonghwa undong*), in which the nation's celibate monastics struggled to expel fellow clergy who had adopted the Japanese practice of clerical marriage, denouncing the latter as Japanese "collaborators" (P. Park 1998, p. 131).

3.2. Operation of the Myeongjin School 1906–1910

It was in the midst of this political turbulence and organizational instability that the BSS launched the Myeongjin School at Weonheung Temple in 1906. In addition to their affinity with Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, the BSS sought a partnership with the JDS due to the importance the sect placed on education in their proselytization efforts. Along with sponsoring scholarships for Korean monastics to study in Japan, in 1901 the JDS began opening modern, Japanese-style schools for Koreans in various cities including Gaeseong, Hannam, and Haeju. Speaking at Weonheung Temple's opening ceremony in 1902, the JDS leader Hiroya Sansi had declared "Buddhism develops when knowledge is developed, not when temples are built… Buddhist schools must be established in (Seoul) to educate

monks". As such, the JDS was amiable to the partnership. Thus, with JDS support, the BSS applied to the Korean government's Interior Ministry (*Naemubu*) upon its founding, to open a modern Buddhist educational institute, the first of its kind in the nation. Permission was granted on 19 February 1906 (S. Kim 2003, pp. 137–38).

On 10 April, the BSS dispatched an announcement of the school's opening to all major temples throughout the nation. The message begins by lamenting that, over the course of Buddhism's millennium-long history in Korea, the Korean *sangha* has remained steadfast in its adherence to the Buddhist precepts, yet never before has it faced such difficulties. "There is not a single monk who isn't despondent", it continues, "(O)ther religions are rising up everywhere these days… destroying Buddhism, taking away Buddhist properties, and using it to run their schools". The announcement goes on to blame these "deplorable" circumstances on the Korean Buddhism's "ignorance" of worldly studies and the modern global developments, before quoting the BSS's JDS advisor Genshin Inoue that, "if you want to save Buddhism", "(t)he best way" is to engage in modern education. Seeing this as an opportunity for "Korean Buddhism to now reemerge", the message announces the school's starting date and a curriculum including "Buddhist doctrines and new modern studies, texts of other religions, and Western traditions, mathematics, and foreign language." The message then requests that recipients inform their subsidiary temples of the news before inviting them to send two students to enroll at the school at the end of the month, along with sufficient clothes and food. It closes by declaring that "(i)t will be a great boost to Korean Buddhism" for their monastics to engage in "new modern studies."

Planning for the school continued and, after briefly considering naming it after Weonheung Temple, on April 10th the BSS formally christened their new institute the *Myeongjin Hakgyo*, or "School of Advancement in Enlightenment," combining the Chinese Characters *myeong* (明), from *myeongdeok*, or "reveling virtue," and *jin* (進) from *jeongjin*, or "devotion." (Dongguk University 1976, pp. 12–13). Yet, Tikhonov notes the possible political expediency in the name's association with Japan's then-ruling Meiji Regime, whose title also means "enlightened rule" (Tikhonov 2010, p. 265).

On 10 April, the BSS additionally ratified the MJS's charter, establishing the school's purpose to be that of educating monastics through modern teaching methodologies in order to cultivate clergy with a wide base of general knowledge who will be able to lead Korean Buddhism in the modern era (MJS Charter Article 1, (Dongguk University 1976, p. 277). The MJS's initial charter further outlined key guidelines governing MJS admissions, curriculum, evaluation, and conduct. These provisions included the establishment of a student quota of 35 per grade with additional spaces for auxiliary departments (Article 1), a two-year study term (Article 2), and a five-hour daily class schedule, in addition to mandatory gymnastics and meditation practice (Article 3). It further stipulated that only monastics aged 13 to 30 who had completed professional monastic training at their temples would be eligible for enrollment, while the academic year would comprise two semesters, with specific dates outlined for each (Article 4). The school's evaluation procedures would encompass monthly, semester, and graduation tests, with grading thresholds set for passing and achieving honors (Article 9). The charter also addressed disciplinary measures, incentives for academic excellence, and a mandatory monastic dress code (Article 9). Moreover, it obligated all MJS graduates to teach in Buddhist schools or temples for a minimum of six years following graduation, functionally establishing the school as a Buddhist teacher-training facility (Article 9, Dongguk University 1976, pp. 277–79).

With Bodam Lee serving as the MJS's first director, the school's starting faculty included Lee himself, as professor of Buddhist Doctrine, Wolcho Hong as instructor of History of Religions and Propagation Methodology, along with Dongjin Park as instructor of Religious Studies, Buddhist Studies, Philosophy, and Propagation. Non-Buddhist courses were taught by Myungchil Lee, instructor of Mathematics, Sciences, and Metrology, and Haeyoung Shin, instructor of Law and Economics. The renowned scholar Neunghwa Yi (1869–1943), a pioneer in the field of modern Korean religious studies, additionally served as professor of Language and Religious History (Dongguk University 1976, p. 14). Guest

lecturers also made frequent appearances at the MJS, including Hyojeong Yun, a prominent pro-Japanese progressive Korean Buddhist activist (Tikhonov 2010, p. 265).

Initially established as an "Ordinary School" (*Botong hakgyo*), corresponding to the high-school-level educational institution, in 1907, the MJS transitioned into a college-level institution (*godeung jeonmun hakgyo*) following government approval as the level of student enrollment increased (Nam 1983, pp. 102–3). MJS classes followed a standard modern format resembling Japanese educational models, and offered a comprehensive curriculum encompassing "general knowledge" courses alongside its Buddhist studies, including four semesters each of Japanese language, sports, mathematics, and historical geography, in addition to two semesters of law, land surveying, and philosophy (Kaplan 2020, pp. 49–50; Tikhonov 2010, p. 265). In spite of their demanding daily schedule, which included two hours of Seon (J. *Zen*) meditation, the new students were nevertheless reportedly eager and enthusiastic (Dongguk University 1976, p. 14).

Despite the Pure Land focus of the JDS, the MJS Buddhist studies curriculum covered a diversity of texts valued within East-Asian Mahayana Buddhism. The MJS's first semester included classes on the *Brahma's Net Sutra*, alongside Dushun's (557–640) commentary on the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (C. *Huayan fajie guanmen)*, as well as the three Pure Land Sutras, namely the *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra (aka the* Infinite Life Sutra/The Larger Amitabha Sutra), *Amitayurdhyana Sutra* (aka the Contemplation Sutra), and the *Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* (also known as the Amitabha Sutra), while the second semester covered the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (C. *léngqié ābáduōluó bǎojīng*), alongside the *Outline of the Tian-Tai Four Teachings* or *Cheontae sagyoui* composed by the tenth-century Korean monastic Jegwan (?–970). The third semester's curriculum included *The Enlightened Verses* and *The Nirvana Sutra* (C. *Dàbānnièpán-jīng*), and the fourth included the *Transmission of the Lamp* (C. *Ching-te Ch'uan teng lu*) and Yongmin Yanshou's (904–975) *Records of the Source-Mirror* (C. *Zongjing lu*). The lengthy *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (*Daebang gwangbul hwaeomgyeong)* was studied over two semesters in the final year (Kaplan 2020, p. 50). While the Pure Land Sutras valued by the Jōdoshū were addressed in the first semester, the remaining texts were central to a variety of Buddhist schools, including Yogacara (*Yusik*), Madhyamika (*Samnon*), Tendai (*Cheontae*), Huayen (*Hwaeom*), and Chan (*Seon*), each of which has exerted a lasting influence over Korean Buddhism's historical development. The inclusion of courses on these texts was not only directly inspired by the curricula then offered within Korea's traditional Buddhist seminaries (see Kaplan 2020, pp. 12–39 for further discussion), but additionally reflected Korean Buddhism's overall syncretic tendencies.

Even with the clear influence of Korean Buddhist tradition, however, the MJS was not without its critics within the monastic community. Opposing the school's modern educational style and connections to the Japanese, a conservative faction of monastic actively protested the MJS's opening and a month later attempted to take control of Weonheungsa with the express purpose of closing the school. However, their efforts failed and the conservative monastics were expelled from the temple, with one unsuccessfully attempting to launch a rival educational institute at Bongeun Temple (Kaplan 2020, p. 49; Dongguk University 1976, p. 14).

With the removal of opposition from within Weonheung Temple, approximately 50 MJS entrants began their first year of studies, to be joined by 55 additional students in 1907. Yet, despite the zeal of these pioneering students, many of whom reportedly stayed up all night studying (Dongguk University 1976, p. 14), they appear to have faced difficulties. According to the surviving records, the school produced only 11 graduates in 1908 and 7 in 1909, a cumulative graduation rate of less than 20%. According to Korean scholar Doyoung Nam, it has been suggested that many dropped out due to the school's strict rules and associations with Japanese Buddhism, yet there is presently no evidence supporting such assertions. Nam instead proposes the MJS's early students interrupted their studies to serve as teachers at branch schools being established by the BSS around the country, returning later to complete their diploma (Nam 1983, pp. 118–19). However, Nam's claim is also not supported by MJS graduation records, as the reopened school only

produced four graduates in 1912, nine in 1913, and five in 1914 (Dongguk University Graduation Records). Due to the paucity of surviving records, it is unlikely scholars will know the exact reasons behind this high rate of student attrition at the MJS. Yet, given the novelty of the modern education system being piloted by the school within the Korean Buddhist context, the loss of such a high percentage of its early students is not unexpected.

Graduating from the MJS in 1908, the famed reformer Manhae returned in 1909 after a year in Japan to found the MJS-affiliated Metrology Research Institute (*Myeongjin Cheuklyang-gangseupso*). Manhae was additionally appointed as the school's land surveying instructor and, as Tikhonov notes, "was known of his enthusiasm for this rather mundane pursuit" (2010, p. 265). The inclusion of courses on land surveying and law within the MJS curriculum speaks directly to the one of the primary concerns of MJS students, and Korea's Buddhist monastic community, at the time, namely safeguarding monastic landholdings from theft by what Tikhonov describes as "greedy officials and local worthies watching for an opportunity to enrich themselves" (Kaplan 2020, p. 76; Tikhonov 2010, p. 265). Manhae's own "enthusiasm" for land surveying was likely bolstered by his 1908 success in defending his temple's land holdings in court against those fraudulently seeking to claim ownership (Tikhonov 2010, p. 265).

3.3. Impact, Influence, and Subsequent History

Despite the school's initial high attrition rate, the students who did successfully graduate from the MJS in 1908 and 1909 would go on to have an outsized impact on Korean Buddhism in the colonial period. In addition to the influential Manhae, MJS's 1908's graduating class included the translator Jinho An (1880–1965), who published translations of nearly 40 Buddhist scriptures along with materials for Korean monastic seminaries that are still in use today, the Buddhist modernist Sangro Gweon (1879–1965), and Korean independence activist Jonguk Yi (Kaplan 2020, p. 49; Nathan 2018, pp. 67–68; Tikhonov 2010, p. 265).

The initial opposition of conservative monastics within Weonheung Temple notwithstanding, the opening of the MJS appears to have been met with enthusiasm within the wider Korean *sangha*. Tikhonov notes that, after the MJS's launch, "modern Buddhist school mushroomed in all corners of the country," refuting criticisms from Christian Nationalists that Buddhism was incompatible with modern civilization (2010, p. 266). The BSS opened approximately 30 MJS branches at temples throughout Korea over the next five years. In 1906, eight MJS branch schools were established at major monasteries around Korea, namely Yongjoo, Gunbong, Tongdo, Haein, Seokwang, Beomeo, Seonam, and Daeheung Temples. In 1907, twelve more were launched, including at Wibong, Daeseung, Gimryong, Namjang, Yongmun Myeongbong, Gwangheung, Yoojeom, and Shingye Temples. In 1908, three additional subsidiaries were founded at Jikji, Haein, and Eunhae Temples, while 1909 saw the founding of branches at Hwaeom, Cheoneun, Taean, Gwaneum, Bomyeong, Songgwang, Daewon, Namjang, Seongbul, Obong, Bohyun, and Gaewon Temples. Four additional subsidiaries were established: Ssanggye, Gimryong, Hwajang, and Boseok Temples. According to Tikhonov, by 1910 nearly all of Korea's provincial temples had founded their own "new learning" academies, whose most motivated graduates continued their academic careers, eventually forming the "new intellectual core" of Korean Buddhism in the Colonial Era (Tikhonov 2010, p. 267).

Over the following half-a-century, the institute first launched as the MJS would undergo numerous structural alterations and closures in parallel with Korea's tumultuous modern history. In 1907, MJS administration was assumed by the controversial Hoegwang Yi, who made significant changes to the school during his tenure, including expanding the duration of the MJS's program to four years, mirroring higher education in Europe and Japan. In April 1910, Yi renamed the school the Buddhist Pedagogical Institute (*Bulgyosabeomhakgyo*), reflecting the school's intended purpose as a Buddhist teacher-training facility. However, the school officially closed later that year owing to financial difficulties and internal discord over Yi's attempts to ally Korean Buddhism with Japan's Soto Zen Sect

(see Section 3.1). In fact, as both Yi and Manhae were employed as MJS faculty in 1910, it is likely that the MJS stood at the center of the schism between Yi's Weonjong Order and Manhae's rival Imjae Order, although no surviving records have been found elaborating on the role that the school may have played in this conflict.

With Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910 and the passing of the Korean Education Ordinance (*Joseon Gyoyooklyeng*) in August 1911, severely restricting the activities of private schools, the institute remained closed. Reopening in 1914 as the Buddhist Academy of Higher Education (*Bulgyo godeung gansuk)* with 26 students, the academy closed yet again in 1915 only to be revived in 1918 as the Central Seminary (*Joongang hakrim*) with added classes covering Japanese content. Despite this further Japanization, the school again faced closure from 1922 to 1928, only to reopen as the Buddhist Specialized School (*Bulgyo jeonsoo hakgyo*) in 1928 with 31 students. In 1930, the institution was rebranded as The Central Buddhist Specialized School (*Joonang Bulgyo jeonmun hakgyo*) and finally accorded university status by the colonial government, granting the school much-needed legitimacy and stability. Now open to lay students as well as monastics, the school produced over 200 graduates over the following decade. In June 1940, the institute's name was changed again to Hyehwa Professional School (*Hyehwa jeonmun hakgyo*), after the neighborhood around its campus and the Buddhist ideology of "gracefully edifying the world." Yet, for more than the first half of the 1940s, the school's activities were increasingly subordinated to the Japanese war effort, before the school closed again in 1944 (Hwang 2011).

Following liberation from Japan, the school reopened in September 1946, expanding its scope and scale to become Dongguk University. Upon its re-establishment, the institution underwent a notable transformation, transitioning away from its origins within the monastic education towards a more secular framework, rendering it less exclusively Buddhist in nature. While maintaining a Buddhist Studies Department, the university diversified its academic offerings to include departments in Korean Literature, English, and Sociology. Subsequently, in 1953, it opened a Law School and a Department of Agriculture, initiated a graduate program, and began conferring internationally recognized secular degrees—B.A, M.A, and Ph.D.—to its graduates. Over the remainder of the 20th century, Dongguk continued to augment its secular departments, attracting a growing number of lay students, including non-Buddhists. Presently, even within Buddhist Studies, Chan Studies, Indian Philosophy, and Cultural Heritage departments, only approximately a quarter of the student body is comprised of monastics. Yet, regardless of the degree to which Dongguk University has remained a purely Buddhist educational institution, its impact is undeniable, as it has produced approximately 350,000 graduates since its founding. Routinely ranking among the nation's top ten universities, Dongguk University presently has an enrolment of around 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students at its various campuses (https://www.dongguk.edu/eng/, accessed on 8 April 2024; Kaplan 2020, pp. 52–54).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

As noted by H.I. Kim, much of South Korea's post-liberation nationalist historiography has framed Japanese involvement on the peninsula between 1877 and 1945 in "exclusively political and binary terms," with historians classifying historical figures during this period as "colonialist or nationalist, anti-Japanese or pro-Japanese, and traitor or hero." (H. Kim 2010, p. 287). Such "binary" rhetoric became further entrenched in post-war Buddhist discourse with the contentious and occasionally violent Purification Movement (*Jeonghwa undong*) of the 1950s, resulting in the schism between the married Taego and celibate Jogye Orders in 1962, with the latter winning control of most of the nation's temples (for more on South Korea's Buddhist Purification Movement, see P. Park 1998). While such nationalist interpretations of the colonial period reflected popular sentiment following liberation, such a reductive dichotomy oversimplifies the many complexities of the Japanese Empire's involvement on Korean Peninsula. This is especially true concerning the encounter between Japanese and Korean Buddhism during this period, which produced "conflicting

and sometimes contradictory responses" among the Korean Buddhist community (J. Y. Park 2010, p. 2). This binary has also resulted in contradictions in the appraisals of Korean historians, who often praise Korean Buddhism's efforts to modernize during the Colonial Era while condemning Japanese involvement in the process (Tikhonov 2010, p. 267).

Since the turn of the millennium, however, a growing number of scholars have sought to transcend such strict interpretive binaries and instead "emphasize the complexities of the power relationships between the Japanese and Korean Buddhists" in order to "bring to light the subjectivity of the colonized" (H. Kim 2010, p. 287). Prompting debates in the Korean media, this more recent scholarship reveals a "rich retelling" of the period characterized by varied, and often divergent, interests and strategies among Japanese missionaries, native Korean Buddhists, and state authorities. This more nuanced "retelling" further underscores the agency exercised by Korean Buddhists amidst the complex dynamics of colonialism, nationalism, and imperialism, which, according to Kim, discloses "the formation of a Buddhist-centered nationalism" within Korea marked by efforts towards self-governmentality and self-motivated propagation (H. I. Kim 2018, p. 28; H. Kim 2010, p. 287).

As the modern conception of nationalism was only introduced to Korea in the 1890s, this early religious nationalism arose among Korean Buddhists independent of the overtly political, anti-Japanese nationalism promoted by Korea's Protestant Christians, who condemned Buddhism as anti-modern superstition (Tikhonov 2010, p. 261). Instead, according to scholar Pori Park, Korean Buddhists regarded "their religion as the epitome of Korean history. " Embracing a more gradualist form of cultural nationalism, they sought to modernize their religion while maintaining and promoting a traditional, distinctly Korean Buddhist identity (P. Park 1998, p. 24). Yet according to Jin Y. Park, in its early decades, Korean Buddhist nationalists thus "considered Japanese Buddhism a model to follow for the revival of Korean Buddhism" (J. Y. Park 2010, p. 2) and, according to Tikhonov, were inspired by Japanese Buddhism to "pursue their own agenda of modernization … with visible success" (Tikhonov 2010, p. 267). Echoing the Silla and Goryeo Dynasty practices of "national-protection Buddhism (K. *hoguk bulgyo*)," many Korean monastics staunchly believed that Japan had become a "rich nation" with a "strong army" precisely because it "made Buddhism a state religion and respected priests," and desired the same for Korea. However, many others aligned their temples with Japanese sects as they simply saw no other means of defending their property (Tikhonov 2010, p. 267).

The establishment and operation of the MJS as surveyed within Section 3 of this article were very much products of this emergent Korean Buddhist nationalism and the needs of the nation's Buddhist community at this time. In fact, when viewed through this more nuanced historiographic framework, many of the activities of the school, its students, and staff can be seen as expressions of various, if contested, strategies in support of this Buddhist nationalism, regardless of the degree to which the actors collaborated with Japanese sects and colonial authorities. According to the scholar Neunghwa Yi, who served as the MJS's second director, the BSS saw the introduction of modern education to the Korean *sangha* as critical to saving Korean Buddhism from destruction by other religions, which directly motivated their decision to partner with the JDS. Despite JDS involvement, however, MJS's Buddhist studies curriculum covered Buddhist texts valued within Korea's Joseon-era monastic seminaries, demonstrating a clear desire to preserve Korean Buddhism's doctrinal identity, even within the implementation of a modern, Japanese-influenced educational model. Furthermore, the MJS's inclusion of courses on law and land surveying, such as those taught by Manhae, addressed the urgent need within the Korean Buddhist community to protect their properties from theft by corrupt officials and rival religions. Manhae's much-lauded opposition to Hoegwang Yi's attempted alliance with the Japanese Sōtō Zen Sect and the former's leadership of the rival Imjae Order likewise reflected a desire to preserve Korean Buddhism's doctrinal identity and "traditional legitimacy" from foreign encroachment. Yet, even the highly controversial attempt by Yi to align with the Sōtō Sect

reflected the Korean community's desire to secure legal protections for their temples, properties, and clergy (Tikhonov 2010, p. 270).

Despite being what Uri Kaplan describes as Korean Buddhism's "rather humble first attempt" at modern education (Kaplan 2020, p. 51), the MJS would have a significant impact on the development of Korean Buddhism over the twentieth century. The 18 graduates of the MJS included progressive figures like Master Manhae, Jinho An, Sangro Gweon, and Jonguk Yi, who would have a major influence on Korean Buddhism's modernization during the Colonial and Post-Liberation Periods. Furthermore, the MJS and its branches inspired a "mushroom(ing)" of modern Buddhist educational institutions around the country and, by 1910, nearly every major temple had opened its own institution of "new learning", which trained Korean Buddhism's "new intellectual core" (Tikhonov 2010, pp. 266–67 and 270).

The educational institute formed as the MJS survived the turbulence and repeated closures of Japanese colonial rule to emerge from the chaos of the Korean War as Dongguk University. Currently the largest and oldest Buddhist university in Korea, Dongguk has produced hundreds of thousands of graduates since its founding. In 2006, the university commemorated its centennial with a ceremony held in the school's Manhae Plaza attended by an inter-faith gathering of prominent monastics, national religious leaders, and politicians, including two future presidents, celebrating the MJS's legacy and positive impact on the nation (https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2006/05/08/socialAffairs/Poets-actors-and-monks-help-Dongguk-University-turn-100/2720885.html, accessed on 8 April 2024).

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The Conflicts and Compromises of the Two Cosmologies Making Korean Shamanism

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Abstract: This article explores how the unique cosmology of Korean shamanism, which continues to function as a living religion in contemporary Korea, has been shaped. A key characteristic of the cosmology in Korean shamanism is its combination of two cosmological beliefs. First, it adheres to the general shamanistic cosmology of protection, where suffering caused by supernatural beings can be overcome through the protection of even more powerful beings, who also assist in predicting the future. Second, it incorporates the belief that human life and the universe operate according to specific cosmological principles. The coexistence of these two distinct cosmologies which form an explanatory system of modern Korean shamanism reflects the historical experiences of Koreans with Confucianism during the Joseon dynasty and with Western modernity. In this paper, I analyze the dynamics of conflict and compromise between the two cosmologies through a historical approach and case studies. Specifically, I examine the use of the terms '*unse* (wheel of fortune)' and 'spirit's intervention' as conceptual metaphors representing each cosmology, as they are employed in interactions between shamans and their clients. Furthermore, I maintain that contemporary Korean shamanism is a form of religious practice constructed as a compromise between various worldviews, including those of shamans and their clients.

Keywords: Korean shamanism; cosmology; patronal universe; optimal universe; *unse*; conceptual metaphor; transpositionality; plural forms of modernity

1. Introduction

This research explores how modern Korean shamanism has been reconstructed while expanding its spectrum of cosmological ideology. Korean folklore scholarship, which consists of the mainstream of shamanism studies, has primarily focused on the preservation and inheritance of shamanic traditions, often framed within discourses of recovering its 'original form'. Kim (2016, 2023), however, maintains that such essentialist perspectives tend to mythologize shamanism as a unique religion or psychological attribute of Koreans, rendering its contemporary features as deviations of its 'original form' and objects of correction. In the meantime, Hong (2010) reports that more than 50,000 shamanic rituals are held annually in and around Seoul, which suggests that Korean shamanism is not merely a remnant of traditional culture or a marker of premodernity. Rather, it continues to function as a meaningful religious worldview for modern Koreans. This phenomenon invites a reconsideration of shamanism, not only as a symbol of Korean religious heritage or cultural value but also as a contemporary religious practice through which Koreans interpret and give meaning to their lives. In this context, interpreting contemporary shamanic practices requires an interpretive framework that can amend and complement essentialist and static explanations.

To propose a framework for understanding the contemporaneity and persistence of Korean shamanism, this study begins with a fundamental question: how can we explain the popularity of shamanic practices in contemporary Korean society, as evidenced by the frequency of shamanic rituals in and around Seoul, despite various negative perceptions of contemporary shamanic practices? The image of shamanism as a representation of Korean culture and spirituality, often shaped by the romantic and nationalistic perspectives, provides a superficial answer that fails to adequately explain why so many ordinary Koreans engage in fortune-telling and shamanic rituals. Few people would bear the significant costs of shamanic rituals merely because shamanism is deemed a cultural asset.

Where, then, can we locate the reasons behind the continued practice of shamanism among modern Koreans? This study posits that contemporary shamanism retains an effective explanatory system for addressing the everyday experiences and existential concerns of Koreans. The characteristics of this explanatory system, in turn, constitute the religious nature of contemporary shamanism. Specifically, this study suggests that the explanatory system of modern Korean shamanism is formed through the combination of two competing and intersecting cosmologies: beliefs in the 'optimal universe' and the 'patronal universe.'

This perspective, which views the explanatory system of contemporary Korean shamanism as emerging from the interplay of two distinct cosmologies, is grounded in my own case studies. For this research, I conducted participant observation and interviews mainly with three female shamans whom I had previously encountered through informants mentioned in earlier publications. The group of informants includes Dani (58 years old now), Geumhwa Mansin (62), and Kang Bosal (73).[1] A common characteristic of these informants is that they attended private courses on *Saju-Myeongnihak* (A fate reading principle based on Four Pillars) academy in Seoul's Seongbuk District. Through interviews with these informants, I examined how the concept of *unse*, as a conceptual metaphor representing the 'optimal universe', is understood and appropriated by shamans known for their close relationships with spirits. However, the concept of *unse*, as understood and appropriated by shamans, does not fully explain how effectively this notion operates in helping modern Korean clients give meaning to their lived experiences. To address this gap, additional interviews were conducted with five women in their 40s who were regular clients of the shaman Dani's shrine.

2. Key Concepts for Analysis

2.1. Transpositionality, Symbol, Conceptual Metaphor

The series of processes in which a shaman conducts fortune-telling and performs rituals is based on a conventional belief that the shaman can diagnose the root cause of a client's problems through divination and that such problems can be resolved through rituals. Underlying this process is the belief in the close relationship between spirits and the world—a belief that spirits continuously intervene in and influence the domains of human life. However, the process between a client deciding to seek a shaman's divination and ultimately supporting a ritual involves contestations not only between the shaman and the client but also between the shamanic worldview and other diverse worldviews present in contemporary Korea. Therefore, it is essential to note that the actual performance of shamanic rituals is not simply an automatic manifestation of shamanic faith but rather the product of negotiation and contestation among diverse worldviews.

Given that shamanic rituals serve as both a space and an outcome of contestations among shamans, clients, and various worldviews, the diversity of Korean shamanism can be understood. For instance, modern Korean shamanic rituals, often labeled as *Jjambbong gut* (hodge-podge *gut*) and criticized for deviating from the so-called 'original forms' of

shamanic rituals, can be re-evaluated as the results of negotiations between shamans and clients, each carrying different worldviews.

According to performance approaches, summarized by Bell (1997, p. 74), ritual is "an event, a set of activities that does not simply express cultural values or enact symbolic scripts but actually effects changes in people's perceptions and interpretations". This implies that rituals are not merely mechanisms for conveying specific beliefs or values waiting to be discovered by ritual analysts. Instead, they are continually reconstituted by multiple agents—such as shamans, clients, and various worldviews—involved in ritual contexts. By reference to this implication, I maintain that a shift in perspective—from fixed 'systems' or fixed interpretations to the actions and interactions of ritual actors—allows for an understanding of shamanic rituals not in terms of the fixed meanings of symbols but in terms of the way how these symbols are practiced and function in ever-changing contexts.

In addition to performance approach, some ideas from symbolic anthropology of religion can offer a more effective framework for understanding contemporary shamanic rituals than functionalist perspectives that view rituals as mere vehicles for conveying specific meanings. According to Geertz (1973, pp. 93–94), religious symbols transform experiences of suffering or disorder in everyday life into meaningful entities by translating them into cosmological concepts. Turner (1967, p. 28), on the other hand, focuses on the multivocality or polysemy of symbols that constitute religious rituals, emphasizing how symbols create specific effects on participants by transforming the ideological aspects of a culture into desirable forms.

Building on this, I conceptualize the operability of religious symbols as 'transpositionality', referring to their capacity to traverse different levels of meaning and unveil dimensions of alternate realities. This transpositionality of symbols not only operates through the various material elements employed in shamanic rituals but also through metaphors that structure human cognition in analogous ways. Likewise, the conceptual metaphor can be used as an effective tool for explaining transpositionality. According to conceptual metaphor theory, developed notably by G. Lakoff and M. Johnson (Lakoff and Johnson [1980] 2003), metaphors are not merely ornamental language confined to rhetoric. Instead, they are cognitive devices that structure and understand one concept through another. For instance, the metaphorical expression 'life is a journey', commonly used in daily language, structures the abstract concept of 'life' through the more concrete concept of 'journey', shaping our understanding of life in the process. The essence of metaphor, then, lies in understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another, and I believe that conceptual metaphors are among the most effective mechanisms for enabling human understanding of the self and the world. The way conceptual metaphors and symbols operate involves linking two distinct dimensions or conceptual domains, therefore such operations converge on the notion of symbolic transposition.

2.2. The Optimal Universe and the Patronal Universe

What kinds of conceptual metaphors operate within shamanism to facilitate understanding of humans and the world? As previously noted, the defining feature of shamanic belief—that spirits continually intervene in and influence the domains of human life—can be understood through a conceptual metaphor providing orientation for action, helping individuals make sense of uncertainties and the unpredictable suffering they encounter in daily life. Historically, Confucian scholars in the Joseon Dynasty criticized shamanic practices as a wrong belief that everything such as fortune and misfortune, and even life and death is attributed to spirits' interventions. Similarly, a newspaper from the colonial era described shamanic practices as "resorting to supernatural prayers like rain rituals as a last refuge" or "attempting to resist nature by borrowing supernatural power (Donga-Ilbo

1926, June 25)". These descriptions highlight not only human concerns such as life and death, and fortune and misfortune, but also an idea that humans can resist nature with the help of supernatural forces. From this perspective, I argue that the shamanic worldview is formed around the cosmological belief in a 'patronal universe'. The 'patronal universe', a term borrowed from D. Martin (2004, pp. 182–86), materializes as a belief that crises, whether internal or external to human life, can be overcome through the protection of a more powerful being.

The most prominent example of belief in the 'patronal universe' might be Christianity, based on the concept of an omnipotent, singular God. The notion of spirits in shamanism, which intervenes in all aspects of human life and death, materializes the 'patronal universe' in a polytheistic way. In shamanism, human birth is believed to be granted and protected by *Samsin Halmeoni* (Grandmother Spirit of Childbirth). The intervention of spirits in human life extends beyond childbirth. *Chilseong* (Seven Star Spirits) govern health and longevity after birth, *Janggun* (General Spirits) and *Sinjang* (Spirit Warriors) protect individuals from dangers encountered during life, *Daegam* (Spirit Official) bring fortune and wealth necessary for daily living, and Princess Bari guides the deceased to the afterlife. These spirits are involved in every aspect of human life, from birth to death.

Moreover, in shamanic traditions with creation myths, spirits are seen as the entities that bring order to the cosmos, creating an environment suitable for human habitation. In Jeju Island's *Cheonjiwang Bonpuri* (Myth of King of Heaven and Earth), two celestial kings, *Daebyeol* and *Sobyeol*, perform this function. By reducing two suns and two moons to one of each, they provided the cosmos with an order conducive to human life. While they did not create the forms and materials of the cosmos in their entirety, their act of imbuing order qualifies as creation. In regions where such creation myths are absent, it is likely that mythological thought is transmitted directly through rituals. The act of spirits imposing order to render the cosmos habitable can be interpreted as a prerequisite for human existence and as a process that enables humans to live as humans. Within this framework, I insist that conceptualizing shamanic cosmology as a 'patronal universe' is valid, and the conceptual metaphor best representing this cosmology is the various spirits in a shamanic pantheon.

However, my ethnographic research reveals that the vocabulary most frequently used by contemporary shamans to deliver spirits' messages and gain clients' agreement often belongs to a different conceptual level than the religious worldview of spirits intervening in the material world. Terms such as *samjae* (three disasters), *saju-palja* (four pillars and eight characters; birth chart), *gwanjaesu* (fate of legal troubles), *guseolsu* (fate of suffering from rumors), and so on are more commonly employed. These terms belong to the family metaphors of the conceptual metaphor *unse* (wheel of fortune), serving as symbolic language that demonstrates the effectiveness of the explanatory system of shamanism in contemporary Korean society. As Kim (2012) argues, if shamanism is understood as a dynamic religious practice involving negotiation and contestation among shamans, clients, and various worldviews, then the worldview represented by the concept of *unse*, alongside the shamanic belief in spirits' intervention in human affairs, must be considered an integral element of the explanatory system of contemporary Korean shamanism.

The concept of *unse* originates from the Chinese natural philosophical principle of *unsu* (運數)—and has been refined in Confucian traditions—which symbolizes the circulation of creation, transformation, decay, and regeneration of a myriad of things in the universe. It represents a religious belief in a cosmos governed by order rather than chaos or randomness. In the Joseon era, this assumption materialized as the 'optimal universe', a term also borrowed from D. Martin (2004, pp. 180–81), and served as an effective explanatory system for Confucian scholars to organize the ontological hierarchy as well as

the social hierarchy. Just as traditional Roman philosophers such as Celsus, who attacked Christianity as superstition, saw morality as an important point of reference in the ontological hierarchy (D. Martin 2004, pp. 140–59), they understood the degree of cultivation to be the important factor in organizing the hierarchy. Therefore, it was even thought that virtuous Confucian elites, in a higher degree of cultivation, were placed on an ontological hierarchy higher than divine beings. Interestingly, it is an historical irony that the concept of *unse*, representing the optimal universe, also played a pivotal role in channeling the aspirations of people yearning for change in the late 19th century. In a broader context, I would like to argue that *unse* has served as a crucial symbol for interpreting Koreans' experiential world through a cosmological lens, not only in shamanism but also throughout Korean religious history.

For the sake of convenience, I posit that the concept of *unse* represents a conceptual metaphor for the 'optimal universe', while the various spirits in the shamanic pantheon intervening in human affairs correspond to the 'patronal universe'. While this distinction is typological, it provides insights into the nature of shamanic practices, which translate and interpret the domains of everyday experience through symbols and metaphors. In the following section, I will examine how these theoretical concepts, conveying different cosmologies, conflicted, negotiated, and amalgamated with each other while constructing the explanatory system of Korean shamanism.

3. A Brief History of Conflicts and Compromises Between the Two Cosmologies

As a conceptual metaphor representing the 'optimal universe', the concept of *unse* suggests that the workings of the cosmos and human destiny are objects of understanding and models to emulate, but never subjects for transformation. Hwang (2002, p. 16) explained the differences between Western determinism and Eastern views of destiny through the concept of *unse*. Citing the Jinxin chapter of Mencius, he elaborated on the significance and development of divination in the East as follows:

> How fortunate it is to be able to know *myeong* (destiny). The reason divination has flourished so greatly in the East is precisely because of the belief that one can understand destiny. By understanding destiny in advance, one gains the conviction to derive wisdom sufficient to respond to it. This response does not involve supernatural supplication or magical acts of petition. Rather, after mastering the cosmic principles of the universe's operations, one selects the most appropriate course of action based on the wisdom gained. Then, as Mencius stated, one does not engage in foolish actions, like standing under a collapsing wall. The Book of Changes is the pinnacle of Eastern wisdom rooted in this very notion (my translation).

According to the passage above, the true purpose of divination lies in knowing *myeong* (destiny) and mastering the cosmic principles governing the universe's operation. Fortune-telling, as a religious practice corresponding to the conceptual metaphor of *unse*, is not a form of rigid fatalism but an active effort to gain wisdom for appropriate actions. However, he also raised concerns about the corruption of divination practices, which had degenerated from a tool for wisdom to mere magical or superstitious acts of petition. This demonstrates that the conceptual metaphor of *unse*, representing the 'optimal universe', is ideologically in conflict with the idea that spirits intervene in human affairs, which underpins shamanic practices.

Indeed, the hostility of Joseon-era Confucian scholars toward shamanism, which they labeled as *eumsa* (improper/licentious rites), exemplifies the conflict between the two cosmologies represented by *unse* and spirits' intervention. This disdain for *eumsa* was rooted

in the Confucian concept of *ye* (ritual propriety), which was understood not merely as superficial formalities but as principles essential for living in harmony with *Cheolli* (Heavenly Principle). Consequently, Joseon Confucian scholars regarded rituals as mechanisms for maintaining hierarchical social order and embodying the cosmology of Neo-Confucianism. For them, differentiating social classes and maintaining hierarchical order through rituals were critical for building a harmonious society. However, despite this hierarchical ritual system, ordinary people, women from noble households, and even members of the royal court practiced rituals led by shamans that defied these hierarchies. Such practices were seen as challenges to both social order and the Confucian worldview. As a result, shamans were expelled from the capital and classified among the lowest social classes.

Moreover, in the Joseon period, knowledge of *saju-palja* and the fortune-telling system based on divination references such as I-ching was limited to an elite minority due to its complexity and the scholarly competence required to comprehend its terminology and texts (Jo 2001, p. 68). Given these considerations, it is evident that the two distinct cosmologies corresponding to the conceptual metaphors of *unse* and 'spirits' were in conflict and contestation during the Joseon period. This tension is reproduced in contemporary Korean society by fortune-tellers called by the name of '*yeoksurin*' (fortune-tellers who learn their divination technique through books such as *Yijing*) and shamans. One of my informants, Geumhwa, explained the difference between *yeoksurin* and shamans: "In my experience, many *yeoksurin* deny gut-rituals entirely… There are such people". This differentiation between *unse* and 'spirits' is also reflected in a journal article on fortune-telling:

> Rejecting acts that incite superstition is a commonality among these novice *yeoksurin*. Namgung Seok, for example, firmly asserts to his clients from the outset that "changing one's destiny is impossible". This means that charms or rituals cannot alter one's destiny. Instead, he strives to teach clients the wisdom of 'seizing good fortune and avoiding bad luck.'. He is highly critical of the indiscriminate misuse of charms or rituals by struggling fortune-tellers or shamans for fraudulent purposes, noting, I have never heard of a shaman's children succeeding in life", and argues that money dishonestly earned brings harm to future generations. (December 31, *Sisajournal* 1998)

Namgung Seok's assertion that "charms or rituals cannot change destiny" reflects a worldview in which life's fortunes and misfortunes are predetermined. Divination serves only to understand one's fate and respond appropriately, not to alter it through magical practices. This perspective echoes the criticism of Joseon Confucian scholars who dismissed shamanic practices as attributing life's outcomes to spirits. It seems, then, that *unse* and shamanism—or the 'optimal universe' and the patronal universe'—are irreconcilable. In the meantime, considering the social sensitivity of shamans and their ability to strengthen their vocation through relationships with their communities, it has always been possible for the concept of *unse*, appropriated by the dominant group of a society, to permeate shamanic practices.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the concept of *unse* became integrated into the Korean shamanic worldview centered on the relationship between spirits, humans, and the world. It is only suggested that this integration began long ago, not in recent times, as seen in the rebellion incidents during the Joseon Dynasty. Jo (2001, pp. 69–72) estimates that *myeongnihak* (a divination technique with reference to *saju-palja*) began to circulate among commoners around the 18th century. He supports this claim by indicating a notable increase in references to *saju-palja* in connection with rebellion incidents recorded in the annals of the Joseon Dynasty during this period. He also argues that belief in *saju-palja*, combined with geomantic theories, provided the ideological foundation for various uprisings, and the widespread occurrence of these incidents during this time demonstrates the

popularization of *saju-myeongni*.[2] While his analysis does not directly address how Confucian cosmology was introduced into shamanism and merged with its worldview, it allows us to infer that the popularized belief in *saju-myeongni* created a backdrop for the concept of *unse* to enter the shamanic worldview.

One notable case illustrating the integration of the *unse* concept into shamanic practices occurred during the reign of Sukjong in the 17th year of his reign (C.E. 1691). This was the 'Mountain Ritual Incident (Heaven-Worshipping Rituals in Mountains),' led by a shaman in Jae-ryeong, Hwanghae Province (now in North Korea), which involved rituals aimed at anticipating the arrival of a 'living Buddha'. Choe Jongsung's analysis of this event offers key insights into the union of the *unse* concept with shamanic practices. He highlights three characteristics of this incident: firstly, the participants upheld not only shamanic beliefs but also a strong faith in geomantic prophecies; secondly, they reinforced transformative discourse by linking faith in the 'living Buddha' with geomantic beliefs; lastly, this discourse was not limited to dissemination but was connected to ritual practices, specifically *Cheon'gi* Study or mountain rituals to heaven (Choe 2012, pp. 204–7).

While he uses these points to explain how faith in the 'living Buddha' was strengthened among the populace, my interest focuses particularly on the ritual practice of *Cheon'gi* Study. Choe (2012, p. 207) describes it as follows:

> *Cheon'gi* Study is a compound term combining *cheon'gi* (天機), meaning the mysteries of heaven or the harmony of the cosmos, with *gongbu* (工夫), referring to the practical discipline of internalizing these cosmic ideals through physical and mental cultivation. Ultimately, this was a ritual practice aimed at anticipating the salvation represented by the living Buddha and materializing his presence. Specifically, *Cheon'gi* Study involved the devout preparation of offerings and the performance of mountain rituals to Heaven (祭天) as acts of ceremonial veneration. (my translation)

The concept of *cheon'gi* as the mysteries of heaven and cosmic harmony corresponds to the belief in a 'well-ordered universe,' which aligns with the 'optimal universe' represented by the conceptual metaphor of *unse*. While *cheon'gi* could be understood through divination and prophecy, the belief in the appearance of Maitreya at the right time and place presupposes a universe and human life governed by established order and destiny. In addition, records that shamans led mountain rituals to heaven to materialize the appearance of Maitreya at the right time and place provide clear evidence of the fact that the two distinct cosmologies were integrated.

This incident, later referred to as the 'Execution of Cha Chung-geol,' ended with the execution or exile of those involved. However, similar events anticipating the arrival of a living Buddha continued to be reported afterward. Choe (2012, p. 213) argues that the sequence of incidents anticipating the living Buddha established a foundation in which the belief in his immortality could re-emerge whenever conditions became favorable. While Choe's analysis focuses on the messianic movements combining faith in the living Buddha with the *unse* concept and highlights shamans who abandoned their shamanship to follow the living Buddha, my interest lies in the practices of shamans who incorporated and fused differing cosmological concepts into their shamanship.

It is not possible to determine how shamans in the Joseon Dynasty attempted to negotiate between the two cosmologies. However, I believe that we can find clues to the ways in which they combine by inquiring into the practices of contemporary shamans. In the following section, I will describe how modern shamans used to treat the two distinct cosmologies in their practices.

4. A Mode of Integration I: *Unse*, Dealing with Ambivalent Feeling Among Clients

According to L. Kendall's ethnographic study based on fieldwork conducted in the late 1970s, Koreans tend to have ambivalent feelings when consulting a shaman (Kendall 1985, p. 76). This ambivalence arises from the expectation that the shaman will inevitably recommend additional rituals which demand financial support after fortune-telling, leading clients to feel both suspicion and trust. From the shaman's perspective, the accuracy of divination and the subsequent acceptance of additional rituals by the client represent a successful negotiation. However, negotiations can fail, and shamans can also determine that no further rituals are necessary. Such negotiations between shamans and clients, as documented over 40 years ago, continue in the present day.

One of my informants, a shaman named Dani, explained that her recommendations for *gut* or other rituals are based on a comprehensive consideration of the client's *unse* and problems originating from spirits or ancestors. She told me, "even if the client has abundant financial resources, I would not recommend rituals if their *un* (fortune)[3] does not align with them. Conversely, if the client has unfavorable fortune, they are unlikely to heed my advice, no matter how persuasive it is. However, if the client's fortune aligns with the necessity of rituals, I feel compelled to explain their importance thoroughly". Dani's explanation of how reading and interpreting the client's *unse* aids in negotiation is as follows:

> Of course, even without studying *myeongni*, when a client comes, the spirits let me know what kind of problem they have. But there are times when I don't fully understand why such a divination result emerges or why the spirits say what they do. I study *saju* primarily for my own satisfaction. Another reason is that these days, clients understand much better when I calmly explain, "Your *unse* is like this or that", rather than just saying, "This is what the spirits told me". This helps clients decide whether or not they need to proceed with rituals [such as gut or small-scale rituals]. Sure, I'm good at divination, but a shaman's job is to explain things, after all. (Interview with Dani, 12 January 2015, at her residence)

Although shamans can receive messages directly from spirits through personal experiences, they cannot communicate those experiences to clients without using a language the clients can understand. If the shaman fails to adequately explain the client's issues in comprehensible terms, communication between the two parties breaks down. A shaman unable to communicate with clients or the community may fail to persuade the clients to sponsor rituals and ultimately lose confidence in their vocation. From this perspective, the first divination process called *mugguri* diagnosing the client's problems can be defined as the most effective ritual for analyzing the explanatory system of shamanism. As Dani's account illustrates, she explains the message sent by spirits using the more publicly familiar concept of *unse*.

The effectiveness of the conceptual metaphor *unse* in helping modern Koreans interpret their everyday experiences is well demonstrated by a survey conducted by Gallup Korea in 2009. In response to the question, "Do you believe a person's destiny or fortune is predetermined, or do you think it is shaped by personal effort or ability?" 24% answered, "1. A person's destiny or fortune is predetermined", 62% chose, "2. A person's destiny or fortune is shaped by personal effort or ability", and 12% selected, "3. A combination of both". In identical surveys conducted in 1994 and 1996, the proportions were 36.1%, 55.4%, and 1.1%, and 32.1%, 62%, and 3.8%, respectively (Gallup Korea 2011). These results indicate a gradual increase in the number of Koreans adopting a proactive view of life over a belief in fixed destiny, as well as a steady rise in those who believe in a combination of the two distinct attitudes.[4]

Despite the declining proportion, the survey results show that approximately one-third of Koreans remain familiar with the cosmological notion that destiny is determined by one's *saju*. Additionally, an intriguing finding emerges when the survey examines the experience of consulting fortune-tellers. Among those who believe destiny is predetermined, 50% reported having consulted a fortune-teller, while 36% of those who believe destiny is shaped by effort also reported such experiences. This suggests that even those who consciously reject the notion of predetermined destiny still consult fortune-tellers, revealing the ingrained familiarity—perhaps unconscious—of concepts like destiny, *saju*, and *unse* within Korean society. This familiarity underlines the effectiveness of Dani's use of the concept of *unse* to explain the message sent by spirits while giving a divination.

Moreover, it is well-known that the modern world, governed by physical laws, has relegated the intervention of supernatural entities to the realm of 'superstition'. Claims by shamans, such as receiving guidance from spirits or delivering messages from them, are difficult to reconcile with modern worldviews. In this context, explaining a client's suffering solely through the intervention of supernatural beings has its limits. As previously mentioned, a shaman's mystical experiences must be explained in terms comprehensible to clients who lack firsthand experience with supernatural beings. This is where the concept of *unse* becomes relevant. As a conceptual metaphor appropriated by shamans, *unse* serves as a negotiated product between Western modernity and Korea's traditional symbolic systems.

At his point, it should be noted that the concept of *unse* used by shamans exhibits some differences from the static and deterministic *unse* of the 'optimal universe'. While the latter is more fixed and deterministic, the *unse* or fortune interpreted by shamans reflects a dynamic and changeable experience.

> For example, if I say, "You have this kind of *unse*" or "Your fortune is like this", it means that if the person makes efforts to act on it, things can work out. Take marriage fortune—if someone has a good chance of getting married at 26 or 27, but they don't go out or meet people, that fortune might just pass them by. Similarly, people talk about the 'sign of separation.' But not everyone with such a sign ends up separating. Whether it's good or bad fortune, if you don't make efforts, it's like having nothing at all. (Dani, 11 April 2015, at Yaksuam Shrine)

> A teacher I know once said this: Even a beggar at Seoul Station can have good fortune. At that time, the beggar might earn 10,000 won instead of 1000 won through begging. But no matter how much a beggar earns, there's a limit, right? (Kang Bosal, 11 April 2015, at Yaksuam Shrine)

As these accounts from Dani and Kang Bosal indicate, *unse* appears to be a predetermined part of human destiny, specifying when and what kind of fortune a person might encounter. However, their understanding of *unse* incorporates the notion that individual effort can influence life's outcomes, often placing a greater emphasis on effort. This perspective aligns closely with the views of over 50% of Koreans in the Gallup survey who believe life is shaped by one's efforts.

The key difference between these two groups lies in the scope of effort. Unlike modern individuals who totally reject supernatural intervention or destiny and trust only human effort, shamans like Dani and Kang Bosal emphasize the indispensable role of spirits' assistance alongside human effort. The two shamans' statements reflect how the explanatory system of shamanism integrates *unse*, spirits, and the individual's autonomous effort, merging diverse worldviews in contemporary Korean society. Here, spirits are understood as entities capable of realizing the potential inherent in *unse*.

5. A Mode of Integration II: Spirits, Realizing the Potential

During the research for this study, I encountered two women in their 40s who visited Dani's shrine. These two women were friends, and one of them had decided to hold a *gosa* (small-scale ritual) based on Dani's divination. The woman, who decided to proceed with the ritual, accepted Dani's divination that her adolescent son had the fortune of leaving home and that her husband was under the fortune of accidents. While I was unable to witness the divination session firsthand, I had the opportunity to accompany the woman to the bank when she went to withdraw money to place at Dani's shrine. The following is part of the conversation that took place during that time:

> Researcher: You must be quite worried about your adolescent son and your husband.
>
> Woman: I'm okay because my husband's problem is attributed to *samjae* (three disasters), and I was told it will get better after this period. My son's issue is temporary, so I'm not too worried. You remember the friend who came with me earlier? She is in a worse situation than I am. She's never had peace of mind since getting married. Earlier, the teacher [Dani] said that my friend doesn't even need to perform gut because it wouldn't benefit her. Instead, she was advised to pray at a temple or church. So, if a *gosa* can improve things for me, I feel like I'm in a better position.

The term *samjae* mentioned by the woman is a familiar concept for many Koreans. It refers to a cosmological concept used to describe a three-year period of hardship determined by one's *saju*, forming part of the family metaphor associated with *unse*. The woman recalled her experiences with her son's behavior and connected them to the explanation of *samjae*, confirming a correlation between the two. In other words, the cosmological explanatory system represented by *samjae* and *unse* allowed the woman to interpret and assign meaning to her past experiences.

As Dani has previously stated, she limits her recommendations for rituals such as *unmaji-gut* (rituals to welcome good fortune) or *gosa* to cases where divination predicts that fortune will come in a particular year depending on the client's destiny. In other words, there is a belief that even spirits cannot intervene when a person lacks fortune. The belief that the assistance of spirits is needed to fully receive good fortune or block bad fortune, combined with the ritual practices that actualize this belief, provides a clear example of how two distinct cosmologies are integrated within the explanatory system of shamanism. This demonstrates that human destiny or *unse* is predetermined according to certain rules but holds value only as the potential. Realizing the potential requires the intervention of spirits.

Another case which illustrates the way to integrate two cosmological ideas is provided by Dani's own ritual practice. For nearly 40 years, Dani has conducted *jinjeok gut* (rituals for spiritual renewal) every spring and fall. However, the *jinjeok gut* performed in the fall of 2022 and the spring of 2023 were special, because they were held for successfully receiving Dani's predetermined *daeun* (great fortune).

> They say misfortune comes with fortune. When fortune comes, bad energy follows as well. To properly welcome great fortune, the spirits must be treated with utmost respect. I might even need to sacrifice an ox next fall [2023]. When the weight of *daeun* feels as if the heavens are pressing on one's shoulders, it can harm a person unless the spirits are properly honored.
>
> (Interview with Dani, 21 March 2022)

Even when *daeun* arrives and *unse* seems favorable, there is a belief that spirits must be well-treated to 'properly' receive it. In other words, it is a belief that *unse*, representing the

flow of fortune latent in one's *saju*, is not automatically realized. This belief is also evident in the segment of *ilwolmaji* (welcoming the Heavenly Spirits) performed as the first stage of Dani's *jinjeok gut*. Dani conveyed the spirits' message as follows: "How can a lowly human expect to receive heaven's fortune while sitting idly? Even offering an ox would not suffice. Such trivial offerings! Next fall, an ox must be sacrificed to receive the great fortune." This message illustrates the relationship between *unse* and spirits, emphasizing that receiving fortune requires the intervention of spirits and proper ritual action.

The explanatory system in which the conceptual metaphors of *unse* and the spirits' intervention are integrated addresses both perspectives of the Gallup poll question that I described in the previous section: "Do you believe a person's destiny or fortune is predetermined, or do you think it is shaped by personal effort or ability?" While this structure does not align perfectly with the modernist ideal of an independent individual shaping their destiny, it fits an image of modernity where individuals use every possible means to alter their circumstances. This may represent a form of alternate modernity, transformed and adapted to Korean society after the importation of Western modernity.[5]

6. Conclusions

The initial questions that inspired this study are as follows: Is the dominant interpretive framework for Korean shamanism—centered on the discourse of 'preserving and inheriting shamanic traditions' and 'recovering the original forms'—adequate for understanding the contemporary characteristics of shamanism? If Korean shamanism is not merely a remnant of traditional culture or a marker of premodernity but still functions as a meaningful religious worldview for modern Koreans, how does it work? In seeking answers to these questions, this study aimed to present the two cosmologies that constitute the explanatory system of shamanism. Specifically, it examined how practitioners of shamanism incorporate and integrate two distinct cosmologies—beliefs in the 'optimal universe represented by the conceptual metaphor of *unse* and the 'patronal universe' represented by the presence of spirits—into the explanatory system of contemporary shamanic practices through both discursive and ritual practices.

The integration of these differing cosmologies by modern Korean shamans occurs through their interpretations of their ritual lives and daily experiences. However, the reinforcement of this explanatory system takes place through their interactions and negotiations with clients and patrons. Thus, this study did not limit its focus on the actors in shamanism to shamans alone but also considered clients and patrons as key participants in the subsequent rituals following divination. These interactions were analyzed as the product of exchanges between the two groups, resulting in the combination of the two distinct worldviews. It is important to understand this interaction as a continuous process. While this study analyzed the explanatory system of modern shamanism through cosmological metaphors, these metaphors should not be understood as part of a completed process. The spectrum of the shamanic worldview continues to expand, constantly responding to changes in the cultural contexts experienced by shamanic practitioners.

The breadth and continuity of this spectrum can be explained as follows: *Unse* can be interpreted as a conceptual metaphor rooted in Confucian tradition. That is, metaphors such as *unmyeong* (destiny), *saju-palja*, *Yijing* (Book of Changes), and *Tojeong bigyeol* (Tojeong's Secrets of Divination), which are symbolically classified alongside *unse*, are emblematic of the broad interpretive capacity of the Confucian worldview.[6] Although it is unclear when these conceptual metaphors were introduced into the shamanic worldview of Korea, there is ample reason to deduce that they were incorporated after Confucianism became a central worldview in Korean society. Considering that these metaphors have functioned as enduring symbolic elements in Korean shamanism since at least the

Joseon era, and that they became popularized among the general population around the 18th century, it is plausible that shamans—characterized by their acute social sensitivity—appropriated these metaphors.

However, the concept of *unse* as understood and appropriated by the shamans introduced in this study does not fully embrace the belief in the 'optimal universe.' Instead, it is limited to its meaning as a potentiality, inherently necessitating the intervention of spirits. This phenomenon can be interpreted as the result of a compromise, occurring through the strong influence of another cosmology represented by the presence of spirits in the shaman pantheon and the intense experiences of shamans who are compelled to directly encounter these spirits. Despite this, the explanatory system of shamanism—combining the concepts of *unse* and spirits—has persuasiveness even for modern individuals who are unable to accept the intervention of supernatural entities. This suggests further research on the characteristics of Korean modernity.

If we consider B. Latour (1993)'s analysis of the process of 'purification', in which the world is segmented and severed from magical and traditional practices through modernization processes, the integration of these differing cosmologies in Korea might appear as a reflection of a society that has failed to modernize. However, this does not necessarily imply that Korea is not modernized. Rather, it suggests that the world experienced by modern Koreans may represent an alternate form of modernity. From this perspective, the characteristics of the explanatory system of the shamanic worldview in contemporary Korean society can be understood as one of the plural forms of modernity distinct from the conceptual reality of Western unilinear modernity.

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Notes

1 Of these shamans, Dani has been my main informant since 1996, when I began my shamanism studies, and other two female shamans are informants with whom I have had a close relationship for over 20 years. All of these shamans are practitioners of Hwanghaedo-style *gut*, and I am close enough to them that I have had casual meetings with them without any specific research purpose.

2 *Saju-myeongni* is a more accurate term than *saju-palja* as a way of divination based upon a person's birth chart.

3 Here, I translated *un* into 'fortune', and *unse* into 'wheel of fortune'. It seems that *un* refers to the high probability of something happening in a person's future, *unse* refers to the order or principle that acts on the overall flow of person's life, including the present and future.

4 For a description of the analysis of the 2009 Gallup Korea survey and earlier surveys, see Gallup Korea, *Han'guginui Cheorhak (The Philosophy of Koreans: The first approach on the Korean philosophy based on a public opinion poll)*, (Gallup Korea 2011).

5 In a similar vein, Kendall et al. (2015)'s study of the social and historical life of *musindo* (god pictures of Korean shamanism), which analyzes the coexistence of artistic value and magical power as an example of Korean modernity, provides valuable insights for understanding the persuasiveness of contemporary Korean shamanism.

6 A reviewer of this manuscript pointed out that the claim that the Book of Changes and *Tojeong pigyeol* are types of metaphor is ambiguous. In order to clarify the meaning of the claim, I would argue that we should focus on the way shamans utilize the two books: They do not adopt their semantic content or interpretive schemes, but rather utilize their traditional authority as

divination books. In other words, in the shaman's divination practice, these two books do not have semantic independence, but rather are metaphors to express the authority of divination that even Confucian scholars referred to.

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Bridging Doctrinal Divides: Analyzing Ecumenical Dialogue Between Catholics and Protestants in South Korea

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Abstract: The remarkable growth of Catholicism and Protestantism in Korea has garnered significant attention in the history of Asian missions. However, their relationship has predominantly been characterized by persistent conflicts and competition, with limited progress in ecumenical efforts. This study examines the ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Protestants in Korea, focusing on the doctrinal issues central to their divisions. The analysis reveals that many of these disputes stem from doctrinal controversies introduced by Western missionaries in the early 20th century. Through a detailed examination of dialogue documents, the study demonstrates that despite over two decades of concentrated ecumenical efforts since 2000—when serious discussions on doctrinal matters began—progress remains limited. This stagnation is attributed to the lack of rigorous academic inquiry, insufficient engagement with global ecumenical movements, and ineffective dialogue methodologies. Finally, the article provides suggestions for fostering the local adoption of global ecumenical initiatives and promoting greater unity among Christians.

Keywords: Catholics; Protestants; conflict; cooperation; doctrinal dispute; ecumenical dialogue in Korea

1. Introduction

Catholicism and Protestantism, introduced to Korea roughly a century apart, share a distinctive feature: both traditions were embraced by Koreans through their engagement with the Bible and devotional literature before the arrival of missionaries. Despite their remarkable growth in the history of Christianity in East Asia,[1] their relationship has been predominantly characterized by conflicts and competition, with only limited success in ecumenical endeavors.[2]

These tensions are rooted in doctrinal misunderstandings, which perpetuate mutual prejudices and divisions. Theological disputes introduced by Western missionaries remain a significant obstacle to unity. Addressing these issues through ecumenical dialogue is not merely an academic endeavor but a necessary step toward fostering mutual understanding and collaboration between the two traditions.

Following the Second Vatican Council's call for Christian unity (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1), the Catholic Church initiated an ecumenical movement. Catholics and Protestants participated jointly in "prayers for Christian unity" and collaborated on political issues such as democratization, human rights, and reunification. Serious theological dialogue, however, did not begin until 2000, when efforts to address longstanding doctrinal misunderstandings gained momentum.

Despite its importance, research on Catholic–Protestant relations in Korea remains limited. Most studies focus on one tradition rather than examining their interactions. This

gap reflects the historical distance and lack of mutual interest between the two Confessions. Even ecumenical studies rarely analyze these relations; a notable exception is Shin Kwangchul's doctoral thesis, which covers the period from 1876 to the end of the Japanese occupation (Shin 1998). Post-liberation relations and ecumenical efforts led by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea (CBCK) and the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK) after the Second Vatican Council remain largely unexplored.[3] These two organizations have been central to the ecumenical movement in Korea.

This study seeks to address this research gap by analyzing three volumes of documents presented at the Ecumenical Forum and the Ecumenical Academy, jointly organized by the CBCK and the NCCK.[4] These three volumes, which represent key materials in the ecumenical dialogue between Korean Catholics and Protestants (specifically the eight Protestant denominations affiliated with the NCCK that actively participate in ecumenical dialogue), document the outcomes of a dialogue initiated in 2000 with the goal of dispelling doctrinal misunderstandings and addressing theological conflicts. The necessity of this doctrinal focus has been emphasized by participants in the ecumenical dialogue; according to Young-min Song, "the greatest barrier to Church unity consists of misunderstandings and prejudices regarding each other's doctrines and beliefs" (Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches 2020, p. 142); ecumenical experts similarly stress the urgency of overcoming these divisions.

At this critical juncture, when it is essential to evaluate the achievements of ecumenical dialogue over the past 20 years, analyzing this collection of documents provides an opportunity to assess how effectively Catholics and Protestants have addressed the profound misunderstandings that have divided them for more than a century. Furthermore, it offers a foundation for proposing practical solutions to the challenges that remain. Moreover, by evaluating the outcomes of these dialogues in light of the materials produced by the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission in its efforts to address doctrinal disputes and divisions since 1927, the study will offer insights into the local reception of global ecumenical achievements. Before delving into the analysis of these documents, this study will briefly review the deeply rooted doctrinal disputes and the ecumenical movement prior to 2000, as this historical context is crucial for understanding the materials analyzed herein.

2. Historical Background

In any historiography, the timeline may vary among scholars. However, the widely accepted dates for the introduction of Catholicism and Protestantism to Korea are 1784 and 1884, respectively. Arriving a century apart, they encountered vastly different historical contexts. From its inception, Catholicism faced relentless persecution for nearly a century within a closed Confucian feudal society marked by social and political isolation. This hostility was especially severe due to its opposition to ancestral rites, as evidenced by the numerous martyrs (Dallet 1874). In contrast, Protestantism, introduced in the 1880s after Korea opened its doors under Western influence, experienced rapid and relatively smooth growth. It aligned with the nation's modernization needs by integrating the dissemination of Western civilization with evangelism, employing missionary strategies that included medical services and educational institutions.

The early years of encounters between Catholic and Protestant missionaries in Korea show a dynamic of cooperation and conflict. Protestant missionaries relied on the achievements of Catholic missionaries, such as using the Korean–French dictionary (*Hanbul chajŏn*) for studying the Korean language. In 1889, during a severe famine in Jeolla and Gyeongsangbuk-do, both denominations collaborated to organize a relief movement (Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (SMEP) (1890, p. 17)).

However, in the 1890s, with the rise in Protestant missionary activity, the rivalry between the two Confessions intensified. By 1907, Protestants surpassed Catholics, who had arrived a century earlier, increasing competition for the same territory and population (Cho 2013, p. 521). In 1923, according to a report by Catholic missionaries, the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres were managing schools and orphanages in Seoul, Jemulpo, and Daegu. At the same time, American Presbyterian missionaries operated four hospitals in the southern regions and seven in the north, including a leprosy hospital in Gwangju that housed 300 patients. Together with Methodists, they managed a total of 25 hospitals nationwide. Bishop Devred, concerned about Protestant dominance in education and healthcare, critically assessed their activities and accomplishments in his report, "Le péril protestant en Corée" (The Protestant Threat in Korea). He observed that prior to 1883, there were no Protestant pastors in Korea. However, following the signing of treaties with various nations, they began arriving in significant numbers. By 1923, denominations such as Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Seventh-day Adventists, the Salvation Army, Anglicans, and others were all well established. Devred attributed their rapid growth to substantial financial and human resources. Unlike Catholics, who struggled with limited means, Protestants had access to considerable budgets and employed numerous paid local pastors and catechists. He also noted that they specifically targeted the middle and upper classes, pursuing both educational and religious objectives. According to Devred, "The benefits go beyond religion and become political and economic. The pragmatic Anglo-Saxons understand this well" (Devred 1924, pp. 103–104). His report reflects a sense of caution and competition in response to the rapid growth of Protestantism. Against this historical backdrop, doctrinal disputes between the two Confessions erupted, particularly since 1907, when the number of Protestants began to surpass that of Catholics (Cho 2013, p. 521).

2.1. Doctrinal Disputes in the Early 20th Century: Roots of the Ongoing Conflicts

Starting in 1907, as the growth of Protestantism began to surpass that of Catholicism, an intense doctrinal debate emerged between the two Confessions, prominently reflected in books and the press. These controversies left a lasting imprint on Korean Christianity and offer an essential context for understanding the ecumenical documents analyzed later in the study. Tracing the roots of these misunderstandings is crucial for dispelling misconceptions that persist to this day. To examine these polemical exchanges, I will briefly analyze representative apologetic texts from each Confession: *Yesu chin'gyo sap'ae* (Han 1907) and *Yesu T'yŏnjyu ryanggyo pyŏnnon* (Ch'oe 1908). Additionally, I will consider documents debating interpretations of the Reformation, particularly *Nut'ŏ kaegyo kiryak* (Gale 1908) and "*Sin'gyo chigi-wŏn*" (Demange 1923). Finally, this section will address a series of articles written by a Protestant missionary that have profoundly shaped the Protestant perceptions of Catholicism, leaving a legacy that endures to the present day.

2.1.1. *Yesu chin'gyo sap'ae* (예수진교사패, 1907): A Defense of Catholic Orthodoxy

Yesu chin'gyo sap'ae (Four Signs of the True Religion of Jesus), is a classic of Catholic apologetics and a critique of Protestantism. It was reprinted in 1932 and widely read during the Japanese occupation. This book is a Korean translation of a Chinese text written by Henri Vacquerel (1850–1936),[5] a missionary in China sent by the Missions étrangères de Paris. A Korean priest, Han Ki-geun (1868–1939), translated it under the supervision of Bishop Gustave Charles Marie Mutel (1854–1933). The book's aim is to demonstrate the "orthodoxy" of the Catholic Church through the four marks of the Church (unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity). The author critiques Protestantism as a "religion" that has broken away from the unity of the Church by dividing into several branches. He addresses 111 controversial subjects, such as the veneration of Mary, the Immaculate Conception

of Mary, the veneration of holy images, purgatory and the commemoration of the dead, Church Tradition, the inefficacy of faith without works, and the seven sacraments (Shin 1998, p. 120). It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these issues in detail; however, it suffices to acknowledge that they remain points of contention between Catholicism and Protestantism to this day.

2.1.2. *Yesu t'yŏnjyu ryanggyo pyŏnnon* (예수텬쥬량교변론, 1908): A Defense of Protestant Orthodoxy

The Protestant response to the *Four Signs of the True Religion of Jesus* emerged in 1908 with the publication of *Yesu t'yŏnjyu ryanggyo pyŏnnon* (Doctrinal Controversy Between Catholics and Protestants), by Methodist pastor Rev. Ch'oe Pyŏnghŏn (1858–1927), a prominent Protestant theologian. This work is a translation of the Chinese Protestant catechism *Liang jiao he bian* (兩教合辨, 1885), written by F.H. James, and it underscores the distinctions between Protestantism (*Yesugyo*, "the religion of Jesus") and Catholicism (*T'yŏnjyugyo*, "the religion of the Lord of Heaven") by employing biblical passages as evidence. Ch'oe's work criticizes Catholicism for its alleged prohibition on Bible reading and for elevating tradition and ecclesiastical authority above Scripture. It also reproaches Catholicism for venerating idols and images, contrasting this practice with Protestantism's exclusive worship of God (pp. 2–3). Furthermore, Ch'oe critiques the Catholic use of Latin, advocating for the use of the vernacular in worship and Mass, asserting that "prayers should be said in the languages of the nations, so even children can understand." He also challenges the Catholic view on the relationship between Scripture and tradition, arguing that the Catholic Church accords tradition equal authority with Scripture.

While some critiques, such as the alleged prohibition on Bible reading, were based on misunderstandings, other points, like the advocacy for indigenous languages in worship, warrant consideration. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has strongly encouraged the use of vernacular languages in worship.

2.1.3. *Nut'ŏ kaegyo kiryak* (누터개교긔략, 1908): A Protestant Perspective on the Reformation

James Scarth Gale (1863–1937) (Gale 1908), a Protestant missionary, authored *Nut'ŏ kaegyo kiryak*. In this work, Gale traces the origins of Luther's Reformation, primarily highlighting Luther's encounter with the Bible. He identifies the abuse of indulgences as the trigger for the Reformation and offers a sharp critique of Catholic ritualism, Roman centralism, and the doctrine of salvation based on works. Gale emphasizes salvation by grace alone and by faith alone, interpreting Luther's Reformation as a restoration of lost truths (Cf. Ahn 2017, pp. 7–35). He presents the distinction between salvation by works and salvation by faith as the key marker differentiating Catholicism from Protestantism. Gale's critique of Catholicism has had a significant impact on Protestant perceptions of Catholicism to this day.

2.1.4. "*Sin'gyo chigi-wŏn*" (新教之起源, 1923): A Catholic Critique of the Reformation

"*Sin'gyo chigi-wŏn*" written by Bishop Florian Demange (1875–1938), the first bishop of Daegu, aims to critique the Protestant conception of the Reformation in Korea. He seeks to reveal Catholic orthodoxy and correct Protestant errors, highlighting the need for a sovereign authority and the unchanging nature of the Church as an important Catholic tradition (p. 3). Demange argues that Catholicism "has never changed" and therefore did not require Luther's Reformation. The book focuses on Luther's life and work, emphasizing Protestant misunderstandings of the papacy. It explains that papal infallibility is often misunderstood by Protestants; it does not mean that the pope is infallible as an individual but rather only when making declarations on faith and morals ex cathedra (p. 7).

While the author acknowledges the need for political and personal reforms within the Catholic Church during the humanist period, he insists that ultimate authority lies with the Magisterium, portraying Luther's Reformation as a private act without legitimacy. Chapters 1, 2, 9, and 12 critically examine Luther's life and work, presenting Catholic scholars' critiques, which portray Luther in a very negative light.[6] Chapter 4 refutes Protestant ideas about indulgences, explaining that they concern the remission of temporal punishment, not the forgiveness of sins. Chapters 10 and 11 focus on the errors and weaknesses of Protestantism and sharply criticize the divisions within Protestantism. While this book attempted to correct Protestant misconceptions about the papacy and indulgences, its impact was limited by its small circulation in Protestant circles.

2.1.5. Protestant Criticism of Catholicism in *Sinhak Chinam* (神學指南), a Protestant Theology Journal

Beyond the four books mentioned, the two Confessions engaged in press debates. Notable among them are the critical articles by C. F. Bernheisel (1874–1958), a missionary of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and professor at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 'P'yŏngyang'. He published 11 articles criticizing the Catholic Church in the theological journal *Sinhak chinam* between 1936 and 1938. His views on Catholicism, which were typical of Protestant missionaries in Korea at the time, significantly shaped the negative perception of the Catholic Church among Korean Protestants—a perception that endures to this day.

In the article entitled "The Catholic View of the Church" (Bernheisel 1936a), Bernheisel criticizes Catholic soteriology, describing it as mechanical because, in his view, simple participation in church rituals guarantees salvation. He also criticizes the Catholic Church's emphasis on unity as a mechanical imposition and interprets the Lord's call for unity in the Gospel of John as "spiritual unity" rather than "unity of external institutions" (p. 46). According to Bernheisel, Protestant churches, despite their various denominations, form the true Church due to their spiritual unity amidst diversity. He criticizes the Catholic Church's ministry as centered on priestly absolutism, emphasizing that Christ is the sole mediator.

Bernheisel views the papacy as the height of the Catholic Church's priestly absolutism and centralism. He rejects the idea that the pope is the "foundation and head of the Church," affirming that only Christ fulfills this role (pp. 46, 49). He reinterprets Matthew 16:18, asserting that Jesus was referring to the truth confessed by Peter, not Peter himself. Bernheisel also criticizes Catholic worship as idolatrous, accusing the Church of venerating objects other than God, such as saints, angels, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. He claims the Catholic Church teaches that "Mary is our only refuge and savior. Our prayers are often answered more by addressing Mary than the Savior. Everything obeys the Virgin's commands. Even God obeys" ("The Worship of the Roman Catholic Church," (Bernheisel 1936b, p. 29)). He argues that the Catholic Church creates a Mariology that places Mary in the role of Jesus the Savior. However, he adds that Mary should still be honored: "Every believer must show the greatest respect and affection for Mary, the mother of the Lord, because she is a noble woman, deeply faithful, rich in Christian virtues, and greatly blessed before God" (p. 30). Bernheisel criticizes the Catholic sacraments, asserting that only baptism and the Eucharist are biblical, and he argues that Catholic insistence on seven sacraments is intended to control the laity's lives ("The Sacraments," (Bernheisel 1937, p. 24)).

Bernheisel's critique of Catholicism raises questions about whether it is genuinely based on an accurate understanding of the Catholic Church's orthodox doctrines. A detailed examination and critique of these issues lie beyond the scope of this paper. In particular, his depiction of the Catholic Church's Mariology seems significantly exaggerated. This has likely contributed to the persistent misunderstanding of Catholic Mariology within Korean Protes-

tantism to this day. It can also be assumed that such misconceptions have been perpetuated across generations through Protestant pastors shaped by his theological influence.

According to the doctrinal dispute documents briefly reviewed above, the controversies between Korean Catholicism and Protestantism are centered on the key themes of disputes between the two traditions in the West after the 16th-century Reformation: the papacy, Scripture and tradition, Mariology, and the sacraments.

2.2. The Ecumenical Movement Before 2000

Although relations between the Catholics and Protestants in Korea were long marked by doctrinal conflicts, little effort was made to overcome these mutual misunderstandings. However, starting in 1966, after the Second Vatican Council, the Korean Catholic Church initiated efforts to promote Christian unity by creating the "Reunification Commission" (재일치위원회).[7] In 1968, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea (CBCK) and the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK) jointly organized the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This Week of Prayer, held annually from January 18 to 25, was originally launched in 1908 by Father Paul Wattson. In 1968, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity officially joined this movement, preparing documents for the Week of Prayer together. From 1968, Korean Catholics and Protestants began organizing this Week of Prayer together.

In addition to ecumenical prayer meetings, they established a joint committee for Bible translation in January 1968, resulting in the publication of an ecumenical translation of the New Testament in 1971 and of the Old Testament at Easter in 1977. However, this translation was officially adopted only by the Catholic, the Anglican, and the Orthodox Church, and was not widely used among Protestant denominations, primarily due to disagreements over the translation of the divine name.[8] In 1977, the Institute of Korea Theological University (Protestant) and the Institute of Theology at Sogang University (founded by Jesuits) published a translation of *Neues Glaubensbuch. Der gemeinsame christliche Glaube*,[9] an ecumenical theological manual. This text, written by 19 prominent Catholic theologians and 17 Protestant theologians from Germany and published in 1973, aimed to present the results of scholarly dialogue for unity in Germany and to provide a basis for theological dialogue in Korea. However, this translation was not widely used as a teaching tool in Korean Churches.

The Korean ecumenical movement is not limited to intra-church matters; it stems from the desire to obey Christ's call for unity and a shared witness (Raiser 1995, pp. 430–438). Korean Catholics and Protestants also cooperated in response to the political needs of Korean society. Since the Yushin dictatorship[10] in 1972, progressive Catholic and Protestant groups have allied in the democratization movement, human rights movements, and the reunification movement. They also collaborated on environmental issues. These joint efforts and solidarity in social engagement vividly expressed "the union that already exists between them" and more fully illuminated the "face of Christ the Servant" (*Christi servi vultum*).[11]

However, although Catholics and Protestants collaborated on social issues, the dialogue to overcome their doctrinal divisions was neglected during this time. When their joint efforts began to bear fruit in the social domain, the Korean ecumenical movement recognized the need to resolve these conflicts through theological and doctrinal dialogue.

3. Analysis of Ecumenical Dialogue Documents Since 2000: Focus on Doctrinal Issues

Since 2000, the ecumenical dialogue, which had stalled after the publication of a common Bible translation and an ecumenical theology manual, has gained renewed momentum. In January 2000, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea (CBCK) and the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK) jointly organized an ecumenical forum based on a proposal

from the 8th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in December 1998. This proposal aimed to organize an ecumenical forum for all churches confessing Christ as Lord (Korean Christian Ecumenical Movement Theologians Study Group 2010, pp. 9–20).

This initiative was actively adopted by the Korean Church and brought together Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic theologians, who decided to hold an annual theological forum starting in 2000 (Byun 2003, pp. 255–56). In 2014, the "Korean Commission on Faith and Order" was launched to invigorate the Korean ecumenical movement and deepen theological debates. Professor Shin Jae-sik, an active participant in the ecumenical dialogue in Korea, called the establishment of this organization "the most significant activity" of the Korean Christian ecumenical movement (Shin 2022, p. 149). Since its inception, the Commission has managed the Ecumenical Forum and the Ecumenical Academy. The three volumes examined in this analysis are collections of the presentations made at this Forum and Academy. Before analyzing these texts, a brief introduction to the "Faith and Order Commission of Korean Churches" is necessary.

3.1. History and Organization of the "Faith and Order Commission of Korean Churches"

The "Faith and Order Commission of Korean Churches" is modeled after the WCC's "Faith and Order Commission." Its primary goal is to promote the visible unity of the Church of Jesus Christ by studying the theological issues that divide churches (Lossky et al. 2002, p. 411). The term "Faith and Order" involves disagreements related to doctrine ("faith") and the organization of church ministry ("order"), which prevent the unity of Christian churches (https://www.oikoumene.org/fr/what-we-do/faith-and-order-commission, accessed on 10 January 2025).

Ecumenical dialogue in Korea began to gain momentum with the establishment of the annual Ecumenical Forum in 2000. Nevertheless, in his presentation at the 11th Ecumenical Forum in 2011, Professor Byung-Jun Chung observed the following:

> Ecumenical cooperation between Catholic and Protestant churches in Korea is still in its early stages. It is indeed shameful and unfortunate that conflicts persist between Protestant and Catholic churches due to misunderstandings and ignorance. These issues have become a great scandal for the Christian witness in Korean society. (Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches 2020, p. 18)

Professor Chung's remarks underscore the limited progress in mutual understanding despite over a decade of ecumenical discussions. In 2014, at the 14th Ecumenical Forum, Catholic priest Yongmin Song, who had been appointed co-chair of the theological committee within the Korean Faith and Order Commission, addressed the forum, explaining that the commission was established in response to the enduring need for a renewed phase of the ecumenical movement in Korea.

Its inaugural general assembly was held on 22 May 2014. The commission is composed of theologians from the Catholic Church and the National Council of Churches in Korea, including the Korean Orthodox Church, and eight Protestant denominations: Presbyterian Church of Korea [예장통합], Korean Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church of Korea [기장], Salvation Army Korea, Anglican Church of Korea, Christian Church of God in Korea, Christian Gospel Church of Korea [기독교대한복음교회], and Korean Lutheran Church. It has two co-chairs and 18 committee members. At present, the co-chairs are a Catholic bishop and a Presbyterian pastor.

3.2. Analysis of Ecumenical Dialogue Documents Since 2000

The documents from the Ecumenical Forum, initiated in 2000, have been compiled into two volumes titled *Hana toege hasosŏ* (하나되게 하소서), meaning "That They May Be One." The first volume, encompassing 530 pages, includes documents from the Forum's presen-

tation between 2000 and 2009 and was published in 2010. The second volume, spanning 378 pages and covering the years 2010 to 2019, was published in 2020. Additionally, the proceedings of the Ecumenical Academy, established in 2015, were published in 2019 under the title *Kŭrisŭdoin ŭi sinhaktaehwa* (그리스도인의 신학대화), meaning "Theological Dialogue of Christians," commemorating the fifth anniversary of the formation of the Korean Commission on Faith and Order.

(1) Objectives of the Ecumenical Forum and the Ecumenical Academy

The Ecumenical Forum is primarily aimed at theologians and seminarians, while the Ecumenical Academy focuses on providing ecumenical education for the laity. At the 14th Ecumenical Forum, the catholic priest Yongmin Song explained the origin of the Ecumenical Academy:

The current state of the ecumenical movement in South Korea is primarily reflected in the perception of ecumenical unity among the laity. Most Catholics and Protestants do not have a sufficient awareness of the fact that they share the same faith in Christ, and some Protestant pastors and Catholic clergy are struggling to restore the unity of the church or to find a fraternal bond of unity in diversity because of their limited understanding of each other. In particular, the misunderstandings and prejudices of front-line priests and pastors have a profound impact on the consciousness of the laity, which is one of the greatest obstacles to the ecumenical movement. Long-standing mistrust, such as the perception of Catholics as "elders" and Protestants as "illegitimate children," or the view that Catholicism is heretical, Mary-worshipping, or a remnant of the feudal institutional Church of the Roman Empire, highlights the importance of educating the faithful in the ecumenical movement (Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches 2020, p. 146).

Youngmin Song, who presented the text extensively quoted above, emphasized that Korean Catholics and Protestants often fail to acknowledge their shared faith in Christ and highlighted that even clergy from both traditions harbor mutual misunderstandings and prejudices. He underscored the critical importance of education, a point that precisely illustrates the rationale and purpose behind the establishment of the Ecumenical Forum and the Ecumenical Academy. Accurately recognizing the problematic state described in this extended quote is the first step toward its resolution. Youngmin Song also emphasizes that Catholic conservatism and the exclusive conservatism of certain Protestant denominations, influenced by American Fundamentalism, have created many obstacles to ecumenical dialogue to this day.

(2) Themes Addressed in the Forum and the Academy

The Ecumenical Forum was held annually from 2000 to 2019, for a total of 19 sessions. Catholic presenters attended 18 of these sessions. Protestants were represented at all 19 sessions, with the following breakdown: Presbyterians of Jesus (10), Presbyterians of Christ (8), Methodists (13), Salvation Army (2), Lutherans (4), and Full Gospel Church (1). Orthodox participants attended five sessions.

Since its inception in 2015, the Ecumenical Academy has held 11 sessions. Participation by denomination was as follows: Catholics attended 10 times, Protestants attended 10 times (Presbyterians 5, Methodists 2, Salvation Army 1, Assemblies of God 2, with no other Protestant denominations present), and Orthodox representatives attended 3 times.

The Ecumenical Academy provides education to the faithful in collaboration with the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches. Each year, the program includes 10 lessons for a basic course and 4 lessons for an advanced course, the latter consisting of lectures and visits to churches of different denominations. The collection of documents of the Ecumenical Academy includes 11 sessions, one more than the 10 sessions planned for the basic course.

The topics of these 11 sessions are divided into three main areas: history (3 sessions), doctrine (4 sessions), and Christian life (4 sessions).

(3) Analysis of Doctrinal Issues Debated

A wide variety of topics have been addressed in the Forum and the Academy. This analysis focuses on doctrinal issues, which have been the primary obstacles in the ecumenical movement within the Korean Church. Five key doctrinal issues have been discussed in the Forum and the Academy:

(i) Soteriology and Justification (3rd Forum session and 4th lesson of the Academy);
(ii) Scripture and Tradition (5th lesson of the Academy);
(iii) Eucharist (5th Forum session and 5th lesson of the Academy);
(iv) Ministry (16th Forum session, 6th lesson of the Academy);
(v) Mariology (7th lesson of the Academy).

Three of these issues—soteriology and justification, Eucharist, and ministry—were discussed in both the Forum and the Academy, while two—Scripture and tradition, and Mariology—were discussed only in the Academy. As noted above, these issues have been debated between Korean Catholics and Protestants since the early 20th century.

The debates, which began in the early 20th century, persist even a century later and reflect the historical discussions within global Christianity since the Reformation in the 16th century. In what follows, I will explore how the two traditions view these five issues and whether they have reached a mutual understanding or theological consensus.

(i) Soteriology and Justification

The third Ecumenical Forum (Korean Christian Ecumenical Movement Theologians Study Group 2010, pp. 136–225) and fourth lesson of the Ecumenical Academy (Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches 2019, pp. 141–76) addressed the issue of justification, a key point of division between Catholics and Lutherans during the Reformation. Since the early 20th century, Korean Protestants have maintained that justification and salvation are by faith alone, while Catholics believe that justifying faith must be accompanied by good works.

At the forum, the Catholic priest who presented Catholic soteriology avoided the topic of justification and instead discussed salvation as the kingdom of God and its salvific characteristics according to Jesus. In contrast, two Protestant professors presented the Protestant views of soteriology: one discussed Paul's doctrine of justification through biblical exegesis, and the other offered historical context on the development of the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," engaging with debates among German theologians such as Jüngel and Sauter. A Catholic theologian commenting on this presentation expressed disappointment that the Protestant speaker did not address the issues of "justification by faith and grace" (para. 25–27 of the "Joint Declaration") or "good works of the justified person" (para. 37–39), which have often been controversial between Catholics and Protestants. He stressed the importance of respecting the progress already made in global ecumenical dialogue. This comment was apt and significant, as it emphasized the need for ecumenical dialogue in Korea to integrate developments from the global level. In addition, the Catholic theologian pointed out the Protestant theologian's use of the term "sale of indulgences," translated as "sale of forgiveness of sins," noting that this translation distorted the Catholic understanding of indulgences (Korean Christian Ecumenical Movement Theologians Study Group 2010, p. 183). In fact, this translation issue was raised by Catholic theologians as early as the early 20th century, and it is striking that such a misunderstanding persists a century later, even among Protestant theologians.

(ii) Bible and Tradition

In the fifth lesson of the Ecumenical Academy, the Catholic professor Yongmin Song presented the Catholic understanding of the relationship between Scripture and Holy Tradition, together with the sacraments. His focus was on the common ground that the two confessions have reached through global ecumenical research, rather than on internal debates within the Korean church.

Song emphasized that "taking the Bible as the norm of faith is an important starting point for establishing a common foundation among Christians" (Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches 2019, p. 180). He asserted that the Protestant perception of the Bible and Holy Tradition as opposing forces has been overcome through biblical studies (p. 182). Song presented the conceptual distinctions between "Tradition," "tradition," and "traditions" as proposed by the Fourth Faith and Order Commission in Montreal in 1963 in connection with Decree 9 of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, reflecting the Catholic Church's post-Vatican II understanding of Scripture and Tradition.

The fourth World Conference on Faith and Order made the following distinctions: "Tradition" (with a capital "T") refers to the Gospel itself, passed down from generation to generation in and through the Church; "tradition" (with a lowercase "t") refers to the process of transmission; "traditions" refers to the various forms of expression and denominational traditions, such as Lutheran or Reformed. Song quoted the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: "Holy Tradition and Holy Scripture are closely connected and communicate with each other. For both of them, flowing from the same divine Source, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same goal…" (Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches 2019, p. 186). The text cited by Song is from *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council. The subsequent passage offers insights highly conducive to fostering unity between the two Confessions: "However, the task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the Word of God, but serves it" (*Dei Verbum*, n. 9). This final point—that the Church's teaching office (Magisterium) is subordinate to the Word of God—has been a central tenet of Protestant theology. This principle underscores the supremacy of Scripture over ecclesiastical authority. Notably, the Catholic Church also acknowledges that the Magisterium is not above the Word of God but serves it. This convergence highlights a significant area of agreement between the two traditions.

Song's presentation demonstrates that the misunderstandings and conflicts regarding the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, which have persisted in the Korean Church since the early 20th century, have largely been resolved through global ecumenical dialogue. However, he points out that this clarification has not yet been widely accepted within Korean Protestantism, especially among the general public, apart from ecumenical dialogue researchers and biblical scholars. This highlights the reality that the achievements of global ecumenical dialogue have not been fully embraced at the local church level.

(iii) The Eucharist

The Eucharist was the theme of both the fifth session of the Ecumenical Forum and the fifth lesson of the Ecumenical Academy. Professor Yongmin Song presented the Catholic theology of the Eucharist, first highlighting that the agreement reached in the *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (BEM), document from Lima (1982), represents a "remarkable achievement for ecumenical unity" (Korean Christian Ecumenical Movement Theologians Study Group 2010, p. 258). He stated that mutual understanding between Korean Catholics and Protestants had improved, particularly in overcoming the Catholic rejection of Protestant Eucharistic practice as merely devotional, and the Protestant view of the Catholic Eucharist

as idolatry. However, he acknowledged that the controversy surrounding the Eucharist remains a major obstacle to Church unity.

Song addressed misconceptions on both sides: Catholics reduce Jesus' sacramental presence to the host,[12] while Protestants fear that the Church's sacrifices in the Mass detract from the one sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Notably, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), in Question 80, explicitly criticizes the Catholic Eucharist as "nothing else than a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and an accursed idolatry."[13] In response to this critique, Song explained that the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist is rooted in the belief that Christ's sacrifice on the cross is so perfect that it transcends the barriers of time and space. The Church's commemoration and sacramental representation of this sacrifice are neither a substitute nor a supplement, but rather a continuation of Christ's command (Korean Christian Ecumenical Movement Theologians Study Group 2010, p. 272).

The Protestant contribution to the fifth Forum session did not directly address interconfessional issues, but the commentators highlighted them. A Protestant commentator asked the Catholic presenter about the danger of absolutizing the church and the clergy as the mediators of grace, suggesting that the Eucharist might be unnecessary if God and humanity were in direct communion (ibid., p. 331). This question reflects an extreme position in the Reformation theology, which denied the necessity of the sacraments. A Catholic commentator, on the other hand, noted that the BEM document's concepts of thanksgiving, remembrance, the work of the Holy Spirit, koinonia, and sacrifice are shared by Protestant churches, and suggested that these could provide a basis for future ecumenical unity (ibid., p. 333). This remark, however, failed to recognize that the BEM document was a product of interconfessional collaboration in which Catholic theologians also participated.

(iv) Ministry

The theme of ministry was examined in depth during the 16th Ecumenical Forum session and the 6th lecture of the Academy. Anglican priest Tae-Sik Park provided an analysis of the origins of the Protestant term "pastor" (*moksa* 牧師) and the nature of ministry as depicted in the New Testament. Concurrently, Catholic priest Jung-Hoon Shin of the Catholic University of Seoul presented perspectives on ministry from biblical, medieval, and Second Vatican Council contexts. In the sixth Academy lecture, Shin emphasized the paradigm shift initiated by the Second Vatican Council, which reconceptualized the Church as a community of equals, wherein all the baptized members are considered equal members of the People of God, thereby moving away from a clergy-centered ecclesiology (Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches 2019, pp. 231–33). The Council further distinguishes between the ministerial priesthood and the universal priesthood, which is common to all believers. Professor Shin also underscored the similarity between this latter concept and Martin Luther's emphasis on the universal priesthood (Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches 2020, p. 246).

As a delegate from the Presbyterian Church, professor Eunsil Son responded to Shin's presentation by noting that the Lima document, the culmination of fifty years of efforts by the Faith and Order Commission, could serve as a foundational reference for this discussion. She highlighted the similarities between the Lima document and *Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council, observing that both documents address the People of God before discussing ordained ministry and frame ministry fundamentally as a service. Furthermore, she emphasized that the mutual recognition of ministry necessitates a reexamination of the meaning of apostolic succession, which remains a crucial point of contention in the division over the Eucharist, as articulated in the Lima document. Additionally, she raised the issue of the non-recognition of women's ordination as a significant barrier to mutual recognition, citing relevant biblical teachings (Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches 2020, pp. 248–55).

The analysis of the presentations and commentaries indicates that the Ecumenical Dialogue panels on this topic are well informed about the developments in global ecumenical dialogue. However, effectively disseminating the outcomes of these discussions among Catholic and Protestant believers remains a significant challenge.

(v) Mariology

In Korea, Mariology continues to be one of the most contentious theological issues dividing Catholics and Protestants. However, this topic was not addressed in the Ecumenical Forum but was instead covered in the seventh session of the Ecumenical Academy. Sister Hyun Sook Lee of the Franciscan Sisters of the Assumption analyzed key elements of the Marian doctrine in her presentation, including the titles "Mother of God", "Perpetual Virginity", "Immaculate Conception", and the "Assumption". She highlighted the misunderstandings that exist between Protestants and Catholics regarding Marian devotion, noting that Protestants often erroneously perceive Catholicism as a Marian religion. Furthermore, she pointed out several problematic aspects of Marian devotion among Korean Catholics, including the pursuit of prosperity, the concept of Mary as a co-mediator with Jesus, and the misinterpretation of Mary as a goddess (Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches 2019, pp. 244–8)

This presentation underscores the significant differences that persist between Catholic and Protestant perspectives on Mariology.

4. Analysis and Evaluation of the Themes and Methods Used in the Documents

While the preceding analysis concentrated primarily on doctrinal issues, this section examines the overarching themes and dialogue methods addressed thus far within the context of the Forum. This approach enables us to discern directions for the future advancement of ecumenical dialogue.

4.1. Analysis and Evaluation of Themes

The themes addressed during the 19 sessions of the Forum are quite varied and can be classified into four main categories:

(1) Introduction to the History of the Global and Korean Ecumenical Movement and Presentation of Its Results (eight sessions: 1, 2, 6, 9, 10, 11, 14, and 17)

Here are some examples: The first session (2000) covers the history of ecumenical movements in various churches (Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Methodist, and Orthodox). The second session (November 2000) presents the current state of the theological dialogue of the WCC, with contributions from Professor Hyung-Ki Lee and Orthodox Archbishop Ambrosios, as well as an analysis by Catholic priest Sung-Tae Kim on WCC documents.[14]

(2) Doctrinal Issues (three sessions: 3, 5, and 16)

The examples have been analyzed above.

(3) Christian Life and Spirituality (three sessions: 4, 7, and 13)

Here are some examples: The 8th session titled "Diversity in Christian Ecological Spirituality" (2008) discusses Christian spirituality related to ecological issues to rediscover the Christian vocation as stewards of creation in the face of the 21st-century ecological crisis.

(4) Contemporary Social Issues (four sessions: 8, 12, 18, and 19)

Here are some examples: The 18th session addresses "The Church and Women" and presents the reality of women and the women's movement in both the Catholic and Protestant churches. The history of the founding of the Federation of Korean Women's Churches

in 1967 by various Protestant denominations (Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, and Anglican) to "promote unity and cooperation among churches, jointly address current social issues, and contribute to the development of women and world peace" is presented. In the 19th session titled "Peace Together: The Task of Christians in Korea," a Protestant presenter examines whether the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the peace process can be an alternative to U.S. domination in the international order and constitute a new context for Asia. The Catholic speaker highlights that the first indigenous bishop of Korea, Ki Nam No, referred to the Korean War in 1950 as a "holy war". This designation is linked to the distrust and fear of the Catholic Church towards North Korea's atheistic materialism and the persecution suffered by it. This forum examines the history of the direct and active involvement of Korean Catholics and Protestants in perpetuating the Cold War system after the liberation from Japanese occupation, drawing attention to the significant responsibility of the entire Korean Christian community in resolving the Cold War system and establishing a new path to peace on the Korean Peninsula.

This analysis shows that the orientation of the themes of ecumenical dialogue in the Korean Church aligns with that of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC. The latter has primarily focused on doctrinal studies since its first Assembly in 1927, but at the fifth Assembly in Santiago, emphasis was placed on the task of human unity. In his article "Faith and Order, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," presented at a young theologians' meeting in 1995, the year of the fifth congress, Orthodox theologian Zizioulas emphasized that the dichotomy between "Faith and Order" and "Life and Work" is problematic and insists that the tasks of the Faith and Order Commission are determined by the challenges of our time, and that Christianity must have "cultural relevance" and respond to these challenges if it does not want to be marginalized throughout history. Aligning with this orientation of the global ecumenical movement, the Korean Forum for Christian Unity also prioritizes Christian life and the unity of humanity, addressing doctrinal issues only three times during its 19 sessions. However, the Academy places relatively greater emphasis on doctrinal issues. This stems from a growing awareness of the ecumenical lag in the Korean Church and the recognition that the greatest obstacle to unity lies in unresolved misunderstandings and conflicts over doctrinal issues.

4.2. Analysis and Evaluation of Ecumenical Dialogue Methods

The orientation and trajectory of global ecumenical dialogue are clearly evident in the topics addressed within Korean ecumenical dialogue, yet this alignment does not extend to the methodologies employed. In global ecumenical dialogue, particularly in discussions centered on the doctrine of justification, emphasis has been placed on examining the historical and theological roots of disagreements between Catholic and Lutheran theologians. This approach represented a pivotal shift, prompted by the realization that mutual accusations persisted even after two decades of dialogue. Through collaborative biblical studies and historical research, these theologians succeeded in drafting the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, which recognizes both points of agreement and areas of divergence.

In contrast, Korean ecumenical dialogue has not pursued an in-depth investigation into the historical roots of doctrinal conflicts. Since the early 20th century, Korean Catholics and Protestants have sharply criticized each other on several theological points without engaging in a systematic historical study of these issues. This approach stands in stark contrast to that of German theologians, who, prior to reaching the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, conducted thorough examinations of the historical controversies surrounding each doctrinal point of disagreement. Moreover, Korean dialogue lacks ongoing joint research and collaborative authorship, with contributions from the two traditions being conducted separately. This approach has led to a lack of productive debate and limited development of a shared understanding. Thus, despite the ecumenical forum having been convened an-

nually for over 20 years, it has not produced results that facilitate a common understanding, as noted by Jae-Sik Shin (Shin 2022, p. 146). While some doctrinal misunderstandings have been alleviated, participating theologians largely agree that significant misinterpretations persist. Unlike global ecumenical dialogue, which emphasizes joint research and collaborative authorship, ecumenical discussions in Korea have predominantly focused on identifying theological differences. For example, whereas discussions on the doctrine of justification in Korea have led merely to a recognition of differences, global dialogues have produced a "differentiated consensus".

To examine this more closely, let us consider the example of the doctrine of justification. Misunderstandings and disagreements between Korean Catholics and Protestants regarding justification are profound and cannot be overcome through simple neglect or denial. An in-depth historical and doctrinal study is essential to achieving a common understanding of this doctrine (Cf. Lehmann and Pannenberg 1989). A notable example of the effectiveness of such a study can be found in the collaborative research conducted by German Protestant and Catholic theologians over four years, a process that culminated in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* in 1999. Catholic commentators from the Ecumenical Forum and the Korean Ecumenical Academy have highlighted three points of disagreement between Korean Catholics and Protestants regarding this doctrine. These three points are addressed in the Joint Declaration: (1) Luther's formula "sola fide" (by faith alone), discussed in para. 25–27; (2) Luther's concept of "simul iustus et peccator" (both justified and sinner), examined in para. 28–30; and (3) the concept of "merit", covered in para. 37–39. Here, we shall consider only the second point.

At the second Ecumenical Forum in 2001, Sung Tae Kim explained that according to Catholic doctrine, a person is freed from all sin through baptism. Although concupiscence remains, it is not considered a sin in itself (Korean Christian Ecumenical Movement Theologians Study Group 2010, pp. 133–134). This understanding is at odds with the Lutheran view, which maintains that believers remain sinners. Paragraph 28 of the Joint Declaration presents the shared belief that, in baptism, the Holy Spirit unites the believer with Christ, justifying and renewing them, though the justified person must continually rely on God's grace and seek daily forgiveness. Paragraph 29 articulates the Lutheran perspective that sin remains in believers even after justification. Paragraph 30, in turn, expresses the Catholic view that the grace of Jesus Christ removes sin "in its own sense," though concupiscence remains, albeit without being a sin in itself. The core difference lies in the interpretation of concupiscence: Lutherans regard it as sinful, whereas Catholics view it as a non-sinful tendency in itself. Despite this divergence, both traditions agree that the tendency to turn away from God persists in the justified.

This example demonstrates that the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* represents significant progress, particularly through the method of "differentiated consensus," which involves articulating differences after establishing a common confession of faith. Hervé Legrand has emphasized that this method accommodates legitimate differences "in language, in forms of thought (*Denkformen*), and in emphases" (Legrand 2002, pp. 30–56) without jeopardizing the overall agreement. André Birmelé also emphasizes that "consensus is not synonymous with uniformity. It not only tolerates but includes difference."[15]

5. Suggestions for the Future Development of Dialogue

Over the past two decades, ecumenical dialogue between Korean Catholic and Protestant theologians has continued; however, the outcomes have not met expectations. Doctrinal issues rooted in the 16th-century Reformation remain unresolved, and insights from the global ecumenical movement have not been fully utilized. To foster more meaningful exchanges and deeper mutual understanding, a strategic approach is essential, one that draws

on global ecumenical achievements while addressing Korea's unique context. The following five measures outline a framework for advancing dialogue:

(1) Deep Engagement with Global Ecumenical Achievements
The work of the Faith and Order Commission, which has actively promoted church unity since its inaugural assembly in 1927 (Gassmann 1993), must be more thoroughly integrated into Korean ecumenical discussions. While some efforts have been made to translate and disseminate global ecumenical outcomes, the underlying doctrinal agreements remain insufficiently studied. As a result, theological discussions in Korea often revert to historical controversies, limiting progress in resolving doctrinal conflicts.

(2) Adoption of Proven Methodologies
Methodologies developed within the global ecumenical movement, such as "differentiated consensus" and Christological and biblical approaches, should be actively utilized. Collaborative biblical and historical studies are particularly effective in bridging longstanding doctrinal divides. A notable example is the German collaborative research group, composed of experts in theology, history, and church history. Over four years of rigorous study and discussions, this group successfully reconciled centuries-old conflicting perspectives on key theological topics such as justification, sacraments, and ministry.[16] This approach provides a valuable model for Korean theologians.

(3) Enhancement of Expertise and Establishment of Working Groups
The success of ecumenical dialogue depends on the involvement of the most competent and creative theologians from each tradition. In Korean ecumenical discussions, insufficient expertise among presenters and discussants has often compromised the depth and quality of dialogue. As John Zizioulas has emphasized, addressing the issues of faith and order requires entrusting such matters to the most qualified individuals. Establishing joint research groups dedicated to systematic theological studies is crucial. These groups should be equipped with sufficient human and financial resources, composed of experts suited to each topic, and committed to sustained and responsible research. The outcomes should be regularly reviewed, discussed, and disseminated through platforms such as ecumenical forums.

(4) Promotion of Collaborative Writing
Collaborative writing processes, as exemplified by the Group of Dombes, can foster collective understanding and agreement. This method ensures that consensus is built through active cooperation and shared reflection, rather than individual contributions.

(5) Unification of Theological Terminology
Unifying key theological terminology, starting with fundamental terms such as the name of God (cf. Son 2022, pp. 1–32), is a foundational step toward reducing misunderstandings and fostering a common language for dialogue.

By implementing these measures in a coordinated and sustained manner, Korean ecumenical dialogue can overcome its current limitations and contribute meaningfully to the global pursuit of Christian unity.

6. Conclusions: Implications of Korean Ecumenical Dialogue for Global Ecumenism and Mission

The relationship between Catholics and Protestants in Korea exhibits a complex dynamic characterized by both conflict and cooperation, with a significant gap in mutual understanding between the two traditions. This divide can be attributed to each denomination's focus on its own evangelization and church growth, which has fostered indifference and, at times, hostility toward one another.

Nevertheless, the ecumenical movement has not been absent from the Korean Church. Despite its relatively short history—240 years for Catholicism and 140 years for

Protestantism—the Korean Church has successfully translated and adopted key global ecumenical documents thanks to the dedicated efforts of a small number of scholars. Beyond merely adopting these resources, the Korean Church has demonstrated an openness to the directions of global ecumenical dialogue and has sought to contextualize these efforts within the Korean setting. Notably, initiatives promoting "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation" and social engagement inspired by the "face of the Servant Christ" stand out as achievements that deserve recognition.

However, significant limitations persist, particularly concerning doctrinal controversies, which remain the primary source of tension between Catholics and Protestants. Translated ecumenical dialogue documents have not been sufficiently utilized in educational or pastoral settings. The findings of this study reveal that even ecumenical dialogue participants often lack sufficient awareness of the achievements and insights of global ecumenical discussions and research. This has contributed to the perpetuation of negative perceptions and judgments between Catholics and Protestants and highlights the inherent challenges of integrating the outcomes of global ecumenical dialogue at the local church level. Even when global dialogues achieve a common understanding of doctrinal issues, if these agreements are not thoroughly understood and practically applied at the regional church level, the doctrinal disputes that have divided Catholics and Protestants since the 16th century are likely to persist.

The urgency to overcome these longstanding hostilities and misunderstandings has become even greater in light of Korean Protestantism's global missionary activities, which now extend to 174 countries. In some cases, Korean missionaries are perpetuating the same doctrinal misunderstandings and divisions that Western missionaries once brought to Korea. In this regard, a statement made by a Chinese delegate at the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference offers an important lesson: "You have sent us missionaries who made us know Jesus Christ, for which we thank you. But you have also brought us your divisions… Deliver us from all the 'isms' that afflict your preaching of the Gospel among us" (Desseaux 1983, p. 54). Unless Korean Catholics and Protestants resolve their mutual misunderstandings and divisions, they risk encountering similar appeals from their own mission fields.

The study has confirmed that Catholics and Protestants in Korea have engaged in sustained ecumenical dialogue for more than two decades, seriously addressing issues of doctrinal division since 2000. However, an analysis of dialogue materials from this period reveals that progress has been constrained by several factors, including insufficient scholarly research, inadequate engagement with global ecumenical developments, and ineffective dialogue methodologies. Moving forward, it is imperative that dialogue participants recognize the underlying causes of this stagnation and adopt the effective approaches proposed in the study to advance their efforts. Doing so would enable the fruits of global ecumenical efforts to be more effectively embraced by the Korean Church, fostering greater unity among Christians and contributing to meaningful changes in mission fields worldwide.

Ultimately, ecumenical dialogue holds immense significance both domestically and globally. It fosters mutual understanding by addressing the doctrinal conflicts that hinder unity, and promotes social cohesion. In a globalized world where Korean missionaries play an increasingly active role, ecumenical dialogue is essential not only for the credibility of the Korean Church but also for its meaningful contribution to the global ecumenical movement.

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Notes

1 The rapid growth of Protestantism has been the subject of numerous studies. For various analyses, see Sung-Deuk Oak (2016), "Protestantism Comes East: The Korean Case," in *Protestantism after 500 Years*, ed. Mark K. Noll (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 228–257.

2 Jaeshik Shin (2022), "A Critical Reflection on the Ecumenical Movement in Korean Churches," *Religion and Culture* 42: 131–167; Kyo Seong Ahn (2024), "The Main Trends of the Ecumenical Movement in Korea: Focus on 5 Periods" (text presented at the 10th-anniversary ceremony of the Faith and Order Commission of Korea). These two articles summarize the key points of the history of the Christian movement in Korea and discuss the ecumenical movement among the various denominations of Korean Protestantism, which is not covered in this article.

3 The following study is noteworthy: Mina Kim (2020), "Seeking Solidarity between Protestant and Catholic Churches for Social Justice in Korea: The Case of the Korea Christian Action Organization for Urban Industrial Mission (Saseon) (1976–1989)," *Religions* 11–6: 1–13.

4 The documents of the Ecumenical Forum, initiated in 2000, are compiled in two volumes titled *That They May Be One*. The first volume covers documents from 2000 to 2009 (published in 2010, 530 pages), and the second volume includes documents from 2010 to 2019, *That They May Be One II* (published in 2020, 378 pages). Additionally, the documents from the Ecumenical Academy, launched in 2015, are published under the title *The Theological Dialogue of Christians* (published in 2019, 424 pages).

5 For information on Henri Vacquerel, see the following source: *Catholic World* 145 (Paulist Fathers 1937), no. 865, p. 479.

6 Cf. Y. Congar (1983), *Martin Luther, sa foi, sa réforme*, 7. Congar describes how 19th- and 20th-century Catholic theologians disparaged Luther; he notes that the person and life of Luther were characterized as mediocre by Denifle, pathological by Grisar, and subjective by Maritain.

7 The term "reunification" reflects the Catholic understanding of the unity of the Church as found in the encyclical *Mortalium Animos* (1928), which states that the unity of the Churches consists in the return of the separated to the Catholic Church. Today, the CBCK has replaced it with "unification".

8 The translation of the name of the Christian God adopted by the Ecumenical Bible Translation Committee was *Hanŭnim* (하느님), which combines "Heaven" with an honorific suffix and is a traditionally used divine name in Korea. At the time the Ecumenical Bible Translation project began, the Catholic Church used *Ch'ŏnju* (천주, "Lord of Heaven"), while the Protestant Church used *Hananim* (하나님). The origin of this Protestant term can be traced back to John Ross's translation. In the project for the first Korean translation of the New Testament, partially completed in 1882 and fully completed in 1887, John Ross chose the Korean term "*Hananim* (하나님)" as the translation for God. This term was originally derived from a northern dialect meaning "heaven". However, during the publication of the ecumenical translations of the New Testament in 1971 and the Old Testament in 1977, the term *Hanŭnim* (하느님) was adopted. Indeed, according to the Korean orthography at that time, *Hana* (하나) was used to mean the numeral "one". Consequently, the ecumenical Bible translations opted for *Hanŭnim* (하느님), which reflects the original meaning of "heaven" intended by Ross's use of *Hananim* (하나님).

9 The original text was published in 1973, and the Korean translation was released under the title "Hanain midŭm" (하나인 믿음) in 1979.

10 The Yushin dictatorship refers to the authoritarian regime of South Korean President Park Chung-hee, following the implementation of the Yushin Constitution in October 1972. The Yushin (meaning "revitalization" or "restoration") Constitution granted Park virtually unlimited powers, allowing him to extend his presidency indefinitely, dissolve the National Assembly, and heavily suppress political opposition and civil liberties.

11 *Unitatis Redintegratio* 12: "Comme de nos jours la collaboration dans le domaine social est largement pratiquée, tous les hommes sans exception sont appelés à l'action commune.[…] La collaboration de tous les chrétiens entre eux exprime de façon vivante l'union qui existe déjà entre eux, et fait paraître le visage du Christ Serviteur dans une lumière plus pleine." See *Le Concile Vatican II. Édition intégrale définitive* (Winling 2003), p. 199.

12 It is worth noting that there is a gap between balanced theology and the representation in the minds of the faithful.

13 *Le Catéchisme de Heidelberg. Au cœur de l'identité réformée* (Léchot 2013), Introduction de Pierre-Olivier Léchot, tr. P. Fraenkel, O. Fatio, M. Hoegger, P.-D. Nicole et C. Rapin (Geneva: Labor et fides), pp. 89–90: "Le Catéchisme de Heidelberg joua, jusqu'à très récemment, un rôle fondamental dans le devenir des Églises protestantes de France et de la Suisse francophone." See also *Ibid*. p. 7. The preface of this book notes that the Heidelberg Catechism has played a fundamental role in the French Protestant and French-speaking Swiss Protestant communities up to recent times. The interpretation presented in this text, which views the Catholic Mass as a denial of the unique sacrifice of Jesus, remains widely accepted among Korean Protestants to this day.

[14] Hyung-Ki Lee is a Protestant theologian who has significantly contributed to the study and teaching of ecumenical theology, presenting the current state of research and theological dialogue within the World Council of Churches (WCC). Meanwhile, Archbishop Ambrosios of the Korean Orthodox Church discusses the ecumenical movement from an Orthodox perspective, and Catholic priest Sung-Tae Kim outlines the history of the ecumenical movement in the Catholic Church. He also analyzes key WCC documents that have led to some consensus or differentiated consensus, such as the Lima Document and the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.

[15] A. Birmelé (1999), «Notre différence est désormais reconnue légitime», *La Croix*, 29 October, 1999, p. 12. Cited by Bernard Sesboüé (2009), *Sauvés par la grâce. Les débats sur la justification du XVIe siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Editions Facultés Jésuites de Paris), p. 237.

[16] The result of their research can be found in this book: *Les anathèmes du XVIe siècle sont-ils encore actuels? Les condamnations doctrinales du concile de Trente et des Réformateurs justifient-elles encore la division de nos Églises ?* (Documents des Églises, Paris: Cerf, 1989).

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The Rise of Religious Nones and Its Impact on Interreligious Dialogue: Examining "Religious Literacy" and "Meditation" as Mediating Mechanisms

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Abstract: As interactions between Eastern and Western religions increase, "interreligious dialogue (IRD)" has become more prevalent. This study investigates the evolving religious landscape of South Korea, shaped by the growing presence of "religious nones" (or simply "nones"), through the framework of IRD. Since the 1960s, IRD in South Korea has been predominantly led by Christian institutions and facilitated by experts, such as theologians and religious studies scholars. However, the rise of the nones is driving a profound shift in the dialogic paradigm. The traditional intellectual approach, which focused on identifying doctrinal similarities, is shifting toward an emphasis on practical dimensions, including personal religious experiences and the concept of salvation. In this shifting context, "religious literacy" and "meditation" are emerging as crucial points of convergence, not only for IRD but also for interactions between the religious and the nones. While the growing presence of the nones may initially lead to confusion and conflict, it has the potential, in the long run, to foster religious coexistence. South Korea serves as a notable case illustrating how IRD can open new pathways in the realm of praxis. Religious literacy enhances understanding and promotes a tolerant attitude toward the broader social relationships that religion cultivates, while meditation provides a shared platform for dialogue and engagement at the societal level. In this regard, Korea presents a particularly compelling case study, offering a critical examination of the feasibility of these possibilities.

Keywords: Korean religion; religious nones; interreligious dialogue; religious literacy; meditation

1. The Rise of Religious Nones and Its Implications for "Interreligious Dialogue (IRD)"

Encountering different religious traditions naturally raises the question: "In what ways are religions similar or different?" This inquiry is central to the academic field of the Comparative Study of Religion, which systematically examines the similarities and differences among diverse religious traditions. While encounters between religions can sometimes be sources of tension, they also present important opportunities for mutual enrichment. Historical evidence consistently demonstrates that religious differences have frequently escalated into conflicts.

Dialogue serves as a constructive means of encounter, developing deeper mutual understanding among religions and promoting peaceful coexistence. In the modern era, active exchanges between Eastern and Western religious traditions have spurred increased efforts in interreligious dialogue (IRD). In South Korea, where multiple religions coexist vibrantly, engagement in IRD has rapidly expanded since the 1960s (Yun 1999, pp. 22–27).

However, contemporary Korea is undergoing an unprecedented shift, with the proportion of individuals identifying as non-religious now exceeding half of the national population. Those unaffiliated with any religious organization are referred to by various terms, including "non-religious", "religious nones", "nones", and "religiously unaffiliated." Despite this significant demographic transformation, scholarly research on the impact of nones on IRD, religious conflicts, and coexistence remains limited, both in South Korea and globally.

The rise of the nones raises critical questions regarding their role in IRD and their impact on religious conflicts and coexistence. This paper explores these central issues, specifically analyzing how the growing presence of nones in South Korea may reconstruct the religious landscape within the framework of IRD. As South Korea experiences an ongoing trend of deepening secularization, these questions become increasingly pressing, offering essential insights into both the present and future religious dynamics of the nation. Historically, IRD in South Korea has been primarily driven by an intellectual approach that emphasized doctrinal commonalities among religious traditions. More recently, however, attention has shifted toward practical dimensions such as personal religious experiences and the notion of salvation. Within this evolving framework, "religious literacy" and "meditation" have emerged as important mediating concepts, with the potential to foster communication between religious adherents and nones and to mitigate religious conflict. South Korea offers a compelling case that illustrates these changing dynamics.

Despite the growing visibility of nones, empirical studies investigating whether they constitute a coherent or internally homogeneous group remain scarce. Moreover, few academic works have addressed how the rise of the nones may systematically reshape traditional IRD, influence patterns of interaction between religious and non-religious individuals, or affect broader conditions of peaceful coexistence. To address these gaps, this study adopts a twofold methodological approach. First, it presents a quantitative analysis of demographic trends and shifts in religious affiliation based on available statistical data. Second, it engages in a literature-based examination of the identity and diversity of the religious nones, drawing on relevant academic publications including journal articles and monographs. In addition, the study analyzes the historical development and dialogical modes of IRD in South Korea, alongside the increasing significance of religious literacy and meditation as emerging points of engagement. Ultimately, this research aims to lay the groundwork for future empirical investigations involving case studies, interviews, and participant observation.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 examines the history of IRD efforts in South Korea, situating them within the context of South Korea's pluralistic religious landscape. It explores how South Korea's dialogue initiatives have been shaped by global trends and highlights the rapid growth of religious nones as a crucial factor. Sections 3 and 4 analyze the transformations brought about by the emergence of nones, particularly in relation to the agents, content, objectives, and methods of IRD. These sections argue that future IRD must necessarily include nones and propose "religious literacy" and "meditation" as potential bridging mechanisms. Religious literacy equips community members with knowledge and fosters inclusive attitudes toward different religions, while meditation offers a shared experiential foundation, facilitating not only traditional interreligious interactions but also engagements between the religious and the nones. Finally, Section 5 assesses the potential short-term and long-term impacts of the nones on religious conflict and coexistence in Korea.

2. South Korea's Multi-Religious Context and Interreligious Dialogue (IRD)

IRD encompasses interactions among individuals engaged in religious discourse, focused on religious themes, and pursued for various purposes, including persuasion, conversion, and mutual understanding. This paper conceptualizes IRD specifically as a communicative endeavor grounded in mutual understanding among equal participants, with the ultimate goal of promoting coexistence. Consequently, interactions primarily driven by persuasion or conversion, or those that incite conflict, cannot be considered as genuine dialogue. Moreover, authentic dialogue presupposes encounters among religiously diverse individuals, making it feasible only within or between communities marked by religious plurality. In this context, South Korea, with its dynamic and multi-religious society, serves as an ideal setting for IRD.

2.1. South Korea's Multi-Religious Context

In South Korea, various religious traditions have actively coexisted for an extended period (Baker 2008). While certain religions have dominated at different historical junctures, Eastern traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, alongside Western traditions like Catholicism and Protestantism, have been widely practiced. Shamanism has also maintained a long-standing presence, and numerous indigenous religions, including *Cheondogyo*, *Won* Buddhism, and *Jeungsangyo*, emerged in the modern era. South Korea's ability to sustain harmonious coexistence among various religious traditions without major conflicts represents a unique case in religious history. The following three defining features of Korea's multi-religious landscape serve as critical frameworks for understanding IRD.

Practical Religious Diversity. During the *Unified Silla* (676–935) and *Goryeo* (918–1392) periods, Buddhism was the dominant religion, whereas Confucianism became predominant during the *Joseon* Dynasty (1392–1910). However, even in these eras, multiple religious traditions, including shamanism, coexisted without instances of extreme violence.[1] Since the introduction of Christianity in the 19th century, South Korea has evolved into a fully multi-religious society, with no single dominant religion comparable to Christianity in Europe or Islam in the Middle East. Additionally, although precisely measuring the number of adherents is difficult due to low levels of institutional organization, Confucianism and shamanism continue to exert considerable influence in the country (Kang 1997, pp. 87–118). In summary, South Korea exemplifies vibrant religious diversity (J.-S. Kim 2000, pp. 43–44).

Balanced Distribution of Eastern and Western Religions. South Korea demonstrates a balanced integration of both Eastern and Western religious traditions. According to *the 2015 Population and Housing Census*, Protestants accounted for 19.7% of the population (9,676,000), followed by Buddhists at 15.5% (7,619,000) and Catholics at 7.9% (3,890,000) (Korea Statistical Office 2015). Similarly, a 2021 Gallup Korea survey reported that Protestants comprised 17% of the population, Buddhists 16%, and Catholics 6% (Gallup Korea 2022). The relatively balanced presence of Christianity from the West alongside Buddhism from the East is globally rare, presenting unique challenges for interreligious encounters and dialogue. The "balanced distribution" of religions in Korea developed gradually over an extended period, making it difficult to identify a single definitive cause. Nevertheless, it can be understood as the outcome of rapid social transformations since the nineteenth century, during which Catholicism and Protestantism expanded by offering forms of social consolation within a society where Confucianism and Buddhism had long been established as traditional belief systems. For example, Sung-Deuk Oak emphasizes that Protestantism

took root successfully by actively seeking "points of contact" between the Christian gospel and Korean cultural traditions (Oak 2013, pp. xvi–xviii).

A High Degree of Religious Freedom. As a multi-religious society, South Korea strongly upholds religious freedom. Although the late *Joseon* period (19th century) witnessed governmental persecution of Catholicism (Baker 2008, pp. 64–70), major religious conflicts have been rare in Korean history.[2] Today, South Koreans experience minimal social pressure when converting to a different religion or choosing to become nones, and families often include members with diverse religious affiliations. This high degree of religious freedom, characterized by flexible conversion and disaffiliation, has contributed to a highly competitive religious landscape in South Korea.

2.2. The History of Interreligious Dialogue (IRD) in South Korea

IRD is profoundly influenced by participants' perceptions and attitudes toward the similarities and differences among religions. Overemphasizing similarities in dialogue risks overlooking the distinct characteristics of each religion, whereas hyper-focusing on differences may hinder meaningful communication. Effective dialogue requires participants to transcend stereotypes and prejudices toward religious others, fostering mutual respect and openness. The historical trajectory of IRD has been a complex and ongoing pursuit to establish and reaffirm these essential conditions.

IRD gained prominence in the West from the 1960s onward, initially spearheaded by Christian initiatives. Notably, the Catholic Church's *Second Vatican* Council (1963–1965) and the establishment of the Ecumenical Dialogue Department by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1960 were pivotal developments (K.-J. Kim 2014, pp. 64–72). Historically, Christianity upheld an exclusivist stance, encapsulated in the phrase "*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the Church)." However, increasing interreligious encounters strengthened inclusivist approaches, such as Karl Rahner's concept of "anonymous Christians", which sought to incorporate other religious traditions within a dogmatic and inner-Christian framework (Rahner 1966, pp. 115–34). Eventually, pluralist perspectives emerged, recognizing the intrinsic value of different religions. John Hick was a leading proponent of this view, shifting dialogue frameworks from "Christ-centered" to "God-centered", and ultimately to "Reality-centered" paradigms (Hick 1985).

However, Hick's pluralist approach has been criticized for minimizing religious differences by interpreting diverse religious traditions as various culturally conditioned responses to the same Ultimate Reality. Critics argue that this perspective insufficiently respects the distinctive features of individual traditions, effectively reinterpreting them through the lens of a Western Enlightenment worldview. Such an approach, they contend, reflects an implicit universalism that imposes externally derived frameworks onto non-Western religions (Cobb 1982; Apczynski 1992). This tendency raises concerns that core aspects of certain traditions—such as the non-theistic orientation of Buddhism or the polytheistic elements of Hinduism—may be overlooked or misunderstood. Furthermore, Hick's model tends to center dialogue on institutionalized religion and metaphysical concepts like Ultimate Reality, making it ill-suited to address the perspectives of religious nones and other non-religious worldviews that are increasingly prevalent in contemporary societies. This represents a significant limitation of his framework in today's pluralistic and secular contexts.

In essence, attitudes toward IRD can be broadly categorized as exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist (Hick 1985, pp. 31–34; Han 1992, pp. 37–71). Understanding these categories is crucial for comprehending the complex dynamics of interreligious interactions.

In South Korea, IRD has closely mirrored global trends. While Korea has long maintained a multi-religious environment, systematic dialogue began in earnest in the 1960s,

initially led by Christian theologians such as Nam-dong Seo, Seon-hwan Byun, Dong-sik Yu, Kyung-jae Kim, and Jung-bae Lee, among others (Han 1992, pp. 37–71; J.-B. Lee 2007, pp. 46–47). Scholars of religious studies, including Hee-sung Gil, Yi-heum Yoon, and Jong-seo Kim, also played an active role in promoting dialogue (J.-S. Kim 2000, pp. 33–48; Gil 2002, pp. 1–28). Although Buddhist scholars such as Ki-young Lee and Yong-pyo Kim participated in dialogue, the movement was predominantly led by Christians (K.-Y. Lee 1990, pp. 207–26; Y.-P. Kim 2011, pp. 71–80). Buddhism's relatively passive approach has been attributed to institutional exclusivism, Christianity's assertive missionary strategies and unilateral attitudes, and a general lack of knowledge about other religions (C.-S. Lee 2009, pp. 46–47).[3] The dialogue movement was largely shaped by the fact that nearly all theologians and religious scholars engaged in IRD had studied abroad, predominantly in the West. Even Buddhist scholars actively involved in the movement often had international academic experience.

In addition to intellectual dialogue efforts in theology, comparative religion, and Buddhist studies, distinctive practical movements emerged from a spiritual perspective to bridge religious differences. Figures such as Young-mo Yu, Seok-heon Ham, Heung-ho Kim, Hyun-ju Lee, and Ho-kyung Jeong sought a common foundation beyond religious boundaries through meditative and spiritual practices (C.-S. Lee 2009, pp. 65–68). These individuals aimed to transcend religious divides through profound spiritual experiences cultivated in personal religious practice. Such practice-oriented approaches continue to influence IRD efforts today.

In South Korea, IRD has mostly involved the country's two largest religions, Christianity and Buddhism, with the central goal of encouraging peaceful coexistence. Dialogue has often been pursued from a pluralistic perspective, emphasizing that mutual understanding enriches each religious tradition. These dialogues have largely been dominated by theologians and religious scholars with extensive academic expertise, while most clergy and lay believers have rarely participated. Moreover, conservative religious groups have strongly opposed pluralistic dialogue initiatives from an exclusivist standpoint. The expulsion of Methodist theologian Seon-hwan Byun in 1992, who actively promoted dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity, exemplifies the conflicts surrounding these interreligious efforts (Shim 2001, pp. 297–319). The South Korean IRD movement has experienced a notable decline since the 1990s, primarily due to its limitation as an intellectual effort facilitated by a small group of specialists and the rapid transformation of South Korea's religious landscape, particularly driven by the rise of nones, among others.

2.3. Changing Religious Landscape and the Rise of Nones in South Korea

Since the 2000s, South Korea's religious landscape has undergone meaningful transformations. Importantly, interactions with Islam, which had previously been minimal, have noticeably increased. This shift can be attributed to various sociopolitical factors, including the influx of international students, labor migration, intermarriage, and political asylum, all contributing to a substantial rise in the Muslim population. As a result, instances of social tension have emerged, such as the controversy surrounding the construction of an Islamic Mosque in *Daegu* (Chi 2023) and the debates over the arrival of Yemeni refugees on *Jeju* Island (Ko 2018). Simultaneously, evangelical Protestantism has adopted an increasingly fundamentalist stance on political and social issues, including homosexuality, thereby exacerbating religiously motivated tensions and conflicts (Kang 2020). Furthermore, the missionary activities and religious practices of newly emerging Protestant sects, such as "the Christian Gospel Mission (commonly known as JMS)" and *Shincheonji*, have had ongoing and profound social repercussions (Roh 2013; Seo 2024). In sum, religiously driven societal conflicts have intensified in contemporary South Korea.

Concurrently, the number of nones has risen rapidly. The global trend of increasing irreligiosity is evident, with the proportion of nones rising from 11.77% in 2007 to 16% in 2015 (Pew Research Center 2017). In the United States, the prevalence of nones reached 26% in 2023 (PRRI 2024). In South Korea, the growth rate of the nones has been even more pronounced. According to the Korean Statistical Office's Population and Housing Census, the share of nones increased from 46.9% in 2005 to 56.1% in 2015 (Korea Statistical Office 2015). Similarly, a Gallup Korea study reported an increase from 46.5% in 2004 to 50% in 2014 and 61% in 2021 (Gallup Korea 2022). A noteworthy generational disparity exists in religious affiliation: as of 2021, while 41% of individuals aged 60 and older identified as nones, this proportion surged to 78% among those in their teens and twenties.

However, as scholars have pointed out, nones in South Korea do not constitute a homogeneous group with a unified identity (Kang 1997, pp. 107–13; Woo 2016, pp. 43–46; H.-J. Choi 2019, pp. 14–17). According to Gallup Korea, in 2021, 23% of nones believed in the existence of the soul after death, while 45% accepted the concept of miracles (Gallup Korea 2022). A study conducted by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism in the same year similarly found that 24.4% of nones acknowledged the afterlife, and 34.9% accepted the existence of supernatural beings (The Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism 2022). While the common characteristic among nones is their lack of affiliation with institutionalized religion, this does not necessarily imply adherence to a materialist worldview. Rather, their identities remain highly complex.[4]

The rapid transformation of South Korea's religious landscape, driven by the growing number of nones, has significantly curtailed IRD. Additionally, heightened tensions stemming from the influx of Muslim immigrants, the aggressive proselytization by new religious movements, and the increasing fundamentalist tendencies within religious groups have further intensified societal conflicts. Paradoxically, in a context where religious authority is diminishing and the population of nones is expanding, the need for IRD has become even more pressing. Nevertheless, the growing majority of nones and their multifaceted identities suggest that traditional approaches to IRD may no longer be viable.

3. The Shift in Dialogue Paradigm and "Religious Literacy"

The growing number of nones is profoundly reshaping South Korea's religious landscape across multiple dimensions. If this trend continues, the decline of institutional religions will become inevitable. The expanding presence of the nones is not only limiting IRD but is also poised to fundamentally redefine its paradigm—including its participants, content, objectives, and methods.

3.1. Agents, Objectives, and Themes of IRD

In South Korea, IRD has traditionally been conducted by individuals directly engaged in religious scholarship and theological discourse, including Christian theologians, scholars of religion, Buddhist academics, clergy, and a select group of devout practitioners. However, the fact that nones now constitute a majority necessitates a fundamental reconfiguration of the agents of dialogue. The inclusion of nones as active participants is imperative. A discourse on religion that remains confined exclusively to religious affiliates can no longer retain its societal relevance if it systematically excludes the perspectives of the nones.

The diversification of dialogue participants brings about a corresponding transformation in both its objectives and thematic scope. Traditionally, IRD aimed to facilitate peaceful coexistence among religious communities by promoting an understanding of doctrinal commonalities and differences. However, contemporary discourse must extend beyond interreligious considerations to engage with the multifaceted intersections between reli-

gion and society. Core issues now include resolving personal and societal conflicts related to religious identity, formulating ethical and practical standards for religious practice, examining the evolving social functions of religious institutions, assessing the public utility of religious infrastructure and heritage, and addressing other related concerns.

The dispute over the construction of a mosque in *Daegu*, along with the societal disruptions caused by the controversial proselytization strategies and religious practices of emerging Protestant sects, began as intrareligious or doctrinal disputes but soon extended into broader concerns, such as urban planning and immigration policy. In an era of heightened social interconnectivity, religious conflicts increasingly produce immediate and far-reaching impacts on entire communities. Consequently, in a sociocultural landscape where the non-religious demographic continues to grow, IRD must be reframed to prioritize mitigating religion's potential societal externalities while simultaneously maximizing its constructive contributions to the public sphere.

In South Korea, both central and local governments are expected to act as key participants in IRD. Since the post-liberation period, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism has been responsible for various administrative functions intended to encourage peaceful religious coexistence. These functions include facilitating dialogue and exchanges among religious leaders. The Religious Affairs Office currently implements state-funded initiatives to prevent religious discrimination and administers policies for the preservation and maintenance of Buddhist temples under the framework of cultural heritage conservation (Seong 2024, pp. 19–21). Given that nones now make up a majority, the Religious Affairs Office must justify the allocation of public funds for temple preservation under a framework distinct from previous rationales. Similarly, initiatives designed to prevent religious discrimination must be expanded beyond their current focus on central and local government officials and educators to cover a broader range of occupational sectors across society. Furthermore, the educational content of such initiatives must explicitly affirm that nones have the right to refrain from religious belief and that this right must be upheld and protected across all domains of social life.

3.2. Interreligious Dialogue (IRD) and "Religious Literacy"

Changes in the agents and objectives of dialogue are bound to bring about shifts in both its content and methods as well. Traditionally, the primary modes of IRD have included panel discussions, academic presentations, the publication of research papers and monographs, and interfaith gatherings. Notable institutions that have contributed to facilitating such dialogues include the Korea Dialogue Academy and the Korean Conference of Religions for Peace (KCRP), both of which have been at the forefront of cultivating interfaith engagement in South Korea.[5] The shared goals of these organizations have been to promote an understanding of religious differences from a pluralistic perspective, facilitate interreligious exchanges, and encourage the peaceful coexistence of a variety of religious traditions. In the contemporary context, enhancing "religious literacy" among all members of society—regardless of their religious affiliation or lack thereof—has become essential for advancing social cohesion and improving individual well-being.

Within this evolving context, the concept of religious literacy has gained increasing significance. Religious literacy is defined as "the ability to understand the religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, themes, and stories that are employed in (American) public life" (Prothero 2020, p. 17). This concept emerged within the field of religious studies, grounded in the recognition that knowledge about religion nurtures attitudes of inclusivity and tolerance. Importantly, religious literacy is not intended to cultivate personal faith or religious devotion (Marcus and Ralph 2021, pp. 22–25). Rather, it serves as a foundational tool for navigating religious diversity in pluralistic so-

cieties. Religious literacy can also enhance traditional IRD, as engagement in such dialogue has been shown to actively reinforce attitudes of tolerance and inclusion (Ciocan 2024, pp. 526–39). In this way, religious literacy and IRD create a mutually reinforcing cycle that encourages greater religious tolerance. In South Korea, one of the most frequently cited obstacles to effective interfaith dialogue has been the lack of knowledge about other religious traditions (Gil 2000, pp. 25–26).

Religious knowledge is equally crucial for religious adherents. A comprehensive understanding of one's own religious tradition is not only a prerequisite for engaging in traditional IRD but also essential for creating meaningful interactions with nones. Uncritical certainty in one's own religion often instills a sense of superiority and exclusivist attitudes, thereby reducing dialogue and interaction to mere acts of persuasion or proselytization. In contrast, a more constructive approach to interreligious engagement requires "intra-religious dialogue", in which individuals deepen their understanding of their own faith before engaging with others. This process is essential to ensuring that IRD remains mutually enriching and free from coercive intentions (K.-J. Kim 1991, pp. 397–98).

Religious literacy equally contributes to the promotion of meaningful interactions between religious individuals and nones. A lack of religious understanding is often cited as the root cause of social prejudice and conflict, while enhanced religious literacy is seen as a pathway to greater social cohesion and civic inclusion (Jackson 2014). In secularized societies, religious literacy includes not only knowledge of religious beliefs and practices but also of atheistic value systems, thus serving as a tool for civic integration. It offers a shared platform for collaborative engagement across religious and non-religious communities, particularly in areas such as justice, peacebuilding, and environmental sustainability (Wright 2004). For example, the growing presence of Muslims in South Korea underscores the need for all members of society to acquire at least a basic understanding of Islam to cultivate greater cultural and religious tolerance.

Educational initiatives in this field aim to address the roles of both religious and secular perspectives in society from a neutral standpoint, thereby reducing mutual prejudice and laying a foundation for peaceful coexistence (Prothero 2008). Programs such as Harvard University's *Religious Literacy Project* have been recognized for fostering mutual understanding and easing social tensions in multicultural, multireligious contexts (Moore 2015). This emphasis on inclusive worldview comprehension in the public sphere aligns with Jürgen Habermas's call for dialogue within what he terms a "post-secular society" (Habermas 2008).

Building on this foundation, a range of practical strategies can be pursued. Above all, ensuring the neutrality of dialogue spaces and facilitators is essential. Expanded forms of IRD should be hosted in non-sectarian settings such as universities, public institutions, and civil society organizations. Facilitators should include not only religious leaders but also scholars of religion, sociologists, and other neutral actors. In addition, programs should be tailored to the diversity within the nones—for instance, meditation workshops may appeal to SBNRs (Spiritual But Not Religious), while initiatives focused on social justice may resonate with secular humanists or atheists. Finally, empirical and participatory research is needed to further demonstrate the value of including religious nones in expanded models of IRD and to develop effective practices for their engagement.

Additionally, the overwhelmingly high proportion of nones among younger generations makes them more vulnerable to exploitative or unethical missionary practices due to their limited exposure to religious knowledge and experience. In such instances, religious literacy can serve as an effective tool for addressing these challenges, equipping individuals with the knowledge necessary to engage with religion critically and constructively.

Thus, religious literacy should be integrated into civic education frameworks as a means of promoting the common good (Walker et al. 2021, pp. 1–16).

Contrary to common assumptions, a post-religious society—characterized by declining religious affiliation—entails an even greater societal awareness of religion and stronger commitments to tolerance. This need comes from the fact that, in an era of hyperconnectivity, where social exchanges have exponentially increased, religion remains a powerful force capable of intensifying conflicts. Moreover, the growing complexity of religious identity, fueled by the rise of nones, underscores the urgent need for a shared foundation for dialogue and engagement. Within this context, "meditation" as a spiritual practice is being re-evaluated and recognized as a potential bridge for fostering understanding across religious and non-religious divides.

4. The Potential of "Meditation" as a Common Ground

IRD in South Korea has not achieved great success. Religious traditions other than Christianity have generally been less involved in dialogue, and the number of active participants has remained limited. In fact, the IRD movement, which was relatively active in the 1960s, experienced a notable decline after the 1990s. The growing number of nones has further constrained the scope of IRD. Against this backdrop, meditation—a practice deeply embedded in various religious traditions—has emerged as a promising alternative framework for stimulating engagement (Y.-M. Song 2024, p. 52). The potential of meditation as a point of convergence in IRD, as well as in interactions between religious individuals and nones, is increasingly being recognized at multiple levels.

4.1. Establishing a Practical Common Ground

The attempt to establish a foundation for IRD through meditation has emerged multiple times both in South Korea and internationally. John Hick sought to create a universal common ground by shifting the dialogue from a "Christ-centered" perspective to a "God-centered" one. In response to critiques that his approach remained theistic, he later transitioned to a "Reality-centered" framework, emphasizing the practical dimension of salvation (Hick 1989, pp. 248–49). For Hick, salvation is not a singular event but an ongoing process of personal fulfillment (Hick 1989, pp. 300–1).[6] By highlighting the impact of religious experience on real-life practice, Hick identified meditation as a means of directly encountering "Ultimate Reality", the fundamental source of all religions (Hick 1983, p. 380). He argued that across religious traditions, Ultimate Reality is universally regarded as the object of both worship and meditation, thereby positioning meditation as a shared experiential foundation for IRD (Hick 1985, p. 249).

The "contemplative dialogue" proposed by Trappist monk Thomas Merton can be understood in a similar vein (Park 2024, pp. 59–105). Merton argued that meaningful engagement between religious traditions does not necessarily need to be grounded in doctrinal discussions but can instead be effectively facilitated through meditation and direct religious experience (Merton 1967, pp. 205–6). Merton actively engaged in various Eastern meditative traditions in an effort to integrate them with Catholic spiritual disciplines. Notably, while he initially held an exclusivist religious stance, his encounters and dialogues with Eastern religious traditions eventually led him toward a practical pluralism that sought spiritual fulfillment and salvation through contemplative practice. His approach exemplifies how meditation can serve as a transformative and integrative medium in interfaith engagement.

Similar approaches have also emerged in South Korea in the context of exploring the possibility of dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity (J.-Y. Lee 2005, pp. 167–84). Hee-sung Gil emphasized the necessity of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in South Korea

but acknowledged the significant theological differences—particularly regarding the concept of God—that made it difficult to establish a solid foundation for dialogue (Gil 2005, pp. 102–6). While Gil and other scholars recognized the pressing need for interreligious engagement, they also grappled with the challenge of bridging the doctrinal and philosophical divide between the two traditions. The breakthrough, however, was found in the personal experience and in the practice that enables such an experience—meditation (Byun 1982, pp. 153–79; Gil 2000, pp. 1–35; J.-B. Lee 2007, pp. 73–105; K.-J. Kim 2014, pp. 7–56). Since Buddhism has long emphasized meditation as a core spiritual practice, and Christianity has rediscovered its own mystical traditions, some scholars argue that a shared spiritual foundation can be found in their respective contemplative practices.

For this reason, Meister Eckhart, a medieval Catholic mystic often referred to as an "anonymous Buddhist" (Graham 1963) has garnered considerable attention in Korea. Scholars have highlighted the striking similarities between Eckhart's understanding of divinity and the Buddhist concept of "emptiness" (空, *Śūnyatā*). Additionally, Eckhart's emphasis on "self-emptying" (*Gelassenheit*) and "breakthrough" (*Durchbruch*) as essential aspects of the spiritual journey closely parallels Buddhist soteriological frameworks, positioning his mystical thought as a potential common ground for IRD (Byun 1990, pp. 358–59; Gil 2005, pp. 99–133; K.-J. Kim 2014, pp. 7–56). Thus, both the intellectual dimension—interpreting Ultimate Reality—and the practical dimension—mystical contemplation and spiritual practice—have been recognized as important points of convergence in Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

The intellectual endeavor to identify doctrinal commonalities from a universalist perspective has faced substantial criticism for overlooking the concrete differences among religious traditions (Cobb 1982; Apczynski 1992, p. 45). Such approaches have struggled to resonate with devout practitioners who uphold the absolute authority of their own religious doctrines. Thus, intellectual attempts to reconcile doctrinal differences have gradually shifted toward emphasizing individual religious experience and the practical dimension of salvation. This transition reflects a broader movement away from theoretical abstraction and toward a recognition of the tangible, positive effects of religion on human life. Within this context, the value of meditation has been rediscovered as a shared spiritual practice. Furthermore, as meditation becomes increasingly detached from its original religious frameworks, it has emerged as a significant point of convergence for both religious individuals and nones.

4.2. The Emergence of Meditation as a Common Ground

Recent trends in South Korean religion highlight the growing emphasis on individual engagement in meditation practices. A prominent example is the *Templestay* program, in which Buddhist temples offer laypeople the opportunity to experience traditional Buddhist practices, including meditation. Interestingly, the majority of participants join the program not with the intent of converting to Buddhism, but rather to seek physical and mental well-being through meditation.

Since the *Jogye* Order, the largest Buddhist sect in South Korea, first introduced the program in 2002, more than 6.4 million people have participated, with over half of them being non-Buddhists (Hanguk Munhwa Hongbowon [Korean Culture Promotion Service] 2022). Encouraged by the success of the *Templestay* program, the *Jogye* Order has expanded its approach beyond its traditional emphasis on *Ganhwa Seon* (看話禪, *Kanhua Chan*) meditation, incorporating elements from *Vipassana* meditation in *Theravāda* Buddhism as well as mindfulness meditation popularized in Western contexts (Y.-S. Song 2016, pp. 607–39). However, an ironic contrast underscores the shifting landscape of contemporary South Korean religion: while the *Templestay* program has enjoyed immense success, the number

of registered Buddhist adherents in South Korea has declined by approximately 3 million (H.-C. Jang 2018, pp. 191–93). This irony encapsulates a broader trend in South Korean religion, where interest in spiritual practices such as meditation is growing, even as institutional religious affiliation continues to decline.

In response to modern spiritual aspirations, South Korean Catholicism has recently undertaken efforts to revive its tradition of spiritual exercises (H.-J. Choi 2012, pp. 137–56). Historically, the mystical tradition within Catholicism, which emphasizes spiritual discipline and personal religious experience, has remained on the margins, often subjected to skepticism and suppression. However, in recent decades, Catholic initiatives to rediscover and revitalize mystical traditions have gained momentum, leading to the popularization of contemplative practices that were once exclusively practiced by monastic orders. *Centering Prayer*, which originates from the medieval text *the Cloud of Unknowing*, has gained particular prominence (Keating 2007; J.-H. Kim 2011). In Korea, *Ignatian Spiritual Exercises*, *Lectio Divina*, the *Jesus Prayer*, and other contemplative practices are now gradually spreading among the laity.

This trend reflects the growing contemporary inclination to seek physical and mental well-being, as well as existential meaning, through meditation—regardless of one's religious beliefs. Meditation is rapidly expanding across various sectors of South Korean society, including psychotherapy, medicine, education, and corporate training, signaling its transition beyond traditional religious boundaries. A prime example of this trend is the widespread adoption of "mindfulness" meditation, which has its roots in Buddhist *Vipassanā* but has been adapted for secular settings through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn. Since the 1970s, Kabat-Zinn's *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) program has introduced mindfulness into hospitals, schools, and corporate environments, enabling its use across diverse sociocultural contexts regardless of religious background (Kabat-Zinn 1990; Baer 2003; Brown and Ryan 2003). In parallel, the field of neuroscience has contributed empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of meditation in enhancing brain structure, cognitive function, and emotional regulation. These scientific findings have helped reduce cultural resistance to meditation and encouraged religious nones to adopt it as a tool for psychological well-being (Tang et al. 2015).

In an era marked by widespread stress and growing concerns over mental health, meditation has become a significant resource for stress management and the promotion of individual well-being (Creswell 2017). Recent research also suggests that meditation may foster prosocial emotions such as empathy and compassion (Goyal et al. 2014). Consequently, many individuals today engage in meditation not as a spiritual or religious act, but as a means of enhancing psychological health (Grossman et al. 2004), facilitating personal development and self-growth (Goleman and Davidson 2017), or deriving evidence-based practical benefits (Schmidt 2016). In response to this shift, forms of meditation that are perceived as religiously neutral—such as mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn 1990), Transcendental Meditation (Ospina et al. 2007), and breathing meditation (Tang et al. 2007)—have gained broad acceptance and application in both clinical and everyday settings.

The modern tendency to selectively adopt and utilize meditation as a means of enhancing adaptability to life's challenges is commonly categorized under the broad concept of "healing" (H.-R. Kim 2018, pp. 77–82). However, healing should not be hastily interpreted as the pursuit of a new form of religiosity, as the majority of nones do not engage in meditation with the intent of gaining religious insight or experiencing transcendence. Some nones deliberately seek to fulfill their spiritual aspirations through practices such as meditation while remaining outside institutionalized religious frameworks. This phenomenon is encapsulated by the *Spiritual But Not Religious* (SBNR) paradigm[7] and is also linked to mysticism, which emphasizes extraordinary states of consciousness and transfor-

mative experiences (Parsons 2022, pp. 79–92). From a religious studies perspective, such trends align with the argument that personal religious experience, rather than doctrinal systems or institutional structures, constitutes the core of religion (James 1902, p. 36).

Korean religious traditions have long emphasized the significance of personal experience acquired through spiritual practice. In the modern era, South Koreans—regardless of their religious background—continue to selectively adopt and utilize various meditative and contemplative techniques according to their needs (Woo 2008, pp. 36–44). This strongly suggests that meditation can serve as a vital conduit for engagement between religious and nones in South Korea. This idea resonates with the religious approaches of figures such as Young-mo Ryu, Seok-heon Ham, and Heung-ho Kim, who sought to integrate personal spiritual experiences across different religious traditions through contemplative practices (C.-S. Lee 2009, pp. 65–68). The success of the *Templestay* program not only reflects a longstanding trajectory in Korean religious history but also reinforces the notion that meditation has the potential to serve as a common ground for both religious individuals and nones.

5. Conclusions: The Nones, Religious Literacy, and Meditation

The rise of nones in South Korea has emerged as a critical factor in reshaping both IRD and the overall religious landscape. How does the increasing presence of the nones influence religious conflict and coexistence in South Korea? In the short term, negative effects are anticipated. Some religious groups have responded to the rise of the nones by adopting strategies of heightened distinctiveness. Conservative Protestantism, perceiving religious disaffiliation as an existential threat, has sought to reinforce internal cohesion by adopting fundamentalist stances on political and social issues. Notable examples include recent anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-Muslim movements. Additionally, some new religious movements, aiming to attract the growing non-religious demographic, have engaged in aggressive proselytization, further exacerbating social tensions.

These responses not only undermine IRD but also unnecessarily escalate competition and conflict among religious groups. Furthermore, such trends risk damaging the public perception of religion, potentially accelerating the growth of the nones and creating a vicious cycle of religious disaffiliation. The response of South Korean Protestant churches to COVID-19 provides empirical evidence of this phenomenon. Conflicts between certain churches and the government over restrictions on in-person worship, as well as the role of church gatherings in superspreading events, contributed to a decline in public trust in Protestantism and a decrease in its adherents (Seong 2021, pp. 112–19).[8]

In a highly competitive religious marketplace, a negative public image can be detrimental to the sustainability and growth of religious traditions. Contemporary individuals—characterized by high levels of education and a strong awareness of individual rights—are more critical of religion than ever before. Moreover, South Korea's tradition of peaceful religious coexistence remains strong.[9] As nones surpass the majority threshold, this trend is expected to further reinforce the stability of religious coexistence. In other words, in the long term, the expansion of the non-religious demographic is likely to serve as a powerful force in nurturing interreligious harmony.

Sociological research suggests that the rise of the nones is prompting religious communities to reassess their roles in society and to engage in dialogue and cooperation with greater openness. In her analysis of the growing number of nones in the United Kingdom, Linda Woodhead argues that this demographic shift is compelling religious institutions and believers to reconsider their social identities and responsibilities. She anticipates that the emergence of religious nones will lead religious actors to recognize new social realities and adopt a more inclusive and dialogical stance (Woodhead 2016). Similarly, Steve

Bruce contends that the broader secularization process—marked by the declining influence of religion in modern society—is a major factor encouraging religious individuals to re-evaluate their engagement with the public sphere. He suggests that the diminished social authority of religion can serve as a catalyst for religious communities to adopt more open and cooperative approaches to intergroup relations (Bruce 2011).

Hans Küng famously stated: "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions" (Küng 1991, p. 31). However, the emergence of religious fundamentalism intertwined with political extremism in South Korea demonstrates that even in a post-religious society, religion can still serve as a source of conflict or worsen pre-existing societal tensions. As communities become more heterogenous and fragmented—particularly with the rise of distinct religious and non-religious identity groups—the potential for social discord increases alongside religious diversity. In an era of hyperconnectivity, where differences in religious identity can easily escalate into conflict, the need to transform these differences into opportunities for dialogue, coexistence, and mutual development has become more urgent than ever.

The shifting religious landscape of South Korea suggests that IRD can achieve new breakthroughs at a practical level. Religious literacy enhances understanding of and tolerance toward the broader societal functions of religion, while meditation can serve as a shared experiential platform that promotes engagement and dialogue across religious and secular communities. Unprecedented changes are unfolding at a rapid pace, making it challenging to predict the outcomes with clarity. However, South Korea can be a crucial testing ground for these possibilities, offering a compelling case study that not only illustrates the evolving role of religion in modern society but also provides valuable insights into its future role in cultivating social harmony.

Nevertheless, these findings should be considered in light of certain limitations. This research does not yet provide a systematic analysis of the historical, social, and religious factors underlying Korea's "balanced distribution" of Eastern and Western traditions, nor does it clearly link the rapid rise of Protestantism to the claim that the growth of nones is reshaping IRD. The diversity within nones (e.g., unbelief, disaffiliation, spirituality-seeking) remains largely unexamined. Future research will differentiate these subtypes through primary and secondary sources, empirical surveys, and targeted cross-national comparisons, thereby clarifying underlying mechanisms and offering practical implications for IRD in contemporary Korea.

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Notes

[1] Indeed, during the *Joseon* dynasty, Confucianism was institutionalized as the dominant state ideology, leading to the systematic suppression of other religious traditions. Buddhism was marginalized through measures such as temple closures and the confiscation of temple properties (J.-S. Choi 1994). Shamanism was similarly stigmatized as superstition, although it continued persist widely in popular religious practices (Yoo 1985). The introduction of Catholicism in the late eighteenth century further heightened religious tensions; its rejection of Confucian ancestral rites was perceived as a direct challenge to established social norms, resulting in severe state-led persecution.

[2] Although Korean Protestantism achieved remarkable growth for various reasons during Korea's modernization process from the late 19th century onward (Pak 2002; S.-H. Jang 2018), it also faced significant challenges similar to those encountered by Korean Catholicism. Under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), Protestantism suffered severe suppression due to its close ties to nationalist resistance movements. Major oppressive policies included mandatory participation in *Shinto* shrine worship, the imprisonment of Christian leaders involved in independence activities following the March First Movement of 1919, censorship of religious publications, and forced organizational restructuring under colonial authority (H.-S. Kim 1994). Furthermore, Protestantism underwent severe persecution under the socialist regime established in North Korea after liberation (T. S. Lee 2010, pp. 60–72). This repression, coupled with the large-scale migration of North Korean Protestants to the South, significantly contributed to shaping the staunchly anti-communist orientation of South Korean Protestantism in the years that followed.

[3] Kim Yong-pyo notes that Buddhism is exclusivist at the institutional level, inclusivist doctrinally, and pluralist at the experiential level (Y.-P. Kim 2000).

[4] The term "religious nones" refers to a sociological category encompassing individuals who do not identify with any particular religious tradition. This group includes atheists, agnostics, and those who self-identify as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNRs). In contrast, the concept of "the secular" denotes a condition or process in which religious authority and norms are marginalized or excluded from the public sphere. As articulated by Charles Taylor (2007), secularism primarily refers not to individual belief or affiliation but to the declining influence of religion in institutional, political, and societal domains. Meanwhile, the notion of "the post-religious" highlights a context in which traditional religious worldviews and institutions have significantly receded or lost their relevance in both social and personal life. This term is often used to describe the broader cultural shift away from institutional religion (Heelas and Woodhead 2005).

[5] The Korean Conference of Religions for Peace (KCRP) was established in 1986 and comprises seven major religious orders in South Korea, including Catholicism, Buddhism, and Protestantism. It is an organization dedicated to fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among different religious traditions in Korea. Its primary initiatives include IRD and cooperation projects, exchanges between South and North Korean religious communities, and international exchange programs. The Korea Dialogue Academy originated as the Christian Academy, founded in 1965 by Rev. Won-yong Kang to promote Christian engagement in social issues. In 2000, it was renamed the Korea Dialogue Academy, and it continues to implement various programs related to the role of religion in social participation, including IRD initiatives. (Korea Dialogue Academy, http://www.daemuna.or.kr/ko accessed on 14 August 2025).

[6] Similarly, Paul Knitter transitioned from a theory-centered approach to IRD to a practice-oriented perspective, emphasizing a "common goal" centered on the concept of salvation (Knitter 1988, pp. 185–87).

[7] The category "SBNRs"—those who identify as "spiritual but not religious"—refers to individuals who reject affiliation with institutional religious traditions while actively pursuing personal and inward forms of spirituality (Fuller 2001). SBNRs may be considered a subcategory of nones; however, the broader category of nones also includes atheists, agnostics, and others who do not engage in spiritual seeking. While the designation "religious none" is based on the absence of formal religious affiliation, SBNRs are defined by their proactive engagement in spiritual exploration and subjective experience, independent of institutional ties. In this sense, most SBNRs fall within the scope of the nones, but not all nones qualify as SBNRs. For instance, a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 35% of Protestants in the United States identified themselves as SBNRs (Pew Research Center 2017).

[8] A 2023 survey conducted by the Christian Ethics Movement of Korea (CEMK) further illustrates this trend. Among non-religious respondents, only 8.8% expressed trust in the words and actions of Protestants, while a mere 3.2% identified Protestantism as the most trustworthy religion. In contrast, Catholicism (17.5%) and Buddhism (12.2%) received higher trust ratings. However, the most common response was 'none' (56.4%), reflecting the growing secularization of South Korean society (Gidoggyo Yulli Silcheon Undong [the Christian Ethics Movent of Korea. CEMK] 2023), https://cemk.org/resource/29349/ (accessed on 14 August 2025).

[9] For instance, Gil claims that Confucian cultural foundations and democratic institutions are often cited as key mechanisms for preventing the escalation of religious conflicts (Gil 2002, pp. 24–25).

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The Intersections of Buddhism and Contemporary Korean Visual Culture

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Abstract

Religion has played a significant role in shaping social cohesion by providing stability and support that transcends the human capacity to resolve individual desires, aspirations, and concerns while contributing to national identity and unity. Religion has also become an inseparable element of human history, and the human desire to embody religious imagery has been with human history. Art has historically visualized the complex and subtle relationship between humans and religion directly and profoundly. In this way, religious works have provided a lens for examining how religious ideas permeate everyday life and influence cultural practices. This study explores how Buddhist philosophy and esthetics have influenced and coexisted in contemporary Korean artistic expression to emphasize the rich intersections between Buddhism and modern and contemporary Korean artworks. The concept of consilience, which refers to the integration of knowledge across diverse domains, aims to explain how Buddhist thought has transcended human conflict and promoted harmonious coexistence within Korean visual culture. The dynamic interplay between traditional Buddhist values and contemporary visual practices produces a rich cultural synthesis that highlights the importance of preserving Korea's artistic heritage and expands and fosters the development of global visual culture today.

Keywords: Buddhism; Korea; art; consilience; tradition; contemporaneity; Trans-Asian perspectives; Korean artists

1. Introduction

Throughout the long history of human existence on Earth, humans have expressed their desires in various ways in pursuit of safety, stability, and prosperity in life. They have recognized and further developed a transcendent being that can grant their wishes beyond human power. In this context, religion was born and developed naturally, and the religion that emerged due to human needs has been with people throughout human history. It shows how the various religions of the world today breathe and continue along with human history. Buddhism has become an inseparable element of Korean history among many religions, and the human desire to realize Buddhist religious images has been part of that history. In other words, art and visual culture have historically visualized the complex and subtle relationship between humans and Buddhism directly and profoundly. For centuries, works of art have served as essential tools for understanding religion's changing role and significance in society. In this way, Buddhist artworks have provided a lens through which to view how religious ideas permeate everyday life and influence cultural practices. However, their aspirations are manifested in more diverse forms in today's complex and varied society than in the past. As Buddhism was transmitted from India to East

Asia around the 4th century, China, Japan, and Korea exchanged Buddhist ideas with one another, and each country adopted various forms and represented them visually. This study aims to analyze how this long history has continued to the present day, using specific examples of contemporary Korean visual art to investigate the exchange between Buddhism and art. The rich intersections between Buddhism and contemporary Korean visual culture allow us to explore how Buddhist philosophy and esthetics have influenced and coexisted in contemporary Korean artistic expression.

First, to enhance understanding, this study briefly deals with the historical background of Korean Buddhism and discusses how Buddhism has been established and coexisted with Korean culture, especially visual culture. Using the works of Kwon Jin Kyu (1922–1973) and Chang Ucchin (1917–1990), among modern and contemporary Korean artists, shows how Buddhism's inspiration on modern art began to be interpreted in a broader sense beyond the simple religious role. After that, this paper provides insight into how Buddhist philosophy has transcended human conflict and promoted harmonious coexistence within Korean visual culture through the concept of integration, which means the integration of knowledge across various fields today. Then, it examines how the importance of Buddhist contemplation and meditation, emphasizing personal reflection and cultivation, has been fused with art, expanded into multiple media and themes, and visualized to acquire new modernity through the works of Suh Seung-Won (1941–) and Cho Inho (1978–). Finally, this study demonstrates that the inspiration and ongoing relevance of Buddhism in contemporary art is an ancient tradition that has inspired and enabled diverse exchanges in the growth of contemporary art beyond Korea and examines how the convergence of art, religion, and science can add to the richness of new, future-oriented visual culture. Paul Hedge proposes, 'Every religious artifact we never see only one religious tradition exemplified, but instead, we witness part of a global story of interreligious encounters, sharing, and even religion as it only ever is: syncretic, blended, and interreligious' (Hedges 2024, p. 126). The works of Nam June Paik (1932–2006) and Michael Joo (1966–) demonstrate how the religious characteristics of Buddhism and artistic elements are combined with scientific elements to provide a new arena of convergence through media fusion. Through this process of reflection, this study aims to demonstrate that the dynamic interaction between traditional Buddhist values and contemporary visual practices creates a rich cultural synthesis that emphasizes the importance of preserving Korea's artistic heritage and promotes the expanded development of global visual culture today. Namely, the interaction of religion and art is an essential element that allows the ongoing exchange of Buddhism to enrich contemporary visual culture today creatively and serves as a bridge between the past and the present, visualizing cultural identity and further enhancing the communication of people's thoughts and emotions in the global art world. In this way, Buddhism, which has been passed down from the past, shows how the religion can coexist with today's culture and offers a venue for dialog and communication that can resonate beyond Korea and around the world, thereby contributing to creating a more harmonious and inclusive society and world.

2. Historical Background of Buddhism in Korea

The Shakyamuni Buddha, who was born in India around the 5th century BC and founded Buddhism, prohibited collusion with political power, but King Ashoka, who appeared around the 3rd century BC, accepted Buddhism as a state ideology and called himself the universal king, showing an example of collusion between the state and Buddhism, and spread Buddhism to Central Asia. In this way, Central Asian Buddhism had a different character from early Indian Buddhism. It was introduced to China around the 1st century BC by merchants and monks who traveled from Central Asia along the Silk Road

and gradually spread to China (J. Kim 2020, p. 261). In China, Buddhism went through the process of Sinicization and formed Chinese Buddhist sects, including the Hwaeom sect and the Chan (Seon) sect (J. Kim 2020, p. 262). Buddhism, which was first transmitted to Korea through China in the 4th century, accepted Sinicized forms of Buddhism, and soon after, as Buddhism flourished, Korean Buddhism received the characteristics of Indian and Central Asian Buddhism. In this way, while many parts of Korean Buddhism are strongly influenced by Sinicized Chinese Buddhism, Korean Buddhism has developed in its own way. For example, various sects of Korean Buddhism used Chinese names, but the Jogye Order is a sect that originated in Korea. Jinul of Goryeo founded the Jogye Order to continue the lineage of the sixth patriarch of Chinese Chan Buddhism, Master Huineng, and unify the Kyo and Seon sects. Thus, Buddhism, which originated in India, was introduced to Korea around the fourth century, starting with the Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla dynasties, and became Korea's main philosophy and religion from the mid-fifth century. In particular, Buddhism became an essential means and method for strengthening the royal authority of the Korean nation and promoting unity among the Korean people by being accepted as the country's guiding ideology. These three dynasties sought to unite their people with Buddhism and the culture created along with it. Especially, Silla developed an elite youth warrior group, Hwarang, with the idea of Maitreya Buddha, representing the future Buddha, with the position that the king is Buddha, and achieved the feat of unifying the period of the Three Kingdoms and the Unified Silla dynasty (Feuer 2022, p. 134). The Hwarang of the Silla Dynasty was the leader of the Nangdo and was regarded as Maitreya. These armed young men defended their country and played an essential role in unifying the three kingdoms under Silla. After the Unified Silla, Buddhism developed further while being theorized and systematized academically. For example, the Hwajaeng ideology developed by Wonhyo (617–686) is a Buddhist doctrine that seeks to transform all disputes into harmony (Buswell 2017, p. 132). Another great monk, Uisang (625–702), developed the Hwaeom ideology, which he learned while studying in the Tang Dynasty of China, into an ideology that suited Korea, stating that all things in the universe are not separate but are causes of each other and that they transcend conflict and are fused into one (McBride 2019, p. 148). He valued theory and practice and sought a harmonious and equal world (Yi and Jin 2024, p. 197). In addition, among the ordinary people, the Pure Land belief in Korea developed that if they diligently say and believe in 'Namu Amitabha Buddha,' they can go to the Pure Land, meet Amitabha Buddha, and be reborn in paradise (McBride 2020, p. 34). The Gwaneum belief developed that if they diligently believed, people could get rid of bad luck, be cured of illness, and have their wishes come true (P. Park 2012, p. 154). The leader of the young noble boys of the Silla Dynasty, who regarded the Hwarang as Maitreya in Maitreya Buddhism, protected the country and contributed to the unification of the three kingdoms of Silla (McBride 1998, p. 110). However, the belief of Amitabha Buddha, the principal Buddha of the Pure Land Sect, contributed to expanding Buddhism to the ordinary people by saying that one can go to paradise after death by simply reciting the Buddhist chant (Y. Kim 2015, p. 133). Various Buddhist beliefs and the means of maintaining the national system continued until the Goryeo Dynasty. Especially, Zen, Huayan, and Pure Land Buddhism are separate sectarian systems, with Zen Buddhism (Seon Buddhism in Korean) being the mainstream Korean Buddhism. Even during the Joseon Dynasty, when it was founded with Confucianism as its state value, Buddhism was not an official state ethic. However, it was an essential means of mental support for many people and has continued to be one of the major religions in Korea today (Park and Kim 2024, p. 2).

In this way, Buddhism, intentionally revived at the national level, became an educational tool emphasizing harmony and ethical awareness for the people. At the same time,

it naturally combined with the folk beliefs that existed in the lives of Koreans to become a vital religion that fulfills their wishes, hopes, and healing. Numerous Buddhist art pieces have been created along with Korean history, including Seokguram Grotto, Bulguksa Temple, and Goryeo Buddhist paintings, which go beyond the religious visualization of Koreans and provide profound insight into history, culture, art, and society while also helping us understand the lives of Koreans from the past to the present. Contemporary Korean art has not only been influenced by universal religious works such as the Buddha's reliquary-pagoda, but also has been influenced by specific sects, especially Seon Buddhism and the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism. Namely, Korean artworks that are visualized while being inspired by Buddhist religious works as well as ideologies have made an essential contribution to showing how the traditional religion and ideology can be visualized in a contemporary visual language, and thereby leading today's people to rethink the religion of Buddhism, as well as informing them of the importance of the past and tradition.

3. An Expanded Visualization of Buddhism in Modern Korean Art

Buddhism, a long-standing religion in Korea, began to change along with the various drastic changes in the country since the twentieth century. As the era of modernization approached, people who had to live under Japanese colonial rule were forced to erase their existence as Koreans under political and social pressure and in a cultural environment where they were exposed to new cultures from various parts of the world, many Koreans tried to regain their lost country, cope with the latest times, and maintain their identity as Koreans. After the 1950s, many Korean artists, such as Kwon Jin Kyu and Chang Ucchin, protected Korean sentiments with their artistic styles, and their fierce lives and passion for art, which valued human dignity and lived lives, were projected into their works. In the case of Kwon Jin Kyu, it is worth noting that rather than simply producing works that fit the iconography of Buddhist works or follow existing traditions, he created new modern sculptural works inspired by primary forms but with his interpretation and expression (Yeol Choi 2011, p. 90). Kwon Jin Kyu grew up in a Buddhist family and was naturally exposed to the religion, which gave him a deep connection with Buddhism. He was commissioned to work for temples several times and created works inspired by Buddhism. In 1948, Kwon Jin Kyu stayed at Beopjusa Temple for six months, studying the works left behind by his teacher, sculptor Kim Bok-jin (1901–1940), and participated in the creation of the Maitreya Buddha at Beopjusa Temple. Kwon Jin Kyu said, "When the lush summer forest turned into the colorful autumn colors, I felt that I had already become Buddha, under the miraculous spell of the Maitreya Buddha." (Yeol Choi 2011, p. 39) His experiences of living in the temple and creating Buddhist statues several times throughout his life later became a catalyst for creating various Buddhist-related works. In particular, his older brother's early death in 1949 made him directly experience the meaninglessness of the boundary between life and death, and he felt that there was an area in the human world that he could not interfere with, and the temple he visited whenever he felt personal anguish, which was given form in his work, *Entering the Mountain* (Figure 1). This work, which was produced in 1964–65, shows how his abstractly condensed thoughts are shaped through Buddhism. The word 'entering the mountain (入山)' is a Chinese character that means to enter the mountains, and in Buddhism, it is interpreted as meaning to become a monk. It is the first gate people pass through when entering a temple. It is lined with pillars and topped with a roof, as the starting point from the secular world to the world of Buddhism. It was inspired by the Iljumun (一柱門), which was created with the meaning of escaping worldly worries and pursuing Buddhist teachings with one mind (一心). Instead of directly representing the gate erected with a single pillar, Kwon Jin Kyu emphasized the horizontal flatness of the left pillar by making the part above the pedestal a single tree, but

splitting it into two evenly as it goes up toward the sky. In contrast, the right pillar emphasizes verticality and goes beyond the lintel part toward the sky. The pedestal, divided into three parts and positioned in different shapes and directions, shows how Kwon Jin Kyu's inspiration from traditional Buddhist styles can be reinterpreted to create new sculptures that bring balance and three-dimensionality to space.



Figure 1. Kwon Jin Kyu, *Entering the Mountain*, 1964–65. wood, 109 × 93 × 23 cm. Courtesy of the artist and SeMA—Seoul Museum of Art, Korea.

Kwon also produced various works, such as human figures and animals, captivated by the charm of terracotta. This material has endured and been maintained for a long time. For example, his *Self Portrait,* produced from 1969 to 1970, is a representative example (Figure 2). The self-portrait, which depicts him wearing a monk's robe, a long neck made into a bust, and an expressionless but determined will, has his slender, oval-shaped face slightly lifted and his round eyes directed somewhat upward. Below the small face, a long neck is stretched out and gently flows down to the shoulders, forming an isosceles triangle and creating a bust. Significantly, the large eyes look into the distance, but rather than glaring or tense, they are calm and confident, not arrogant. This work shows a good harmony of Kwon Jin Kyu's will and diligence for art as an artist. The monk's red robe, which covers one shoulder, is divided in half, with the other shoulder in dark gray that can be seen below the neck, clearly revealing his artistic simplicity but pursuing the beauty of change and balance. This work, made using the terracotta technique of working with clay and then firing it once, has both the roughness and soft touch of the material. It shows his view of nature and his artistic philosophy, which sought to explore the essence of existence rather than technique while respecting the material's properties. In addition, starting in the late 1960s, he stayed at temples more frequently than before and created many Buddhist statues. On 7 March 1971, while staying at Tongdosa Temple in Gyeongsangnam-do and creating Buddhist statues, he sent a letter to his nephew saying that Tongdosa Temple was a great place to study and that he was "about to finish making the first Buddha and to begin to produce the second Buddha (Yeol Choi 2011, p. 90)." The letter shows Kwon's continued research on Buddhist statues and his devotion to Buddhism. Like this, Kwon Jin Kyu's work is inspired by the appearance of traditional Buddhist monks, but at the same

time, he reinterprets it as the present artist. It nicely captures his ability to reinscribe the past and his attempt at recreating dialog between the past and present.



Figure 2. Kwon Jin Kyu, *Self Portrait*, 1969–70. Terracotta, 49 × 23 × 30 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Korea University Museum, Korea.

Another artist, Chang Ucchin, is an artist who, under the Buddhist tradition, has practiced Buddhist visual culture in our daily lives that can be approached by the public and the way we live today. Born into a devout Buddhist family, he met a Buddhist wife, and even without his help, his works are infused with the profound philosophical and religious thoughts and teachings of Buddhism (Yeob Choi 2023, p. 429). Chang says, "Just because a monk has abandoned the secular world does not mean he has abandoned his life. Rather, just as he has been given another responsibility to live with the Buddha and to carry out his will, art is also a way of life (Bae 2023, p. 23)." He visualizes nature, people, and our lives simply and warmly, making viewers happy and comfortable. Nevertheless, when people look inside his works, they can feel his countless hidden artistic efforts and passion, which seem to convey the profound truth of life beyond the understanding of art. Among his works, *Zinzinmyo* (眞眞妙) is a Buddhist-related painting that Chang Ucchin drew of his wife in 1970, which has the dictionary meaning of really incredible or truly outstanding beauty (Figure 3). He began the painting after seeing the image of his wife praying and titled the work after his wife's Buddhist name, Zinzinmyo. For this piece, Chang spent countless hours agonizing over drawing to visualize the image, which led to his health deteriorating. Because of this, his wife worried and later donated the painting to someone else. In the work, a halo surrounds the entire body, and this oval halo is a typical background treatment seen in Buddhist sculptures. However, in Chang Ucchin's case, the lower part is arranged in a straight line, which seems to represent a wife inside a lotus leaf, which symbolizes the purity of Buddhism. The texture of the oil painting is emphasized through matière treatment, and the figure's flat, beige, and light brown tones, and the deep contrast of the lotus flower, reflect the balance of the entire screen well. The face is evocative of meditation or prayer, and the head is not a crown but a vertical line, the opposite of the horizontal depiction of the face and eyes, expressing his wife as a bodhisattva. However, the hand gesture, 'Do Not Fear' mudra, shows a Buddhist image welcoming believers, reflecting the loving appearance of a wife who always warmly welcomes him while

praying. In order to emphasize the true faith and cultivation of the Bodhisattva, the upper part shows U-shaped draperies, but the lower part is drawn in the primary, free-spirited form of the body, like the style of the Buddha's iconography that was unified in the Gupta period of India, which depicted the body with light robes. In particular, the bare feet and the omission of ornaments are also images of a frugal wife, but Chang's art, which does not simply depict the image of a traditional Buddhist bodhisattva but modernizes and simplifies it, shows how he reinterprets and develops images from the past. In addition, this work, which uses his wife as its subject, shows us how Buddhism, a religion that is a legacy of the past, still exists in our lives today.



Figure 3. Chang Ucchin, *Zinzinmyo*, 1970. Oil on canvas, 33 × 24 cm. Private Collection.

A Buddhist painting, *Palsangdo* (八相圖), depicts essential events in the life of Shakyamuni, such as his birth, leaving home, training, enlightenment, and nirvana, in eight panels. Although Buddhism originated in India, it was visualized more diversely in East Asia according to their religious preferences. *Palsangdo* began to be produced earnestly in Korea from the early Joseon Dynasty. The eight events seem to be derived from the central tenets of Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Chang Ucchin's *Palsangdo: Eight Scenes from the Life of Buddha* shows the condensed expression of lines that he has developed and, at the same time, the transitional process of his later transformation into the painting style with black ink (Figure 4). While traditional paintings are painted on eight screens each, Chang collects eight stories into one on a small screen and handles them in a simple yet innocent, childlike style (Yeob Choi 2023, pp. 432–33). It also feels like the thick lines are drawn with black ink, not the colors of traditional Buddhist paintings. Even in terms of subject matter, it has its own variation, starting with the process of Maya, the mother of Sakyamuni, giving birth to Buddha in the upper left and progressing clockwise. Next to his mother's scene is a baby Buddha with his hands raised to the sky, and on the upper right is a scene depicting the grown Buddha becoming a monk. This scene is transformed into a form that seems to show the traditional Korean temple style, such as the main gate, visualizing the Koreanness and popularization of Buddhism. In the middle right, clockwise, there is a Buddha who achieves true enlightenment after practicing and becomes a Buddha. In the lower middle is a Buddha entering nirvana, with the soles of his

feet replaced on the pedestal. People are depicted together in a scene trying to receive the Buddha's relics, and on the lower left is a famous Jataka story from one of the Buddha's previous lives, where he sacrificed his body by jumping off a cliff to save starving tiger cubs, showing the Buddha's process of nirvana. After that, a magpie, which symbolizes the people in Korean folk paintings, is placed on top of the Buddha's cross-legged seated statue, seeming to show how Buddhism has become popular among the people and how it has been teaching them in Korea. Finally, the Buddha statue in the center of the screen is in the mudra, touching the ground. It is also shown in one of the famous Buddha statues in Korea, the Buddha of Seokguram Grotto. The legs are in the lotus position; the right hand is placed on the right knee with the fingertips touching the ground, and the left-hand palm is facing the sky and placed naturally in front of the navel. This mudra depicts Sakyamuni overcoming all obstacles and attaining the path.

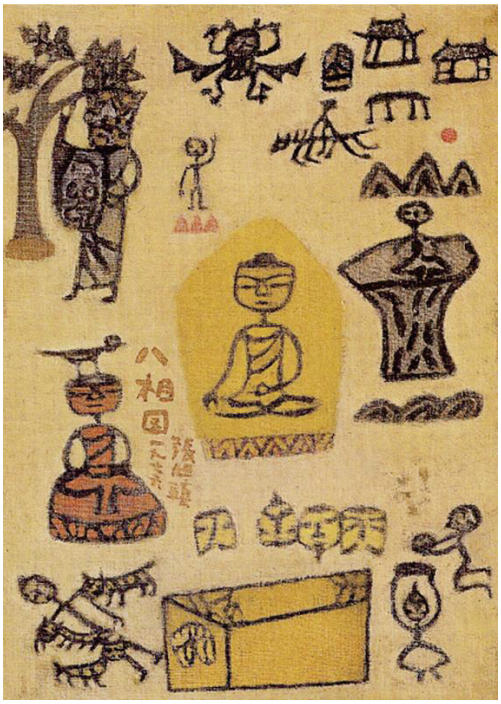


Figure 4. Chang Ucchin, *Palsangdo: Eight Scenes from the Life of Buddha*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 35 × 24.5 cm. Private Collection.

Chang Ucchin's piece resembles the most well-known Buddhist statue to Koreans and, at the same time, depicts the Buddha overcoming hardships and achieving enlightenment. Buddhism, a familiar religion that has been with Korea for a long time and which coexisted closely with his life, was a visualization that is an extension of "the art of living, the art of living, the art of drawing life, discovering life, and further, the art of creating life itself with life as the center," which Chang Ucchin had been pursuing since the late 1960s (Shin 2023, p. 564). I believe that Chang pursued to go beyond the description of the Buddha's process of overcoming hardships and achieving enlightenment and symbolizes his will as an artist and a human being to overcome hardships and perfect his artistic style while also containing the meaning that all people in the world should overcome the difficulties and temptations they face and obtain the authentic truth and enlightenment so that they can live together in harmony and peace in the world. In this way, his seemingly simple visual representation combines artistic techniques and styles between Western and Eastern, past and present, to create a familiar yet profound resonance for the public and show how Buddhism, a religion of the past, can contribute to the right living and thinking of today's society and people.

4. Modern Manifestation of Buddhist Reflection and Cultivation

In the early 1960s, Suh Seung-Won formed a group called 'Origin' to break away from old customs and introduce young Koreans' new ideas and thoughts to the world. Based on Korean tradition and his life experiences while growing up, he began his geometric abstract works centered on paintings and prints, and tried to build a new theoretical art form by combining his own geometric elements to convey the artist's attention to convey to the world. After that, his artworks gradually deconstruct these former concepts and styles in reverse until offering a space for various interpretations. As a result, his visual representation provides a diffused space where people can experience and feel together through the expansion of the art medium. The elements of reflection and meditation on life that are increasingly emphasized in his later works go beyond regional Koreanness and lead to the religious meaning of Buddhism, which is to realize the truth and attain liberation through meditation. Suh Seung-Won confesses, "I think that my mind, which seeks true enlightenment by practicing and reflecting, turning myself in, not being tainted by the secular world, and trying to liberate and purify my mind, is a Buddhist believer and Buddhism itself, and I think that it is my work (M. Kim 2024c)." In addition, Suh's belief, "Meditation, reflection, and contemplative elements are connected to Buddhism," is completely buried in his works (M. Kim 2024c). His paintings calm the viewers' minds, allow them to focus while looking at them, and enable them to reflect on their lives and contemplate deeply about the world. The extensibility of his works creates a more universal visual language, enabling international communication that transcends national borders.

Suh Seung-Won's early works were inspired by traditional Korean culture, such as white porcelain, a Korean traditional house (Hanok) window paper, and geometric patterned door frames, and established the theme of simultaneity, which included a modern sense of design esthetics in a society that was rapidly industrializing at the time (Yoon 2016, p. 2). Since 1963, he has taken simultaneity as a proposition and has sought to show what can be simultaneously expressed through him in the world of peace by making the invisible visible (Chun 2010, p. 106). It allowed him to develop his artworks that utilized geometric forms earnestly, using the proposition of 'simultaneity.' For example, his *Simultaneity 69-H* is a work with a black square tilted diagonally at the top of the screen (Figure 5). This work was used as the cover of the first magazine published by AG (The Korean Avant-Garde Association), an art group formed in 1969 to pursue experimental and modernized new art (M. Kim 2024a, pp. 42–44). When used as the magazine cover, a red line was attached to the front side of the black square to emphasize its three-dimensionality. At the same time, the red letters 'AG' at the bottom and the black letters in the rest of the area were in harmony with the overall screen, emphasizing the characteristics of AG, an art group that attempted simple but new forms. In the original *Simultaneity 69-H*, the slanted rhombus shape at the top is composed of a geometric form in which the back is smaller than the front, giving a sense of space while being flat. In addition, thin black lines run vertically down the screen below the two front sides. Among them, the line closest to the viewer below the screen is drawn at the same angle as the side of the black square above, leading the viewer to imagine a space where the flat square does not look like a hexahedron. However, at the same time, all the lines are composed so that some are visible or invisible, showing how much Suh Seung-Won himself values formative order and harmony while also making the two-dimensional picture screen look three-dimensional and further providing the viewer with an opportunity to create an imaginary world within the screen in multiple dimensions. Suh Seung-Won says, "Simultaneity means making the invisible visible, allowing what happens in the world of nirvana to be expressed through me simultaneously, and it is the pursuit of identical and equal time and space. My work explores strict formative order and the space of harmony, and I try to capture physical time simultaneously with

action and mindfulness" (Suh 2011, pp. 80–81). Thus, the mindfulness Suh means Korean uniqueness and modernity that can be recognized as globalized, while at the same time emphasizing a universal world of thought that goes beyond abstraction and breaks down the boundaries obtained from simplified and organized informativeness.



Figure 5. Suh Seung-Won, *Simultaneity 69-H*, 1969. Oil on canvas. 145.5 × 112 cm. Courtesy of the artist and National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea.

The profound reflections embedded in the work are also strongly connected to Buddhist thought and have been further developed in Suh Seung-Won's recent works. His continuous reflections on the theme of 'simultaneity' have continued for over fifty years under the name of simultaneity, a name for purely expressing lines, colors, and planes as geometric abstractions. In the formativeness of the form, as seen in works such as *Simultaneity 22-707*, the reflections on colors and sensibility have developed in the direction of pursuing freedom (Figure 6). Suh Seung-Won's past simultaneity had a strong cold feel of squares and corners, but his works since the 2000s have eliminated corners and have used gentle colors, pursuing works that express soft light like the evening glow (Yoo 2009, p. 4). This work is an expanded version of his belief that the most important thing in art is to be new in an experimental spirit. It is the result of his long-standing research in pursuing art that has filtered the physical properties of color and paint. *Simultaneity 22-707* is a work in which pastel tones of pink, sky, and yellow coexist, with spaces where the forms become blurred (Sim 2021, 15). Through this continuous filtering process, *Simultaneity 22-707* is a space set in pastel tones of pink, sky, and yellow where the forms become blurred. These coexistences are warm, peaceful, and cozy colors that naturally overlap and mix with each other, creating a three-dimensional or multi-dimensional deep and invisible endless space within the screen rather than a two-dimensional one, creating a space for contemplation and meditation where the viewer can think in various ways. Suh Seung-Won's reflections on his life, saying, "Before this body was born, what was this body, and after I was born into this world, who am I?" led people to reflect on their own lives (M. Kim 2024c). Suh also explains his new painting style in *Simultaneity 22-707*, saying, "I see myself immersed in a meditative world while reflecting on my life, and now, facing death, I paint while looking at myself without any noise" (Tetto 2024). When reflecting on one's life, the elements

of the meditative world are connected to the idea that one can attain liberation and enlightenment by overcoming dualistic thinking in Buddhism and observing the oneness (一義) that goes beyond opposition and discrimination based on the idea of equal non-duality. In particular, the emptiness (空) that appears in the Buddhist scripture, the Heart Sutra, form is empty, but empty is form (色卽是空空卽是色) means that something seems to exist but in reality, does not exist, emphasizing the importance of realizing that everything in the universe is empty (Strong 2015, p. 258). His current project displays an esthetic of contemplation and meditation with an esthetic and contemplative aftertaste influenced by his sense of restraint, self-recovery, and freedom. His combination of art and Buddhist elements provides a more universal space for contemplation and meditation (Yoon 2016, p. 7). Thus, Suh's art visualizes contemplation and meditation, which are widely practiced in Buddhism as a form of practice through the medium of art. It offers a place for people today to have a greater sense of peace of mind beyond religious meaning, inducing contemplation on natural life and the world and allowing today's people to contemplate how they should embrace one another and create a harmonious society.

Figure 6. Suh Seung-Won, *Simultaneity 22-707*, 2022. Acrylic on canvas, 162.3 × 130.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and PMK Gallery, Korea.

Cho Inho produces traditional Korean landscape paintings that contain Korea's nature and philosophy. He says, "Buddhism has greatly influenced me because my parents are Buddhists, and a significant portion of my art is based on Buddhism. As an example, I had an exhibition called 'Gyeonseong' that visualized liberation in Buddhism while attempting to concretize the Buddhist teaching, 'if you meet me and know me, you will know the world and become free,' with the visitors (M. Kim 2024b)." Majoring in art, he found his own artistic style when visiting Jeju Island in the middle of winter in 2006. The harsh wind and cold he experienced there made him reflect on his life, and through this, Cho began to visit Korea's nature in person and visualize it in his paintings. Among the long history of Korean landscape paintings, true-view landscape paintings, which aimed to paint Korea's actual nature as a background, were fully developed by Jeong Seon (1676–1759) in the 18th century. True-view landscape painting emphasized Koreanness while expressing the zeitgeist of the late Joseon Dynasty that sought to change politically and socially. Cho Inho, strongly inspired by true-view landscape painting, created works depicting today's Korean land while incorporating people's thoughts, philosophy, and trivi-

alities of everyday life, thereby pioneering a new modernized genre of traditional Korean landscape painting.

What he first valued was the encounter and connection between people and nature. Just as in Buddhism, a person's past and present lives are linked, and all of them come together to determine the next life, or people are connected with profound relationships; he established the space of Korean nature as a place where people with connections meet each other, and at the same time, a place where humans meet and reflect on themselves, and he began to produce landscape paintings that could meet and connect with people by putting these ideas into works. For example, in order to draw a mountain that people visit, he walked around the mountain himself and gathered sketches to create a single work, which is the same method as traditional landscape painting, but to understand the subject of the hill, Cho Inho began to draw his *Warped Landscape* series in which all parts are visualized from multiple angles, rather than the easily recognizable shape of the mountain, by stitching and gathering parts of the hill depicted from various moving points (Figure 7). In particular, the spatial composition that gives a sense of three-dimensionality by overlapping parts depicted from multiple angles and heights is expressed in black ink, which enhances sufficient liveliness. In addition, through the coexistence of ink lines that contain the roughness and softness seen in traditional ink paintings and detailed or abstract object descriptions, people know the picture depicted as a complex natural appearance that is different from the actual landscape at first glance and through profound observation, they feel as if they are in that place, contemplate human existence through nature, and think that each person living in the world should live with a precious heart just as a single blade of grass, which is considered insignificant, is essential. It establishes a modernized, participatory landscape painting that induces active participation. In this way, his art expresses affection for a world where we respect insignificant things and people live harmoniously. It represents the Buddhist idea of cause and effect, which states that everything is connected beyond nature and people and people to people.



Figure 7. Cho Inho, *Warped Landscape-Seoraksan 08*, 2009, Ink on paper, 130 × 380 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Traditional East Asian and Korean landscape paintings frequently describe nature, are mostly painted on paper or silk, and are made into hanging scrolls or handscrolls. Cho Inho, who pursued the modernization of landscape painting, attempted to make landscape painting three-dimensional. For example, his work, *Enlightenment [Gyeonseong (見性)]–Gujeongbong*, is arranged as a hanging painting that naturally moves in the air, allowing the audience to freely move around the work and become one with it (Figure 8). The screen is wrapped in eleven pieces of silk cloth and arranged to flow naturally from the wall, creating another space within the exhibition hall and providing an entrance space for visitors. Young-Taek Park explains, "Cho draws each world with a brush on a piece of cloth and captures it in ink. The mountains, which are living things, writhe with a strange power, and

the painting is spread out in a circular space, heightening the feeling as if the entire mountain is being viewed in order" (Y.-T. Park 2011, p. 1). In particular, the nearby nature was depicted with rough and spontaneous brushstrokes, giving it a sense of liveliness swaying in the wind. At the same time, the distant landscape was painted with dense and compact brushstrokes, utilizing various techniques and styles. When the viewers go inside the installation space, they see a stone filled with water in the shape of a well placed to express the scene where Cho Inho observed himself reflected in one of nine stagnant water halls on the peak of Gujeongbong in Wolchulsan (or Mt. Wolchul), Korea. Cho states, "I installed this piece with the theme of meeting nature and myself while hiking by directing a scene of meeting myself by looking at my reflection in a well at the peak of Gujeongbong (M. Kim 2024b)." The piece's title, Gyeonseong (見性), comes from Seon Buddhism (also known as Zen or Chan Buddhism) and says that one can achieve enlightenment and become a Buddha by facing one's mind and seeing one's original nature. The term 'Gyeonseong' was interpreted by the artist as enlightenment. Enlightenment means that the Buddha realized the truth about the cycle of life and death, became liberated entirely from that cycle, and revealed the spiritual path he had rediscovered (Cantwell 2010, pp. 24–26). The work allows the audience to experience Cho's wish, "if one naturally meets oneself and knows oneself, one will also know the world and be free, if not liberated (M. Kim 2024b)." In order to reflect on himself, Cho Inho, who has become more solid and built a full-fledged art world, shows through his works how diverse an object can be beyond a simple depiction of the nature of Korea. In such a way, in nature, which is described in detail or broadly, we can see how many relationships and connections a human has without realizing it and how they live as one of nature. Contemporary Korean artists such as Suh Seung-Won and Cho Inho, who are profoundly inspired by Korean tradition and nature, show how today's visual culture can be connected to the field of religion and integrated in a broader way to create a synergistic effect.



Figure 8. Cho Inho, *Enlightenment [Gyeonseong (見性)]–Gujeongbong*, 2010. Ink on silk, 370 × 2010 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

5. A Place of Art Beyond Time and Space by Integration and Consilience

This section is not intended to discuss the influence of American culture on Korean culture, nor to discuss Americanized forms of Buddhism. Instead, it aims to provide concrete examples of how Buddhism as a religion can be interpreted comprehensively and multidimensionally for Korean American artists, through the works of Nam June Paik and Michael Joo. For example, Nam June Paik was influenced by Buddhism in Korea before coming to the United States. Michael Joo was influenced by his Korean parents, who believed in Buddhism, and thus did not accept Americanized Buddhism. Furthermore, this study focuses on how the two artists tried to show how Buddhism was an important medium to inform their artistic beliefs, convey the importance of traditional religion and philosophy, and connect the world. Nowadays, due to the diversification and universalization of media, people can simultaneously share what they think, like, and feel about their lives. The United States was one of the places where many people inevitably encountered these trends. Like numerous immigrants, two Korean American artists, Nam June Paik and Michael Joo, address the values of multicultural exchange, academic consilience between various disciplines, and communication with people and the world in a wide range of regions worldwide. Koreans who immigrated and settled in the United States were exposed to diverse cultural situations and witnessed a relatively new interest in Buddhism, especially Seon/Zen Buddhism, which had spread in the United States since the 1950s and 1960s. After Japanese immigrants began to build the first American Zen temples in 1913 in Hawaii and more Zen temples were erected in 1922 in the mainland United States, the 'Zen Boom' appeared during the 1950s and 1960s (Williams and Queen 2013, p. 20). Its environment may perhaps have provided an opportunity for Korean American artists to combine Buddhism and art. Their specification between art and religion to cultural exchanges through various modulations, reinterpretations, transformations, and creations represents how art and religion combine other genres, such as science, music, and technology.

Nam June Paik, known as the founder of video art, worked during a time when various cutting-edge machines, including color televisions, were readily available at the time. After moving to the United States, he produced a work, *Robot* Opera (1964), featuring a human-sized robot that moves, talks, and defecates using remote devices. Paik also used the first consumer portable video camcorder, the Sony Portpak, released in 1965, which was first used to pioneer the early media in the video camera field. While mainly introducing artworks created purely by technical means, as seen on video and television, Paik created new forms of abstraction in *Magnet* TV (1965) and *TV* Crown (1965), illustrating pattern images by manipulating the television's internal circuitry. These pieces exemplify how art can be integrated with technology and science. Beyond continuing the fusion of technology and science in art, his installation art deals with the concept of Buddhism. An art group called Fluxus, which he joined in Europe in the early 1960s in Europe, heavily covered this religion. Gradually, Paik expanded his artistic boundaries while combining Seon Buddhism. In addition, TV, a technological and popular cultural item, was used to demonstrate how much the medium can inspire people to think, meditate, and empathize. A Korean-born, Nam June Paik grew up in a Buddhist family and was able to expand his knowledge and experience of Buddhism when he studied abroad in Japan. After arriving in the United States in 1964, he visualized the consilience of religion and science using technological media, including TV. His *TV Buddha* was made from an 18th-century wooden Buddhist sculpture and a television that he purchased at an antique market in New York with an inheritance from his family living in Japan in the United States. Sitting cross-legged and meditating, Buddha is seated in front of a monitor that broadcasts

his image. A camera installed in front of the Buddha records the Buddha, and the recording is broadcast on a monitor screen in real time. A Buddhist statue created in the past is recorded and shown in its present form, capturing a moment of coexistence between the past and the present. In addition, the technological medium TV shows the front view of the Buddha to visitors looking at the back of the Buddha while appreciating this work, allowing people to enjoy the three-dimensional sculpture fully. In this way, Nam June Paik's media art provides a space where the audience can feel materiality and religiosity simultaneously by combining TV, made of metal and plastic, which emphasizes physicality, and Buddhist sculpture, which promotes meditation. Meditation is a significant part of Buddhist practices. According to Ronald Green, Seon Buddhism gets its name from the Sanskrit word dhyāna, which means 'meditation,' and modern Korean Buddhism focuses on doctrinal and meditative wisdom, respectively (Green 2014, p. 57). Since 1974, Paik's *TV Buddha* has been continuously produced in various versions with Buddha statues from multiple regions. It conveys the teaching and message of Buddhism that anyone can become a Buddha through practice and the use of different Buddha statues.

In addition, Paik has introduced works that express his view that combining science/technology and art is inevitable and how to deal with this inevitability specifically. For example, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* was inspired by George Orwell's novel, 'Nineteen Eighty-Four,' published in 1949, which tells the story of a human being whose freedom of expression is suppressed due to the advancement of science. However, in his work, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*, Nam June Paik conveys a positive message that although the development of technology and communication can be a means of surveillance, it can also sometimes be a means for people worldwide to communicate. These embracing gestures of objects and living creatures seem to be inspired by compassion in Buddhism. Compassion (*Karuṇā*) is one of the two virtues in Buddhist doctrine that is defined as 'the wish that others be free of suffering, in contradistinction to love/benevolence (*Maitrī*), which is the wish that others be happy. Compassion is a quality that a Buddha is believed to possess to the greatest possible degree and that Buddhists still on the path strive to cultivate (Jackson 2004, p. 419).' Nam June Paik visualizes in his video piece the message that overcoming jealousy and anger among people and society is essential, as well as breaking free from selfish greed and having a broad and compassionate heart. This video, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*, simultaneously screened to various parts of the world via satellite for 38 min, allowing many people to view it in real-time, making art no longer a medium for the few but a medium for the many. As it merged with science, Paik's art further enriches the world and shows that it can contribute to communication. *Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii* is a work that visualizes his idea that electronic highways will connect the whole world. It shows how the world can be quickly connected through media and communication through a map of the United States. In particular, 50 DVDs are located inside 336 television sets that project total images within 575 feet of multicolored neon tubing shaped like each state. The projected images were created using motifs and colors that symbolize each state's identity, characteristics, and culture in the United States, as seen on the map. These images are connected like blood vessels with 3750 feet of cable, which seems to symbolize cause and effect' and 'karma' in Buddhism, as if the TVs are connected as if they are one person (Burton 2017, p. 34). During the 1990s, when the Internet was not widespread worldwide, we can see his foresight that predicted an era in which people would live connected. Nam June Paik's thoughts are already well expressed in his writings written in 1974, where he sought to connect the past, present, and future and visualize the expanded role of media for the present and future world through works of art. In his 1974 report, Paik argued that the forthcoming information superhighway would become widespread in American society and even worldwide, addressing urgent social problems

such as racism, economic inequality, and environmental pollution while claiming the necessity of preparation for the future network (Paik [1974] 2019a, pp. 154–65). That is why Paik's artworks contain the messages to find ways to humanize rapidly evolving technology and electronic media rather than avoid them. He says, "The real issue implied in 'Art and Technology' is not to make another scientific toy but to humanize the technology and the electronic medium" (Paik [1969] 2019b, p. 33). The primary Paik's belief is that the newly emerging cutting-edge society will create an invisible but inconceivable and close connection between human life and the world. If people cannot disregard the future situation, he attempted to visualize a better solution through his work: That is, the coexistence of technology and humans. At the same time, the Buddhist idea of causality is deeply rooted in his art, which visualizes how people and the world are interconnected. The Buddhist concept of karma is that our past and present appearances can determine our future, and the belief that this has created is one of the essential elements. Like this, Nam June Paik's visual representation goes beyond the integration relationship in which science and art can collaborate to create a work of art. It shows how the genre of art can be connected to people's lives and society, and how this role can be infinitely expanded through collaboration with other fields today. Thus, Nam June Paik was one of the pioneering artists who studied science and technology and converted them into tools that could enrich human life and imagination and provide humane alternatives.

Michael Joo, born to Korean parents who settled in the United States to study science, was influenced by his parents; he majored in science in college before changing his major to art. His interest in academic and natural phenomena expanded into various academic fields, such as civilization, nature, history, and religion, and was reflected in his works. His art initially began with a consideration of people's cultural identity and gradually diversified into intersections between science and art, nature and humans, and past and future times. He uses scientific thought processes and physical experiment results to produce his works, making fluid and persuasive representations more tangibly and existentially. His pieces break away from the framework of typical ideas and customs about existing objects and people, leading viewers to question the nature of identity and the environment and visualize how consilience between disciplines is possible through art.

Since the 1990s, Michael Joo has been asking people questions through influential works that expose the meaninglessness of dichotomous perception between the East and the West and promote change in people's prejudices. While visiting the transpacific regions, he primarily collects various materials and creates them into artworks with multilayered meanings and messages. His works also show the infinitely expanded scope and role of the field of art today through the consilience of various scientific fields such as chemistry, geography, ecology, and the humanities, including philosophy, religion, and anthropology. For example, Michael Joo's *Visible* is a headless urethane cast piece depicting a Buddha meditating in a lotus position (Figure 9). The exposed body has a dissected shape with all bones and internal organs visible under transparent skin that combines Buddhism, one of the representative Asian religions that originated in India, and anatomy, a field of science that values accuracy and reality. Hyunsun Tae notes that 'the viewers' gaze can freely move in and out of an engagement with Buddha, which turns the visible and invisible boundaries into two-way flows (Tae 2007, p. 39). The two-way flow overlaps the sacred Buddha's existence and the physical human body. The traditional religious Buddha's body has been created to be constantly viewed with reverence, but Joo's Buddha allows visitors to take a close look at the Buddha's invisible inside of body. The Buddha's body is also trapped in a metal frame, pointing out humans' narrow vision and perspective. It suggests how we need to break away from the typical frame of human assumption. The Buddha's face, which conveys many religious meanings and symbols, is intentionally omitted, and

the transparent shape of the body is emphasized, disturbing the viewer's straightforward interpretation. Michael Joo's interest in Buddhism began during childhood in an environment where Christianity and traditional Korean Buddhist practices coexisted with his household—Christian mother and Buddhist father. In addition, growing up with his parents, who were scientists, he was also a science student who went to college to major in biology before majoring in art, which allowed him to naturally incorporate science into his art. Young Paik Chun's evaluation highlights Joo's artistic ambition to merge cultural discourse with scientific rationality and cultivate a sense of creative originality that transcends conventional boundaries by incorporating reality, authenticity, and veracity themes into his artworks (Chun 2009, p. 301). The absence of a face can obliterate individuality, but the meditating posture of the body still brings up the image of Buddha. The visual fluidity, displaying the body without a face, that Michael Joo intentionally provided with places of reversal conveys the profound possibility and Buddhist teaching for any living being to become a good teacher, Buddha, if they attain enlightenment. Moreover, the Buddha's hand gesture, called mudra, in Joo's statue, illustrates the meditation mudra that helped Buddha obtain enlightenment. The thumbs of both sides are placed together, and the back of the hand is naturally placed on the foot in the lotus position. Ronald Jones says, "Joo has metaphorically uncovered the corporeality of the man called Buddha from beneath the cultural mock-up that has subsumed Buddha's original identity over the centuries, and this is where his irony sings. He has made his individuality transparent in order to sacrifice it to a universalizing form of cultural artifact (Jones 1999)." Joo's *Visible* illustrates that anyone or anything can become a Buddha, and his art goes beyond simply dealing with race and dichotomous East–West concepts. Michael Joo confesses, "I think people are exaggerating my identity, but I am more concerned about racial ambivalence than that. I explore complex issues of ambivalence, such as the relationship between nature and civilization, my inner self, and the outside world (Lee 2006)." The same year, Michael Joo presented an expanded version of *Visible in Headless*. This work combines the Buddhist sculptures seen in the former piece, *Visible*, with the faces of various characters and dolls to create a fusion of diverse forms.



Figure 9. Michael Joo, Visible, 1999–2000. Urethane, nylon, plastic, steel, glass, wood, lacquer, 60 × 48 × 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

After that, Joo expanded his art world with works such as *Bodhi Obfuscatus*, combining Buddhism and science. His *Bodhi Obfuscatus* was first introduced in 2005 using Gandhara Buddhist statues and cameras. He was granted permission to work with the Rockefeller Collection of the Asia Society, allowing him to see many collections. In the process, Michael Joo saw many of the collections that were not on display and 'thought that one way to instinctively get closer to them as objects was to have insects crawl all over the face of the sculptures (Gluibizzi 2020).' In the process, he changed perspective as he questioned 'what and how insects see,' the solution was to point the eyes at the face like cameras. He imagined that the cameras surrounding the Buddha's face were like a space helmet to him, and he hoped that the artificial elements he installed would create a 'theatrical work in which the entire image is absorbed at once as the eyes adapt to the light (Gluibizzi 2020).' It goes beyond the process of observing existing parts, and through careful observation or training of each part, which reminds us of the Buddhist process of sudden enlightenment. The 2006 Gwangju Biennale, held in Korea, was reproduced as a Pensive Bodhisattva statue from Daewonsa Temple in Boseong, Korea. Instead of sitting cross-legged with both legs crossed during Buddhist practice, the Pensive Bodhisattva statue has the left leg on a lotus-patterned pedestal and the right leg crossed so that the soles of the feet are visible, combining the postures of meditation. The Pensive Bodhisattva was actively produced as another form of the Maitreya Bodhisattva statue along with the development of the Maitreya belief that represented the future Buddha, which was popular during the Three Kingdoms period of Korea. As it is the form of the future Buddha, Maitreya's installed cameras capture various forms and angles, such as a face with an old look, a slight smile, a chin gently resting on a finger, meditating, and looking at sentient beings. In particular, the depiction of the less musculature upper body shows the style of the Gupta period in the 5th century, when the Buddhist style was unified in India. On the other hand, the drapery and robe lines decorated on the lower half are inspired by the famous Chinese style at the time and have a restrained and developed appearance in the Korean style. Moreover, installed cameras in a circular shape around the statue, especially around the head and shoulders, provide various perspectives to the viewers and encourage them to appreciate the Buddha statue as seen with their eyes and the images of parts of the Buddha statue captured according to the angle of each camera. Simultaneously, the live surveillance of cameras surrounding the Buddha statue in a circular shape is shaped like a halo, maximizing the synergy created by combining religious art from the past with current science and technology. This work visualizes an example of possible collaboration in Korea, time, and geography by combining cameras representing Buddhism, a religion with a long history, and modern science and technology to create a new type of art.

6. Conclusions

Focusing on Buddhism, one of Korea's major religions, this study explores the rich intersections between Buddhism and contemporary Korean visual culture and how Buddhist philosophy and esthetics have influenced and coexisted with contemporary Korean artistic expression. The dynamic interaction between traditional Buddhist values and contemporary visual practices creates a rich cultural synthesis while emphasizing the importance of preserving Korea's artistic heritage and expanding and promoting the development of global visual culture today. In addition, the interaction between religion and visual culture is an essential element in how the ongoing engagement of Buddhism creatively enriches contemporary visual culture today, bridging the continuous connection between the past and the present, not only visualizing Korea's cultural identity but also enhancing the communication of people's thoughts and emotions in the global art world. In this way, Buddhism, a religion that has been passed down from the past, is showing how it can co-

exist with today's visual culture and provide a venue for dialog and communication that can resonate beyond Korea and around the world, thereby contributing to creating a more harmonious and inclusive society and world.

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Ham Sok Hon: Bridging Spirituality and Politics

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Abstract: This paper aims to offer an interpretation of Ham Sok Hon's views on the dynamic relationship between religion and politics. While considerable discussion has already taken place in the Korean academic community across various fields, including philosophy, theology, and political science, many of which propose *ssial* philosophy as the metaphysical foundation of his political thoughts, there still remains a need for a more systematic understanding of their relationship, which I argue is closely linked to his concept of *jeonilhwa gwajeong* (the process of unification/integration). By exploring Ham's unique analysis, particularly in relation to the notion of *ipcheseong* (stereoscopic/multi-dimensional), this paper will underscore their shared roots and objectives across different spheres of life: one pertaining to *salim* (human affairs) seeking the pursuit of fairness and equality, and the other dealing with spirituality, aspiring to grasp the sublime aspects of human existence. Both religion and politics, as these movements are termed, are mutually dependent, with their culmination promising peace and harmony in historical reality. Through highlighting Ham's integrated perspective on religion and politics, I will ultimately suggest a specific discourse—civil religion—as a theoretical framework to effectively unravels Ham's viewpoints.

Keywords: Ham Sok Hon; Korean religion; Korean philosophy; *ssial* philosophy; religion and politics; civil religion

1. Background

The politics of the 21st century is facing unprecedented challenges. The nation-state model, in particular, which has long been geographically stabilized and fixated, regardless of its creative origin based on constituents' shared ideas and identities, currently seems to exhibit a prelude to a dramatic denouement. While it still retains a formidable presence, especially in international relations, where it pursues self-interest and seeks to enhance its power through multi-dimensional competition, the nation-state is internally crumbling. What may seem robust externally are the governmental, institutional frameworks such as the United States, the G8, NATO, IMF, or WTO, and the multinational corporations, as well as other regressive states that Hardt and Negri symbolically label in their creative work, *Empire*, as Monarchy and Oligarchy, respectively (Hardt and Negri 2001). However, the inner unity and collective strength of the nation-state are eroding as historical challenges proliferate on multiple fronts. It contends with formidable counterforces that undermine its very foundations, such as globalization, which continually expands the sphere of human activity, transnational issues like migration and diaspora concerns, the broadening of notions of belonging, and identity politics that transcend national borders, fostering a new era of international political collaboration. The recent manifestations of the nation-state's struggle through various economic battles and military conflicts, including the wars in Ukraine and Israel–Palestine, signify more the desperate actions of a declining power than the exertions of a thriving Leviathan. Among various factors, politics stands out as a crucial factor in reaching resolutions for many. For example, a plethora of politically motivated liberals and progressives across the world have long acted as if they can sacrifice anything to secure individual rights and freedom, regardless of the complexity of their current social challenges, while communitarians and socialists have prioritized their rhetoric

on community values and collective ownership, sometimes even risking a slide into forms of fascism.

While their universal visions of the well-being of the people are generally meritorious, their means of achieving it often fall short. In many cases, major problems in politics and the political community are not merely issues of programs, policies, strategies, or institutions but rather stem from the mindset, political consciousness, and even the spirit of the people. This is dramatically illustrated by major historical events of humanity such as the French Revolution, the American Civil Rights Movement, and the Indian Independence Movement, whose driving forces extended beyond the material and institutional realms. Among the myriad forces that shape our minds, attitudes, perspectives, worldviews, and spirit, religion continues to prove itself relevant and powerful in the realm of politics, whether for beneficial or harmful ends. If the Delphic oracle for Athenian democracy and the Hebraic covenant for the Jewish Kingdom serve as ancient examples, the enforcement of Islamic law during the Iranian Revolution, the emergence of identity politics in the partition of India, and Christian nationalism in contemporary America are modern illustrations. Throughout the ages, a wealth of intellectual luminaries have recognized the profound intersection of religion and politics. From the timeless wisdom of Plato and Confucius to the modern insights of Reinhold Niebuhr, Leo Tolstoy, and Rabindranath Tagore, these thinkers have shed light on the complex and inevitable relationship between faith and governance.

2. Introduction

In the context of Korea, Ham Sok Hon's philosophy can be a compelling showcase of this dynamic interplay of religion and politics. Ham, twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, is renowned in the Korean intellectual sphere as one of the most powerful and influential thinkers, celebrated for his dedication and leadership in the nation's independence, labor, and democratization movements, as well as for shaping the overall tone of Korean progressivism. Like Gandhi and Tagore, Ham found in religion a powerful insight that could enrich the understanding of politics and help better prepare for establishing a political community. According to Ham, religion rekindles and amplifies the fundamental core of Benedict Anderson's imagined community, enabling individuals to transcend conventional and natural constraints—such as biology, geography, and even culture—thus allowing them to reconfigure themselves within a new social environment and redefine their relationships with others (Anderson 2006).

Religion is not inherently at odds with politics. When properly defined, guided, and applied, religion can empower politics. Similarly, when politics is correctly understood, it provides religion with a practical framework and language to manifest, communicate, and realize its value. His personal engagement with the history of Korea vividly illustrates this reciprocity. For instance, the Christian narrative of emancipation and unconditional love played a pivotal role in shaping his unique historical perspective on the tragic reality of Korean politics. Drawing from the biblical narrative of the suffering bride and oppressed people, who ultimately rise again to unite with the divine groom, God, and attain freedom, Ham contextualized Korea's colonial fate within a salvation narrative. This perspective influenced his participation in various independence movements, including crucial moments such as the March First Movement, his tenure at Osan School, and his imprisonment by both colonial authorities and military regimes. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha Movement and the Hindu philosophy of Atman, Ham tried to translate religious ideals, values, and power into concrete political actions and programs aimed at national salvation and progress. Furthermore, drawing from the teachings of Daoist *wu-wei* and Buddhist non-attachment, he transcended institutional and ideological politics to better navigate the evolving political landscape and embrace diverse voices on national identity. In other words, Ham's historical sufferings, including numerous imprisonments and political persecutions, symbolize his deliberate efforts to foster a reciprocal dynamic between religion and politics.

Therefore, in this paper, I articulate Ham's understanding of the relationship between religion and politics. To offer a comprehensive portrayal of Ham's thought, I have selected materials ranging widely from the 1950s to the late 1980s.[1] This selection reflects my personal belief in the enduring consistency of his fundamental philosophy despite noticeable changes in tone within his theological and ecclesiastical perspectives over time. Through an examination of Ham's respective conceptualizations, my discussion will progress toward a nuanced exploration of their symbiotic interplay. Central to this exploration is Ham's concept of *ipchejeoseong*, which not only highlights the inherent interconnectedness of religion and politics but also underscores the distinctive role of authentic religiosity in bringing efficacy and righteousness to politics. As I examine Ham's definitions of religion and politics drawn from various sources of his writing, I will also elucidate his personal diagnosis of their problems. By emphasizing the necessity and significance of religiosity in all dimensions of human life, including history and politics, I ultimately aim to identify a specific conceptual dimension, in which I think religion can properly and beneficially function in political life, thus emphasizing its potential for playing a constructive role in shaping a so-called "good" political consciousness and community. While numerous connections can be drawn, this paper employs the discourse of civil religion (DCR), often seen as a theoretical framework primarily for American historical narratives, to illuminate Ham's religious reflection on the political community and his transcendent vision for a broader national understanding, including cosmopolitanism. Within this framework, "religious reflection" delineates Ham's scrutiny and efforts to address the moral quality and destiny of the nation, while "transcendence" signifies his movement beyond conventional boundaries toward cosmopolitanism, seeking to realize the metaphysical truths and aspirations of both individuals and his historical community, Korea. This application of civil religion specifically hinges on Ham's prophetic approach to political discourse, echoing the American discourse characterized by common soteriological rhetoric among prominent historical intellectuals and leaders envisioning morally and spiritually ideal communities. Examples include John Winthrop's iconic sermon on "the City upon a Hill", Jonathan Edwards's prophetic warning, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", Lincoln's reference to the "Almost Chosen People" in his Gettysburg Address, Reagan's invocation of a "proud city built on rocks", and Rev. King's Dream Speech. Rather than categorizing Ham's views on religion and politics as a direct example of the DCR, this paper suggests that the DCR can serve as a useful interpretive framework to elucidate the dimension where his various religious ideas intersect with political thoughts and visions.

3. Review of Literature

To contextualize my discourse, let me briefly outline the current academic discourse on Ham's views regarding the intersection of religion and politics and discuss the potential contribution that my analysis can offer. Research, along with various academic discussions and debates on Ham's thoughts, has continued since the late 1980s. Starting with Kim Kyoungjae's meaningful theological analysis of Ham's *ssial* philosophy and his view of history in 1989, a variety of scholarly subjects have been explored since then, including his biography, literary uniqueness, pacifism, and religious thoughts during the 1990s and the early 2000s (Jung 2006; K. Kim 1989a, 1989b; J. Kim 1993; Samwoong Kim 2000; Sunsoo Kim 2001; Y. Kim 2006; Park 2001; Roh 2000; Yi 2005). Interest in Ham Sok Hon has remained relatively consistent across various academic fields in Korea, including religious studies, theology, philosophy, education, history, and political science. However, the mainstream discussion has yet to significantly advance toward presenting a new direction of discourse with fresh materials. Moreover, English-language research on this subject is exceedingly rare. Recent studies on religion and politics within Ham's thoughts predominantly focus on three central themes: (1) the active involvement of minjung (the people) in political affairs; (2) the necessity for mental or spiritual (*jeongsin*) transformation for societal progress, including the role of Christian faith and church; and (3) Ham's understanding of and critical approach to the nation-state and democracy. In all these seemingly

practical discussions of political life, there always lies a discussion of Ham's philosophy of *ssial* and *saengmyeong*, not only as a theoretical foundation of any formulation of political vision but also as a fundamental force to empower people to act collectively. In his 2022 work titled "Hamseokeonui Sahoechamyeorongwa Jonggyogwane Daehan Gochal (A Study of Ham, Seok-heon's Social Participation Theory and Religious View)", Kim Bongkeun sheds light on Ham's intentional efforts to place people at the forefront of political life. Through an analysis of Ham's poems from the 1950s, like *Huinson* (White Hands) and *Dae Seoneon* (Declaration), Kim explores how Ham articulates his dynamic Christian theology and activism, drawing inspiration from both Western and Eastern philosophies (Kim 2022b). Lee Sangrok discusses how, according to Ham, minjung can contribute to the fulfillment of the will of God in political and historical reality, emphasizing a soteriological task. Historical salvation is the realization of democracy (S. Lee 2010). Similarly, Kang Sootaek expands on the notion of *ssial* to broaden Ham's perspective on minjung, particularly within the realm of civil society (S. Kang 2014). On the relationship or interaction between religion and politics, numerous productive discussions have been undertaken as well. For instance, in his 2020 work, Kang Mungu illuminates the multifaceted nature of politics, suggesting that biblical narratives offer valuable insights into this realm. Ham's unwavering advocacy for political engagement reflects his deep-seated religious calling and his aspiration for a cohesive and inclusive community (M. Kang 2022). Likewise, Kim Bonggeun's recent comparative analyses of Ham with Augustine and Hauerwas aim to underscore Ham's soteriological perspective on political action across history, particularly evident in his views on the interplay between church and state and the role of religion in societal responsibility (Kim 2022a, 2021).

The active and meaningful role of religion in politics is further illuminated by Ham's characterization of it with the notion of *jeongsin gaehyeok and jeongsin hyeokmyeong*. Comparing Ham's perspective with that of Kim Suyoung, Choi Ho-young highlights Ham's deliberate efforts to empower the Korean intellectual community, urging them toward creative initiatives for social progress and liberation from injustice and oppression. He emphasizes that the true revolution lies in intellect and spirit, with institutional reforms being mere reflections of this deeper change (Choi 2022; Kim 2021; Han 2014). Han Kyumoo echoes similar sentiments, suggesting that Ham's political ideas are rooted in *uminron* (愚民論), yet lamenting the failure of Korean intellectuals, including educators, to effectively catalyze minjung growth (Han 2014). In a similar vein, Lee Dongsoo recognizes the unique role of Ham as a social critic or political commentator who effectively functions to translate highly professional concepts into a public language to deliver political messages and inspire action accordingly (D. Lee 2002). Lee Unsunn's examination of Wang Yangmyeong's notion of *simjeungni*, which is paralleled with Ham's *ssial* awakening as vividly portrayed in his experience of *sinobijeu mot ga* (不忍池畔) in Japan, serves as another compelling showcase indirectly illustrating the fundamental role of religious enlightenment in reshaping human mentality and consciousness, thereby influencing our physical and political environment (U. Lee 2013). There are several notable discussions exploring Ham's perspective on democracy. In her works from 2007 and 2013, Moon Jiyoung tries to clarify terms such as *minjok* (nation), *minju* (democracy), and *gukka* (state), which featured frequently and significantly in Ham's political discourse. She underscores his persistent advocacy for empowering minjung over career politicians to achieve genuine democracy (Moon 2013). In her 2006 work particularly, Moon illuminates how Ham's discourse of resistance profoundly impacted the democratization movement of the 1970s (Moon 2006).

Although recent discussions have consistently highlighted the profound role of Ham's philosophy of *ssial* in explaining a variety of his pluralistic political expressions and formulating a system of thought, there remains a noticeable lack of serious exploration concerning the fundamental relationship between religion and politics. While many draw upon individual ideas from Ham's public statements to support their arguments, they often neglect to establish a strong logical connection between them. Even when one can deduce theoretical insights from Ham's scattered statements across his various works attempting to

integrate religiosity into political life, synthesizing an overarching idea proves challenging, particularly due to Ham's heavy use of metaphorical language. Therefore, this paper will pay special attention to instances where Ham explicitly discusses politics and will carefully trace where these discussions conceptually and logically lead. For instance, when Ham states, "In times when politics decays, it is religion that saves; and when religion withers, it is politics that rescues", he unequivocally expresses their inseparability.[2] This paper will explore how this seemingly archaic idea—the unity of religion and politics—can navigate predicted fallout and be effectively repositioned to appeal to modern sensibilities. Central to this exploration is Ham's notion of *ipcheseong*, which he himself depicts through diagrams, emphasizing the reciprocal and organic interaction between religion and politics. This logical framework will be further elucidated by Ham's articulation of the historical development of this relationship. According to him, the primal state of this relationship involves religiosity playing a critical role in inspiring, guiding, and empowering politics, ultimately leading to an expanded political consciousness such as cosmopolitanism. At the end of the analysis, I will propose a conceptual framework of civil religion through which I believe Ham's discourse on religion and politics can be adequately understood and communicated.

4. Defining Religion and Politics

4.1. Religion

In Ham Sok Hon's broader philosophical project, religion may be one of the most challenging subjects to study, not because his thought is overly complex but because it evolves through different stages over time. Without considering the particular historical context of his life, one may easily misunderstand his points. Although his thinking was relatively more open-minded than that of others with similar religious affiliations, even from a young age, due to the profound influence of his significant mentor, Yu Yougmo, renowned for his creative and syncretic philosophy, Ham's mature understanding of religion remained largely aligned with the typical Christian theological thought available at the time. Having experienced numerous dramatic life situations, both personally and communally, including his extensive intellectual journey across multiple places such as Japan and the U.S., as well as his unwavering struggle for justice and democracy, Ham's conception of religion ultimately diverged from conventional notions.[3] For Ham, religion epitomizes the pinnacle of human potential. Metaphysically, it embodies the divine impulse or force that compels individuals to introspect and self-criticize. This process not only helps them effectively navigate life's challenges, such as physical survival and sustenance, but also taps into their boundless creativity, constantly reshaping or enriching their identities and destinies. Functionally, and more specifically, sociologically, religion serves as a tool for individuals to awaken to their true identity and actively manifest this awakening, particularly within historical reality. It redirects their ontological concerns inwardly, inspiring and empowering them to align their practical life efforts, such as pursuing ease of living and nurturing an inclusive power dynamic with what Ham terms the natural law or the law of *saengmyeong* (life). For this comprehensive and practical function, Ham's religion is not something that humans choose but something that comes to them as a living force, "the lived religion: religion is fundamentally inherent to life—an attitude or essence. Belief or disbelief does not define religion."[4]

Taking a closer look, for the metaphysical dimension, Ham believes that religion is an expression and instrument that deals with the grand evolutionary process of human existence, in which we, "born as materialistic and carnal entity, come to transcend the material plane to what we commonly term as the spiritual realm."[5] It helps us seek unity and transparency within the existence between the binary opposites that we often take for granted, such as the mind vs. the body, the inner vs. the outer, the worldly vs. the otherworldly, and the self vs. the other, so that we can move beyond our uncritical inclination to frequently label as "other" that which is not part of ourselves, whether it be things or ideas. The idea of *ssial*, which is Ham's most famous philosophical concept, contains this no-

tion of deep ontological and epistemological integration. Differing from the conventional understanding revolving around institutional and organizational expressions of humans' sacred experiences, which can be represented as a static noun, Ham's notion of religion is more of an adjective and a verb, implying process and movement toward an ultimate direction. As articulated in his myriad uses, specifically in socio-political contexts, the idea of *ssial*, as the revolution of the mind (*jeongsinhyeongmyeong*), represents both the inner awakening and the outer expansion or fulfillment of our existence. Encountering the ultimate divine, reciting sacred syllables, chanting holy names, dancing to celestial melodies, and immersing oneself in the sacred symphony of ancient words are all different expressions of awakening to *ssial*. Ham believes that if one discovers their true self or the essence of their existence, united organically and meaningfully, engaging with other lives and surroundings, it can be called *ssial*-awakening or religion in the more conventional sense. Due to their shared functions, phenomena, and resulting moral outcomes, *ssial* and religion can be interchangeable. It is not that Ham's notion of *ssial* closely aligns with our general understanding of religion, but rather that his creative articulation of religion, which draws on a heightened state of mind in both intelligence and spirituality, bears similarity to the notion of *ssial*. Thus, religion, like *ssial*, serves not as a noun but as an adjective or verb denoting a kinetic journey toward the primordial, ultimate, and ideal state or direction.

Integral to or synonymous with *ssial*, religion inspires and empowers individuals to embrace a boundary-breaking disposition conventionally called transcendence. For Ham, this entails the function of breaking various realms spanning ontology, epistemology, theology, and ethics. Ontologically, the purpose of religion is to rediscover one's divine, "true identity (*chamna*)",[6] "opening up the spirit (*honeul yeolgo*, opennin up hon)" [7] and essentially stimulating dormant minds to shake off their intellectual and spiritual lethargy. The encounter and communication with God, the epitome of existence, unveil the depths of our being, elevating our significance throughout history and empowering our influence in politics as we come to embrace our inherent humility, reminiscent of the greatness of Jesus on Mount Golgotha rather than of Prometheus on Mount Olympus. Religion, the articulated form of our desires, experiences, and expressions of transcendence, enables us to sense the universally and cosmically shared identity of all lives, referred to as *ssial* in Ham's vocabulary. *Ssial*, awakened through religious insights, inspirations, and practices,[8] according to his idiosyncratic usage, denotes our innate, natural, affective connection to each other, synonymous with Confucian *jen*, Jesus's *agape*, Hindu unity of Brahman-Atman, and Buddhist *metta*.[9] Through true religion, we become ontologically primordial or, more literally, "pure (*maen*)"—stripping away all the artificial constructs and labels—to harmonize with others, thinking as "the whole within the individual (*jeonchejuui uisigeul gajin gaein*)."[10] Since religion is the sublime pursuit of truth both internally and externally within beings, there is no distinction between individuals, societies, and nations. Just as faith coincides with one's genuine desire to learn, as shown in Jesus' teaching on his intention of parables, religion emerges when one strives to ontologically reconfigure their entire life, aiming to truly understand and appreciate the divine melody played by the various instruments of nature and human affairs.

Epistemologically, religion intends to expand knowledge not only in terms of the quality of its content but also in how we acquire it. True knowledge, particularly about life, cannot be confined within a conceptual box. It is dynamic and organic, constantly reshaped by the vicissitudes of time, place, and human interaction. According to Ham, the awakening-to-*ssial* or religion signifies a cognitive and spiritual boundary-breaking and expansion, not solely due to human intention but also because of the fundamental nature of the divine, which is constantly expanding, connecting, and unifying. Thus, Ham warns against religion, specifically against absolutizing religious claims and communities. He stated, "Believing that all other religions are falsehoods except for one's own reflects a deficiency in one's own faith."[11] He even compared our epistemology of religion with various artistic expressions, saying, "Absolute truths need not manifest in a singular form. Just as there is no rule stating that inspiration in art must be expressed in one way, I believe

the same applies to religion."[12] It makes sense because for Ham, religion or religious faith should entail something about plausibility, "*seolmyeongdoeneun sinang*", which implies or presupposes reasonableness—a larger epistemological outcome than merely within the individual.[13] Furthermore, since religion, unlike science seeking factuality, is an act of finding and creating meaning, it should remain open to various interpretations and practices that suit evolving social contexts.[14] Although not expressed with sophistication due to the distinct literary genre of his writing, his religious epistemology resonates with numerous intellectual predecessors, including Aristotle and Aquinas, who emphasized the contextual and interactive nature of meaning and knowledge—a perspective echoed by various modern thinkers such as Foucault and Rorty.[15] He even parallels his concept of religion with the Buddhist notion of *upaya* (*bangpyeon*, skillful means), wherein cognitive fluidity and adaptability blend heavenly truth with earthly reality.[16] Ultimately, it serves the fundamental purpose of life: expressing and realizing universal love. Ham thus envisions the integration of all dimensions of life, including politics, economy, culture, and arts, particularly in our thinking, which he calls "the integration of thoughts (*tonghabui sago*)", beyond "specialization from technological society (*gisulsahoeui teuksuhwa*)."

This epistemological openness naturally leads to challenging the doctrinal and ethical rigidity of religion. Inspired by his intellectual journey, drawing from a diverse array of religious and philosophical thinkers spanning the East and West, including H. G. Wells, Romain Rolland, Tolstoy, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Tagore, Confucius, Laozi, and many others, and confronted by ceaseless life crises—both personal and communal—Ham gradually, yet resolutely, embraced a universalist stance. He articulated, "No one in this world can claim to possess an entirely perfect truth. Instead, truth is singular; at least, in moral religions—though I'm uncertain about minor cultic religions—there must be a singular truth and the same. Shouldn't it be otherwise? Thus, the essence of religion is unity." In the realm of true religion, encapsulated by the transcendent dimension termed *yŏnggye* (spiritual realm) by Ham, doctrinal formulations such as the deity of Jesus and the facticity and historicity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary and their debates hold no significance. In essence, everything should harmonize if it embodies truth, just as in mathematical and logical truths. Ham perceived diverse theological experiences, understandings, and interpretations as varied expressions of the Ultimate Truth, encapsulated in his phrase, "Many yet one, one yet many."[17] He even pondered, "If Laozi or Zhuangzi were to describe the concept known as God in Christianity, wouldn't they refer to it as the Dao?"[18]

For his elaboration of ethics, Ham harbored strong disdain for the traditional religious system, particularly its doctrinal and institutional components, which often became glaringly problematic through political entanglements. This sentiment is vividly portrayed in his contentious essay on the powerful, including religion, that he wrote in *Sasanggye* in 1957 and the ensuing exchange of debate with Catholic priest Yun Hyeongjung, who believed that his criticism was nothing more than a low, obscene disparagement. He vehemently condemned, "Religious institutions erect walls higher than those of prisons atop governmental offices, luring in vulnerable souls with honeyed words. Once inside, these souls are confined day and night, stripped of their outer and inner coverings, rendered unable to leave. Meanwhile, outside, there's a tempting facade of soul-salvation, all in a glorious display."[19] Although the establishment of organized religion is inevitable to create a space to respond to our desire to continue our transcendent experiences, its descent into a mere social and political institution seeking and wielding power is unacceptable to Ham. Religion is an act of elevating our mental or spiritual realm into a higher dimension where one can exercise the sublime power to connect and co-thrive with all living beings.

What should not be overlooked in Ham's articulation of religion, however, is the fact that his seemingly highly pluralistic position did not lead him to abandon his theocentric Christian religious framework. Since *jeonilhwa gwajeong* (Unifying Process) constitutes Ham's larger philosophical proposition encompassing most of his thoughts, including history, politics, and mass movements for social progress (K. Kim 2010), there should be a focal point or a singular axis from which all constituents of life can find order, a sense of

direction, and a moral goal. Great wisdom traditions from Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism are all inspiring in helping humans discover the profound ontological depth manifested in a variety of forms. However, they fall short in translating their potential into a sociological and historical force. While Ham never explicitly pointed it out, given his emphasis in his overall literature, the absence of the soteriological narrative inherent in the Christian faith was a central concern. For effective human progress, singularity or centrality is imperative. Humans, as assumed in most of Ham's literature, are vulnerable to selfishness and power-mongering due to the paradoxical nature of free will. They need a singular focus from which to collectively make sense of the world and find a better relatable plausibility in explaining the origin and destiny of life. Moreover, to imbue this framework with significance, the ultimate singularity needs to be personified or anthropomorphized so that humans can engage with it personally and communally, thereby creating stories and meanings. Even though Ham recognized the possibility of alternatives in other religions, he believed that the soteriological narrative of Christianity is the best not only to reveal the inherent problem of human nature but also to properly respond to the feeling of transcendence in various sectors of life, such as history, society, and politics, particularly with the salvific focus on both personal and communal life through various effective narrative devices such as enslavement, the advent of a messianic aid, exodus, liberation, and the promised land.

4.2. Politics

In Ham's view, religion and politics exhibit homology not in their divergent manifestations in life but in their shared origins. Both stem from life's fundamental movement, which unfolds in two different directions: horizontal and vertical. Politics, as defined by Ham, embodies the horizontal expansion of life, aiming "to level things (*jeong*, 政 or *jeongya*, 正也)", metaphorically put, "not to have bumps and lumps" to achieve and "govern (*chi*, 治) justice", while religion represents the vertical pursuit of spiritual alignment, "aiming to ascend to heaven (*haneullo ollagajaneun undong*)." The former addresses social and moral aspects, while the latter pertains to the spiritual realm. They both represent "the structure of life (*saengmyeongui gujo*)", a concept Ham characterizes specifically as *ipchejeok* (stereoscopic) rather than *pyeongmyeonjeok* (planar).[20] What Ham tries to emphasize with *ipcheseong* is the shared goal of religion and politics. Though their functions diverge within different spheres, they ultimately converge in their shared endeavor: the realization of unification/integration. In the realm of this stereoscopic dimension, religion and politics are closely interrelated. For instance, as religion deepens, politics becomes useful and beneficial. Conversely, when politics falters, it reflects a weakening of religion. Both, in their respective spheres, contribute to the integration of life, as defined by Ham as "living like a true human"[21]: politics addresses life matters and related interactions, while religion attends to spiritual concerns. In a sense, they all grapple with the inner enemy: politics wrestles with the tendency to devise schemes "to unload suffering onto others",[22] while religion seeks to diminish self-identity to mere biological existence. The inner enemy interferes with their common goal of leveling and deepening to realize the largest possible unity of life. Ham believes that religion and politics are both the movement of *jeongsin* (精神). While *jeongsin* is commonly translated as spirit or mind, contrasting with the physical and material realm, its nuance transcends mere religiosity or spirituality. It encompasses our cognitive capacity and state of consciousness and often extends to the *zeitgeist*. For that reason, Ham frequently calls for *jeongsin undong* (movement of *jeongsin*) and *jeongsin hyeongmyeong* (revolution of *jeongsin*) whenever talking about political matters.

Therefore, the problem of politics, as diagnosed by Ham, needs careful clarification. Although Ham was persistently disapproving and critical of politics, much of his severe criticism and disparagement of politics are not aimed at the goal and activity of politics, but rather against politicians and their entrenched corrupt strategies, programs, policies, and systems. He harshly denounces politicians, labelling them as "sly fox politician", "conniving rat politician", "divisive agitator politician", "manipulative butcher politician", "de-

ceitful schemer politician", and "fossilized statesmen."[23] However, he never relinquishes the original purpose of politics, which, in its sublime state, would ultimately intersect with that of religion, aiming to recover the sacred nature of human life. Ham says, "In striving to live in a manner that is spiritually and morally upright, in striving to live as true and authentic individuals, the language of a nation emerges, along with its customs, morals, and institutions. This is referred to as culture. Working consciously and systematically to advance this culture is what constitutes a country and politics."[24] Much like religion, politics is an active life movement, manifesting horizontally to seek truth through non-violent means. While religion aims to reconfigure the relationship with the divine, politics focuses on arranging human relationships for the improvement and distribution of various material and social resources. It is a *jeongsin undong* within the historical and sociological context.

Thus, the enduring political problems that we have been experiencing are caused by our misunderstanding of politics, resulting in an unbridgeable divide with religion. Not only have we, at various points of history, fortified a formidable barrier against the intrusion of religion into politics, but we have also begun to exalt politics with an almost reverential fervor. He asserts, "The false deity of salvation is politics. Throughout human history, it has been the faith in the omnipotence of politics that has guided us."[25] This lofty status of politics derives particularly from its control over power. As Harold Lasswell famously defined politics as being about "who gets what, when, and how", people believe that politics is primarily concerned with facilitating access to and utilization of power and material resources within our social environment (Lasswell 2011). They perceive this task as distinct from that of religion. What is known as secularization, including the division of labor, professionalism, and bureaucratization, has solidified this false belief. Specific skill sets were mechanistically and unfairly relegated to particular professions, fostering professional communities imbued with a positivist ethos that overlooks spirituality. Consequently, our essential consideration of human emotions and volition has been dehumanized and reduced to mere quantitative and objective facets. Ham suggests that what we currently perceive as politics is, in fact, politics stripped of its essence, leaving only its superficial aspects. Programs, policies, and institutional strategies, essentially, are mere surface elements. True politics resides in the realm of consciousness, mentality, disposition, and attitudes, serving as the authentic aims of political engagement. It involves a conscious effort, utilizing various methods, to construct a new way of thinking and engaging with people to thrive together.

To better grasp Ham's reasoning on how religion and politics interact, both striving for the common goal of *jeonilhwa gwajeong* (the process of unification and integration), it is important to discuss his concept of the evolving relationship between these two spheres. Ham presents a distinct interpretation of 物有本末 事有終始 知所先后 則近道矣 (muryubonmal sayujongsi jisoseonhu jeukgeundoui, 물유본말 사유종시 지소선후 즉근도의) a renowned passage from the Great Learning. It underscores that everything has its origins and outcomes; events have their conclusions and beginnings. Understanding the significance of the end is crucial here. "What comes last was the first", suggesting that what appears insignificant or humble is actually fundamental and significant.[26] This interpretation symbolically shows Ham's focus on the people/minjung as the driving force shaping and guiding history and politics. It implies that the end marks a new beginning, empowering previously ignored or oppressed individuals to become active and authentic participants. Ham contends that political history has evolved to reflect this dynamic.[27] For instance, in ancient hunting and gathering societies characterized by a nomadic lifestyle, simple tools, and limited possessions, individuals with exceptional environmental knowledge, communication skills, and charisma often rose to power. Later, the development of agricultural technology and lifestyle led to the centralization of power and the establishment of city-states and kingdoms, in which a powerful king or monarch dominated politics. As social stratification, along with the expansion of wealth and territories, became stronger and more sophisticated, a primitive exercise of collective political power, particularly by the elite aristocrats, emerged along with the for-

mation of a new system called feudalism and manorialism. However, the politics of modern and contemporary society, marked by the explosive production of endless new professional fields and knowledge, a new mode of economy, and a new way of controlling systems with elaborated laws, regulations, and policies, is being dominated by technocrats, capitalists, and bureaucrats. Thus, people who were the fundamental root of life and society have long been placated at best, marginalized at the least, or oppressed at their worst. Ham argues that the end of politics marks the onset of a new era, wherein people emerge as the primary architects of their own destiny. The essence of their power lies not in charisma, specialized skills, wealth, or territorial control but rather in their unique experiences of the lowest points in life, particularly what he calls suffering, whether economic, political, or even philosophical. Since politics is something internal, dealing with the character, culture, disposition, consciousness, and values of the people, programs, policies, and institutional efforts are simply instruments to express it. The mode of politics has been, however, misled by focusing excessively on the external. Ham believes that without a revolution in people's consciousness, there can be no good politics. Given that conventional politics and its various agents think and act from their privileged position, accessing and expanding the sources of power, their institutional efforts inevitably fail, as history has repeatedly demonstrated. Ideas such as Reinhold Niebuhr's prophetic warning of an "immoral society", when viewed through Ham's perspective, should be reframed. Instead of solely emphasizing group egoism, which inadvertently accentuates the inherent limitations of collective human consciousness, we should redirect our focus toward our moral or even spiritual negligence resulting from excessive trust in established structures.

Therefore, the final stage of political mode is the *ssial*-driven politics, which is the movement of people's political consciousness, called in various phrases such as the revolution of *jeongsin*, non-violent struggle, and *ddeut*-seeking life (meaning/will-seeking life). Varieties of Ham's humanistic expressions deepen this notion. Politics is "to prescribe medicine, which is to hear the voice of people."[28] And "a true politician should resemble a diligent farmer, nurturing and cultivating, rather than a carpenter or blacksmith, shaping and molding through force and coercion."[29] "The people are the spirit of the tiger, and the governance of the nation is the tiger's fat. When the nation is in disarray, it is because the spirit of the tiger has perished; when the spirit is lost, it is because the belly is hungry and confined."[30] "The true politics is to meet the tiger in nature."[31] These metaphoric expressions, such as prescribing medicine, cultivating land, and nurturing the soul of the tiger, are all intended to deliver Ham's core philosophical message on awakening the political consciousness of the people.

Examining further, according to Ham, mature politics or the ultimate mode of politics would manifest three major markers: *seuseuroham*, serenactivism (*jeongjeokpyeongan*), and cosmopolitanism. They all demand the spiritual maturity of the people. *Seuseuroham* is the concept that Ham frequently highlights in his writing. It literally means self-doing and self-acting. This concept emerges in his metaphysical discussions when he talks generally about the divine nature of life and history. Inspired by biblical narratives, Ham explains the origin and movement of life by emphasizing the self-initiating act of the logos of God. God descended upon this earth of His own volition, willingly embraced suffering, faced death by His own choice, triumphantly rose again, and thus single-handedly redeemed humankind. What is more important is the paradox. He ascended to glory by embracing humility, attained liberation through enduring suffering, attained sanctity by shouldering sin's consequences, and triumphed over death by embracing mortality.[32] In grappling with the numerous political challenges facing the Korean people, Ham draws inspiration from the biblical grand narrative, advocating for a concept he terms *seuseuroham* (Moon 2006). He passionately encourages the people to emerge as the architects of history and politics, citing historical triumphs like the Imjin War, the Donghak Movement, the March First Independence Movement, the April Revolution, and the Gwangju Uprising. Even amidst historical setbacks such as the Rebellion of Myocheong, Ham emphasizes that if the people had joined and taken the lead, it might have turned successful, implying the importance of *seuseuroham*. As mentioned earlier, if the country is the tiger, the people are its soul, and politics is the fat. Without their spiritual and

intellectual agility and cleverness, the country-subject to political dynamics—cannot thrive. The reason why people can thrive *seuseuro* is because they are the most emphatic agents in this highly conflicting political reality, labeled as, according to Ham, *maensaram* (bare person), *nandaero inneun saram* (person true to their innate self), *sunjeonhan saram* (pure-hearted individual), *amugeotdo butyeogajigo itji aneun saram* (person without anything attached), and *geunboni chakage doen saram* (person with a fundamentally good nature).[33] We are all "born from the love of our mothers."[34] "Politics does not solely govern the country; instead, life generates skills and institutions. Similarly, it is not philosophers or moralists who guide the people, but rather the people themselves who impart wisdom and empower others. The nation belongs to the *ssial*, and the world belongs to the *ssial*. Nor are the politicians who lead the people, but the ignorant people who lead the country"[35]. Ham states, "We (the People) established the ancient king Dangun, selected Dongmyeong, birthed Hyeokgeose and Wangeon, and raised Sayuksin and Saengyuksin."[36]

The ultimate mode of politics should also present serenactivism. Inspired by H. G. Wells's *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution*, Ham highlights the awakened or enlightened intellect and dynamic activism of the people. Echoing Wells's idea of people voluntarily and openly engaging in a world revolution, he emphasizes *deureonae noeun moban* (open conspiracy). This concept underscores the notion that individuals, realizing themselves as the original and pure source of power and change, must openly act to influence and shape society and politics. Unlike the clandestine plotting characteristic of communist revolutions, serenactivism should operate transparently, with the objectives of the people's movement and its strategic efforts being open to all stakeholders because they are confidently reasonable and justifiable. To engage in serenactivism in politics, individuals must break free from the habit of everydayism, characterized as "a revolutionary way of life, (*hyeongmyeongui saenghwalhwa*) (Choi 2022)." Everydayism here refers to a secularized state, a life of inertia, a passive existence, a life taken for granted, a life without action, and a life without spontaneous creativity; in other words, a life that the masses should avoid at all costs.[37] In a state where people speak freely, express their opinions without restraint, and engage in activities of freedom as they please, peace naturally arises. This state is serenactivism.[38]

Ham believes that people's *seuseuroham* and serenactivism would lead to a non-violent cosmopolitan mode of politics. When *ssial*-awakened people think, act, and collaborate with each other, boundary politics would eventually collapse. As mentioned earlier in the discussion of the evolutionary process of the modes of politics in history, the only alternative that has not been seriously and systematically tried is the option where people themselves take the lead in politics, not dictators, ideological cadres, or unenlightened mobs. The political community that people or minjung themselves would ultimately establish must be cosmopolitan. Ham himself said, "I have become a cosmopolitan because of Wells." Many countries, particularly those emerging after World War II, have uncritically embraced the nation-state model as the default for their systems. Regrettably, the essence of the nation-state has transformed into a system primarily serving corporate leviathans, driven solely by profit and power. All constituents, especially those lacking status, privilege, and power, are relegated to serving morally and spiritually insensitive political machinery. People have been indoctrinated to believe that it is impossible and unjust to transcend the nation-state paradigm, as statism has become a revered theology, worshipped and sacrificed for. Ham vehemently criticizes this confinement of people's political consciousness within the boundaries of a nation, state, or territory.

While acknowledging the significance of *minjok* (nation) in shaping the narrative for the Korean people, Ham emphasizes its universality beyond mere national confines. According to Ham, *minjung* (people) are the true owners and authors of their narrative, not subservient to any particular nation. Ham advocates for embracing diverse narratives of *minjok*, particularly those highlighting shared suffering, to foster a deeper global unity. Consequently, Ham rejects the concept of "nationalist democracy (*minjok minjujuui*)" as inherently unjust.[39] Politics, for Ham, serves as a means to level the playing field and promote fairness and equality horizontally. It is an earthly tool reflecting our innate desire and duty to connect with others.

Ham views the current nation-state system as a transitional phase in our institutional development, urging it to serve as a stepping stone rather than a final destination. Reflecting on human history's successes and failures—from ancient empires to the United Nations—Ham emphasizes the need for continual evolution and adaptation. At the heart of this vision lies humanity's awakened belief in its unification, metaphysically described as the unification of *ira* (一我) and *daea* (大我), driven by a shared moral imperative derived from humanity's shared historical experiences. Ham poetically echoes Rev. King's universal moral imperative on justice, stating, "I cannot become a sinner without implicating the entire human race in sin, nor can I disregard the whole while striving to do good." Like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin predicts in his *Phenomenon of Man* (Teilhard de Chardin 2008), Ham envisions an Omega Point where human endeavors across various domains converge toward a common direction, culminating in the highest ideal—the thriving of all humanity.[40] People or minjung can and must work on envisioning and establishing living together peacefully and harmoniously. The nation of Korea finds itself in a favorable position within this lofty cosmopolitan endeavor, not due to its grandeur, but because it has been an insignificant pawn, like many others, lost in history's dim alleyways—a mere echo of failure.[41]

5. Ham's Imagination of Korean Civil Religion

As articulated in the stereoscopic relationship with politics, Ham's vision of religion in the practical dimension is very exquisite to conceptualize. Like religion, in its larger goal, politics serves the overarching goal of fostering harmonious coexistence among people to the fullest extent possible. Although not directly intertwined, the vigor of religiosity within a society, true spirituality, is believed to contribute to the *jeonilhwa gwajeong* (the grand unifying process), of which politics is a significant part. Religion deeply resonates with individuals, inspiring them to mold their political consciousness, culture, and institutions toward a moral character, which entails constant self-reflection and self-criticism to better accommodate all who cross our path, be they residents or sojourners seeking solace. To elucidate Ham's nuanced perspective on the complex relationship between religion and politics, I think that it could be beneficial to employ a conceptual framework anchored in the notion of civil religion.

Civil religion, a term initially coined by Rousseau and later revisited and popularized by Bellah and his adherents, embodies a symbolic system of beliefs and rituals centered on the sacred identity of the political community. Drawing from Durkheimian principles, civil religion conceptualizes the political community and society themselves as objects of veneration, mirroring the reverence typically reserved for religious deities. Much like traditional religions, civil religion encompasses divine cosmogony, covenantal agreements, and redemptive narratives featuring elements such as transgression, liberation, and prophetic figures or events. For instance, Bellah contends that the American nation occupies a sanctified position in the collective psyche of its citizens. This sacredness derives from pivotal historical junctures, symbolic acts, and soteriological narratives. Events like the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement are revered as hallowed moments in the nation's narrative. Similarly, symbols such as the American flag, the Statue of Liberty, and the Great Seal of the United States, along with rituals like the national anthem, presidential inaugurations, Memorial Day, and Thanksgiving, are imbued with sacred significance. However, the true essence of this civil religion lies not merely in the reverence for these symbols and rituals but in the collective consciousness that transcends individual perspectives and fosters a sense of unity and cohesion among the populace. It is in this communal consciousness, where individuals perceive themselves as part of a greater whole that the quintessence of civil religion truly resides. With civil religion, in principle, individuals have the ability to think as a whole. America holds greater value than the individual. This fundamentally means individuals internalize the nation's identity, enabling them to make profound decisions and act when demanded, even at the cost of personal interests or life.

Similarly, Ham emphasizes the self as a whole. The whole does not refer to Korea as an institutional entity but a personified collective self. Speaking on religion and politics at

the Gyeongseong-Jungang-Gidok-Cheongnyeon-Hoegwan auditorium in 1948, during the nation's nascent quest for institutional identity, Ham delivered a striking phrase to the audience: "*Joseoneuro malhage hara* (Let Joseon speak for itself)."[42] He suggests a metaspheric viewpoint, in which the broader contour and landscape of the whole's varying voices fade out individual noises. He visualizes the following:

> "When you climb up a high mountain and look down at the valleys, each valley has its own streams and villages, forming towns and cities. They compete with each other, boasting of their prosperity and reveling in their pleasures. Houses become like crab shells, where people crawl in and out, resembling ants bustling about, with no tears or laughter, no praises or curses to be heard. Instead, invisible lights and inaudible whispers reveal the true essence of life."

The community, according to Ham, is not merely an institutional apparatus but an organic entity with a personality formed from the accumulated memories of specific historical experiences. Similar to the concept of civil religion, where the American people perceive the nation of America as a sacred entity with feelings and agency in history, Ham suggests that Korean people should likewise be able to sense the personality of Korea that both exults and mourns amidst the ever-shifting tides of fate. To be precise, in Ham's case, this personality has been shaped by the history of *han*, which presents the endless struggle of the Korean people to reclaim human dignity from myriads of collective challenges and adversities, including numerous foreign invasions, turbulent internal strife, and brutal civil war, oppressive colonial occupation, bitter ideological divide, and countless other trials. Ham discovers within these tragic memories a collective sacred narrative: the tale of peace-loving Korean people persistently striving to overcome oppression and injustice, courageously journeying toward a promised land. To achieve this, Koreans must uncover or awaken to the *ddeut* (meaning/will) of their history, which Ham believes involves feeling and becoming unified (*hanaga doejaneun or irujaneun geot*). This task of unity transcends language, policies, heroes, hierarchy, and even the will of the people.[43] Ham states, "*Joseoniran jeonche geujasini malhayeoyahanda. Jonjaehaneun geoseun joseoniraneun saengmyeongiji musangyegeupdo aniyo, jabongado aniyo jeongdangina gyohoedo anida* (Joseon must speak for itself. Its existence is not merely a social class, nor is it capitalist, nor is it a political party or a church)." It is, again, Jonseon, the nation, that undergoes self-awakening, self-reflection, and self-redemption rather than individuals thinking independently.[44] He envisions a civilization's maturity in which individuals are highly and ceaselessly attuned to the voice of the whole, interpreting its message to guide and uplift the moral growth of the community.

According to Ham's perspective on religion and politics, the term "whole" does not denote an institutional entity like government, nation, or ideology. Instead, it embodies a sense of community rooted in individual consciousness—an awakening to true self-understanding and impelled by a moral imperative: the quest for harmonious coexistence with fellow travelers in life. Thus, for Ham, religion—what I term civil religion—signifies an individual's capacity to transcend biological and social constraints in pursuit of discovering and embodying life's profound meaning. Being civil represents the milieu where this transcendence is translated, applied, and tested socially. Both aspects should not be taken literally, as Ham evolved beyond the literal dimensions of his circumstances over time. For instance, he formally distanced himself from institutional Christianity in the *Declaration*, aligning his actions with his faith's truths. Furthermore, he transitioned from nationalism to cosmopolitanism, embracing a broader citizenship concept. Ham envisages a driving force to unite people and move society forward—a civically mature consciousness. This consciousness fosters a higher, more sacred conception of the political community, where established systems undergo profound moral reflection and imaginative evolution.

6. Conclusions

According to Ham, religion and politics are reciprocal. "There is no religion without politics, and there is no politics without religion."[45] They serve distinct purposes on varying horizons, yet they converge on the common aspiration of *hanaro mandeuljaneun isang* (the ideal

of unification). The unification in the political horizon aims for fairness and equality in practical affairs and governance, while religious unification seeks to harmonize the cosmos with life and reconcile time with eternity.[46] They are various expressions of life. "Life is physical strength, instinctual power, survival competition, belief, and love. When it comes to the act of living, it's called economics; in the realm of interactions, it's called politics. When spoken of in the context of complex spiritual relationships, it's called religion."[47] Given their reciprocal nature, when one falters, the other follows suit. True religiosity or spirituality serves as the backbone of societal well-being. For Ham, genuine religiosity is the moment of *ssial*-awakening: the realization that life entails creative growth, peaceful connections, and thriving alongside others. Politics serves as an instrument to actualize this life vision in historical reality, continuously influenced by the *ssial* notion, which is evolved spirituality, and perpetually challenging and expanding our potential for coexistence with all forms of life.

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Notes

1 Two distinct compilations of primary sources by Ham Sok Hon have been released in Korea: (1) *Ham Sok Hon Jeonjip* (함석헌전집), (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1987), and (2) *Ham Sok Hon Jeojakjip* (함석헌저작집), (Seoul: Hangilsa, 2009). Additionally, there exists another online collection titled Babosae Ham Sok Hon (바보새 함석헌: 동서를 아우른 생명평화사상, hereafter referred to as Babosae), available at http://ssialsori.net/, which was curated and maintained by Chung Hyeonpil, former executive director of the Ham Sok Hon Memorial Foundation (함석헌기념사업회). All references to Ham Sok Hon in this paper are sourced from *The Collected Works of Ham Sok Hon* of Babosae (hereafter referred to as *Collection*). Notably, each in-text citation from the *Collection* is presented in this paper with specific volume titles and page numbers.

2 "Sae Sidaeui Jeonmang 새시대의 전망 (Prospect for a New Era)", *Collection*, p. 81.

3 Since the 1950s, Ham has been recognized for embracing a more pluralistic stance on matters of faith. For further discussion, refer to Bongkeun Kim (2022b, p. 20).

4 "Ssiarui Uimiwa Minjungundong 씨알의 의미와 민중운동 (The Meaning of Ssial and Minjung Movement)", *Collection*, p. 305.

5 "Ssauneun Pyeonghwajuuija 싸우는 평화주의자 (A Fighting Pacifist)", *Collection*, p. 55.

6 "Minjok Tongirui Gusang 민족 통일의 구상 (Envisioning National Unification)", *Collection*, pp. 142–143.

7 "Minjok Tongirui Gusang", p. 60. Moon interprets Ham's notion of hon as the spiritual whole or the collective consciousness of the people. See (Moon 2006).

8 Ham said that *ssial* is of the religious. See "Kkeunnaji Aneun Gangyeon 끝나지 않은 강연 (Unended Lecture)", *Collection*, pp. 406–410.

9 "Ssiarui Uimiwa Minjungundong" pp. 135–136.

10 "Ssiarui Uimiwa Minjungundong", pp. 310–311.

11 "Nae jonggyo bakkeneun dareun jonggyoneun da geojinmarirago haneun geoseun geu saramui mideum jachega bujokan pyosirago saenggakaeyo 내 종교 밖에는 다른 종교는 다 거짓말이라고 하는 것은 그 사람의 믿음 자체가 부족한 표시라고 생각해요." See "Minjok Tongirui Gusang 민족 통일의 구상 (Envisioning National Unification)", *Collection*, p. 196.

12 "Yesure isseoseo yesulgaege eotteon inseupireisyeoni japyeotda hadeorado geugeosi hangajiro pyohyeondoeeoya handaneun beobeun eopjiyo. jonggyodo machangajirago saenggakaeyo 예술에 있어서 예술가에게 어떤 인스피레이션(靈感)이 잡혔다 하더라도 그것이 한가지로 표현되어야 한다는 법은 없지요. 종교도 마찬가지라고 생각해요." See "Minjok Tongirui Gusang", p. 197.

13 "Ssiarui Uimiwa Minjungundong", p. 22.

14 "Ssauneun Pyeonghwajuuija 싸우는 평화주의자 (A Fighting Pacifist)", p. 55.

15 See Aristotle's attention to situational context in *Rhetoric*, Aquinas's exegetical approach in *Summa Theologica*, Foucault's interactive process of the production of knowledge in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, and Rorty's pragmatic approach to understanding truth and meaning in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

16 "Ssauneun Pyeonghwajuuija", p. 372.

17 "Ssauneun Pyeonghwajuuija", p. 74.

18 See note 17 above.

19 "Saenggakaneun Baekseongiraya Sanda생각하는 백성이라야 산다 (Only Those Who Think Must Live)", *Collection*, p. 109.
20 "Sae Sidaeui Jeonmang", p. 82.
21 "Kkumteulgeorineun Baekseongiraya Sanda 꿈틀거리는 백성이라야 산다 (Those Who Are Resiliant Must Live)", *Collection*, p. 318.
22 Ham said, "*gonaneun dareun saramhantero tteobonaeja, geuge* jeongchiimnida (Politics is attempting to pass on suffering to others)." "Kkeunnaji Aneun Gangyeon 끝나지 않은 강연 1 (Unended Lecture)",*Collection*, p. 38.
23 "Saenggakaneun Baekseongiraya Sanda", "여우처럼 생글거리는 정치가 (p. 64)" "밑구멍, 똥구멍으로 숨쉬는 정치가 (390)" "선동정치가 (p. 427)"; 꿈틀거리는 백성, "떡잎을 자르고 오리 배를 째는 정치가 (p. 75)" "교활한 정치가 (p. 215)" "낡아빠진 정치가 (p. 439)".
24 "Kkumteulgeorineun Baekseongiraya Sanda" *Collection*, p. 318.
25 "Sae Sidaeui Jeonmang", p. 78.
26 "Sauneun Pyeonghwajuuija", *Collection*, pp. 352–254.
27 For Ham's thought of the evolution or progression of history, see "Kkumteulgeorineun Baekseongiraya Sanda" *Collection*, 8. Additionally, see (Kim 2022a).
28 "Kkumteulgeorineun Baekseongiraya Sanda", p. 16.
29 See note 28 above.
30 "Kkumteulgeorineun Baekseongiraya Sanda", p. 17.
31 "Kkumteulgeorineun Baekseongiraya Sanda", p. 18.
32 "Teuseuro bon segyeyeoksa뜻으로 본 세계역사 (World History Viewed Through Meaning)", *Collection*, 56.
33 "Ssauneun Pyeonghwajuuija", p. 5.
34 "Ssauneun Pyeonghwajuuija", p. 231.
35 "Kkumteulgeorineun Baekseongiraya Sanda", pp. 5–7.
36 "Kkumteulgeorineun Baekseongiraya Sanda", p. 248.
37 "Kkumteulgeorineun Baekseongiraya Sanda", p. 21.
38 "Kkumteulgeorineun Baekseongiraya Sanda", p. 284.
39 "Ssauneun Pyeonghwajuuija", p. 106.
40 "Ssauneun Pyeonghwajuuija", p. 38.
41 "Kkumteulgeorineun Baekseongiraya Sanda", pp. 123–126.
42 "Mueosi Cham Munjeinga 무엇이 참 문제인가 (What is the True Problem?)", *Collection*, p. 120.
43 "Mueosi Cham Munjeinga?" p. 125.
44 "Mueosi Cham Munjeinga?"pp. 123–124.
45 "Kkeunnaji Aneun Gangyeon 1", p. 10.
46 "Saesidaeui Jeonmang", p. 84.
47 See note 46.

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Superstition or Culture: Protestant Discourses on Halloween Following the 10.29 Itaewon Disaster

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Abstract: The 10.29 Itaewon Disaster in Seoul, which claimed 159 lives during a Halloween celebration in 2022, has divided Korean Protestant discourse on Halloween into two opposing theological positions: one that interprets Halloween as inherently superstitious and satanic based on its historical origins, and another that embraces it as a contemporary youth cultural phenomenon worthy of protection under principles of cultural diversity. These theological frameworks are intertwined with questions of disaster accountability within the political–historical context of Korean Protestantism's social engagement, with the former—corresponding to the conservative stream of Korean Protestantism—implicitly attributing responsibility to festival participants while absolving the government, whereas the latter—corresponding to the progressive stream—emphasizes institutional failures in crowd management and public safety protocols. Through comparative analysis with established American Protestant discourse on Halloween, this study examines how Korean Protestant theological interpretations of Halloween intersect with both the specific context of the 10.29 Itaewon disaster and political orientations within Korean Protestantism. The research draws on diverse primary sources, including articles, commentaries, official statements, social media discourse, and sermonic materials, to analyze the emergent Protestant narratives following the disaster.

Keywords: Halloween; 10.29 Itaewon Disaster; superstition; culture; discourse; Korean Protestants

1. Introduction

On 29 October 2022, a catastrophic crowd crush in Seoul's Itaewon district resulted in 159 fatalities during Halloween festivities. The majority of victims were young people in their 20s and 30s, including 26 foreign nationals from various countries such as Iran, Russia, China, the United States, and Japan. The incident occurred when a dense concentration of celebrants converged in the narrow alleyways at the district's entrance. This disaster, now known as the 10.29 Itaewon Disaster, ranks as the ninth most severe crowd-related disaster globally in the 21st century. Its occurrence in an urban center of South Korea's capital, coupled with real-time witness accounts and documentation, precipitated profound social trauma and widespread public distress.

In the aftermath of the incident, public discourse centered on causation and accountability. The convergence of large crowds in Itaewon was anticipated, given that this was the first Halloween celebration following the complete lifting of COVID-19 social distancing measures. However, governmental authorities failed to implement adequate crowd control mechanisms. Subsequent investigations revealed significant deficiencies in police preparedness and emergency response protocols. Despite receiving multiple reports of imminent

danger, police authorities' failure to respond promptly, coupled with their inadequate handling of victims in the aftermath, exacerbated the casualty toll. These systemic failures led to widespread criticism and assertions of governmental culpability in the disaster.

In this context, the bereaved families, survivors, and citizens calling for a thorough investigation and legal accountability of those responsible for the tragedy have formally designated the incident as the '10.29 Itaewon Disaster.' This nomenclature serves to preserve the temporal and spatial specificity of the tragedy while countering the South Korean government's initial characterization of the event as an 'accident'—a term that potentially diminishes both its societal implications and governmental accountability. The distinction between 'accident' and 'disaster' is significant: while an accident typically denotes an unexpected occurrence with individual attribution, a disaster encompasses catastrophic events of broader scale, implying state responsibility for response, investigation, and preventive measures. In South Korea, the concept of 'social disaster' has emerged as a theoretical framework to illuminate the structural and systemic nature of mass casualties (S.-E. Park 2023, pp. 86–89). This framework has been applied to analyze major incidents, including the 1994 Seongsu Bridge collapse, the 1995 Sampoong Department Store collapse, the 2003 Daegu Subway fire, the 2014 Sewol ferry sinking, and the 2022 Itaewon crowd crush. These events collectively exemplify the state's fundamental responsibility in emergency response, rescue operations, and post-disaster recovery.

Immediately following the 10.29 Itaewon Disaster, the Protestant community in South Korea, irrespective of theological or political orientation, unanimously expressed profound condolences to the victims and their families. Major Protestant denominations, including the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Korea (GAPCK), the Korean Methodist Church (KMC), and the Assemblies of God of Korea (AGK), issued official statements conveying their grief (G. Kim 2023, pp. 33–34). Even the United Christian Churches of Korea (UCCK), a denominational coalition traditionally characterized by conservative leanings, expressed mourning and announced the provisional postponement of the Korea Parade—a large-scale street festival scheduled from Gwanghwamun to Seoul City Hall under the theme "W.A.L.K. With, All generation, Love, Korea" (CTS 2022; Yang 2022).

However, when the government subsequently established a national mourning period and installed an impersonal memorial altar at Seoul Plaza—one bearing neither names nor photographs—and when it was revealed that the government had circulated official directives to local authorities instructing them to classify the incident as an 'accident' rather than a 'disaster' and to refer to victims as 'casualties' rather than 'sacrifices,' bereaved families and numerous citizens responded with outrage and resistance, condemning governmental incompetence and evasion of accountability (Miryu 2023, pp. 180–81; S.-E. Park 2023, p. 86). This state-imposed forced and uniform mourning was perceived as an expedient attempt to attenuate the traumatic impact of the catastrophic event (S. Park 2025, pp. 166–208).

At this very moment, a parallel public discourse emerged that directed criticism toward Halloween celebrants themselves. Conservative Protestant groups emerged as prominent critics, characterizing Halloween as a problematic Western cultural import steeped in superstition, and attributing responsibility to the victims for their participation in such festivities. This sparked a contentious debate within Protestant circles about the fundamental nature of Halloween—whether it constituted legitimate youth culture or represented dangerous superstitious practices. The fact that substantive discussion of Halloween within Korean Protestantism was catalyzed specifically by intensifying civil society criticism of the government reveals that the superstition-versus-culture discourse surrounding Halloween emerged within a distinctly political context—one structured by whether groups supported or criticized the government's response. While these conservative Protestant perspectives held limited sway in broader civil society, their voices suppressed the

atmosphere of mourning within Protestant communities, proving particularly detrimental to bereaved Protestant families affected by the disaster.

This study examines the Protestant discourse surrounding Halloween in the aftermath of the 10.29 Itaewon disaster, analyzing how religious and cultural interpretations of the event intersect with questions of public accountability and social meaning. Methodologically, it employs a discourse-analytic approach informed by historical and sociopolitical perspectives to reveal how the labeling of Halloween as either "culture" or "superstition" within Korean Protestantism reflects not intrinsic properties but historically situated dynamics shaped by broader political and social contexts. More specifically, this study argues that the divergent Protestant discourses on Halloween in South Korea stem from political positions regarding responsibility for the 10.29 Itaewon disaster, and that these political positions are closely intertwined with the long-standing political–historical divisions within Korean Protestantism. Section 2 reviews the existing literature on Halloween and superstition discourse to situate this research and clarify its methodological approach. Section 3 briefly traces Halloween's historical origins and examines its introduction into Korean society, while Section 4 conducts a comparative analysis of Halloween perceptions between Korean and American Protestant communities prior to the 10.29 Itaewon disaster. In Korea, prior to the disaster, a minority of Protestants criticized Halloween primarily on commercial rather than religious or spiritual grounds, while the majority remained indifferent to the observance. Section 5 provides a detailed analysis of the evolving Halloween discourse within Korean Protestant circles following the 10.29 Itaewon disaster. Conservative Protestant factions adopt a theological framework, condemning Halloween as theologically unsound and superstitious—a stance that correlates with victim-blaming narratives that attribute responsibility to those who participated in Halloween celebrations. Conversely, progressive and socially engaged Protestant groups approach Halloween through a cultural lens, interpreting it as an expression of youth identity and cultural diversity, a perspective that corresponds with their attribution of responsibility for the disaster to governmental authorities. This analysis reveals that Korean Protestant Halloween discourse is situated at the intersection of two critical contexts: the specific circumstances of the 10.29 Itaewon disaster and the varying political orientations of Protestant groups in relation to governmental authority.

2. Review of Existing Literature on Halloween and Superstition Discourse

Research on Halloween in South Korea can be broadly categorized into two streams: analyses of Halloween as a cultural festival and discussions that critically approach Halloween from a theological perspective. The former includes studies that approach Halloween as a cultural code and analyze public perceptions of it (C. Park 2011), cultural and aesthetic analyses of Halloween costumes themselves (C. H. Kim 2007; Lennon et al. 2016; Kim and Kim 2020; Yu 2012; Lee and Baik 2001), immanent analyses treating Halloween festivals as objects of cultural textual analysis (I. R. Kim 2022; Che 2001), and critical approaches to its commercialist characteristics (Jiwon Lee 2019; Yim 2006), among others. The latter consists primarily of either case studies presenting the adoption and adaptation of Halloween into Sunday school educational programs in Korean American churches (E. Park 2007) or non-academic columns criticizing Halloween as a festival that deviates from Protestant doctrine. These discussions share three notable characteristics: first, their limited volume prior to the 10.29 Itaewon disaster; second, the concentration of academic research papers primarily on Halloween as a cultural festival, particularly focusing on costumes; and third, the lack of an established scholarly framework for religious or theological approaches to Halloween. This paper attends to the explosive increase in Halloween dis-

course in South Korea following the Itaewon disaster, demonstrating that any meaningful analysis of this discourse must account for the disaster's catalytic significance.

Meanwhile, the concept of superstition has been employed within the Korean religious landscape as a mechanism for othering specific targets, especially other religions (D. Kim 2012). Jingu Lee (1995) points out that prior to liberation, Korean Protestantism positioned itself as rational and civilized while utilizing the concept of superstition as a regulatory framework to exclude Buddhism, Confucianism, folk beliefs, and new religions from the domain of legitimate religion by emphasizing their dimensions of ancestor worship and idolatry. However, the concept of superstition is neither fixed nor stable; rather, it is arbitrary and fluid. For instance, Korean shamanism was stigmatized as superstition by the government for an extended period, yet when its sociality—its capacity to foster community cohesion—was emphasized, it was accepted as culture (Shinzato 2019, pp. 95–97). Shinzato thus proposes that by capturing the specific dimensions emphasized when particular phenomena are criticized as superstition, one can trace the historicity of the superstition concept. This study moves beyond analyzing the transformation of the superstition concept through the inherent properties of the objects themselves, demonstrating instead that the labeling of something as superstition is enabled by specific political–historical contexts. In other words, through the concrete case of the Itaewon disaster, this research seeks to reveal that political–historical contexts may contribute more profoundly than internal attributes to the criticism of something as superstition. This illuminates how, in the context catalyzed by the Itaewon disaster, Protestant discourse surrounding Halloween is deeply entangled with theological, cultural, political, and social dynamics.

3. The Origins of Halloween and Its Introduction to Korea

3.1. The Origins of Halloween

The historical antecedents of Halloween traditions and customs can be traced to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain, celebrated in what is now modern-day Ireland. Samhain, whose etymology denotes the 'end of summer', was a millennia-old celebration deeply embedded in Celtic culture. The Celtic calendar marked 31 October as the year's end, coinciding with the onset of winter and the harvest season. According to Celtic cosmology, this date held particular significance as it represented the temporal point at which the boundary between the mortal realm and the domain of the dead reached its most permeable state, facilitating potential communion between the living and the deceased (Lefkowitz 1993). Celtic belief systems held that during this period, supernatural entities—ghosts and demons—would traverse from the otherworld into the mortal plane, gaining the ability to interact with the physical realm of the living. These entities were believed to possess emotional capacities, harboring either benevolent or malevolent intentions toward the living world, with the potential to inflict harm upon both people and agricultural yields (Yousaf 2021, pp. 89–90). In response to these perceived supernatural threats, the Celts developed ritualistic practices of offering food and donning spectral disguises, operating under the belief that such a masquerade would deceive these entities into identifying them as fellow spirits, thus averting potential harm. These practices constituted the fundamental elements of the Samhain festival.

Following the Roman conquest of Celtic territories, the Church adopted a strategy of cultural adaptation rather than prohibition regarding the deeply embedded Samhain festival. This process involved synchronizing the Celtic calendar's observance of 31 October with its Gregorian counterpart and emphasizing the theological significance of All Saints' Day. In 609 CE, the Church formally designated 1 November as 'All Hallow Day', a feast day commemorating all heavenly saints. Consequently, 31 October was designated as 'All Hallow's Eve', from which the contemporary term 'Halloween' etymologically

derives. This exemplifies the Church's sophisticated approach to cultural assimilation, wherein indigenous practices were not suppressed but rather recontextualized to facilitate the transmission of Christian doctrine. Subsequently, Halloween, originating in Europe, was transmitted to the United States through Irish and Scottish immigration, eventually becoming a quintessential American tradition (Chamber 1997; Gu 2020; Seunghun Lee 2015).

3.2. The Introduction of Halloween to Korea

The first documented Halloween celebration in Korea was organized at a hotel in Itaewon in 1988. However, Halloween remained largely unfamiliar in Korean society until the late 1990s, being primarily perceived as a foreign Western cultural practice. The mainstreaming of Halloween in Korea from the late 1990s can be attributed to several factors: the increased penetration of foreign cultural content through various media channels—television dramas, cinema, and music—contributed significantly to the dissemination of Halloween culture, particularly among adolescents and young adults. During the 1990s, amid a growing emphasis on early English education, Halloween began to spread through English-language educational institutions in the Gangnam district, where private kindergartens and language academies adopted the celebration as part of their cultural curriculum. The 2000s witnessed its rapid expansion through commercial venues and entertainment facilities, while the 2010s marked an unprecedented acceleration in its popularity, driven by the emergence of the culturally expressive MZ generation and the proliferation of social media platforms. The Korean adaptation of American Halloween underwent a distinctive transformation, incorporating elements of street culture, cosplay, and nightlife entertainment. This localization process reconceptualized Halloween as a youth-centered performative cultural practice, characterized by public costume display and temporary escape from quotidian social norms. This cultural evolution catalyzed significant commercial developments, particularly in costume retail, decorative merchandise, and event-based entertainment sectors (J.-H. Ryu 2023).

Itaewon emerged as the focal point of Halloween celebrations in Korea during the post-2000 period. While modest Halloween events began appearing in the district in the early 2000s, the celebration expanded significantly around 2005 when the Itaewon Merchants Association initiated large-scale Halloween festivals. Although Halloween festivities subsequently proliferated across other regions, Itaewon maintained its position as the primary hub for Halloween celebrations in Korea.

Itaewon, an administrative district within Seoul's Yongsan-gu, was designated as the city's inaugural tourism special district in 1997, characterized by its multinational demographic composition with a foreign resident population exceeding 20,000. The district's international character emerged in the post-Korean War period following the establishment of a major U.S. military installation in Yongsan-gu. This military presence catalyzed the development of a distinctive commercial and cultural ecosystem centered around American military personnel and their families. The district became notable for its informal economy of military surplus goods and PX merchandise, while simultaneously developing into a multicultural hub featuring diverse international retail and culinary establishments. The district's established multicultural infrastructure and cosmopolitan atmosphere have historically attracted both expatriate residents and international visitors. Several factors facilitated this development: the widespread acceptance of international currencies, particularly the U.S. dollar and Japanese yen; multilingual commercial transactions conducted in English, Japanese, and Chinese; and the presence of diverse cultural institutions. These characteristics created an environment particularly conducive to the adoption and proliferation of Halloween celebrations.

The district's Halloween celebrations attracted substantial crowds, with attendance exceeding 100,000 participants on peak days in the pre-pandemic period. This concentration of celebrants within the district's limited spatial parameters—specifically, a 320 m commercial corridor lined with restaurants, retail establishments, and nightclubs—created significant population density during Halloween festivities.

4. Protestant Churches' Perceptions of Halloween in the United States and South Korea Before the 10.29 Itaewon Disaster

While Halloween has become deeply embedded in American cultural traditions, its integration into South Korean society represents a relatively recent cultural adaptation driven by globalization and Western cultural diffusion. This distinct historical trajectory has fostered fundamentally different theological and cultural interpretations of Halloween between Protestant communities in these two nations.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, American Protestant leadership mounted theological opposition to Halloween, characterizing it as a pagan and satanic ritual (Hislop 1858; Rogers 2003; Victor 1994). In response, they developed alternative Christian celebrations such as 'Holy Day,' 'Holyween Day' and 'Hallelujah Festival' (Phillips and Robie 1987). These events incorporated fundamental Christian practices, including worship, prayer, scriptural study, and communal activities, functioning as theological counterpoints designed to preserve Christian orthodoxy and religious identity. These adaptations within American Protestantism emerged from the necessity to navigate Halloween's dual nature—its pagan origins and its established cultural significance. Protestant efforts to infuse the holiday with Christian elements, however, drew criticism in America's pluralistic society for potentially undermining cultural diversity. The debate gradually subsided as Halloween gained broader social acceptance and cultural legitimacy as a secular celebration.

Recent discourse has proposed a reframing of Protestant engagement with Halloween, suggesting potential theological and social benefits. These perspectives emphasize Halloween's utility for strengthening communal bonds and its parallel themes with fundamental Christian doctrines—specifically, the theological concepts of death and resurrection, eternal life, and the cosmic battle between good and evil (Dominguez 2021; Grove 2020; Oh 2020; Smith 2012). Contemporary perspectives advocate examining Halloween through a cultural lens, recognizing its evolution into mainstream American tradition with diminished religious significance. This view emphasizes Halloween's transformation from pagan origins to contemporary celebration, noting its gradual integration into American Protestant cultural practices (Bannatyne 1998; Kim and McCune 2004; Rogers 2003). These interpretations converge on recognizing Halloween as a distinctly American cultural phenomenon.

In contrast to the complex historical negotiations between American Protestantism and Halloween traditions, the holiday's emergence in Korea since the 2000s has followed a distinctly different trajectory. The holiday's Korean adoption has manifested primarily as a youth-centered cultural phenomenon, detached from its historical and religious significance. Halloween celebrations have proliferated among Korean youth, particularly in Seoul's Itaewon district, generating minimal Protestant opposition. While some Protestant groups echoed early American concerns about Halloween's pagan and satanic associations (Daniel Lee 2022), these objections remained peripheral within Protestant communities. Notably, substantive theological critique of Halloween, particularly regarding its Samhain connections, has emerged predominantly from Korean Protestant clergy serving in U.S. churches and scholars with extensive U.S. residence (E. Park 2007), whose perspectives have been distinctly shaped by direct engagement with American Protestant theological discourse. Prior to the 10.29 Itaewon Disaster, religious critiques of Halloween maintained little significance within South Korean Protestant circles.

Prior to the 10.29 Itaewon Disaster, Korean conservative Protestant critique of Halloween focused primarily on its commercialization rather than its religious origins. Their criticism centered on how major corporations had transformed the holiday into a profit-driven enterprise. This commercialization manifested through various corporate-sponsored events: Theme parks and amusement parks offered elaborate Halloween parades and horror experiences, while luxury hotels hosted themed parties with premium pricing. Major entertainment companies organized exclusive celebrity Halloween parties with fan participation opportunities, and restaurants developed special holiday menus. This extensive commercialization required significant financial investment from young participants seeking to engage with Halloween culture. Korean conservative Protestants interpreted this phenomenon as emblematic of capitalist exploitation rather than meaningful cultural celebration. They viewed Halloween in Korea not as an ideological or religious concern, but as an example of corporate-driven consumerism divorced from authentic cultural value (Jeong 2004). The perception of Halloween as a manifestation of American commercialism has contributed to broader cultural resistance. Critics have expressed concern about the increasing engagement of youth with Western cultural practices at the expense of Korean traditional values, characterizing Halloween celebrations as emblematic of cultural imperialism and problematic westernization (Roh 2019).

Nevertheless, prior to the 10.29 Itaewon disaster in 2022, Protestant criticism of Halloween in South Korea was minimal, encompassing both religious and commercial objections, while the majority of Korean Protestant communities remained largely indifferent to the observance. The holiday remained largely absent from South Korean social consciousness until the 1990s, with its cultural presence remaining notably limited even throughout the 2000s. Despite widespread recognition of Halloween as a Western cultural phenomenon, public engagement was negligible (M. Lee 2022). This pattern of cultural detachment extended to religious communities as well. From a theological perspective, Halloween was perceived as an alien cultural practice, while from a capitalist viewpoint, it was categorized merely as one among numerous American consumerist cultural imports, thus failing to generate significant attention from Korean conservative Protestant circles. While Halloween had undergone substantial cultural transformation and integration in Western societies, particularly in the United States, its significance in the Korean cultural context remained peripheral until the 2000s. During this period, younger generations began engaging with the holiday in a distinctly casual manner, characterized by limited understanding of its historical origins or cultural significance, approaching it primarily as a form of recreational activity (M. Lee 2022).

Considering that, since the 2000s, a certain fraction within conservative Protestants who have been vocal on social issues have actively articulated a politics of hate and exclusion in the public sphere against LGBTQ+ individuals, refugees, Muslims, and other marginalized groups through the framework of 'culture wars,' their lack of engagement with Halloween during this period warrants attention. As cultural politics surrounding gender, sexuality, Islam, and multiculturalism gained prominence in the early and mid-2010s, conservative Protestant groups recognized the emergence of new ideological opponents in the cultural arena (Suh 2021, p. 105). In their pursuit of cultural hegemony through confrontational strategies, these groups have systematically opposed the Comprehensive Anti-Discrimination legislation, deliberately adopting 'yangseong-pyeongdeung' (equality between the two sexes) rather than the more inclusive 'seong-pyeongdeung' (gender equality)—thereby reinforcing a binary gender framework that linguistically delegitimizes sexual minorities—and actively resisted the acceptance of Muslim refugees. The absence of organized opposition to Halloween, despite its significant religious implica-

tions, thus serves as a compelling indicator of their historical indifference toward this cultural phenomenon.

5. Analysis of Protestant Church Discourse on Halloween in Korea After the 10.29 Itaewon Disaster

Before examining the conservative and progressive Protestant discourses on Halloween following the 10.29 Itaewon disaster in detail, it is necessary at this juncture to briefly survey the historical, political, and practical differences between conservative and progressive Protestantism. Within Korean Protestantism exists a diverse theological spectrum. However, this paper adopts a broad categorization of conservative and progressive Protestantism along the lines of political–social attitudes—specifically, their history of political–social engagement in Korea. This analytic distinction follows established scholarship on Korean Protestantism that understands theological orientations in close relation to churches' political and social engagement, highlighting how theological spectra are reorganized through their actual practices in the public sphere (D.-y. Ryu 2009; NCCK 2013; M. B. Kim 2009; Chang 2006, 2018; Kim et al. 2024). This approach is warranted because Protestant positions on Halloween are more deeply correlated with their political–social stances, and more specifically, their positions toward the government, than with their theological differences.

Following liberation from Japanese colonial rule, Korean Protestantism maintained close relations with the Syngman Rhee government—Rhee himself being a Presbyterian elder—which granted special privileges to Protestantism, and actively supported the regime (Chang 2006, pp. 122–25; J. G. Lee 2018). This close relationship was formed in part through the influence of American military governance and U.S. Protestant missionary networks, and, within the context of relations with North Korea during the Cold War, contributed to embedding anti-communist ideology deeply within Korean Protestant institutions. However, the April 19 Revolution of 1960 catalyzed an awakening of democratic consciousness among certain Protestant groups, and from the 1960s onward, these groups began to participate in social movements (CISJD 1983, p. 10). Grounded in Minjung theology—which is Korea's indigenous liberation theology interpreting the "minjung" (a Korean term meaning oppressed people) as historical agents—they advocated for the realization of human rights and equality, stood in solidarity with laborers, farmers, and the poor in their struggles for decent and healthy lives, and actively engaged in political movements resisting military dictatorship to achieve democracy. Even after democratization in 1987, they have continued active social engagement for justice, human rights, ecology, health, peace, and equality (M. Kim 2021). Politically, they have supported the so-called progressive administrations of Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in, all of whom came from backgrounds as activists in the democratization and human rights movements.

In contrast, conservative Protestant groups sharing pro-American anti-communism supported the Syngman Rhee administration and subsequent military dictatorships. After democratization, however, they assumed critical positions toward the government when so-called progressive administrations came to power. In the 2000s, some with more extreme positions within the conservative spectrum launched active social campaigns under banners of anti-North Korea, anti-feminism, anti-homosexuality, and anti-Islam sentiments (Suh 2021). This shift emerged within the broader context of Korea's "culture wars," in which debates on gender, sexuality, multiculturalism, and national security became entangled with moral-religious discourse, prompting conservative Protestant groups to increasingly express their identity through more extreme forms of activism. In particular, the COVID-19 restrictions on religious gatherings created a perception among conservative Protestants that the progressive Moon Jae-in administration was suppressing their commu-

nity, which ultimately served to consolidate and strengthen far-right Protestant alignment. To be sure, many Korean Protestants—indeed, the majority—maintain reservations about voicing faith-infused positions on political–social issues, advocating instead for the separation of church and state. However, since the 2000s, many moderate Protestants have been gravitating toward conservatism through their sympathy with opposition to feminism and homosexuality, and by the time of the 10.29 Itaewon disaster in 2022, there was a strengthened tendency to attribute responsibility for the tragedy to festival participants rather than to the government within a discursive framework linking Halloween-Itaewon-homosexuality. Underlying this phenomenon are several factors: theologically, Korean Protestant churches across denominational lines have maintained close relationships with fundamentalism, which has shaped the theological and cultural identity of twentieth-century Korean Protestantism (Bae 2008), while politically, pro-American anti-communism constitutes a shared characteristic across Korean Protestantism as a whole (D.-y. Ryu 2004).

The Korean government at the time of the disaster was the Yoon Suk-yeol administration, perceived as conservative, and conservative Protestant attitudes toward this administration were favorable (N. Kim 2021; Jeongmin Lee 2022b). This convergence stemmed from shared agendas such as anti-feminism, anti-LGBTQ+, and anti-Islam stances; the defense of social order and national security; and opposition to so-called democratic administrations, on which conservative Protestant groups had already established extensive mobilization networks. Setting aside extreme far-right Protestant leader Jeon Kwang-hoon, who argued that the Itaewon disaster was a North Korean conspiracy to impeach President Yoon Suk-yeol (B. Shin 2022), conservative Protestant media outlets and denominational leaders delivered theologically critical messages regarding Halloween and advocated that responses to the disaster should remain confined to consolation and mourning rather than evolve into demands for truth-finding investigations or condemnation of the government (PCK Goodnews 2022; Song 2022; Sinsil Lee 2022; Y. Jang 2022; Choi 2022; J. Jang 2022; G. Kim 2023). In contrast, progressive Protestant circles—critical of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration from its outset—condemned the government's inadequate response to the Itaewon disaster, highlighting its administrative incompetence and evasion of responsibility.

5.1. Conservative Protestant Discourse on Halloween: Religious Approaches and Victim Blaming

In the aftermath of the 10.29 Itaewon Disaster, conservative Protestant groups—aligned with Korea's long-standing conservative Protestant stream—shifted more explicitly toward a critique of Halloween, primarily focusing on its purported pagan and Satanic religious elements. This criticism has been manifested through various channels, including columns, commentaries, and organizational statements that specifically target Halloween's religious characteristics. Korean conservative Protestant communities have acknowledged that while substantive theological critiques and analyses of Halloween have long existed in Western contexts, particularly in the United States—where Halloween celebrations are most prominent—and among Korean-American churches, the Korean Protestant establishment had maintained a position of indifference until recently. The Itaewon disaster has markedly shifted this stance of detachment (Christian Today 2023; Hyosang Lee 2023b).

Conservative Protestant groups have articulated strong theological opposition to Halloween's religious and superstitious elements. Their critiques encompass several key arguments: that Halloween "instills false worldviews and erroneous doctrines," "facilitates the propagation of unbelief, leading to spiritual alienation from God," and that "Halloween's customs represent pagan cultural artifacts incompatible with biblical worldviews." They further assert that "spirits of the deceased are nonexistent" and that "pagan festivals dominate contemporary consciousness through the appropriation of traditional customs, manifested in grotesque costumery, contributing to Christianity's decline while

fostering interest in malevolent practices" (J. Kim 2023). This religious opposition reached an unprecedented level when a pastor, during a public sermon, explicitly referred to the victims of the Itaewon disaster as "young people sacrificed to spirits at a ghost festival [gwisin chukje-e gaseo gwisindeurege huisaengdanghan jeolmeunideul]" (Choi 2022; Y. Jang 2022; J. Park 2022).

While some contend that contemporary Halloween celebrations have evolved toward commercialization and recreational activities rather than maintaining their supernatural elements, conservative Protestant groups reject this secular interpretation. They argue that "the diminution of pagan ritualistic elements and their religious significance does not constitute a legitimate basis for the practice." Furthermore, they assert that "the day remains significant for Satanists and practitioners of black magic as an occasion for supernatural communion, often manifesting in various disturbing practices." Through such arguments, they explicitly establish a direct link between Halloween observance and Satanic practices (Christian Today 2023).

The sociocultural significance of Itaewon as a nexus of LGBTQ+ community formation has generated tension with religious institutions, particularly regarding their criticism of the district's Halloween festivities and their perceived association with homosexuality. Since the 1990s, Itaewon has emerged as a crucial site for the development and articulation of gay cultural identity and community solidarity (Heo 2005, pp. 38–40, 46–48). At that time in South Korea, LGBTQ+ identities were treated as non-normative sexuality and pathologized as a disease of American culture, yet Itaewon began to be recognized as a space where openness toward sexuality—taboo in Korean society—was permitted and where distinctive entertainment could be enjoyed (Haesu Lee 2023a, p. 94). Of particular significance is the area known as "Gay Hill," which functions as a social and cultural hub primarily for gay men, embodying Itaewon's broader characteristic as a space that fosters diversity and social inclusion. This spatial configuration demonstrates how marginalized communities can create and maintain distinct cultural territories within urban landscapes.

The Halloween festival exemplifies Victor Turner's concept of liminality, wherein participants occupy an ambiguous state that transcends conventional social boundaries. As liminal entities, festival participants exist in an interstitial space "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arranged by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 1969, p. 95). This liminal condition engenders what Turner terms "anti-structure"—a temporary liberation from normative social constraints—and facilitates the emergence of "communitas," a distinctive form of social bonding. Significantly, communitas does not dissolve individual identities into a homogeneous mass but rather "safeguards their uniqueness in the very act of realizing their commonness." It does not merge identities. It liberates them from conformity to general norms (Turner 1974, p. 274). Within this theoretical framework, the Halloween festival serves as a crucial vehicle for South Korean LGBTQ+ individuals to navigate and contest their marginalization through performative expressions of identity via costumes, decorations, and makeup. This manifestation of liminality and anti-structure has provoked opposition from conservative Protestant leadership in South Korea, whose Biblical interpretation of homosexuality as transgressive has led to their critique of Halloween as a space of non-normative expression and liminal identity formation.

Conservative Protestant leaders proposed alternative Christian celebrations to counteract Halloween's perceived anti-Christian elements, paralleling similar initiatives in the United States. These religious authorities advocated for the establishment of "true spiritual events" to supplant Halloween's cultural prominence, introducing concepts such as the "Holy Win Festival"—semantically constructed to represent a "Festival of Holy Victory"—and "Hallelujah Night" as theological alternatives. Some conservative Protestant leaders advocated for the creation of exclusive Protestant gatherings during Halloween,

even without formal denominational branding (Choi 2022; Jaewook Lee 2022a). Additionally, these conservative religious authorities proposed reinforcing existing Christian observances coinciding with Halloween's temporal proximity, specifically emphasizing enhanced adherence to Advent, Reformation Day, and Thanksgiving Day celebrations as strategic alternatives to Halloween participation (Roh 2019; Daewoong Lee 2023).

The 10.29 Itaewon disaster emerged as a critical turning point in conservative Protestant discourse surrounding Halloween in South Korea. The unprecedented scale of casualties in an urban center not only traumatized the broader Korean society but also heightened conservative Protestant awareness of Halloween's substantial cultural integration into contemporary Korean life. Significantly, this tragedy catalyzed a marked shift in the rhetorical framework of Protestant criticism, transforming from predominantly secular concerns about commercialization to explicitly religious condemnations. In the aftermath of the disaster, conservative Protestant leaders, who had previously maintained relative indifference toward Halloween celebrations, began to deploy intensified religious narratives that emphasized Satanic and pagan elements.

The religious critique of Halloween was closely associated with casting the disaster victims as transgressors against Christian morality for their participation in a wrongful festival. Conservative Protestant discourse, manifested through sermons, official statements, and social media communications, attributed culpability to the victims by emphasizing their participation in what was characterized as Western satanic practices. The proliferation of religious condemnation in the disaster's immediate aftermath effectively reframed the victims' presence at the event as morally transgressive. This theological framing had particularly severe implications for Christian families among the bereaved. A particularly illustrative case involves a deaconess who lost her son in the disaster. Despite her three-decade membership in her church community, she encountered ostracism rather than the anticipated pastoral support and communal empathy. Her account reveals how church members stigmatized the Halloween gathering as a "ghost festival [gwisin chukje]," questioning the propriety of a Christian's presence at such an event. Notably, she reported that church leadership had never once visited the civic memorial altar erected in Seoul City Hall Plaza to commemorate her deceased son or to console her as a bereaved family member, further exemplifying the institutional distancing from the tragedy. Her expressed desire for the church to cease treating both her son and herself as sinners underscores the profound impact of this religious stigmatization on the bereaved (Na 2023).

The scapegoating of victims by conservative Protestant groups demonstrates notable parallels with governmental responses to the disaster. From the disaster's onset, government officials engaged in systematic responsibility deflection while implicitly attributing culpability to the victims. The Minister of the Interior and Safety's declaration that "there is no one to blame because there is no organizer" exemplified this strategy, simultaneously absolving institutional responsibility while implicitly shifting the burden of safety onto individuals who voluntarily attended the festivities (Huh 2022). The government's investigative priorities further reinforced this pattern: their Special Investigation Headquarters' immediate focus on analyzing CCTV footage and social media content from survivors and witnesses suggested an intent to scrutinize victim behavior rather than examine systemic failures (Statement 2022). This pattern of victim-focused investigation culminated in the controversial decision to conduct unauthorized narcotics testing on the victims' corpses and personal belongings, without familial consent. These investigative priorities and methodologies revealed a systematic attempt to locate fault within the victims themselves, rather than addressing institutional and structural failures that contributed to the disaster.

A segment of civil society organizations and institutions participated in victim-blaming narratives through their coverage and responses. Media outlets exhibited problematic

reporting practices, including the publication of unredacted photographs that sensationally displayed victims in provocative costumes lying on the street and the circulation of unsubstantiated claims attributing responsibility to specific festival participants. This stance by certain media outlets appears to have stemmed from their political position seeking to exclude the government from responsibility for the disaster (K. Park 2025). The media's misrepresentation extended to their interpretation of international coverage. For instance, in their 29 October 2022 article "At Least 151 Killed in Crowd Crush at Seoul Halloween Celebration," published on the day of the disaster, *The Wall Street Journal* provided a cultural context, noting that "In South Korea, Halloween is not widely celebrated as a candy-grabbing holiday for children. Twenty-somethings and other partygoers in recent years have made Halloween into a major clubbing event, with many decked out in costumes" (Martin and Sohn 2022). While this observation merely highlighted the generational and cultural distinctions between American and Korean Halloween celebrations—the former being an all-ages tradition incorporating trick-or-treating, and the latter predominantly a youth-oriented nightlife event—Korean media outlets mischaracterized this descriptive analysis as criticism. They employed phrases such as "Halloween culture has been perverted in Korea" and "WSJ criticized Korean Halloween culture," misrepresenting *The Wall Street Journal*'s neutral cultural observation as condemnation. In fact, given that Halloween in the United States also encompasses elements of youth culture, cosplay, and club culture, Korean Halloween can be understood not as a perversion of American Halloween but rather as a selective adaptation of it. This deliberate misinterpretation generated immediate consequences, manifesting in public commentary that further perpetuated victim-blaming narratives (J. Park 2022).

In the aftermath of the disaster, amid widespread victim-blaming narratives, bereaved families found themselves compelled to construct and emphasize specific virtuous identities for their deceased loved ones to legitimize their status as victims worthy of public mourning. Parents felt pressured to demonstrate their children's moral character through testimonials emphasizing studious, obedient, and restrained behaviors: "he was an introvert and did not like to play outside," "she sat in study cafes all day studying," "he promised to come back and study after just one play date," or "she was the daughter who never spoiled her parents" (PSPD 2023). This compulsion to prove their deceased children's moral worth created a secondary form of trauma for the bereaved, who had to simultaneously contend with the criminalization of their loved ones while demonstrating that these victims merited society's grief and sympathy.

The conservative Protestant characterization of Halloween as a satanic ritual, whether intentionally or not, resonated with governmental responses and certain segments of civil society, contributing to a broader pattern of victim demonization. This convergence of religious and institutional stigmatization effectively marginalized commemorative voices within Protestant communities, suppressing efforts to memorialize and mourn the disaster victims within church spaces.

5.2. Progressive Protestant Discourse on Halloween: Cultural Approaches and Government Accountability

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, bereaved families and survivors mobilized to demand a thorough investigation and governmental accountability. This grassroots movement garnered significant civic support, manifesting in organized campaigns for the enactment of the Itaewon Special Law, the establishment of civic memorial altars, and collective commemorative practices. Progressive Protestant communities emerged as significant counterforces to the dominant victim-blaming narratives, explicitly challenging these discourses while emphasizing institutional culpability for inadequate safety protocols. These religious actors demonstrated active solidarity with bereaved families and

survivors through their participation in social movements demanding thorough investigations, accountability from responsible parties, and appropriate judicial consequences (Statement 2022).

Progressive Protestant communities—aligned with Korea's long-standing progressive Protestant stream—diverged from their conservative counterparts by adopting a cultural rather than religious framework in their approach to Halloween. They conceptualized Halloween as an expression of youth culture, arguing that its rejection represented a failure to acknowledge cultural diversity (News M 2022). This perspective aligns with Ruth Benedict's theoretical framework of cultural pluralism. According to Benedict, pluralism is an inherent characteristic of all cultures. Each society comprises multiple institutions pursuing diverse objectives through mutual interaction, demonstrating that cultural systems are intrinsically complex and multidimensional. Benedict contends that there exists no universal set of values applicable across all temporal and spatial contexts, noting that "the course of life and the pressure of environment provide an incredible number of possible leads, all of which, it appears, may serve a society to live by" (Benedict 1934, p. 34; E. Shin 2006, pp. 215–16).

Progressive Protestant engagement with Halloween as a cultural phenomenon reflects their broader commitment to fostering coexistence and harmony among diverse cultural practices. They critiqued religiously motivated rejection of specific cultural expressions as manifestations of bias and dogmatism that undermined social cohesion. Their position emphasized that cultural diversity and flexible religious–cultural relationships are prerequisites for social solidarity, thereby providing a theoretical defense for Halloween celebrations. Furthermore, they interpreted Halloween as a celebration of diversity and intercultural exchange, viewing it as an opportunity for cultural experimentation and enjoyment. This framework of cultural freedom and creativity ultimately informed their positive embrace of Halloween practices.

Progressive Protestant communities articulated a dual critique of conservative Protestant responses to the disaster: they challenged both the religious exclusivity in Halloween interpretations and the rhetorical displacement of disaster responsibility onto victims. They argued that such victim-blaming narratives obscured the structural causes of the disaster while impeding the development of preventative social systems for future disasters. Rejecting conservative Protestant characterizations of Halloween as a superstitious practice and their criticism of victims, progressive Protestant groups not only issued public apologies for the actions of those who sought to halt social mourning by urging the public to "stop grieving" or who condemned the victims for attending a "ghost festival" (G. Kim 2023, p. 38), but also rebuked preachers who described the tragedy as divine retribution for participating in a "festival of Satan" (News M 2022). At the same time, they actively engaged in multi-faceted advocacy through campaigns, protests, liturgical practices, public statements, and social media engagement to express commemoration of the victims and solidarity with bereaved families.

Civil society mobilized significant criticism of governmental and institutional actors for their negligence and administrative failures. Citizens engaged in collective memory-making and solidarity efforts, organizing grassroots campaigns to support the Itaewon Special Law, which demanded thorough investigation and accountability for responsible parties. The legislative petition for this special law garnered 50,000 signatures within 11 days, successfully advancing the bill to the National Assembly. The National Human Rights Commission of the Republic of Korea intervened with an official statement condemning victim-blaming narratives surrounding the disaster (NHRCRK 2022). Bereaved family members challenged religious interpretations of Halloween, emphasizing that participants, including the victims, approached the festival without significant awareness of or interest

in its religious origins or supernatural elements (Na 2023). This testimony underscores that festival participation was primarily motivated by its role as a contemporary youth cultural practice rather than any religious or spiritual significance.

In the aftermath of the 10.29 Itaewon Disaster, progressive Protestant groups reframed the discourse surrounding Halloween, rejecting religious interpretations in favor of cultural analysis that positioned it within contemporary youth practices. This perspective emerged through their collaborative engagement with bereaved families and progressive civil society organizations. Through this framework, they simultaneously challenged religious parochialism and public stigmatization of victims while advocating for governmental accountability in the disaster.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of Korean Protestant discourse surrounding Halloween reveals the following key patterns:

First, prior to the 10.29 Itaewon Disaster, Halloween generated minimal theological debate within Korean Protestant communities, with existing critiques primarily focused on its commercialization rather than religious implications.

Second, in the aftermath of the 10.29 Itaewon Disaster, conservative Protestant circles witnessed a dramatic surge in discourse emphasizing Halloween's pagan and superstitious origins. This led to proposals for alternative Christian celebrations, including "Holy Win Day," "Holyween Day," "Hallelujah Day," or traditional observances such as Thanksgiving Day, Reformation Day, and Advent.

Third, the conservative Protestant framing of Halloween as a satanic practice implicitly attributed culpability to disaster victims through their participation in these festivities. By aligning themselves with pro-government narratives, conservative Protestant groups sought to deflect responsibility away from government authorities, which in turn fostered victim isolation and stigmatization, prompting concerns about victim scapegoating within civil society.

Fourth, progressive Protestant communities advanced an alternative framework that recognized Halloween as a contemporary youth cultural phenomenon deserving acknowledgment and respect within Korea's diverse cultural landscape. They argued that analyzing the festival's ancient origins was irrelevant to its current practice, as participants engaged with Halloween as a secular celebration devoid of religious significance.

Fifth, this cultural interpretation of Halloween facilitated a shift from victim-blaming narratives toward emphasizing governmental accountability for public safety failures. This perspective garnered support from civil society organizations advocating for improved crowd management systems and institutional responsibility.

In the wake of the 10.29 Itaewon Disaster, the theological debate over Halloween's nature as superstition or cultural practice is closely associated with the fundamental question of disaster accountability. This debate over whether Halloween constitutes superstition or culture is not formed solely on theological grounds; that is, it cannot be explained merely by whether one emphasizes Halloween's pagan religious origins or by the theological divide between conservative theology—which tends to understand sin as an individual moral failing—and progressive theology—which tends to understand sin as a structural problem. Rather, this debate can be comprehensively understood through its connections with the political–historical context in which conservative and progressive Korean Protestantism has been formed and has exerted social influence, as well as their attitudes toward the government at the time of the disaster. The contrasting interpretations of Halloween illuminate how religious and cultural frameworks intersect with broader questions of social responsibility and institutional culpability. A comprehensive analysis of these competing

narratives in post-disaster South Korea necessitates examining two crucial contexts: the specific circumstances of the 10.29 Itaewon Disaster and the political dynamics within Korean Protestantism.

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Article

Negotiating *Wonhan*: Cognitive Frameworks and Ritual Responses to Unresolved Grievances in Joseon Korea

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Abstract: This study examines how cognitive mechanisms shaped the understanding and ritualization of *wonhan* (冤恨, resentment) in Joseon Korea, particularly in the context of disasters. Drawing on cognitive science and historical analysis, it demonstrates that while *wonhan* functioned as a shared conceptual framework across social boundaries, debates over *wonhon* (冤魂, resentful spirits) exposed ideological tensions in state orthodoxy. Through an analysis of key historical cases, particularly the 1451 Sinmi Year Rituals, the study shows how the tension between intention-based and system-based reasoning was negotiated within ritual practices and political discourse. The research reveals that state rituals, especially yeoje, served as sites where these competing reasoning modes interacted. Even as state officials maintained system-based interpretations of resentment as disruptive energy, the inherently anthropomorphic nature of ritual prayer necessitated treating the deceased as intentional agents. This created a practical synthesis of divergent reasoning modes within ritual contexts. By examining the cognitive foundations of *wonhan* and *wonhon*, this study highlights the multilayered nature of contentious religious issues. It demonstrates how shared conceptual ground can emerge even within seemingly opposed perspectives and how conflicting reasoning modes can coexist in ritual contexts. The findings suggest that religious disputes are not solely doctrinal conflicts but also reflect deeper cognitive tendencies that shape divergent interpretations.

Keywords: *wonhan* (冤恨; resentment); *wonhon* (冤魂; resentful spirits); religious reasoning; yeoje (厲祭; rituals for restless and unappeased spirits); disaster management; ritual prayers; Joseon Korea

1. Understanding *Wonhan* Through a Cognitive and Historical Lens

Human death transcends mere physical cessation, leaving profound psychological and emotional imprints on the living. Survivors often grapple with lingering questions about the emotions or grievances of the deceased, imagining unresolved sorrows or resentments persisting beyond death. This can create psychological burdens, occasionally perceived to have tangible impacts on the living. In Korean society, such unresolved emotions are distinctly articulated through the concept of *wonhan* (冤恨, resentment), encompassing unfulfilled grievances of the dead that disrupt harmony. Unlike the supernatural notion of *wonhon* (冤魂, resentful spirits), *wonhan* represents a broader moral and cosmological imbalance, addressed through cultural, literary, and ritual practices. These practices highlight the enduring interplay between the living and the deceased, particularly in disaster contexts.

An enduring idiom from the era, "Even the *wonhan* of a single woman can cause three years of drought", captures the cultural resonance of *wonhan* in Joseon society. Yet, the engagement with *wonhan* was marked by nuanced and contested interpretations. While

wonhan was widely acknowledged as a moral and cosmological force capable of explaining disasters, the rituals addressing it often sparked ideological debates. Officials drew a critical distinction between rejecting the literal agency of *wonhon* and validating *wonhan* as a potent ethical and metaphysical concept. This tension highlights how beliefs surrounding *wonhan* and *wonhon* were deeply embedded in the cultural, religious, and political fabric of the era, reflecting broader negotiations between popular traditions and state doctrines.[1]

This paper aims to explore why attributing disasters to *wonhan* was a prevalent explanatory model during the Joseon Dynasty, while also investigating the sources of ritual and ideological contention surrounding these beliefs. By examining the cognitive and psychological mechanisms underlying religious thought, this study sheds light on how and why *wonhan* became an enduring yet divisive aspect of Joseon society's response to calamities.

The study of *wonhan* (resentment) and *wonhon* (resentful spirits) in the Joseon Dynasty has been significantly advanced by Korean literary scholarship (J.-o. Kang 2002; Cho 2003; S.-s. Kang 2014; Kwon 2014). Researchers have examined how these concepts appear in Joseon novels and anecdotal tales (yadam), often framing them as symbolic representations of societal grievances and justice. Such works highlight how *wonhan* and *wonhon* functioned as narrative tools to navigate cultural anxieties. Beyond their literary representation, *wonhan* has also been examined as a vehicle for marginalized groups, particularly women, to assert agency within restrictive legal systems. J.M. Kim (2017) demonstrates that women who were otherwise excluded from formal litigation could employ *wonhan* as a rhetorical strategy, enabling their participation in legal proceedings and amplifying their voices in the patriarchal judicial context.

Studies of Korean shamanism and folk religion have further explored the ritual and metaphysical dimensions of *wonhon*. Early scholarship highlighted *wonhon* as a distinctive feature of Korean shamanistic practices, rooted in the dichotomy between "normal" and "abnormal" deaths or between ancestors and unfulfilled spirits (G.-s. Choi 2010; T.-g. Kim 1985). Furthermore, Lee (2009) has argued that *wonhon*, originally emerging from popular beliefs, were integrated into state ceremonies such as the yeoje. However, this paper takes a more critical stance on this perspective. It suggests that *wonhan*, being a purely general folk concept, was a shared framework across elite and popular classes. The core tension, therefore, was not about the inclusion of popular beliefs but about whether *wonhon* as an ontological category should be officially recognized. This distinction moves beyond the dichotomy of "popular" versus "elite" and emphasizes the universal cultural logic of *wonhan* in Joseon society, while identifying the ideological rift surrounding *wonhon* as a separate issue.

Existing research has primarily focused on the conditions under which *wonhan* and *wonhon* were recognized or on their symbolic and ontological significance. Few studies have explored the cognitive underpinnings that made *wonhan* a compelling explanation for disasters, not as a concept dividing elites and commoners, but as a shared framework transcending social hierarchies, and examined the ideological tensions between acknowledging *wonhan* and rejecting *wonhon*. This study addresses these gaps by situating the discourse on *wonhan* and *wonhon* within the cognitive mechanisms of religious thought. Through an analysis of the Sinmi Year Rituals (1451), it argues that these tensions arose from the interplay between intention-based and system-based reasoning. This research further investigates how ritual practices reconciled these conflicts, enabling divergent frameworks to coexist within Joseon's ritual traditions.

This study employs a cognitive and historical approach to investigate the religious reasoning underpinning the Joseon Dynasty's engagement with *wonhan* and *wonhon*. Drawing on cognitive science, it examines two modes of religious reasoning: intention-based

and system-based reasoning. Intention-based reasoning, rooted in the detection of agency and purpose in natural phenomena, offers insight into why humans instinctively attribute supernatural causes to disasters. This perspective draws on concepts such as Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD), Theory of Mind, and anthropomorphism. In contrast, system-based reasoning is characterized by analytical, rule-driven cognition, akin to Daniel Kahneman's System 2 framework (Kahneman 2011). By juxtaposing these two reasoning modes, this study highlights their interplay in shaping the divergent responses to *wonhan* and *wonhon* during the Joseon period.

To explore how *wonhan* was understood and ritualized, this research draws on a wide range of primary sources from the Joseon period. Core materials include state chronicles like the Joseon Wangjo Sillok (朝鮮王朝實錄), ritual documents such as Yeoje deungnok (厲祭謄錄), and various prayer texts (祭文/祝文) composed for disaster-related rituals. These sources not only document official responses to disasters but also reveal the complex reasoning processes behind ritual practices. The prayers and debates recorded in these texts provide invaluable insights into how different modes of religious reasoning—both intention-based and system-based—operated in practice. While official sources predominantly reflect elite perspectives, they also capture tensions between different approaches to understanding disasters and ritual responses, allowing us to trace how various cognitive frameworks coexisted and competed within Joseon society.

The structure of the paper reflects this methodological foundation. Section 2 provides a theoretical framework, delineating the two modes of religious reasoning and their cognitive underpinnings. It explores how intention-based reasoning serves as a default mechanism for interpreting crises, while system-based reasoning introduces doctrinal rigidity that can exacerbate ideological tensions. Section 3 applies this framework to the case of the 1451 Sinmi Year Rituals, a pivotal moment in the Joseon Dynasty's engagement with *wonhan* and *wonhon*. This chapter examines how Confucian scholars' system-based reasoning clashed with more intuitive, intention-based interpretations, culminating in ritualistic and ideological conflict over the recognition of *wonhon*. Section 4 analyzes the broader implications of this case, focusing on how rituals acted as a canopy for negotiating and reconciling these divergent reasoning modes. By framing the ritual process as a site of negotiation, the chapter demonstrates how intention-based and system-based reasoning coexisted within a unified ceremonial framework, despite their underlying tensions.

In tracing these dynamics, this paper critiques the conventional dichotomy between popular and elite belief systems, proposing that *wonhan* functioned as a folk concept—a shared cultural framework spanning social strata—while its treatment as *wonhon* unveiled ideological fissures. Ultimately, this study reveals how cognitive mechanisms shaped not only the intellectual but also the ritualistic landscapes of the Joseon Dynasty, enabling divergent understandings to persist within the same religious and political milieu.

2. Cognitive Foundations of *Wonhan*: Two Modes of Religious Reasoning

Human religious cognition is fundamentally rooted in innate cognitive mechanisms. Among these, the intuitive ability to infer the intentions and purposes of unseen agents plays a pivotal role in shaping religious thought (Barrett 2004; Boyer 2001). This cognitive foundation helps explain why the concept of *wonhan* (resentment) held such significance in Joseon Korea. Emerging from experiences of unjust deaths and unresolved tensions, *wonhan* became a lens through which people interpreted societal crises, particularly disasters. While *wonhan* invoked moral and emotional dimensions, its influence extended into ritual and governance, illustrating the dynamic interplay between human empathy and structured cosmological frameworks.

This chapter explores how *wonhan* was understood and ritualized through two contrasting modes of reasoning: intention-based reasoning, which emphasized agency, and system-based reasoning, which aligned with Confucian cosmology. By examining these frameworks, we gain insight into the ideological tensions and ritual adaptations that shaped Joseon society's responses to calamities.

2.1. Two Modes of Human Reasoning: General Framework

Human reasoning operates through two primary cognitive systems that address distinct challenges of interpretation and decision making. Kahneman (2011) conceptualized these systems as System 1 and System 2, while Mercier and Sperber (2009) referred to them as intuitive and reflective inferences. System 1 encompasses rapid, automatic processes that function largely unconsciously, relying on cognitive heuristics to facilitate quick judgments. By contrast, System 2 involves slower, deliberate, and effortful analytical reasoning, essential for solving complex or unfamiliar problems (Kahneman 2011; Mercier and Sperber 2009). This chapter adopts this framework, analyzing these reasoning modes as intention-based reasoning and system-based reasoning.

Intention-based reasoning reflects the natural cognitive tendency to infer the intentions and purposes of agents. This mode relies on evolved cognitive mechanisms, including the Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD), Theory of Mind (ToM), metarepresentation, and anthropomorphism. The HADD exemplifies a cognitive mechanism that predisposes humans to detect agency even in ambiguous or unexplained phenomena. This evolutionary adaptation prioritizes survival by minimizing the risk of overlooking genuine threats, such as predators or other dangers, and has the unintended effect of fostering belief in supernatural entities (Barrett 2004; Atran 2002; Boyer 2001). Closely related to this is the Theory of Mind (ToM), a cognitive faculty that allows individuals to infer the mental states of others, including their beliefs, desires, and intentions, based on observable behavior. While primarily applied in social contexts, ToM also extends to non-human agents, facilitating the attribution of agency to spirits, deities, and other supernatural forces (Epley and Waytz 2010; Bering 2006; Guthrie 1993).

This capacity is further enhanced by anthropomorphism, which attributes human-like characteristics to non-human agents, rendering abstract entities more relatable. In religious contexts, this often results in deities being perceived as possessing human-like intentions, emotions, and goals, reinforcing their role as agents within a moral and cosmological framework (Guthrie 1993; Barrett 2000). Together, these mechanisms form the cognitive foundation for intention-based reasoning, allowing humans to interpret natural and social events as the purposeful actions of unseen agents, a process that lies at the core of many religious beliefs.

In contrast, system-based reasoning embodies a deliberate and analytical approach to religious phenomena, aligning with Kahneman's "System 2" thinking, characterized by slow, effortful, and rule-based cognitive processes (Kahneman 2011; Evans 2008; Evans and Stanovich 2013). Unlike the intuitive immediacy of intention-based reasoning, this mode engages abstract principles and structured frameworks, often requiring formal education in theological traditions to construct coherent doctrines. However, these reasoning modes are not mutually exclusive. Research suggests that System 1 and System 2 processes are deeply intertwined, with many responses involving the simultaneous engagement of both intuitive and analytical mechanisms. Intuitive responses often provide initial interpretations—such as attributing agency to unseen forces—which System 2 then elaborates, rationalizes, or suppresses based on contextual demands. Conversely, System 2 reasoning may rely on System 1 shortcuts when cognitive load or time

constraints are high, demonstrating their mutual dependence and dynamic interaction (Evans and Stanovich 2013; Kahneman 2011).

This dual-process framework sheds light on the cognitive dynamics of religious interpretations and rituals, particularly in contexts like Joseon Korea, where Neo-Confucian systematic thought confronted intention-based folk beliefs about disasters and *wonhan*. Confucian rituals, such as yeoje (厲祭), exemplified efforts to mediate these tensions by incorporating intuitive beliefs into structured doctrinal systems, aligning popular practices with cosmological harmony while addressing the emotional needs of the populace. Despite these efforts, intuitive agency detection and Theory of Mind persisted, even within system-based theological reasoning, highlighting their deep-rooted cognitive nature. This interplay explains why certain intuitive interpretations, such as attributing disasters to aggrieved spirits, often felt more immediate and compelling than abstract theological explanations, even among educated elites. Ritual practices acted as sites of negotiation, managing these competing cognitive modes to maintain social cohesion and cultural legitimacy (Barrett 2000). This persistent tension illustrates the intricate ways religious systems integrate and reconcile autonomous intuitive reasoning with controlled analytical thought.

2.2. Theory of Mind: Cognitive Roots of Wonhan Representation

Among the two modes of reasoning previously discussed, intention-based reasoning is fundamentally rooted in the Theory of Mind (ToM). ToM is closely intertwined with cognitive mechanisms such as the Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD), meta-representation, and anthropomorphism, yet it plays a uniquely pivotal role in understanding and inferring emotions like *wonhan* (resentment). This framework provides a key explanation for the widespread acceptance of *wonhan* representations across classes and religions throughout the Joseon period.

Theory of Mind (ToM) is a cognitive faculty that enables individuals to infer the mental states of others, encompassing beliefs, desires, and intentions. This ability is essential for predicting and interpreting behavior, whether in social interactions or inferences about unseen agents. ToM is often associated with two key components: conscious experience and intentional agency (Gray et al. 2007). Conscious experience involves understanding emotional states and psychological processes, such as empathy, fear, and regret, while intentional agency focuses on attributing purposeful actions to others. These cognitive mechanisms operate even in the absence of actual agents, as evidenced by phenomena like anthropomorphism and teleological reasoning (Barrett 2004; Boyer 2001). Evolutionarily, ToM is believed to have developed as an adaptive advantage for navigating complex social environments, enhancing cooperation and competition (Epley and Waytz 2010). Its foundational role in detecting agency—often hyperactively—underpins religious and supernatural beliefs, enabling humans to conceptualize unseen entities as possessing human-like intentions and emotions (Guthrie 1993; Barrett 2000). Additionally, through the complementary process of meta-representation, ToM allows individuals not only to attribute mental states to others but also to imagine counterfactual scenarios, such as the intentions or grievances of the deceased. This dual capability makes ToM a powerful framework for understanding the projection of emotions onto nonliving agents, such as in cultural concepts like *wonhan*.

Meta-representation, a higher-order cognitive mechanism integral to ToM, enables individuals to form representations of representations. It allows humans to conceptualize that others may hold beliefs, desires, or emotions that differ from their own and may not align with reality (Sperber 1996; Bering 2006). In the context of imagining emotional states, meta-representation facilitates the projection of feelings, such as sorrow or resentment, onto entities that cannot directly experience or express emotions. For example,

when observing a neglected grave, people might infer that the deceased "feels" forgotten or wronged, even though such emotions are purely a projection of the living. This process reflects humans' capacity to simulate others' mental states using their own emotional frameworks, driven by the belief that similar situations would elicit comparable emotions in themselves. This cognitive mechanism extends human empathy beyond direct interactions, enabling the attribution of mental states to entities as diverse as historical figures, pets, or even inanimate objects—such as a broken family heirloom, which might be seen as "sad" due to its disrepair. By combining agency detection and the imaginative capacity of meta-representation, ToM helps construct complex social narratives, supporting both the universality of transcendent beliefs and cultural practices aimed at addressing perceived grievances of the nonliving.

Therefore, the universality of *wonhan* representations can be attributed to the workings of ToM. *Wonhan* is not an emotion genuinely experienced by the dead but a feeling projected onto them by the living. Inferring the emotions of the deceased is an example of how ToM operates to make sense of the mental states of others. Although the minds of others cannot be directly observed, ToM enables individuals to predict and understand their actions and reactions. In Joseon Korea, the *wonhan* of the deceased was most acutely perceived under conditions of neglect, such as when bodies were left unburied or funerary rites were absent. People imagined the bitter cold of the bodies left exposed to the rain and snow, and the hunger of the dead who had no descendants to perform ancestral rites. The empathy for their imagined suffering—cold, loneliness, and hunger—was central to the perception of *wonhan*. This empathetic resonance transcended class and religion, being shared by Confucian scholars, monarchs, and commoners alike. ToM, constructed through the accumulation of expectations that others react similarly to oneself and through learned imitation from childhood (Mercier and Sperber 2009), made this emotional empathy a natural outcome.

The universality of this mind perception explains why *wonhan* was a pervasive cultural concept across Joseon society, regardless of social hierarchy or religious background. While immediate emotional reactions to corpses were often avoidance and disgust (Y. Kim 2024), the operation of ToM transformed these reactions into feelings of pity and empathy. The unpleasant visual and olfactory cues of decomposing bodies might have elicited disgust and evasion due to their identification as potential carriers of disease, yet their human form activated ToM, leading to an empathetic recognition of their suffering (Boyer 2001). The feelings of pity, sadness, and empathy for those who died without proper burial or ancestral rites—encapsulated by the concept of *wonhan*—are outcomes of this cognitive mechanism.

While the attribution of emotional states like *wonhan* to the deceased was a shared cultural phenomenon, the reasoning processes linking *wonhan* to disasters differed considerably across cultural and ideological contexts. Among commoners, *wonhan* was often interpreted as stemming from *wonhon* (restless spirits), perceived as intentional agents actively influencing the world. These spirits were thought to harbor grievances that manifested as misfortunes or disasters. In contrast, within the Confucian framework, *wonhan* was conceptualized as a disruption of harmonious energy, reflecting a cosmological imbalance rather than the actions of specific agents. This divergence highlights the dynamic relationship between intention-based reasoning, which emphasizes personal agency and emotional states, and system-based reasoning, which seeks abstract, systemic explanations. The tension between these perspectives provides a foundation for exploring how different reasoning modes shaped the cultural and ritual responses to *wonhan*, as discussed in the following section.

2.3. Explaining Disasters: Wonhon as Agents or Wonhan as Energies

The intuitive and systematic reasoning approaches previously discussed offer contrasting methods for understanding the causes of disasters. While in popular belief, intention-based reasoning attributed disasters to specific agents like *wonhon* (restless spirits), Confucian interpretations, grounded in system-based reasoning, explained disasters as disruptions to cosmic order caused by resentful energy. These differing interpretations highlight not merely contrasting explanatory frameworks but also significant implications for ritual practices and political responses.

The popular concept of *wonhon* exemplifies intuitive reasoning in Joseon society, as vividly illustrated in period literature like Yu Mongin's Eo-u yadam. In these narratives, *wonhon* manifested as conscious entities retaining human-like emotions and agency after death, particularly when their earthly matters remained unresolved. A representative story tells of a woman who died from an epidemic and appeared to a warrior, her unusually cold body revealing her spiritual nature. Unable to pass on due to lacking proper burial rites, she deliberately sought help from the living (Yu 2006, pp. 255–57). Another account describes a murdered nobleman's spirit who appeared in a traveler's dream, precisely describing both his murderer and the location of his abandoned corpse, demonstrating the *wonhon*'s continued consciousness and purposeful action (Yu 2006, pp. 238–39). These resentful spirits exhibited key features of intuitive reasoning: they maintained human-like emotions, possessed clear awareness of their circumstances, and deliberately influenced the living world to resolve their grievances. Such beliefs were not merely abstract but led to specific ritual practices, as seen in both stories where proper burial and memorial rites were performed to appease the spirits. This understanding of *wonhon* as intentional agents capable of negotiation and reconciliation shaped how people interpreted and responded to disasters, often attributing calamities to the deliberate actions of these unresolved spirits.

In contrast, the Confucian understanding of *wonhan* drew heavily from the Chinese intellectual tradition of interpreting *li* (厲). While *li* originally referred to wandering spirits lacking proper burial and ancestral rites, it underwent significant reinterpretation during the Han period through the synthesis of various philosophical traditions. As Confucian thought incorporated concepts from Daoism, Legalism, and the School of Yin–Yang, it developed a more systematic framework for understanding spiritual phenomena (Li 2005). This synthesis, exemplified in works like the *Lüshi Chunqiu* and *Huainanzi*, sought to reconcile objective natural principles with subjective human agency. Particularly influential was Dong Zhongshu's theory of cosmic resonance between heaven and humanity, which integrated yin–yang cosmology with Confucian moral principles (Li 2005, pp. 285–312). Within this framework, *wonhan* was understood not as the intentional action of individual spirits but as a form of disruptive energy (gi, 氣) that could disturb the harmony of yin and yang. This systematic interpretation reflected the broader Confucian project of explaining apparently supernatural phenomena through abstract cosmological principles rather than through personal agency. Such an approach fundamentally differed from the popular understandings of *wonhon* as intentional spirits, creating tensions that would shape both ritual practice and political discourse throughout the Joseon period.

These contrasting approaches were even more evident in their respective ritual responses. Among commoners, rituals focused on directly appeasing *wonhon* through specific ceremonies. However, the state's official ritual, the yeoje (厲祭), operated within a larger framework of restoring cosmic order. Rather than addressing individual *wonhon*, the state emphasized the broader goal of reestablishing harmony, which system-based reasoning made possible. This systematic reasoning was also deeply tied to political authority, as interpreting disasters as imbalances in cosmic energy necessitated state-led rituals

for resolution. The shift from local shamanistic practices to state-sponsored yeoje as the authoritative method of disaster management highlights the central role of systematic reasoning in shaping ritual practices.

The tension between these two approaches was starkly evident during the 1451 Sinmi Year Ritual. Popular intuitive understandings, which attributed disasters to the actions of *wonhon*, clashed with Confucian interpretations that viewed disasters as disruptions to cosmic order. This conflict sparked intense debates over the form and content of rituals. The next chapter examines this case in greater detail, exploring how the tensions and compromises between these two modes of reasoning shaped the rituals and their broader implications.

3. The 1451 Sinmi Year Rituals and the Tensions of *Wonhan*

This chapter examines how *wonhan* was contextualized within the framework of disaster management in the Joseon period. While *wonhan* was not consistently addressed as a central emotional factor, it frequently resurfaced during calamities and was often ritualized as part of the societal response. Specifically, this section focuses on the recurring epidemics in the Hwanghae Province during the 1400s and explores how these events catalyzed debates on *wonhan* and ritual practice, culminating in the 1451 Sinmi Year Rituals. These rituals became a focal point of contention over the interpretation and treatment of *wonhan* and *wonhon*.

3.1. Resentment and Disaster: Wonhan as a Framework for Crisis in Joseon Korea

> "If even one woman's resentment can cause three years of drought, how could the accumulated resentment of two hundred and seventy departed souls not be sufficient to disrupt the harmonious energy of heaven?" (Yeoje Deungnok n.d.)

Throughout the Joseon Dynasty, natural calamities such as droughts and epidemics were frequently attributed to the unresolved resentment of individuals who had perished under tragic circumstances. While alternative explanations—ranging from natural phenomena and political mismanagement to geomantic imbalances—were occasionally proposed, none elicited the same sustained attention or prompted such consistent ritual responses as the theory of disaster victims' resentment.

An illustrative case of disease etiology and ritual response in Joseon Korea is the persistent epidemic outbreaks in Hwanghae Province during the 15th century. The first recorded outbreak occurred in 1437, when widespread infections reportedly devastated entire households (Sejong Sillok 1437/12/15). King Sejong responded by dispatching physicians to the region and ordering the performance of yeoje, state rituals designed for restless, unappeased spirits (Sejong Sillok 1438/3/2). Despite these efforts, the epidemic persisted, prompting ongoing discussions about its origins and the appropriate countermeasures. In 1442, a local theory emerged that attributed the disease to the scattered remains of the dead in Geukseong and Bongsan, prompting efforts to collect the skeletal remains and perform suryukjae, Buddhist rituals aimed at appeasing the grievances of the deceased, as remedial actions. In response, suryukjae was carried out to address this crisis (Sejong Sillok 1442/8/4).

The search for explanations and solutions continued as the epidemic failed to subside. In 1452, a memorial to the throne argued that relocating Dangun's shrine from Munhwa to another site had triggered the outbreak (Danjong Sillok 1452/6/28). In 1453, residents of Hwangju credited the partial alleviation of the disease to the suryukjae conducted at Seongbulsa Temple and petitioned for further state support for such rituals. However, the Ministry of Rites rejected the petitions as inappropriate and instead recommended yeoje, which Danjong accepted (Danjong Sillok 1453/1/21). This decision stemmed from

the broader effort to reject Buddhist and other non-Confucian rituals while solidifying a Confucian-centered ceremonial system. As a result, yeoje was promoted over suryukjae as the official state response to epidemics (Lee 2001; H.-j. Kim 2001; Sim 2004; M. Choi 2009). By 1472, under King Seongjong's directive, a comprehensive investigation into the Hwanghae epidemics produced a range of etiological theories. These included references to battlefields like Geukseong, where the vengeful spirits of fallen soldiers were believed to linger, as well as shrine relocations, the destruction of sacred trees, and the removal of materials from temples such as Wolbongsa (Seongjong Sillok 1472/2/6). These diverse interpretations reflect the complex interplay of popular beliefs and religious practices. Nevertheless, unresolved *wonhan* consistently emerged as a central explanatory model, with rituals such as yeoje repeatedly implemented to mitigate both physical and cosmic disruptions.

The 17th century offers even more striking examples of this association between disaster and resentment. In 1673, amidst a devastating drought in Hamgyeong and Gyeongsang provinces, Seongju magistrate Yi Se-gwi performed rituals for those who had perished during the Great Famine of 1670–1672. Upon examining the fortress vicinity, Yi discovered numerous unburied remains in varying states of decomposition: "106 bodies with heads and torsos intact, and 49 incomplete sets of remains—some lacking heads, others missing limbs, and some consisting only of scattered vertebrae and extremities (Yi n.d.)". He concluded that the lingering resentment of these unburied souls had "injured the harmonious energy of heaven above", thereby perpetuating the drought.

A similarly dramatic case unfolded in 1675, when a nationwide drought led to repeated rounds of rain rituals during June and July. Despite conducting ceremonies at the Sajik and royal ancestral shrines (Sukjong Sillok 1675/6/20), fashioning clay dragons for worship (Sukjong Sillok 1675/7/4), and implementing other ritual interventions, no rain followed. Amid the growing desperation, senior official Yun Hyu submitted a memorial asserting that the drought resulted from the unresolved resentment of those who had starved during the Great Famine of 1670–1672. He argued that "having neither sustenance in life nor rest in death, how could their concentrated resentful energy (冤氣) fail to disrupt the harmony of yin and yang (Yun 1927)?" Following his recommendation, rituals were performed at burial grounds on the outskirts of the capital, specifically adhering to the Ministry of Rites' guidelines for yeoje, state rituals intended to appease the restless and vengeful spirits of the deceased.

These cases illuminate several key aspects of the Joseon government's understanding of the relationship between disaster and *wonhan*. First, references to *wonhan* as a cause of calamities were closely tied to improperly handled human remains. Second, *wonhan* was not typically conceived as the deliberate action of individual spirits but rather as a disruptive cosmic force that disturbed harmonious energy (和氣). Third, ritual intervention was seen as essential to resolving such disturbances. Notably, these accounts rarely employed the term *wonhon* (resentful spirits) as a direct cause of disasters. Instead, officials and scholars consistently referred to *wonhan* (resentment) or "pent-up(鬱結) energy". This deliberate linguistic choice reveals a nuanced conceptual distinction: while acknowledging the emotional residue left by tragic deaths, official discourse carefully avoided attributing independent agency to the deceased. This perspective reflects a distinctly system-based reasoning, grounded in Confucian cosmological principles, rather than an intention-based attribution of agency to the deceased. This tension between recognizing *wonhan* while rejecting the notion of autonomous spiritual agency reached its apex during the Sinmi Year Rituals of 1451, a pivotal case explored in the following section.

3.2. The 1451 Sinmi Year Rituals: Tensions Between Intention and System-Based Reasoning

The 1451 Sinmi Year Rituals marked a critical juncture in the Joseon court's approach to managing epidemics through state rituals. These rituals were conducted in Geukseong, a battlefield associated with the Honggun Red Turban Rebellion, where numerous soldiers had perished. Local beliefs identified these unappeased spirits, or *wonhon*, as the source of the lingering disease outbreaks. Although rituals had previously been performed at Geukseong, the 1451 ceremonies marked a significant escalation in both scope and importance, driven by the perceived success of Confucian state rituals and the theological debates they provoked. These rituals left an enduring legacy by solidifying the centrality of yeoje in epidemic responses, yet they also exposed deep divisions in how the court reconciled divergent frameworks of religious reasoning.

King Munjong's ritual approach was a response to growing crises in Hwanghae Province, where disease outbreaks continued to spread toward Gyeonggi Province, even prompting discussions of relocating the capital. This intensified urgency led to repeated calls from local communities for the performance of suryukjae (水陸齋), a Buddhist ritual for appeasing the spirits of the dead, who were believed to be resentful (*wonhon*, 冤魂) due to their violent deaths during conflicts, such as battles with the Red Turban rebels (Lee 2001). Despite King Munjong's refusal to recognize suryukjae or yeoje (厲祭) as literal interventions addressing the spirits' grievances, he emphasized their necessity as complementary strategies. Munjong initially proposed three measures: burning large incense burners to expel harmful energies, performing suryukjae based on Yaksa Yeorae (the Medicine Buddha) rituals, and conducting yeoje to console malevolent spirits (yeogwi, 厲鬼) through offerings delivered by morally upright individuals. King Munjong framed these rituals not as concessions to popular interpretations of *wonhon* as agents of disease but as methods to stabilize the spiritual energy (yeogi, 厲氣) believed to disrupt the natural harmony of the cosmos (Munjong Sillok 1451/9/5). By doing so, he indirectly acknowledged the symbolic significance of these rituals while sidestepping the direct validation of popular beliefs.

Despite King Munjong's efforts, his proposals for ritual responses to the Hwanghae epidemics sparked significant opposition within the court. King Munjong emphasized the concurrent performance of yeoje and suryukjae to address the spiritual and social dimensions of the crisis. While yeoje targeted yeogwi (厲鬼), spirits believed to embody malevolent energies, as part of the Confucian ritual tradition, suryukjae was rooted in Buddhist practices designed to console the dead and resolve their grievances. Munjong's intent was pragmatic rather than doctrinal; he framed these rituals as essential for alleviating public suffering rather than validating popular beliefs about *wonhon*.

However, the inclusion of suryukjae drew intense criticism from younger Confucian scholars, particularly those in the Office of the Inspector-General (Saheonbu). These scholars, led by officials like Hwang Bo-in and Jeong Chang-son, viewed suryukjae as a heretical Buddhist practice incompatible with Confucian orthodoxy. They argued that rituals should be confined to recognized deities and traditions, rejecting any association with spirits created by superstition. These officials emphasized the distinction between "orthodoxy" (jeong, 正) and "heterodoxy" (sa, 邪), advocating for the exclusive performance of yeoje, which they deemed more aligned with Confucian principles (Munjong Sillok 1451/9/5).

While experienced officials like Kim Jong-seo, who had previously permitted suryukjae at the request of local communities, supported King Munjong's proposals, the opposition intensified (Munjong Sillok 1451/9/5). The debates culminated in repeated petitions to ban suryukjae, with critics asserting that allowing Buddhist practices to persist undermined the state's efforts to centralize a Confucian ritual system. On September 15, a provincial official reignited the controversy by reporting that "unappeased spirits had become

the cause of disease" and advocating for suryukjae as a necessary remedy (Munjong Sillok 1451/9/15). This was followed by successive appeals from the Inspector-General's Office on September 18 and 19, which condemned suryukjae as a concession to Buddhist superstition and called for stricter adherence to Confucian orthodoxy (Munjong Sillok 1451/9/18-19).

The debates over whether suryukjae could be performed to address the epidemic in Hwanghae Province intertwined with two critical issues. First, the Neo-Confucian agenda aimed to establish a centralized ritual system by rejecting "heretical" practices such as Buddhism and shamanism. Second, the popular diagnosis of the epidemic as stemming from the malevolent spirits (*wonhon*, 冤魂) conflicted with Neo-Confucian reasoning, which disallowed such interpretations as valid grounds for state rituals. These objections were championed most fervently by younger Neo-Confucian officials, who, armed with theoretical rigor, framed their arguments within the dichotomy of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. For them, the endorsement of suryukjae signaled a compromise of Confucian purity that could not be tolerated.

King Munjong ultimately overruled these objections, asserting that addressing public suffering took precedence over doctrinal purity (Munjong Sillok 1451/9/19). He maintained that both yeoje and suryukjae were necessary, reasoning that rituals targeting yeogwi and consoling the dead could alleviate the unrest and the emotions believed to exacerbate the epidemic. Nevertheless, the debates surrounding the 1451 rituals revealed the growing tension within the Joseon court. Confucian scholars increasingly sought to exclude Buddhist elements from state rituals, arguing for the complete removal of suryukjae from state rituals. Although Munjong succeeded in preserving its inclusion temporarily, the broader trend of marginalizing Buddhist practices continued. By the mid-16th century, suryukjae had largely disappeared from state rituals, with yeoje becoming the standard practice for addressing unresolved grievances.

The controversies surrounding suryukjae also reflected broader ideological shifts within the Joseon court. By the mid-15th century, Confucian elites sought to minimize the role of Buddhist rituals in state ceremonies. Although suryukjae had historically been an integral part of the state's responses to crises, its association with Buddhist institutions rendered it increasingly contentious. While Munjong successfully defended its inclusion during his reign, subsequent monarchs faced ongoing pressures to curtail such practices. For example, King Sejo authorized suryukjae for epidemic relief in Hwanghae Province (Sejo Sillok 1465/5/9) and to commemorate the victims of Yi Si-ae's rebellion (Sejo Sillok 1467/6/2), but by the late 15th century, even these limited allowances faced mounting criticism. By the reign of King Seongjong, suryukjae was gradually phased out in favor of yeoje, and by the time of King Yeonsangun, records of state-sponsored suryukjae had all but disappeared.

The 1451 Sinmi Year Rituals thus represent a pivotal moment in the transition from pluralistic ritual practices to a more Confucian-dominated framework. Munjong's leadership revealed how intention-based reasoning could coexist with system-based reasoning through ritual negotiation. However, the eventual marginalization of suryukjae underscored the limits of this coexistence, as doctrinal orthodoxy increasingly constrained the state's ability to accommodate divergent religious practices. By institutionalizing yeoje as the primary response to unresolved grievances, the Joseon state solidified a Confucian approach to *wonhan*, while relegating *wonhon* to the periphery of its ritual landscape. This shift would have lasting implications for the management of societal and spiritual crises in later periods.

3.3. Resolution Through Ritual: King Munjong's Negotiation of Popular and State Beliefs

King Munjong's handling of the 1451 Sinmi Year Rituals exemplified a nuanced approach to epidemic management, grounded in a careful negotiation of popular beliefs and state orthodoxy. King Munjong personally composed the ritual text for the yeoje performed at Geukseong, a battlefield associated with the Honggun Red Turban Rebellion (Munjong Sillok 1451/9/28). This ritual's focus was not on unappeased spirits (*wonhon*) in the traditional sense but rather on the disruptive energy (yeogi, 厲氣) attributed to malevolent forces tied to widespread disease. This distinction allowed Munjong to address local grievances while aligning the ritual with Confucian principles.

The ritual text begins with an assertion of cosmic order, framing the existence of spirits (gui, 鬼) as a natural extension of the universal balance between yin and yang. Munjong articulates this connection, explaining that spirits with emotional qualities (jeong, 情) can be reasoned with, whereas those without such qualities cannot. This reasoning extends to his view of the epidemic: it is not the spirits themselves that cause harm but the imbalance created by human actions. King Munjong's narrative redirects responsibility for the epidemic to human moral failings, emphasizing his role as a monarch tasked with restoring harmony.

The text also reflects Munjong's pragmatic acknowledgment of communal suffering. While maintaining the hierarchical structure of Confucian state rituals, he adopts a compassionate tone, addressing the spirits as entities capable of transformation. He implores them to relinquish their grievances and contribute to the preservation of life. The text concludes with a plea for the spirits to align their actions with benevolence, framing the ritual as both a resolution of past grievances and a reinforcement of cosmic harmony. This duality—engaging with local beliefs while reinterpreting them through Confucian orthodoxy—highlights the layered nature of Munjong's approach. By focusing on yeogi rather than *wonhon*, the ritual addressed local fears of unappeased spirits without conceding to the direct invocation of popular cosmologies. This reframing allowed the state to mediate between intention-based reasoning, which emphasized empathetic engagement with local beliefs, and system-based reasoning, which prioritized doctrinal alignment.

The text's composition reveals an inherent tension between ideological framing and ritual practice. While Munjong successfully reframed the epidemic's cause from *wonhon* to yeogi within Confucian cosmology, the very nature of ritual prayer led to an unavoidable personification of its objects. Even as the text emphasized abstract cosmic energies, its direct addresses to spirits and pleas for their benevolence necessarily imbued them with agency and intention. This inherent anthropomorphism of ritual prayer created a persistent duality in state rituals—while officially maintaining system-based interpretations of resentment as disruptive energy, the practical requirements of ritual communication demanded treating the deceased as intentional agents capable of response and transformation.

This tension between cosmological abstraction and ritual personification would become a defining feature of state responses to disaster throughout the Joseon period. Although Munjong's approach provided a framework for negotiating between elite doctrine and popular belief, it also highlighted an fundamental challenge in ritual practice: the difficulty of maintaining purely systemic interpretations when the very act of prayer implies interaction with conscious agents.

4. From Energy to Agency: Rituals Amplifying Intention-Based Reasoning

In Joseon society, rituals addressing the grievances of those who had tragically died were repeatedly conducted during times of disaster. The monarchs and officials of Joseon

framed these rituals as efforts to dispel resentment, understood as a malevolent energy that disrupted cosmic harmony—a perspective rooted in system-based reasoning. However, the actual rituals often revealed a stronger inclination toward intention-based reasoning, which involved interpreting the emotions and intentional actions of the deceased. This was particularly evident in the prayers associated with disaster-specific yeoje (厲祭), a state ritual. These prayers described resentment as an energy that harmed the natural order but also portrayed the deceased as intentional agents capable of social interaction.

This duality emerged from two factors: first, the inherently anthropomorphic tendency of prayer, which naturally imbues its object with agency; and second, the relative flexibility in the composition of prayers during disaster yeoje, which were less constrained by formalized conventions compared to regular yeoje rituals. While yeoje rituals ostensibly targeted resentment as an abstract force, their practical execution often directed efforts toward appeasing the grievances of individual spirits. This section explores the characteristics of yeoje performed during disasters, the rhetoric of the associated prayers, and the patterns of ritual practice to analyze how differing interpretations of resentment could coexist within these rituals.

4.1. Yeoje: The State Ritual Responses to Resentment in Joseon Society

Yeoje (厲祭) was a state ritual performed for restless spirits (無祀鬼神) during the Joseon dynasty. Modeled after the Ming dynasty's Ji Lì (祭厲) from the Hongwu Protocols, it differed significantly from other state rites. Unlike ancestral rites, which honored specific familial ancestors, yeoje collectively targeted the restless spirits of those who died untimely deaths without proper funerary rites. Moreover, although yeoje was classified as one of the "joyful rites" (gilrye, 吉禮) under the Five Rites (orye, 五禮), it omitted key procedures such as eumbok (飮福) and sujo (受胙)—acts of consuming blessed food as a celebration of unity with divine entities. These omissions suggest that, while yeoje was technically a joyful rite, it did not fully align with the celebratory nature of other such rituals. Another key distinction was the use of royal edicts (gyoseo, 敎書) instead of ritual tablets (chukpan, 祝版). This choice reflected a tone of paternalistic exhortation, where the king addressed the deceased not as deified beings but as subjects in need of solace and guidance.

These characteristics made yeoje especially suitable for addressing the grievances of disaster victims. The capacity to collectively ritualize the deaths of large numbers of individuals made yeoje an effective response to mass casualties from wars, famines, or epidemics. The omission of eumbok and sujo underscored its practical and somber focus on resolving the grievances of disaster victims. The use of royal edicts enabled prayer compositions that emphasized consolation and appeasement. Over time, yeoje evolved from a regular ceremony into a non-periodic ritual primarily conducted during disasters. This shift is evident in records from Yeoje Deungnok (厲祭謄錄), which document numerous yeoje performed in response to epidemics, droughts, and other calamities.

Following the devastation of the Imjin War (1592–1598) and the Manchu invasions (1627, 1636–1637), yeoje increasingly functioned as a ritual tool to address the grievances of those whose remains had not been properly buried or honored. The widespread deaths caused by these disasters disrupted normal burial practices, leading to fears that unresolved grievances of the deceased might provoke further calamities. In this context, yeoje served as an institutionalized means to manage these grievances through ritual. By the late Joseon period, yeoje was frequently conducted in areas near the capital where the unburied dead were interred, such as three burial sites in the outskirts, as well as at other locations scattered across the regions. These rituals were often directed toward the sites where death had occurred or where corpses were found. However, in interpreting these

grievances, the officials preferred to frame them as disruptive energies rather than as the actions of sentient spirits (*wonhon*, 冤魂). This tension between metaphysical abstraction and anthropomorphic representation became increasingly apparent in the rhetorical strategies employed in ritual prayers.

4.2. Representing Resentment: Anthropomorphism and Agency in Ritual Prayers

The prayers composed for yeoje performed during disasters exhibit intriguing characteristics. While the formal structure of prayers for state rituals like yeoje was strictly defined in the National Five Rites Protocols (國朝五禮序例), the prayers for disaster-specific yeoje were not bound by such regulations. This flexibility allowed the authors to vividly convey the grievances of disaster victims. Notably, these prayers often described resentment as an energy that disrupted cosmic harmony but simultaneously depicted the deceased as intentional agents capable of social interaction.

A striking example is found in prayers written during the severe drought of 1731. These texts identified the grievances of those who had died during the great famine of 1671 as the cause of the disaster. At the time, Kim Sangseong wrote, "The drought is dire; springs have dried up, and the fields have cracked. The people are all praying for rain", and he invoked the famine victims of 60 years earlier. He reasoned, "The planet Jupiter (Saeseong, 歲星) has returned to this year, and the accumulated energy of unresolved grievances (won-ul, 冤鬱) may be disturbing celestial harmony, causing calamities anew (Yeongjo Sillok 1731/5/19)". This rationale framed the past victims' grievances as a possible source of new disasters. In response, King Yeongjo ordered sacrifices at altars established in the East and West outskirts of the capital and extended the prayers to include victims of the famines of 1695 and 1698 (Seungjeongwon Ilgi 1731/5/20), collectively referring to them as the "starvation victims since 1671".

The following excerpt from a 1731 prayer, written by Kim Seongtak (1684–1747) for the spirits (yeogwi, 厲鬼), illustrates this reasoning:

> "How can we even speak of the Shinhae Year (1671)? Heaven brought a great famine upon this land, and the number of people who perished from hunger and disease—whether thousands or tens of thousands—cannot be known… People died collapsed by the roadside or in ditches, their skulls left exposed to crows and hawks, and their descendants extinguished, leaving behind ghosts of hunger…It is heartbreaking, and tears cannot stop flowing. How much more anguished must you spirits be? Your sorrow and bitterness have formed into turbulent resentment. In years of sufficient harvest, this resentment only deepens. How could it not disrupt the harmony of heaven and earth, break the balance of yin and yang, and bring calamities of famine and pestilence?… May you eat fully and be satiated, easing your resentment and turbulent sorrow. May this help restore the harmonious energy of heaven and earth, mitigate the harsh drought, and halt the harm of epidemics, saving the fate of our people. From now on, we pledge to hold yeoje annually without fail, sincerely dedicating our efforts to ensure that you spirits accept these offerings and repay the blessings". (S.-t. Kim 1860)

This prayer demonstrates how Kim Seongtak adhered to the Confucian framework of system-based reasoning, describing resentment as a disruption of cosmic harmony that led to famine and disease. Yet the text predominantly treats the deceased as emotional and purposeful agents, retaining the pain of their lives and harboring jealousy and anger toward the living. This anthropomorphic portrayal is most evident in the closing plea for the spirits to eat abundantly, ease their anger, and thus end the disaster. Such elements align with Barrett's (2011) observation that prayer inherently frames its object as an intentional and purposeful agent. This cognitive tendency is further supported by Schjoedt et al. (2009),

who found that personal prayer activates neural regions associated with social cognition, emphasizing the anthropomorphic framing of prayer's object as a relational agent. This suggests that yeoje prayers not only served a ritual function but also tapped into a deeply ingrained cognitive framework for interaction with intentional beings.

These prayers reveal a fascinating duality. On the surface, they adhere to Confucian interpretations, framing resentment as a harmful energy. Yet their rhetoric predominantly treats the deceased as emotional and intentional beings capable of communication. This shift reflects broader changes in Joseon's handling of resentment rituals, moving toward directly addressing the disaster victims themselves. While early Joseon monarchs and officials resisted attributing disasters to intentional actions by spirits, the ritual and symbolic requirements of prayer inevitably anthropomorphized its objects. This trend gained momentum in the late 17th century, leading to the proliferation of rituals specifically targeting disaster victims (Y. Kim 2024).

One such example occurred during the severe drought of 1721, when a ritual was held for those who had starved to death in the outskirts of the capital. The prayer states:

> "From birth, they were struck by disaster; in death, there is no one to oversee their rites. Who will prepare even clean barley rice for them? Their wandering souls know no destination, dwelling among weeds outside the desolate city walls, their cries mingling with foxes and hares, and their gaze stretching to the heavens. A single woman's grief can bring three years of drought; how much more potent must your turbulent energy be, enough to disrupt the harmony of yin and yang? It cannot be without cause that this drought has come upon us. I send a solemn emissary with sacrifices and wine to console your distant, lingering resentment with my sorrowful heart". (Seo n.d.)

Here, while resentment is framed as an energy disrupting cosmic harmony, the overarching narrative portrays the deceased as agents of anger and sorrow whose unresolved grievances might cause disasters. Official rhetoric maintained a Confucian cosmology focused on impersonal energies, but the practical realities of ritual and prayer necessitated anthropomorphic representations.

The anthropomorphization evident in these disaster prayers also speaks to their functional effectiveness. As Barrett (2011) notes, prayer relies on meaningful interaction with its object, which is most effectively achieved when that object is treated as an intentional being. The resolution of resentment during disasters was not merely a matter of balancing abstract energies but required addressing the emotional suffering of the deceased. This necessity drove prayer writers, consciously or unconsciously, to engage in direct communication with these beings. Such anthropomorphic representations were not isolated instances but permeated yeoje prayers, indicating their essential role in the ritual process.

These practices underscore the complexity of Joseon's discourse on disasters and resentment. While resentment was a cognitive construct shared across social and religious boundaries, the methods of interpreting and addressing it varied. Within the Confucian state framework, resentment was framed as disruptive energy, but the realities of ritual emphasized interaction with personified beings. These diverse practices illustrate how differing understandings of resentment coexisted and were negotiated through ritual.

5. Conclusions

This study has examined how cognitive mechanisms shaped the understanding and ritualization of *wonhan* in Joseon Korea, highlighting the interplay between intuitive and analytical modes of religious reasoning. The cognitive mechanisms that lead humans to project emotions onto the deceased made *wonhan* a universally acknowledged concept rather than a belief limited to specific social classes. However, significant differences

emerged in how this shared concept was causally linked to disasters. Drawing on existing research, this study categorized these divergent approaches as intention-based and system-based reasoning. The analysis of historical cases, particularly the 1451 Sinmi Year Rituals, revealed that conflicts surrounding *wonhon* were not about the concept of resentment itself—which was universally shared—but rather about the political and ritual acceptance of intention-based interpretations that attributed agency to *wonhon*. Even as state officials maintained system-based interpretations of resentment as disruptive energy within a cosmological framework, the inherently anthropomorphic nature of ritual prayer necessitated treating the deceased as intentional agents, creating a practical synthesis of these divergent reasoning modes.

While this interdisciplinary approach, combining cognitive science and historical analysis, has yielded valuable insights, it also presents methodological challenges. Applying contemporary cognitive theories to historical contexts requires careful consideration of the interaction between universal cognitive tendencies and culturally specific manifestations. This study has attempted to balance these elements by situating cognitive mechanisms within their specific historical and cultural contexts. Additionally, its scope has been primarily limited to state-level discourse and ritual practices, leaving how these concepts operated within local, non-elite contexts unexplored. The voices of ordinary people who interpreted and engaged with *wonhan* in their daily lives remain largely unexamined due to source limitations. These considerations suggest directions for future research that might incorporate a broader range of sources and methodological approaches to further illuminate the complex interplay between cognition and culture in historical religious practices.

This study contributes to academic discourse in two areas. First, its examination of the relationship between cognitive processes and religious expression in Joseon Korea enhances our understanding of how religious reasoning operates in concrete historical contexts. This research has demonstrated that even within seemingly rigid ideological frameworks, ritual practices often accommodate multiple cognitive reasonings. The tension between cosmological abstraction and ritual personification illustrates how different modes of religious reasoning can operate simultaneously within ritualized settings.

Second, this study's approach to *wonhan* and *wonhon* reveals the multilayered nature of contentious religious issues. Examining these layers allows us to identify shared conceptual ground between opposing perspectives and to recognize how seemingly conflicting ideas can coexist within ritual practice and ritual prayer. While not all contemporary religious conflicts take the same form, adopting new analytical lenses may offer alternative ways of understanding and addressing such tensions. As King Munjong's approach to the 1451 Sinmi Year Rituals demonstrated, effective management of societal crises often requires acknowledging both system-based understandings of order and intention-based recognition of emotional dimensions. While this study does not draw direct parallels or offer prescriptive solutions, its cognitive–historical approach reveals the shared conceptual foundations of religious conflicts. It further demonstrates that the very reasoning modes that generate such tensions can, within ritual settings, coexist rather than remain in opposition.

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Notes

[1] This study defines the term "popular" to refer to groups with religious or social backgrounds that stood in opposition to the elite class of Joseon society, such as the Confucian-oriented yangban. While "elite" and "folk" are often used as contrasting terms, this paper employs "folk" to mean "ordinary people" regardless of social class (J. Choi 2016). Thus, in this paper, "folk" is used as a broader concept that encompasses both "elite" and "popular".

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Why Sink a Tiger Head into the Water? Conflict and Coexistence of Cultural Meanings in Joseon Rainmaking Rituals

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Abstract: This paper elucidates the cognitive and cultural underpinnings that facilitate the coexistence of multiple—occasionally contradictory—interpretive frameworks of magico-religious beliefs and practices within a single sociocultural context. Religious beliefs and practices frequently transcend the boundaries established by a tradition's official doctrines and normative frameworks. From the perspective of religious authorities and theological elites, such transgressions may constitute sites of tension and doctrinal concern. However, individuals, as the primary agents of lived religion, rarely conceptualize these situations as crises of faith or legitimacy. Instead, they develop improvisational strategies to negotiate these apparent contradictions within their sociocultural milieus. At the cultural level, religious beliefs and practices are not rigidly constrained by dominant official doctrines and normative prescriptions; rather, they accommodate a diverse range of interpretive possibilities. Focusing on a specific rainmaking ritual known as "Tiger Head Sinking" from the Joseon Dynasty—a period marked by the hegemony of Neo-Confucian doctrinal and normative structures—this study investigates how the dynamic interplay between cognitive constraints and cultural schemas facilitates the coexistence of seemingly incompatible interpretations and folk theories of the ritual.

Keywords: Tiger Head Sinking; rainmaking; magico-religious belief and practice; folk theory; cultural schema; reasoning; cognition; relevance; cultural meaning; Joseon; Korea

1. Introduction

Rituals are imbued with symbolic meaning, yet this meaning is neither fixed within the practice itself nor determined by a single authoritative interpretation (Bell 1997; Ricœur 2008; Ricœur 2011). Instead, the range of potential meanings that a ritual may assume within a sociocultural milieu can give rise to contradictions and conflicts. At the same time, however, such multiplicity enriches the cultural significance of the ritual and enables participants or observers to engage with it in diverse ways. It is widely recognized—both culturally and experientially—that rituals can bear multiple meanings. Nevertheless, the underlying processes that give rise to this semantic multiplicity have not yet been thoroughly explicated. Which factors, then, shape the emergence of multiple cultural meanings in ritual practices?

Wherever drought-induced suffering arises, some individuals inevitably perform rainmaking rituals. In agricultural societies, when drought ravages the land to the point of rendering farming nearly impossible, people turn to various entities or forces in supplication for rain. Historically, rainmaking formulae or rituals have appeared in multiple forms. Some vanished or were supplanted rather quickly, while others endured and were practiced repeatedly over long periods. Tiger Head Sinking (沈虎頭) is among the most distinctive and enduring rainmaking rituals of the Joseon dynasty (Choi 1999, 2007).

Literally defined, Tiger Head Sinking involves submerging a tiger's head at specific water sites—such as rivers, lakes, ponds, or caves—in a ritualistic manner. From the early Joseon period, this practice was incorporated into state-sanctioned rainmaking ceremonies. However, no explicit theoretical principles or standardized ceremonial guidelines appear to have governed its performance. Nevertheless, the practice was seemingly widespread and persisted over an extended period throughout the country (Choi 1999).

The widespread popularity and longevity of Tiger Head Sinking are particularly intriguing, given that the Joseon state was founded upon Neo-Confucianism as its official ideology. Neo-Confucianism is a sophisticated metaphysical framework that does not depend on mystical or supernatural beliefs or magical practices. Consequently, the rainmaking formula inherent in Tiger Head Sinking would seemingly conflict with Neo-Confucian principles and norms of practice.

Tiger Head Sinking highlights two critical issues concerning the religious-historical significance of state-sanctioned rainmaking rituals in Joseon Korea. The first pertains to the conflict and coexistence between the official ideals of the state and practical realities on the ground. The second involves the conflict and coexistence of divergent semantic interpretations surrounding a ritual that lacks a formal doctrinal foundation.

Regarding the first issue, Korean religious scholars have extensively examined the history of religion in Joseon through a broad cultural-historical lens, portraying it as a dynamic interplay between official and popular religious traditions (Choi 2002; Lee 2009). However, the second issue remains relatively unexplored. Specifically, how did people in Joseon understand the Tiger Head Sinking ritual? While notable scholars have offered valuable insights to address this question, they have tended to overlook the possibility that multiple folk theories concerning rainmaking coexisted and shaped distinct interpretations of the ritual.

This study aims to re-examine these two issues and analyze how differing meanings of Tiger Head Sinking came into conflict and yet managed to coexist within Joseon culture. The primary sources for this investigation include (the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* n.d. (朝鮮王朝實錄); the *Records of Rainmaking Rituals* n.d. (祈雨祭謄錄); the *Augmented Survey of the Geography of Korea* n.d. (新增東國輿地勝覽)), works by Joseon literati, and contemporary scholarship. Methodologically, this research employs a cognitive science of religion framework that considers the cognitive constraints influencing religion and culture (Barrett 2022).[1] By integrating historical and cognitive approaches, it elucidates the patterns, causes, and mechanisms through which the cultural meanings of the Tiger Head Sinking ritual remain unfixed.

2. Tiger Head Sinking in State-Sanctioned Rainmaking Rituals

2.1. The First Issue: The Incongruity Between Official Ideals and Practical Realities

Rainmaking rituals can be carried out through a variety of methods. In the early Joseon period, these methods drew upon multiple religious traditions—including Buddhism, Daoism, Shamanism, and assorted folk beliefs and practices (Choi 2007). This religious diversity was evident not only at the popular level but also in state-sanctioned rituals, a situation that stands in stark contrast to Joseon's foundation upon the doctrinaire ideology of Neo-Confucianism.

During the Joseon dynasty, numerous rainmaking rituals were conducted under the central government's supervision. According to records in both (*Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* n.d.; *Records of Rainmaking Rituals* n.d.), when drought struck, mostly between the fourth and seventh lunar months, the state frequently organized a series of rituals that may be collectively termed "state-sanctioned rainmaking rituals (國行祈雨祭)" (Choi 1997).

While these state-sanctioned rainmaking practices in Joseon inherited earlier Goryeo traditions, they were also systematically reorganized during the establishment of the new dynasty. Broadly speaking, their development reflects two concurrent processes: the reorganization and inauguration of ritual sites centered on the new capital following the relocation to Hanyang, and the gradual refinement of state ritual systems around core Confucian principles (Lee 2009). Recognizing these parallel processes helps clarify the historical trajectory of state-sanctioned rainmaking rituals and the dynamic interrelationships among the diverse ritual traditions that emerged during this period.

However, if we adopt a simplistic view—treating Joseon's state-sanctioned rainmaking rituals merely as Confucian practices imposed by newly empowered social and political elites—we risk overlooking the folk theories that also shaped their historical figuration. This approach fails to account for the possibility that multiple cultural meanings coexisted within these rituals. In such a reading, we merely restate the political objectives of the Joseon government instead of exploring how state-sanctioned rainmaking rituals actually unfolded. Rather than constituting a seamlessly unified system meticulously refined via Confucian logic, Joseon's state-sanctioned rainmaking rituals more closely resembled an ad hoc, heuristic response.

State-led rainmaking rituals had existed on the Korean Peninsula since the establishment of ancient states—an inheritance well acknowledged in the Joseon dynasty. This acceptance is clearly illustrated by a memorial submitted by the Ministry of Rites in 1394 (the third year of King Taejo's reign) when ritual sites were being organized in the newly relocated capital at Hanyang. The memorial observed: "In our Eastern land, since the Three Kingdoms period, we have conducted sacrifices to Heaven at the Round Altar (圓丘, Wongu) and performed rituals to pray for a good harvest (祈穀, Gigok) and for rain (祈雨, Giu). These practices have continued for so long that they cannot be rashly abolished".

Indeed, the state's ritual efforts to summon rain in times of drought continued throughout the Joseon dynasty. The government employed a range of rainmaking practices, particularly in the early Joseon era, by mobilizing people with different ceremonial functions. For instance, even during King Taejong's reign alone, rainmaking rituals were carried out at the Rain Altar (雩祀, Usa), the Round Altar (圓壇, Wondan), and the Altars for Soil and Grain (社稷, Sajik). Female shamans were sometimes enlisted to conduct rainmaking rites, while Buddhist monks burned their forearms or fingers in supplication for rain. Prayers were also offered at Yeonboksa Temple (演福寺), a temple dating from the Goryeo period.

Moreover, prayers for rain were conducted not only at the Royal Ancestral Shrine (宗廟, Jongmyo), the Altars for Soil and Grain, and various rivers and mountains, but also at Sogyeokjeon (昭格殿), a Daoist shrine. Additional measures included investigating and resolving unjust criminal cases, offering relief to the poor, burying exposed bones and corpses, and employing recognized ritual specialists, such as Mun Gahak (文可學). Officials likewise tried unorthodox methods, such as capturing lizards and placing them in incense-burning jars or mobilizing groups of twenty young boys to perform rainmaking ceremonies. In another instance, the blind were assembled at Myeongtongsi (明通寺) to pray, while at Heungcheonsa Temple's (興天寺) Sarira Hall, more than ten nine-headed grass dragons were fashioned and a hundred Buddhist monks conducted ritual supplications.

Evidently, the state marshaled every available means to address the real threat of drought. Confucian officials might have framed this pragmatic strategy in terms of the classical dictum "No spirits are left unhonored and no sacrifices are withheld" (靡神不擧), interpreting it to mean that, in times of national crisis, the ruler should not be selective about ritual methods or venues (Choi 2002, p. 250).

Yet sustaining normative consistency in this approach proved challenging and sometimes became a source of controversy. Under these circumstances, establishing standardized procedures for state-sanctioned rainmaking rituals emerged as a key concern for ensuring systematic and efficient practice. Thus, while continuing to employ all available methods, the government also sought to codify foundational ceremonial guidelines, with the primary directive being adherence to ancient ritual precedents.

Even so, simply following historical precedents did not quell the potential controversies surrounding state-sanctioned rainmaking rituals. From the standpoint of Neo-Confucianism—the state's founding ideology—the legitimacy of such rites was inherently questionable. Consequently, rather than delving deeply into doctrinal matters, the government sought greater control over the practical and procedural aspects of these rituals. By the eighteenth century, state-sanctioned rainmaking rituals had been standardized into a twelve-stage implementation sequence.

Within these formalized procedures, ritual sites and the ranks of officiants were arranged according to a Confucian hierarchy. Notably, ritual specialists from the Goryeo era—such as Buddhist monks, Daoist practitioners, shamans, and the blind—were systematically excluded, while Neo-Confucian officials took leading roles. The emphasis shifted toward reverence rather than coercion. Superficially, this might appear to represent the Confucianization of state-sanctioned rainmaking rituals. Yet in practice, many elements remained difficult to justify solely with Confucian concepts. Among these was the Tiger Head Sinking ritual, an example that underscores the incongruities between official ideals and pragmatic realities.

2.2. The Second Issue: Semantic Multiplicity

It remains unclear when Tiger Head Sinking first originated on the Korean Peninsula. As a state-sanctioned rainmaking ritual during the Joseon dynasty, however, its earliest documented performance appears in 1416 (the 16th year of King Taejong's reign) at the Han River. Following the formal standardization of rainmaking rituals into twelve stages in the early 18th century, Tiger Head Sinking was maintained as the sixth stage. Official records indicate that it continued to be practiced as part of state-sanctioned rainmaking rituals until 1899 (the 36th year of King Gojong's reign) (*Records of Rainmaking Rituals* n.d.).

Yet it would be difficult to assert that Tiger Head Sinking was conducted exclusively within the context of state-sanctioned ceremonies. According to (*Augmented Survey of the Geography of Korea* n.d.), numerous sites across the country were reputed to bring rain when Tiger Head Sinking or Tiger Bone Sinking (沈虎骨) was performed. This record identifies at least a dozen such locations—spanning Hanseongbu (the capital), Gyeongsang-do, Jeolla-do, Pyeongan-do, Gangwon-do, and Chungcheong-do. Admittedly, since tiger heads or bones were not readily accessible, one cannot assume that this practice was commonplace among the general populace. Nonetheless, the wide geographic distribution of sites associated with Tiger Head Sinking suggests that it was a culturally successful ritual during the Joseon period.

The logic and meaning behind Tiger Head Sinking were not always transparent. Even the Joseon officials charged with overseeing the ritual appear to have lacked a clear understanding. A practice might be readily adopted when reliable precedents exist, even if its logic and meaning are not fully grasped. Indeed, in many well-known religious traditions, a developed doctrinal system does not necessarily precede ritual practice. Instead, commentaries often emerge later to justify and systematize the meanings of prescribed rituals. This flexibility allows rituals to function not as mere "signs" reducible to a single meaning but rather as "symbols" evoking multiple interpretations.

Accordingly, two essential questions emerge: Why submerge a tiger's head—a culturally symbolic and materially prized object—into water during a drought to induce rain? More precisely, why did people believe that Tiger Head Sinking could bring rain? While the direct inquiry may be phrased as "Why did they think it would work?", a more nuanced approach asks the following: "When performing Tiger Head Sinking as a rainmaking ritual, how did people infer that this practice could yield rain?"

Addressing these questions involves three distinct lines of inquiry: (1) What was the predominant reasoning surrounding Tiger Head Sinking? (2) What concurrent forms of reasoning coexisted? (3) If different, potentially conflicting interpretations coexisted and each had cultural appeal, how could they do so simultaneously?

Contemporary researchers who examine the belief system and ritual principles of Tiger Head Sinking generally regard it as a dragon-related ritual (Lee 2009; Choi 2002). Two key observations support this interpretation: first, some Tiger Head Sinking sites feature the characters "yong" (龍) or "jin" (辰), denoting "dragon"; second, these locales were understood at the time as dragon dwellings.

In East Asia, dragons have long been regarded as capable of generating clouds and rain (Seo and Song 2002). Their emergence from hiding and ascent into the sky was believed to produce powerful winds, clouds, and rain. Even in modern Korea, a type of water-based tornado is referred to as yong-oreum ("dragon rising"). Moreover, dragons evolved beyond mere weather-manipulating creatures to become anthropomorphic deities known as Dragon Kings or Dragon Gods, each associated with water and revered through various forms of worship.

In light of these clues, two plausible interpretations of Tiger Head Sinking emerge, both of which find support in historical instances. First, one might view the ritual as coercive: by deploying an object dragons supposedly detest, the ritual effectively forces them to produce rain. Second, the ritual might be interpreted as a sacrificial offering to a Dragon King or Dragon God, petitioning for rain.

While there are no official contemporary records detailing its underlying rationale, modern scholars often favor the coercive interpretation, partly because parallels exist in Chinese writings and in accounts by Joseon scholars. For instance, Yi Gyu-gyeong (李圭景), an early 19th-century scholar, cited a similar rainmaking method from the Chinese scholar Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒). Indeed, the notion of forcing a dragon into action resonates with a broader East Asian trope of an archetypal rivalry between the dragon, which brings rain, and the tiger, which generates wind—expressed in the phrase yongho sangbak (龍虎相搏, "dragon–tiger confrontation").[2] Some East Asian records describe submerging tiger bones—an object dragons supposedly fear—to frighten them into movement and thus create rain.

Did the people of Joseon clearly understand Tiger Head Sinking as an act of dragon coercion? Historical sources suggest otherwise.[3] Some records describe having a Daoist practitioner recite the "Chant for the Dragon King", appealing directly to the water god during Tiger Head Sinking. In another account, officials debated whether using a rotten, worm-infested tiger head would fail to appease the heavens, particularly in a year when tiger heads were scarce. Still another instance shows an official proposing to offer a pig's head if a tiger's head could not be obtained. These accounts indicate that people performed the ritual without universally accepting the notion of coercing a hidden dragon. Rather, they suggest that various alternative interpretations—such as viewing the tiger head as a precious sacrificial item—were equally plausible. In such a reading, submersion becomes an offering to an underwater agent of rainfall rather than an instrument of compulsion.

Clearly, no single, definitive meaning for Tiger Head Sinking prevailed among the Joseon populace. Yet this does not imply that the ritual was semantically empty. On the

contrary, it appears to have accommodated a rich multiplicity of possible interpretations, since the meaning of a ritual does not inhere solely in its form but arises through the inferences and reasoning of the people who engage with it.

This semantic multiplicity brings us to the final question raised earlier: How can differing—and sometimes contradictory—meanings remain culturally viable within the same society? The key lies in recognizing that meaning is constructed not by monolithic "societies" but by individuals with distinct perspectives. Moreover, not all potential meanings acquire widespread cultural acceptance (Koo and Kim 2024)[4]. The following chapter will explore this issue in greater detail.

3. Constraints on Cultural Success of Meanings

Tiger Head Sinking in the Joseon dynasty was part of a ritual response to drought. For desperate individuals facing life-threatening conditions, this practice may not have reliably produced rain, yet it offered a psychological sense of hope. Still, no formalized principles or official explanations existed to clarify its meaning. Even when performed as a state-sanctioned rainmaking rite, no governing authority provided theoretical guidelines. Rather, participants simply replicated established precedents and awaited results. In that sense, Tiger Head Sinking was a ritual that had to be enacted—even if not everyone believed in its efficacy.

Paradoxically, the absence of formal doctrinal guidelines meant that many people could serve as agents of meaning-making for this ritual. Individuals inferred the principles and significance of Tiger Head Sinking through diverse interpretations. Two prominent examples included viewing it as a means to provoke or "coerce" the mythical, rain-generating dragon or as an act of supplication—submerging a precious offering to the Dragon King or Dragon God as a water deity. Of course, these two explanations likely represent only a fraction of the interpretive possibilities. There is no reason to assume that different individuals' understandings were limited to these particular interpretations.

Not all possible meanings, however, achieve cultural success. Some are quickly forgotten, whereas others gain traction and spread widely. Which factors both enable and constrain the range of plausible ritual meanings? Or put differently, which elements made certain interpretations of Tiger Head Sinking more appealing to the people of Joseon?

Addressing these questions requires consideration of various factors: sociological and historical circumstances (Shim 2024)[5], the intrinsic symbolism and performance aspects of the ritual (Yoo 2021)[6], and cognitive and psychological constraints[7] that shape how meanings are formed and transmitted—this last dimension being the focus of the present analysis.

According to Sperber and Wilson ([1986] 1995), cognitively relevant inferences are more effectively communicated. "Cognitive relevance" refers to the ratio between the cognitive and contextual effects that new information yields and the mental effort required to obtain those effects (Sperber 1996). For example, when new information easily connects with existing knowledge (thus requiring minimal processing effort) and produces multiple useful implications (substantial cognitive effects), it is considered more relevant. Greater cognitive effects coupled with lower processing effort yield higher relevance for the individual at a particular time. Various cognitive mechanisms and psychological biases, shaped by our evolutionary history, play a crucial role in this process. While these biases do not necessarily yield accurate conclusions, they enable efficient decision-making.

Because of such psychological predispositions, certain ideas become more cognitively accessible—easier to process, remember, and transmit. Our cognitive architecture thus influences which representations tend to flourish in a culture.[8] In particular, "intuitive in-

ferences" require minimal mental effort while producing significant conceptual and emotional impacts, providing readily available frameworks for interpreting the world.

This principle also applies to the cultural success of religion. "Religion", broadly defined, is a diffuse cultural phenomenon and cannot be treated as a direct biological adaptation (Boyer 2010). Yet various cognitive systems—shaped by evolution and still operative in modern humans—constrain our cultural activities. Such systems include agent-detection mechanisms, intuitive inferences about psychological, physical, and biological domains, social-interaction inferences, contamination-avoidance instincts, and memory processes. Scholars aligned with the standard theory in the cognitive science of religion propose that common notions of supernatural agents and ritual practices emerge as incidental by-products of these everyday cognitive systems (McCauley and Lawson 2002; Whitehouse 2004; Boyer 2010). Because concepts pertaining to supernatural agents or ritual activities arise naturally from these cognitive operations, they can be effortlessly mapped onto the myriad situations humans encounter. Consequently, religious thought and behavior can vary widely. Among these varied possibilities, some forms of religious representation more closely align with multiple cognitive systems and therefore lodge more firmly in people's minds. In this sense, cognitive scientists of religion interpret the emergence and cultural success of religious beliefs and behaviors in terms of "aggregate relevance," which reflects the functioning of numerous cognitive systems (Boyer 2001).

The human mind's capacities evolved across millennia, as our ancestors navigated an array of environmental pressures: natural and artificial objects, potential predators and prey, and other humans who demanded cooperation or exchange, as well as corpses, contaminants, and infectious agents. Over time, people developed specialized inference systems for different ontological categories (e.g., person, animal, artifact), each operated by dedicated neural structures (Boyer 2001; Boyer and Ramble 2001). These systems underlie "intuitive" domains—often called intuitive psychology, intuitive physics, intuitive biology, and intuitive sociology—that develop in early childhood without explicit instruction. Our memory has likewise evolved to better recall information that mostly fits these innate ontological expectations yet contains slight violations of them (Boyer and Ramble 2001).

An equally important element is our emotion-related cognitive system, which encompasses a wide range of affective responses. This complex system, too, likely emerged through a long evolutionary process, shaping how we respond to stimuli—ritual or otherwise.

Human culture is saturated with representations that match these mental systems. What we call "religious beliefs and behaviors" succeed culturally precisely because they resonate strongly with fundamental cognitive capacities. Beliefs in supernatural agents, for instance, gain cultural traction by activating an aggregate of systems—from agent detection to social inference and memory. Similarly, rituals recognized as "religious" are found across virtually all cultures partly because they activate, with relative ease, such systems as contamination avoidance or social intuition, thus embedding themselves deeply in people's cognitive architectures (Boyer 2001; Boyer and Liénard 2006).At first glance, such discussions within the cognitive science of religion appear most pertinent to the "oral" domain of religion. One might question whether they apply to "canonical" elements—those led by specialized religious institutions that often develop alongside literacy and occupational differentiation—such as doctrines, rules, and organizational structures. Are such formal aspects truly shaped by cognitive relevance rather than dictated by religious elites? Two points merit consideration: First, people are never as "theologically correct" as religious elites might wish. In other words, ordinary believers invariably add to or reshape orthodox doctrines by applying their own intuitive inferences. Second, despite this widespread potential for "deviation" or "apostasy", religious communities often remain

strongly cohesive because a socio-psychological system undergirds their collective emotions and actions, lending them compelling force.

From this perspective, the two lines of reasoning introduced earlier—coercing a dragon or making a sacrificial offering—both exhibit strong cognitive relevance within broader cultural schemas. Cultural schemas are shared conceptual frameworks that structure cultural knowledge and experience (Garro 2000). When combined with intuitive inference, these schemas produce compelling interpretations that demand relatively little cognitive effort.

The Coercive Interpretation: Viewing Tiger Head Sinking as an act of provoking the dragon leverages both an intuitive understanding of animal behavior (stimulus prompts movement) and East Asian cultural schemas relating to dragons. Within these schemas, dragons and tigers are presumed to be natural antagonists, and the dragon's movement is thought to produce rain.

The Offering Interpretation: Viewing the ritual as an offering to a water deity draws on an intuitive model of social exchange, namely, the assumption that a social action implies both a giver and a receiver. By positing the Dragon King or Dragon God as an invisible recipient, the ritual becomes a complete social transaction. East Asian cultural schemas of ritual practice further support the idea that formalized prayers and sacrifices constitute a coherent act of devotion.

These two forms of reasoning were readily available and easily recalled within the Joseon cultural context, thus achieving a measure of cultural success. While this remains a hypothesis in need of further investigation, such a perspective helps shift our historiography of Korean religions away from purely normative interpretations that reduce ritual meanings to a single doctrinal paradigm.

4. Concluding Remarks

This study has investigated how multiple, seemingly contradictory interpretations of Tiger Head Sinking could coexist in Joseon Korea, drawing on insights from the cognitive science of religion. Several key findings emerge from this analysis:

First, although Tiger Head Sinking became part of state-sanctioned rainmaking rituals, it lacked formal theoretical principles or standardized guidelines. This absence of official doctrine, rather than constituting a weakness, opened space for multiple interpretations to arise and endure.

Second, two primary interpretations of the ritual coexisted: one viewed it as an act of coercing dragons, while another treated it as an offering to water deities. Contrary to modern scholarly perspectives that often privilege the coercive interpretation, historical evidence suggests that the people of Joseon did not adhere exclusively to either framework.

Third, adopting a cognitive science of religion perspective clarifies how these seemingly contradictory interpretations could both achieve cultural success. Both interpretations drew on intuitive inferences and cultural schemas that required minimal cognitive effort but generated significant evocative effects. The coercive view leveraged intuitions about animal behavior and the cultural motif of dragon–tiger antagonism, whereas the offering interpretation built on basic social cognition and established ritual practices.

These findings indicate that for cultural phenomena such as ritual practices, the coexistence and conflict of meanings are natural and ubiquitous (see[9] Kim 2024). Consequently, scholarly efforts to privilege one historical interpretation over others may be misguided. Individuals performing rainmaking rituals did not need a normative understanding of their meaning; they could infer their own interpretations based on precedent. This insight holds important implications for the study of Korean religions at the cultural level, suggest-

ing a shift away from definitive, singular interpretations toward recognizing the richness of multiple, concurrent meanings.

The contemporary relevance of these conclusions is evident in modern Korean society, where local communities continue to perform rainmaking rituals during drought. Although Tiger Head Sinking itself is no longer practiced, similar rituals persist—employing pig heads, dog's blood, or other offerings submerged in water while praying for rain. As in the Joseon period, the meanings of these practices remain fluid and multiple.

In doing so, this study makes several contributions to our understanding of the history of religions in Korea. It shows that ritual practices need not be anchored in uniform doctrinal systems to achieve cultural success. More importantly, it suggests that apparent contradictions in historical religious practices may be better understood by examining the cognitive constraints that shape how people attribute meaning to rituals. While various factors contributed to the long-lasting cultural success of Tiger Head Sinking, its capacity for semantic multiplicity—backed by cognitive relevance through intuitive inferences and cultural schemas—likely played a critical role.

Future research could further examine how similar cognitive constraints have influenced other ritual practices at various historical junctures, potentially uncovering broader patterns in the generation and transmission of religious meanings—even in contemporary populations. In addition, this methodology could be extended to other historical and cultural contexts to investigate how multiple interpretations of religious practices coexist within diverse social settings.

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Notes

1 The cognitive science of religion (CSR) represents a relatively recent interdisciplinary research program that endeavors to elucidate religious and cultural phenomena through naturalistic explanatory frameworks, fundamentally grounded in evolutionary accounts of human cognitive architecture and function. This field primarily investigates the widespread persistence and cross-cultural recurrence of religious cognition and behavior, focusing on identifying the causal mechanisms and cognitive constraints that generate these patterns across diverse sociocultural contexts.

2 However, the specific forms of rainmaking rituals across East Asian regions exhibit distinct differences alongside their cultural similarities. Diverse rainmaking rituals were also performed in China and Japan in historical periods. In China, rainmaking ceremonies were conducted at Buddhist temples by imperial decree, and esoteric Buddhist monks performed rituals to summon rain through their supernatural powers. Notably, there are documented instances of rainmaking rituals directed toward dragons or water deities, confirming their influence on Joseon's Tiger Head Sinking ritual. Japan had rainmaking ceremonies addressing dragons and primarily nature deities, especially water gods, though these were not directly connected to the Tiger Head Sinking practice. Furthermore, unlike China or Joseon, tigers did not inhabit the actual ecosystem of Japan, resulting in a comparatively weaker development of tiger-related cultural schemas in Japanese traditions of rainmaking rituals.

3 The relevant records can be found in the Annals of the Joseon Dynasty. Refer to the following documents: Annals of King Jungjong [中宗實錄] 102, 39th year (1544), 4th month, 27th day; Annals of King Seongjong [成宗實錄] 44, 5th year (1474), intercalary 6th month, 10th day.

4 Koo and Kim (2024) argue that human beings exhibit a cognitive bias toward conceptualizing society as an agentive entity that produces unified cultural patterns, whereas empirical evidence suggests that cultural phenomena emerge from the statistical frequency and distributions of variations in cognition and behavior across individuals within a population, as well as from their complex interactions. Consequently, they advocate for the integration of population-thinking paradigms into cultural studies, with particular emphasis on analyzing the statistical frequency and distributions of cultural variations.

[5] Shim (2024) argues that the socioeconomic context acts as a constraint on the symbolic meanings of the ornaments in folk traditions or ritual practices.

[6] Yoo (2021) argues that humans, living with existential limitations, inherently exhibit symbolism in all aspects of life. As *Homo religiosus*, humans are fundamentally *Homo symbolicus*.

[7] To discuss this issue more systematically, the concept of "evolution" must also be included. All these constraints have become subject to more detailed investigation thanks to advancements in neuro and cognitive sciences, evolutionary psychology, evolutionary anthropology, and human behavioral ecology. Recently, there has been a growing trend to refer to the cognitive science of religion (CSR) as the cognitive and evolutionary sciences of religion (CESR), reflecting a more comprehensive exploration of these constraints.

[8] From this perspective, measuring the statistical freqency and distribution of variations at the population level is a critically important task in a more scientific study of culture. Sperber's (1996) epidemiology of representations presents a similar argument.

[9] Kim (2024) systematically analyzed how various interpretations and practices of disaster victim rituals in the Joseon dynasty coexisted despite conflicts and achieved differing levels of cultural relevance depending on various socio-ecological factors.

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The Distance Between Residences and Cemeteries: Utopia, Dystopia, and Heterotopia in Contemporary Seoul

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Abstract: Seoul systematically removed all graveyards that once lay within the city and its surrounding areas, a phenomenon notably distinct from urban development patterns in other parts of the world. After the Korean War, refugees and migrants poured into the devastated capital. In this postwar environment, cemeteries—traditionally sites of mourning and death—transformed into spaces of survival for displaced populations. With the military demarcation line preventing their return home, refugees began to envision their lost hometowns as "absent places": unattainable utopias, idealized lands where all beauty resides—the very origin and endpoint of life. In contrast, Seoul, where they were forced to settle, became a "dystopia," stripped of sanctity. Over time, however, the next generation reinterpreted this dystopia, gradually transforming it into a heterotopia. As Seoul's urban landscape expanded, this heterotopia evolved into a Christian paradise. The second generation, having never experienced the trauma of displacement, found the newly constructed city comfortable and secure. Reinforced concrete buildings and asphalt roads became symbolic of paradise. The development of Gangnam—famously captured in Psy's global hit "Gangnam Style"—represents a belated cultural revolution among younger generations in modern South Korea and exemplifies the transformation into a concrete paradise.

Keywords: Seoul; graveyards; cemeteries; distance; refugees; migrants; descendants; utopia; dystopia; heterotopia; concrete paradise; Gangnam style

1. Introduction

This essay examines the religious epistemology of life and death among Seoul's residents through an analysis of the spatial relationship between the city and its cemeteries. A substantial portion of this discussion is grounded in my own lived experience. As a lifelong Seoulite, I have resided in various neighborhoods, gradually moving from the city center to its peripheries. Thus, parts of this study function not only as an academic inquiry but also as an oral history from a native resident.

I was born in Euljiro, the heart of Seoul, and later moved to Mia-ri, one of its outlying districts. My experiences in Mia-ri were deeply formative. Encounters with tombs and even the body of an infant, intergenerational tensions with my refugee parents, and the evolving idea of a "concrete paradise" shape this narrative, which spans the years from 1968 to 2024.

Traditionally in Korea, the sense of "home" was closely tied to being with one's parents and ancestors. Graveyards were typically located near villages and formed a natural part of the landscape. These were not modern public cemeteries, but family burial grounds that were intimately connected to everyday life.

In contrast, modern cemeteries—administratively regulated and spatially segregated—were introduced under Japanese colonial rule and felt unfamiliar to most Koreans. According to H. A. Lee (2014, p. 403), "In Korea, the Japanese colonial government published the

Rules on Gravesite, Crematorium, Burial and Cremation (hereafter the 'burial rules') in 1912, marking the first modern institutional regulation of burial practices." Japan, in its quest for imperial status, deliberately adopted modern Western values, knowledge, and technologies. At the same time, it internalized a sense of cultural superiority over fellow Asians, practicing what Kikuchi (2004) terms "oriental Orientalism."

In Korea, the burial policy was implemented in 1912, two years after the onset of Japanese colonial rule. While grave regulation was officially justified on the grounds of sanitation and public health, it also served broader colonial goals. As Takamura (2000) argues, the Japanese found scattered gravesites to be a serious hindrance to land use planning and infrastructure development. Diplomatic correspondence between Korean and Japanese authorities reveals that unregulated burial sites were viewed as obstacles to Japan's colonization strategy.

The Japanese constructed an extensive railway network and established military bases to support campaigns such as the First Sino-Japanese War (1894) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904). During this period, Japanese colonial authorities frequently clashed with the Korean government over the regulation and removal of gravesites (H. A. Lee 2014, p. 407). In 1900, for instance, the Japanese were compelled to revise their original plan to build a railway station near Namdaemun (South Gate) after the Korean government requested the preservation of existing graves (*Chuhanilponkongsakwankirok* 주한일본공사관기록 *Documents of the Korea-based Japanese Legation* 1900, Database of Korean History). Despite such negotiations, the Japanese continued to forcibly remove graves. The compensation offered to Korean landowners was inadequate, leading to widespread protests and remonstrations (*Chuhanilponkongsakwankirok* 주한일본공사관기록 *Documents of the Korea-based Japanese Legation* 1905, Database of Korean History). Beginning with the Residency-General period (1905–1910), the Japanese intensified efforts to control land in Korea, viewing unregulated gravesites as impediments to colonial development (Nahm 2009; Shin 1977).

Japan's modernization efforts, initiated under the Meiji Restoration, were implemented rapidly and with strong state oversight. These efforts were soon extended to its colonies, including Korea. As Lee (p. 406) notes, the administrative technologies used in Japan's colonies resembled those of Western imperial powers, though they were often less institutionally mature. Among these, burial policy played a significant role. Once cemeteries were removed from everyday spaces, Koreans gradually grew accustomed to the spatial separation between the living and the dead. Following the Korean War, this spatial severance became even more pronounced. All cemeteries within the city limits of Seoul were eliminated, a historically unprecedented phenomenon that radically transformed the urban landscape and the cultural relationship between life and death.

As refugees and migrants flooded into a war-torn Seoul, the city came to embody a dystopia for those who had lost their homes. In contrast, their former hometowns—now inaccessible due to the armistice and national division—were imagined as unreachable utopias: idealized places that no longer existed in reality but remained alive in memory.

In the immediate postwar years, Seoul was overwhelmed by housing shortages, and cemeteries—lacking ancestral ties—became objects of aversion rather than reverence. Traditionally, most Koreans had been part of agrarian communities, deeply attached to their land and ancestors. Generations lived and died without ever leaving their native soil, reinforcing a spatial continuity between life, land, and lineage. The refugee experience disrupted this relationship, displacing individuals from both home and sacred burial spaces.

As the influx of refugees stabilized, a new generation emerged—one born and raised in Seoul. Unlike their parents, they did not experience the trauma of displacement or the emotional pull of a lost hometown. For them, Seoul was not a temporary refuge, but their permanent home. Although they inherited their parents' memories of exile, their lived re-

ality was vastly different. Surrounded by concrete high-rises and paved roads, they found comfort and stability in the modern city. In their eyes, the once-dystopian urban landscape had transformed into a "concrete paradise." (See Figure 1).

Waldo Tobler's first law of geography, also known as the distance decay effect, states that "everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things" (Tobler [1970] 2023, pp. 234–40). This principle highlights the centrality of spatial proximity in shaping human experience and perception.

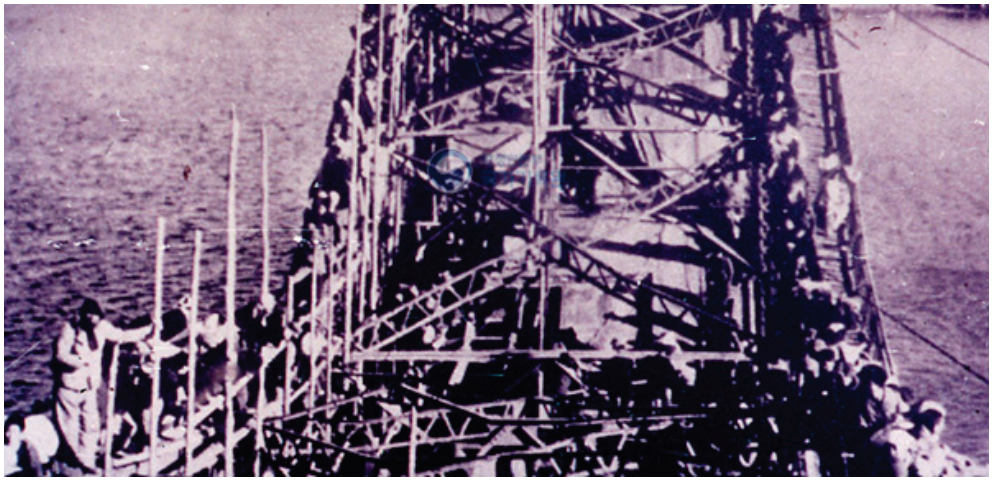


Figure 1. Flight of refugees across wrecked bridge in Korea[1]. Source: National Archives of Korea.

Building on this spatial logic, Michel Foucault distinguishes between three types of space: undifferentiated space, utopia (ideal but nonexistent spaces), and heterotopia (real but alternative spaces). Heterotopias are "other spaces" that simultaneously reflect and invert the norms of ordinary life, such as hidden lofts where children construct their own unique worlds of time and meaning (Foucault [1967] 1986, pp. 22–27).

During the 1960s and 1970s, Seoul underwent rapid and large-scale urbanization. As waves of migrants continued to arrive, the city expanded both geographically and socially, fundamentally altering its spatial structure. For the first generation—composed largely of refugees and rural migrants—the experience of exile solidified over time into a permanent condition.

In contrast, the second generation was born and raised within this newly urbanized landscape. Unlike their parents, who yearned for a lost homeland, they knew no other place but Seoul. Surrounded by concrete high-rises and sprawling infrastructure, they developed their own sense of place and identity. For them, the city was not a dystopia, but rather a "concrete paradise"—a heterotopia where stability and modernity coexisted.

This generational divide, however, gave rise to tensions. The differing emotional attachments to space—nostalgia for a vanished past versus adaptation to a modern present—reflected broader divergences in values, memories, and worldviews.

The rapid disappearance of cemeteries from Seoul's urban landscape—and their relocation to increasingly distant outskirts—signals more than just physical neglect. It reflects a deeper emotional and cultural alienation: a collective disconnection from the processes of mourning, remembrance, and even death itself. This spatial separation between the living and the dead illustrates a broader societal struggle to meaningfully engage with both life and mortality.

Yet burial practices have not remained static. In response to this distancing, new forms of commemoration have emerged—such as columbaria, private memorial parks, and religious facilities—offering alternative modes of engaging with death (Kee 2017, pp. 128–30).

2. The Holy Graveyards vs. the Hates of the Cemeteries

Confucian tradition placed great emphasis on *gwanhonsangje* (冠婚喪祭), the four major rites of passage: coming of age, marriage, funerals, and ancestral rituals. These ceremonies gave concrete form to abstract notions of time, space, and sanctity, shaping the temporal and moral contours of human life. Paradoxically, however, while Confucianism ritualized nearly every aspect of daily life, it also maintained a distinct spatial and emotional separation from death. This paradox deepened in modern urban Seoul, where the cultural and physical divide between the living and the dead exceeded even that of the highly ordered Joseon Dynasty.[2]

Confucianism, the state ideology of the Joseon Dynasty, emphasized a strict spatial demarcation between the realms of life and death. From early on, Confucian practices dictated that graves and burial activities be situated outside the bounds of daily life, particularly beyond the urban center.

This principle is clearly articulated in classical Chinese texts such as the *Zhouli* (周禮, *Rites of Zhou*) and *Kaogongji* (考工記, *Records of Craftsmen*), especially in sections concerning city planning. According to the *Zhouli*, grave sites were prohibited along the city's north–south axis, which symbolized political and ritual authority. Only ancestral shrines—such as Jongmyo (宗廟) and Sajik (社稷)—were permitted along the east–west axis, where cosmological balance was maintained.

This tradition held sway across various Chinese dynasties and in Joseon. Early Joseon thinkers such as Jeong Do-jeon and later scholars like Jeong Yak-yong upheld these principles. Under these guidelines, graves were effectively banned from areas near royal palaces. Even the suburban ring (郊, *gyo*), which extended up to 10 *li* beyond the city walls (城底十里, *seongjeosipni*), was considered under royal influence and therefore deemed unsuitable for graves (Dakamura 2000, pp. 132–33).

The term *bukmangsan* (北邙山), meaning "northern burial mountain," originated in Luoyang (洛陽), China, where it referred to a prominent burial site located north of the city. In Korea, the term was adopted to describe communal graveyards located on hills near villages, distinguishing them from *seonsan* (先山)—private ancestral mountains reserved for family burials.

During the Joseon period, after funeral rites were completed, members of the aristocracy (*yangban*) typically transported their ancestors' remains to *seonsan* sites in the countryside. In contrast, commoners often buried their dead on hills just outside the city walls. In Seoul, these included areas beyond gates such as Gwanghuimun and Seosomun, which gradually became densely populated with graves. These collective burial sites came to be colloquially known as bukmangsan (Dakamura 2000, pp. 135–37), and were regarded by Koreans as sacred places imbued with ancestral meaning.

By contrast, the modern public cemetery, introduced by the Japanese colonial administration, was based on the Western notion of sanitary, regulated burial zones deliberately placed at a distance from residential areas (Home 1997). These state-managed cemeteries were not rooted in traditional spatial relationships or cultural practices. Unsurprisingly, many Koreans viewed the system as alien and even offensive, strongly opposing what they perceived as a forced and de-spiritualized treatment of the dead (Dakamura 2000, pp. 156–58).

Goto Shimpei, a prominent Japanese colonial official, described the colonial police as "the hands and feet of the governor-general, in direct contact with the people" (Tsurumi 1943, II: 151). This statement underscores the extent to which colonial authority relied on police power to enforce its policies, including the regulation of death.

Under the 1912 burial rules, the disposal and regulation of the dead fell explicitly within the jurisdiction of the police. Articles 23 and 24 of the regulation stipulated punishments for non-compliance, most of which were carried out not by judicial courts, but directly by the

police. The colonial police wielded summary powers, including corporal punishment, under the Summary Judgment Ordinance (1910) and the Joseon Flogging Ordinance (1912).

As a result, traditional Korean burial practices—which had not been considered illegal prior to colonization—were suddenly subject to criminalization. This abrupt imposition of new norms generated deep resentment among Koreans, a sentiment that would later surface during the March 1st Independence Movement in 1919 (H. A. Lee 2014).

During the early years of Japanese colonial rule, public cemeteries in Seoul were established in areas that are now central and well-known neighborhoods, such as Itaewon, Mia, Yongsan, Hannam-dong, Ahyeon, Sinchon, Hongje, Sindang, and Gaepo-dong (in present-day Gangnam). At the time, these sites were located on the periphery of the city, consistent with the colonial policy of distancing burial grounds from residential life.

However, as Seoul rapidly urbanized throughout the 20th century, these once-outlying districts became part of the city's core. In response, cemeteries were progressively relocated to more remote locations, including Mangwoo-ri, Yongmi-ri, and Gwangju in Gyeonggi Province. Today, even these suburban burial grounds have been erased from their original urban fabric, symbolizing an ever-growing distance between everyday life and the spaces of death.

Geographer Waldo Tobler's first law of geography—that "everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things" (Tobler [1970] 2023, pp. 234–40)—applies directly to the evolving spatial relationship between urban life and death in Seoul. In traditional Korean society, graves were often located on nearby hills or ancestral mountains, reinforcing an intimate connection between the living and the dead. However, as public cemeteries were increasingly relocated to remote outskirts, death became physically and psychologically severed from everyday urban life. This spatial dislocation produced a double exclusion: death was not only removed from the city but also from the collective consciousness of its residents.

This phenomenon echoes philosopher George Berkeley's famous dictum: "to be is to be perceived." As cemeteries moved farther from urban centers, they also faded from cultural awareness. The distance is not trivial—walking from central Seoul to Mangwoo-ri or Byeokje (Yongmi-ri) takes roughly five hours, and to Gwangju Cemetery nearly fifteen. Although public cemeteries were initially introduced under Japanese colonial rule, the practice of pushing them ever farther away continued even after liberation. Rather than restoring proximity to ancestral land, postcolonial urban planning reinforced this separation. (See Figure 2).

This stands in marked contrast to many European cities, such as Paris, where cemeteries like Montmartre and the Catacombs remain integrated into the urban fabric. Seoul's cemetery policy, by contrast, reflects a mindset rooted in exile and displacement. For refugees and migrants, the city was never a true home, and death—like life—remained provisional and displaced (Kee 2017, pp. 57–63, 83–84; Jeong 2016).

For displaced communities, the ancestral mountains of their lost hometowns came to symbolize an unattainable utopia—a place of origin that existed only in memory. In contrast, their lived reality in Seoul, far removed from these roots, felt relentlessly bleak and alienating. Cemeteries in areas such as Mangwoo-ri, Yongmi-ri, or Gwangju were not perceived as sacred extensions of familial lineage, but as temporary waystations for displaced souls.

Lacking a connection to ancestral land, these burial grounds failed to evoke reverence. Instead, they were often viewed with discomfort or even aversion. Over time, this emotional detachment contributed to a broader dystopian ethos within refugee and migrant communities, one in which both life and death were stripped of stability, continuity, and meaning. As this sentiment deepened, cemeteries—and the very cultural imagination of death—gradually faded from public consciousness.

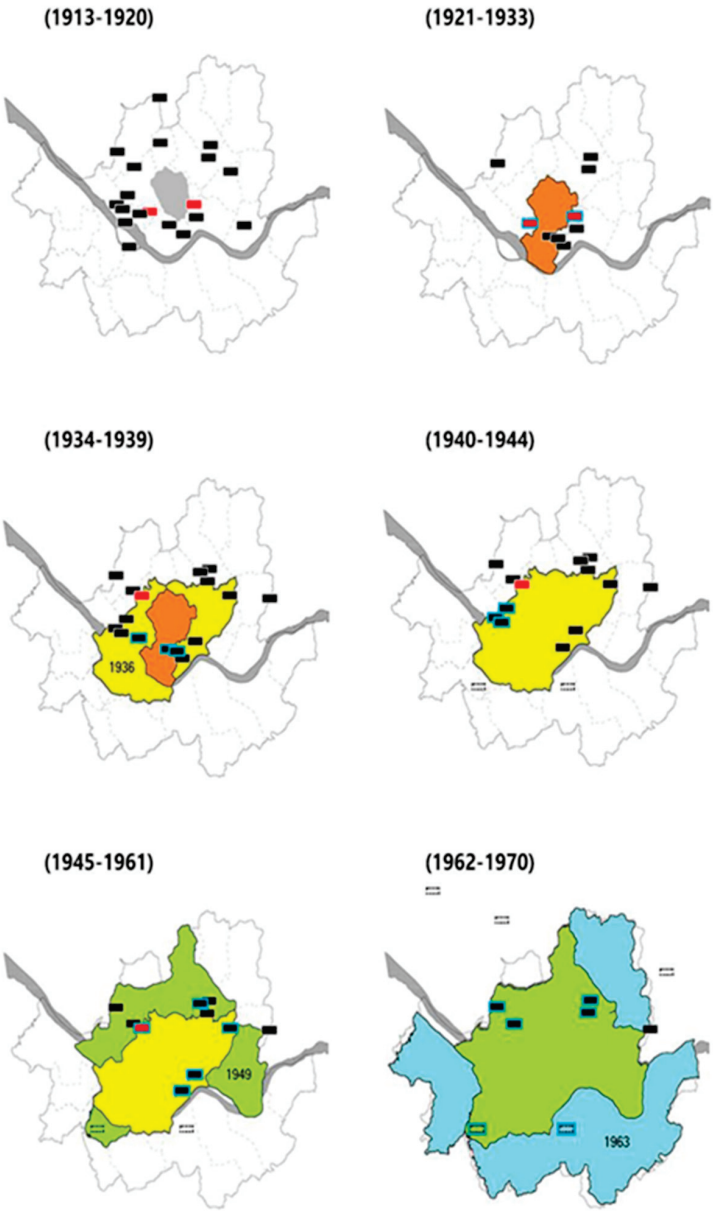


Figure 2. Expansion of Seoul and changing of public cemetery sites (E. Lee 2021, p. 111).

3. Ceasefire of the Korean War and Life in Dystopia

For many refugees, daily life after the Korean War was marked by persistent pain and despair. In contrast, their hometowns—where their parents had once lived—were imagined as paradisiacal spaces, lost to time and history. Reality itself took on dystopian qualities, while the embrace of their parents, accessible only through death, came to represent a form of utopia.

The popular modern term "Hell Joseon"[3] may have its psychological roots in this postwar refugee experience. By the mid-1950s, large waves of displaced persons arrived in Seoul, soon followed by economic migrants. Amidst unfamiliar urban surroundings and acute housing shortages, songs expressing longing for lost hometowns became deeply resonant, offering emotional refuge in an alienating environment. This cultural expression reflected both a physical and emotional chasm: the hometown, idealized yet unreachable, versus Seoul, which embodied disruption, displacement, and social estrangement. Blocked by the 38th parallel from returning and haunted by painful memories, many

refugees began to imagine their hometowns as "absent places"—utopias of beauty and belonging, where life was thought to have begun and where, ultimately, it should end.

These hometowns thus emerged as sacred spaces, firmly rooted in memory, yet rendered unreachable by the "Reds," perceived as a malevolent enemy. Such memories elevated the hometown to a spiritual ideal—an imagined utopia. Conversely, Seoul—the city where refugees were forced to resettle—became a dystopia, stripped of sanctity and emotional resonance.

After the war, the "spaces of death" underwent profound transformation. For many refugees, sanctity was inseparable from tangible experiences of time and place—elements that were disrupted in the unfamiliar cemeteries of Seoul. Unlike the burial sites in their hometowns, these cemeteries lacked continuity with ancestral tradition and were perceived as alien, impersonal spaces. This spatial and emotional disjunction severed their connection to the sacred. When space is fragmented and stripped of memory, sanctity loses its physical grounding and survives only as an abstract idea. Refugees, armed with nothing more than faded photographs and fragmented memories, had no embodied sense of "home" to return to—even imaginatively.

Unlike religious pilgrims, who could physically traverse landscapes imbued with meaning, refugees could engage with the sacred only through dreams or longing.[4] As a result, their experience of sanctity remained incomplete, suspended in emotional and spatial exile (Kee 2017, pp. 72–76). (See Figure 3).



Figure 3. Clapboard housing on Cheonggyecheon in 1965[5]. Source: Seoul Museum of History.

The pervasive ethos of loss experienced by refugees became one of the most potent social forces in postwar Korea. This collective trauma did not remain confined to private memory: instead, it permeated public life, shaping both political ideologies and personal aspirations. In many cases, it gave rise to a form of utopian longing—a desire to recover or recreate what had been irrevocably lost. Within this framework, Seoul emerged not as a site of renewal, but as a dystopian space, devoid of the sacred connections, ancestral ties, and symbolic continuity that had once defined the notion of "home." For many refugees, the capital resembled a state of limbo or even a kind of secular hell, suspended between displacement and belonging.

Refugees and migrants often remarked that contemporary Seoulites appeared "stingy" or inhospitable. These sentiments reflect mutual suspicion and social fragmentation in a rapidly expanding urban environment. Longtime residents viewed newcomers—refugees and rural migrants—with discomfort, while the displaced perceived urban society as cold and exclusionary. A popular saying of the time reflected this tension: "They're so clever they could steal your nose while you're still awake," a phrase used to describe the cunning competitiveness required to survive in Seoul. This atmosphere of mutual distrust, born out of resource scarcity and spatial crowding, contributed to a cityscape shaped by social anxiety and alienation—hallmarks of an emerging urban dystopia.

But are Seoulites inherently defined by such traits? Demographic data suggest otherwise. According to the Seoul Metropolitan Government, the city's population grew from approximately 1.5 million in the early 1950s to over 10 million by 1990. The greater metropolitan area also expanded dramatically—from around 4 million to more than 23 million today—driven largely by an influx of refugees and internal migrants.

I was born in Euljiro, then a refugee settlement area where most residents were from North Korea. Later, when my family moved to Mia-ri, I encountered people from southern provinces—migrants from rural South Korea. This personal trajectory mirrors a broader demographic reality: over 80% of Seoul's population today consists of individuals who are not originally from the city. If one considers that the city's population during the Joseon Dynasty was about 300,000, then up to 97% of present-day residents may be seen as relative newcomers (Son and Nam 2006, p. 23).

In this context, the so-called Seoulite is less a static identity than a product of relentless competition among migrants and refugees, each pursuing their own imagined utopia. Ironically, it is this very collision of competing dreams that has gradually shaped Seoul into the dystopia many experience today.

4. Tears in Mia-ri, the Heterotopia for Second Generations

During my childhood, I lived in Mia-ri, a district in northern Seoul that was known at the time as a shantytown. I vividly remember crossing Mia-ri Hill in the back of a moving truck, passing rows of shamanic and fortune-telling houses decorated with colorful flags. Yet what left the deepest impression were the meticulously arranged tombstones, sculpted by local stonemasons—silent reminders that this area had once served as a cemetery.

Mia-ri was a space where multiple realities coexisted: the sacred and the profane, the dead and the living, the marginal and the everyday. It exemplified a particular urban formation in northern Seoul—a chaotic, but enduring coexistence of memory, displacement, and survival.

As children, we built secret hideouts in the nearby hills, creeks, and abandoned houses that surrounded Mia-ri. The hills were scattered with graves: some marked by small tombstones, others by barely visible mounds. We often encountered skulls and bones, using them unthinkingly as props in our games of war and adventure. The creeks were heavily polluted, emitting a pungent odor. One day, a black plastic bag floating in the water drew our attention. When we opened it, we found the body of a deceased infant.

Just beyond the creek and adjacent to the public cemetery stood Mia-ri Texas, a red-light district. Even as children, we wandered through its streets, occasionally receiving candy from women dressed in traditional *hanbok*. The irony was not lost on us: a place of death had become a site of commercial sex, and the sacred had become intermingled with the profane.

Mia-ri's public cemetery was established in 1912 under Japanese colonial rule following the promulgation of the Cemetery Regulations, which designated the area the official burial ground for Gyeongseong (the Japanese name for Seoul). During the colonial period, Mia-ri Cemetery marked a symbolic boundary between the living and the dead (E. Lee 2021, pp. 96–99). (See Figure 4).



Figure 4. Mia-ri Public Cemetery in 1958[6]. Source: Seoul Museum of History.

Later, Mia-ri Hill came to represent wartime suffering, serving as both an advance and retreat route for North Korean forces during the Korean War. The anguish of those abducted to the North was memorialized in the popular song "Heartbreaking Mia-ri Hill",[7] further cementing the district's tragic reputation.

Starting in 1955, infrastructure development inside Seoul's traditional city gates led to a series of "relocation settlement areas" being established in Mia-ri for residents displaced by urban redevelopment and flood damage. This influx of refugees and other displaced groups gave rise to *dal-dongne* (shantytowns) that spread across the surrounding hillsides. Through government-led settlement projects, Mia-ri was gradually transformed from a cemetery into a residential district.

By the early 1960s, major infrastructural changes—including the construction of bridges and roads and the concreting over of local creeks—led to the entombment of streams like Jeongneungcheon and Wolgokcheon beneath massive slabs of concrete. As public cemeteries vanished and residential development expanded, Mia-ri Texas—an adjacent red-light district—began to grow.

By the mid-1980s, following the 1985 opening of the Seoul subway system and a wave of Japanese tourists arriving for the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Mia-ri's public image underwent a dramatic transformation: from a cemetery zone to one of Seoul's most prominent brothel districts (Kim 2011, pp. 91–93).

Michel Foucault distinguished three categories of space: undifferentiated space, utopia (ideal but imaginary spaces), and heterotopia (real, physical spaces that exist outside normative social orders). Heterotopias, he argues, are "other spaces" that simultaneously reflect, invert, or disrupt the dominant logic of society. Common examples include cemeteries, which spatially isolate death from everyday life, and brothels, which function as "cunning heterotopias" that destabilize moral and spatial conventions (Foucault [1967] 1986; Lee and Wei 2020, p. 6).

In this light, Mia-ri can be seen as a paradigmatic heterotopia, a space where contrasting and often conflicting realities coexisted. As a site that housed both a colonial-era cemetery and later a red-light district, Mia-ri embodied what Foucault calls "evident" and "cunning" heterotopias. It was a zone where death and desire, memory and marginality, public policy and intimate life all converged in uneasy proximity.

For me personally, Mia-ri was also a childhood heterotopia. The hills, graves, polluted streams, and sex work establishments were not just fragments of a fractured city:

they were the everyday backdrops of play, exploration, and unspoken cultural memory. Especially during the 1970s and 1980s, Mia-ri functioned as a layered and overlapping heterotopia: one that revealed how urban development, displacement, and sacred–profane entanglements shaped a generation's formative spatial experience.

5. Christian Paradise

The 1960s and 1970s marked a pivotal era in Seoul's urban development and territorial expansion. As the city rapidly grew, it attracted an ever-increasing population, driven in part by large-scale infrastructure projects, including the Gyeongbu Expressway, elevated highways, the covering of the Cheonggyecheon stream, the construction of Sewoon Sangga, and the rise of high-density apartment complexes.

Seoul's population surged from approximately 3.7 million in 1966 to over 8.3 million by 1980. A similar trend unfolded across the surrounding metropolitan region. The city's physical footprint expanded as well—from 135 km^2 in 1936 to 713 km^2 by 1963, peaking at 720 km^2 in 1970—surpassing even its current land area (Son and Nam 2006, pp. 31–37).

Although many refugees initially experienced Seoul as a dystopia, they actively sought to construct an alternative vision of paradise within the city. This spiritual endeavor found material form in the rapid expansion of Protestant Christianity during South Korea's period of industrialization and urban growth.

In 1966, Protestants accounted for approximately 900,000 people, or 3% of the national population. By 1970, that figure had surged to 3.2 million (10.2%), and by 1980, it had reached 5.34 million (14.3%) (nationwide) (Lim 2019, pp. 135–40). In a city marked by displacement, insecurity, and rootlessness, Protestant churches functioned as surrogate homelands—promising believers a "New Heaven and New Earth," or a "New Jerusalem," superimposed upon the alien urban landscape.

A striking facet of South Korean Protestantism during this period was the emergence of mega-churches, and Seoul was no exception. Of the world's fifty largest congregations, twenty-three are in South Korea, with fifteen located in Seoul alone. Two prominent illustrations of these new utopian movements are Youngnak Presbyterian Church and Yoido Full Gospel Church.

The divergence between these two institutions reflects deeper social and spatial distinctions between refugees and internal migrants. Youngnak Presbyterian Church, located in central Seoul (Chungmuro), functioned as a spiritual anchor for North Korean refugees. Known for its conservative Presbyterian theology, the church embodied a vision of order, resilience, and preservation. I was born near this church and witnessed its centrality in the lives of many displaced families.

In contrast, Yoido Full Gospel Church initially emerged on the urban periphery (Eunpyeong-gu) and later moved to Yeouido, reflecting the trajectory of rural migrants seeking new identities. Associated with dynamic worship, charismatic leadership, and a theology of healing and material blessing, the church offered a vibrant, forward-looking alternative anchored in hope, prosperity, and urban adaptation (S. Lee 2017).

Founded in 1958 in Eunpyeong-gu—then a suburban area on the outskirts of Seoul—Yoido Full Gospel Church experienced extraordinary growth over the next four decades. Membership expanded from 800 in 1962 to 18,000 by 1973, 503,000 in 1986, and over 700,000 by 1997. This unprecedented expansion reflected the church's strong appeal to Seoul's urban poor, migrants, and aspiring middle classes.

Under the leadership of Pastor Cho Yong-gi, the church promoted a theology that blended spiritual salvation, physical healing, and material blessing, a form of prosperity gospel that resonated with individuals seeking hope and security in an uncertain urban envi-

ronment. The church offered a vision of paradise made real in the here and now: not a distant heaven, but one embedded in concrete, economic recovery, and personal empowerment.

According to current Pastor Lee Young-hoon, six key factors contributed to the church's explosive growth: positive and uplifting messages, powerful healing ministries, mountain prayer gatherings, charismatic gifts, such as glossolalia (speaking in tongues), home-based cell groups, and strategic use of mass media.

Doctrinally, this vision was undergirded by the church's Fivefold Gospel—salvation, the fullness of the Holy Spirit, divine healing, blessing, and Christ's second coming—and its Triple Blessing doctrine, which emphasized spiritual, material, and physical prosperity.[8] Together, these offered not only theological coherence but also a practical roadmap for surviving—and thriving—in the rapidly modernizing city.

Protestantism also addressed a deeply pragmatic issue for refugees and migrants: the matter of ancestral rites. Within Protestant theology, ancestral rituals were often denounced as idolatrous practices incompatible with Christian faith (Soo 2015, pp. 112–25). For many urban newcomers—who lacked physical access to ancestral graves—this doctrinal stance offered unexpected psychological relief.

Protestant churches not only discouraged these rites but also provided institutional alternatives, such as funeral services and cemetery support. In doing so, they lifted the emotional and ritual burden traditionally associated with filial piety. Without the need to maintain ties to ancestral burial sites, congregants became more accepting of the growing physical distance between everyday life and the realm of the dead.

At the same time, sermons often depicted heaven as a distant, spiritual realm, mirroring the very remoteness of modern cemeteries. As a result, Protestant eschatology gradually replaced earlier forms of utopian longing rooted in lost hometowns. Ironically, however, this new heaven was even more distant than the physical places refugees had once left behind.

Graves symbolize not only the physical remains of ancestors but also the weight of the past. For many migrants and refugees—whose personal histories were marked by displacement and trauma—the past was a painful reminder they often wished to bury, both literally and figuratively. Although Protestant theology emphasized the forgiveness of sins and offered a sense of spiritual renewal, it had clear limitations. The emphasis on personal salvation did not always engage meaningfully with the complexities of ancestral obligation, unresolved historical memory, or the search for self-understanding in a dislocated urban context. In this sense, while Protestantism succeeded in constructing a new urban utopia for many, it also left certain cultural and existential questions unanswered: questions related to lineage, belonging, and the reconciliation of one's past with a fragmented present.

While Protestantism provided one model of urban utopia, Buddhism also adapted to the modern secular landscape by developing alternative practices for honoring the dead. Traditionally centered in remote mountain monasteries, South Korean Buddhist temples began moving closer to urban populations in an effort to remain culturally relevant and accessible (Kee 2017, pp. 88–92). Rather than emphasizing burial and ancestral graves, Buddhist institutions offered ritual substitutes—such as the *Myeongbu-jeon* (ancestral tablet halls), *Suryukjae* (water and land rites), *Saengjeonyesujae* (rites for the living), and 49-day mourning rituals—that were compatible with cremation and adaptable to urban settings. These ceremonies shifted the focus from the physical grave to ritual memory and symbolic continuity. Korean Buddhism, predominantly Zen in orientation, has historically placed less emphasis on grave-centered practices. While cremation was once uncommon in traditional Korean society, this began to change after the implementation of the Family Ritual Standards Act in 1999. The act encouraged cremation and restricted burial to limited con-

ditions (such as individuals over the age of 70). Since then, cremation has become the dominant form of funeral practice in South Korea.

Nonetheless, Buddhism's overall influence has remained regionally concentrated. According to Gallup Korea surveys conducted between 1984 and 2021, the Buddhist population has consistently ranged between 17% and 24% of the national total, most prominently in the Yeongnam region, which was less affected by wartime displacement and refugee movement.[9] Gallup pointed out that Buddhism is strong in the Yeongnam area of South Korea and has a long history. It is said that the ethos of Buddhism is not like Protestantism in Seoul. During the Korean War, Yeongnam was not occupied by the North Korean forces, so the people did not have to seek refuge elsewhere. At that time, many had to flee to Busan, the southernmost part of the Yeongnam area. In this sense, the population and composition of South Korean Buddhists are not like those of Protestantism.

As industrialization drew more people to Seoul, the Protestant church infused spiritual vitality into an ever-expanding metropolis. By offering its "threefold salvation," it effectively transformed Seoul into a perceived material "paradise."

6. Concrete Paradise

The dystopia described thus far was not merely the absence of hope, but the shadow of a utopia envisioned by displaced refugees and migrants. Over time, however, a second generation emerged—children born into the city of Seoul built from concrete and steel. Lacking direct experience of loss or exile, they developed their own spatial sensibilities and constructed new forms of heterotopia within the urban fabric. While the first generation consisted of North Korean refugees and rural migrants who viewed Seoul as a place of trauma and impermanence, the second generation regarded the city as home. For them, there was no "lost origin" to long for—only the present, made stable by infrastructure, apartment blocks, and asphalt roads. Their values, shaped by physical security rather than memory, diverged markedly from those of their parents.

Nowhere is this contrast clearer than in their relationship to cemeteries. Unlike their parents, who mourned the removal of ancestral graves, the second generation began to literally and figuratively pave over death: covering old graveyards with concrete and integrating them into the city's ever-expanding surface.

For Seoul-born individuals of the second generation, the ideological construct of a "hometown"—so central to their parents' worldview—held little tangible meaning. Unlike their elders, they had neither fled a homeland nor mourned its loss, and thus bore no burden of guilt or nostalgia.

Nevertheless, they often inherited a subtle narrative from their parents: that Seoul was not their true home, but a hostile dystopia, unworthy of genuine attachment. A proper hometown, they were told, lay far away, in rural regions accessible often only after a day-long drive, filled with wooded hills, mosquito-laden paths, and ancestral burial grounds (*seonsan*). These stories conjured an idealized, almost mythological past where electricity was absent and suffering was framed as "the taste of home." Since Seoul did not satisfy these conditions, it was dismissed as an asphalt dystopia—a place devoid of natural landscapes or ancestral graves.

But for the second generation, such portrayals were abstract at best. The Seoul they knew—flattened under asphalt and ordered by gridlines—offered a different sense of belonging. Ironically, it was during national holidays, when older generations left the city to visit ancestral homes, that younger Seoulites found their paradise: empty roads, quiet neighborhoods, and the uncanny serenity of an unclaimed metropolis. They thus began to separate the conceptual "utopia" of their parents from the concrete heterotopia in which they actually lived. For the second generation, these deserted streets symbolized their

true sense of home. They neither idealized their parents' rural hometowns nor yearned for them: instead, the concrete expanse beneath their feet became their paradise.

The cemeteries, too, were eventually covered with asphalt and concrete. What once served as sacred ground—spaces of mourning, memory, and ancestral continuity—was repurposed for roads, schools, housing developments, or simply paved over into urban anonymity. This act was not merely functional. It symbolized a profound cultural shift: death was no longer a visible or integral part of urban life. Instead, it was hidden beneath infrastructure, rendered invisible and inaccessible to everyday consciousness. As reinforced concrete replaced ritual topography, the city severed its spatial and emotional ties to the dead.

In this context, the so-called concrete paradise was not just a metaphor: it became a literal environment in which the past was entombed beneath modern surfaces. For the second generation, death was no longer something to be seen or touched, but something to be walked over, unnoticed. (See Figure 5).



Figure 5. See (Kim and Choi 2019). Source: *Concrete Seoul Map*. Blue Crow Media Architecture Maps—Folded Map.

7. Time and Space and Individualization of Death

7.1. Personal Sensibility Time

As Mircea Eliade observed, religious experience is deeply rooted in conceptions of time and space. Immanuel Kant similarly described time and space as the "pure forms of sensibility"—the fundamental conditions through which humans perceive the world (Stephenson and Gomes 2024, pp. 64–83). Within this framework, sanctity itself can be understood as arising from the structured interplay between spatial and temporal order.

In modern Seoul, however, this sacred structure has been disrupted. A distinctive feature of Korean temporal culture is its dual-calendar system: the coexistence of the solar (Gregorian) and lunar calendars. Individuals frequently shift between the two, selecting whichever is more convenient for a given context—a pragmatic "cheat code" that reflects both flexibility and fragmentation in temporal consciousness.

Because time and space are structurally parallel, changing one's calendar system effectively reshapes the spatial and symbolic order of daily life. Mircea Eliade emphasized how cyclical festivals sustain "the myth of the eternal return," a sacred rhythm that reaffirms communal identity across time and space (Eliade and Trask 1971). Throughout history, new regimes have established their own calendars to assert political and cosmological authority, demonstrating the deep interlinkage between temporal control and spatial sovereignty.

In modern Seoul, however, this unity has fractured. The widespread coexistence of the solar and lunar calendars has disrupted the shared experience of sacred time. Individuals selectively shift between them based on convenience, weakening the communal rhythms once anchored by holidays such as Chuseok and Seollal. Protestant churches in particular have adopted the solar calendar to avoid association with ancestral rites and other culturally embedded lunar practices. As a result, time in the modern city is increasingly privatized, fragmented, and stripped of its collective sanctity.

For the first generation, the lunar calendar remained the primary temporal framework for life events. Although Japan imposed the solar calendar during the colonial period, it failed to erase lunar influences, and even authoritarian leaders like Park Chung-hee could not eradicate it completely. The lunar calendar thus served as the temporal axis of the first generation's utopian imagination, shaping holidays, ancestral rites, birthdays, and personal anniversaries. By contrast, official institutions and broader society operated on the solar calendar. This hybridization weakened the collective force of sanctity, leading to disparities in how time and space were perceived.[10]

7.2. Emotional Geography of Seoul

If one were to map Seoul according to the colors of personal memory, the city might appear as a mosaic of emotional topographies: early childhood spaces rendered in green, romantic memories in pink, workplaces and nightlife in blue, and sites of solitude or reflection in brown. These colors, distributed across neighborhoods and time periods, would form fragmented, yet meaningful islands of experience: an "emotional geography" where each individual navigates their own private heterotopias, imbued with personal sanctity (Song 2011).

For the second generation, this emotional geography diverged significantly from that of their parents. While the first generation's worldview was shaped by grass and trees—that is, by natural landscapes and cyclical time—the second generation came of age amid concrete and asphalt, forged under the *Saemaul Undong* (New Village Movement, 1971 onward) and authoritarian modernization projects.

Virtually everything—from roads and apartment blocks to the Han River embankments and even heritage landmarks such as Gyeongbokgung and Bulguksa—was reconstructed in reinforced concrete. The Stone Pagoda at Mireuksa, a once-sacred relic, now stands as an exemplar of "rebuilt heritage" (Kim and Choi 2019). In such a world, sanctity

was no longer inherited through nature or tradition, but reconstructed, resurfaced, and repurposed in concrete.

Unlike their parents, who reminisced about pastoral landscapes and ancestral villages, the second generation found comfort in concrete. Their sense of time also diverged, aligning primarily with the solar calendar rather than the lunar rhythms that had shaped earlier generations.

As a result, their urban heterotopias provided a sense of stability and belonging. No longer haunted by memories of a lost homeland, they experienced little tension between reality and utopian longing. For them, paradise was no longer imagined elsewhere: it existed directly underfoot, embedded in the concrete and asphalt of the city.

Michel Foucault notes that in pre-18th-century towns, cemeteries were central, usually adjacent to churches. Human remains were grouped collectively, reflecting a communal view of death. Ironically, as modern society became more secular or even atheistic, remains began to be individualized: people were buried in personal plots, situated ever farther from population centers. Foucault refers to this as the "individualization of death," likening it to the isolation of disease. He regards cemeteries as heterotopias par excellence in modernity (Foucault [1967] 1986, pp. 22–27).

This concrete-based reality of the second generation fully embodies what Michel Foucault described as the individualization of death. As urban life became defined by infrastructure, efficiency, and standardization, burial practices adapted accordingly. Traditional funerals—once elaborate, time-intensive, and tied to ancestral land—were replaced by streamlined three-day ceremonies held in standardized funeral halls. Government policies, such as the Family Ritual Standards Act, promoted cremation over burial, further encouraging the removal of death from residential and familial spaces. Unlike the first generation, who wished to die at home and be buried in ancestral soil, the second generation experienced death as a managed process: from hospital mortuary to commercial funeral home to remote crematorium. Everything—attire, flowers, ashes, and resting place—became prepackaged, professionalized, and spatially outsourced.

In this way, death was no longer a communal rupture, but a logistical event. The cemetery, once a sacred landscape of memory and kinship, became a neutral facility on the urban periphery—evidence of a modern sensibility that prefers to contain, control, and ultimately distance itself from the sacred.

8. Gangnam Style Cemetery

Psy's global hit "Gangnam Style" marked more than a viral pop phenomenon: it signaled a new generational aesthetic, a third-generation sensibility born in concrete, but draped in color, spectacle, and self-styling. Unlike the second generation, which found stability in gray infrastructure, this new cohort embraced visual exuberance and symbolic play.

Though still rooted in the concrete cityscapes of their predecessors, the third generation distinguished itself by embellishing the urban surface: vibrant graffiti, bold lighting, and curated streetwear turned the mundane into the theatrical. These "Gangnamites" transformed gray façades into flamboyant canvases—layering joy, irony, and style over structural uniformity.

In this way, even death itself began to appear susceptible to aesthetic reconfiguration. Style became not just a way of life, but a way of remembering, mourning, and ultimately distancing oneself from the gravity of loss.

Gangnam, now synonymous with affluence and urban sophistication, began as a low-lying region of wetlands and rural farmland. Prior to its transformation, it bore little resemblance to the meticulously curated landscape it is today. Between 1968 and 1970, a series of infrastructural megaprojects—including the Gyeongbu Expressway, the Third Hangang

Bridge (Hannam Bridge), and Gangnam-daero—catalyzed the area's rapid development (Kang 2015). These developments laid the groundwork for a new urban frontier: soon apartment complexes, elite schools, and corporate headquarters flooded into the region. Gangnam was deliberately designed not as a natural extension of old Seoul but as a symbolically "new" city—engineered to be modern, orderly, and forward-looking. In this design, there was no room for the past: wetlands were drained, villages disappeared, and cemeteries—if acknowledged at all—were removed, relocated, or erased.

Situated south of the Han River, Gangnam emerged as a city built entirely on farmland, overlaid with concrete and asphalt—a space engineered rather than evolved. Unlike northern Seoul, which retained traces of prewar identity and refugee memory, Gangnam offered a blank slate for a new generation. The area attracted mostly second-generation newcomers who were unburdened by the ideological nostalgia for a "true" homeland, a sentiment that continued to shape the emotional landscape of first-generation refugees in the north (Kang 2015). Owing to this spatial and generational separation, Gangnam residents largely escaped the inherited melancholy of displacement. (See Figure 6).

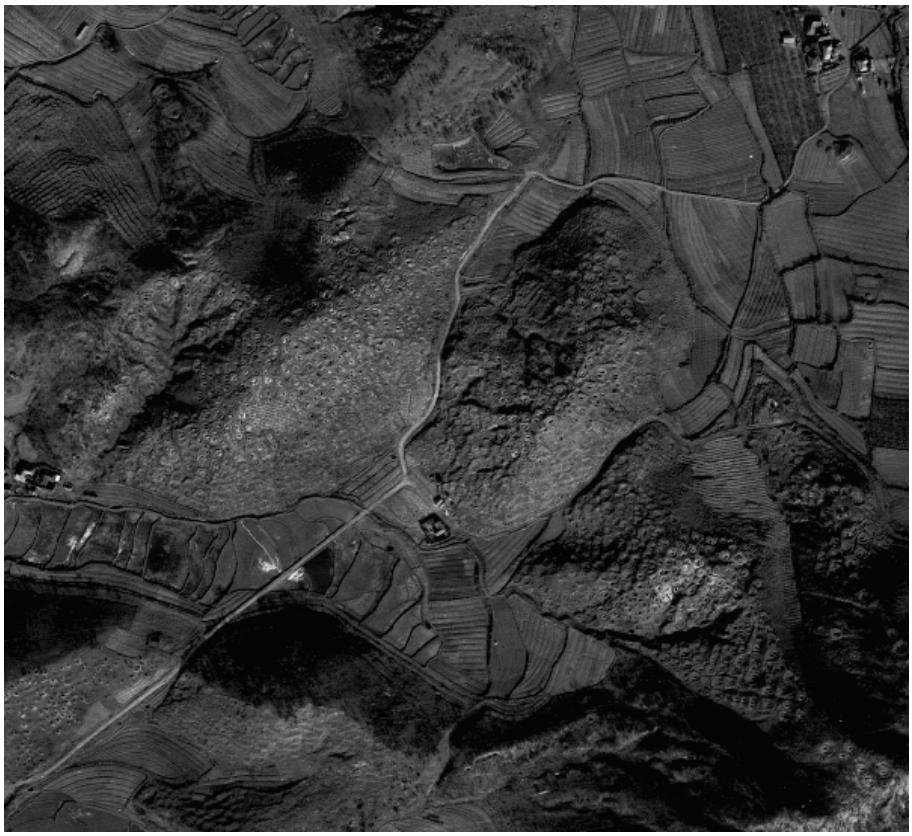


Figure 6. Aerial photograph of Gaepo-dong, Gangnam, cemetery in 1972[11]. Source: Public Data Portal.

A Brand-New Type of "Protest of 1968" in Seoul

Unlike Europe—where the May 1968 protests in France ignited a sweeping cultural revolution encompassing education reform, sexual liberation, social equality, and environmental awareness—South Korea followed a different trajectory. As Russian–Korean historian Park No-ja notes, South Korea effectively missed the cultural dimension of 1968. Instead, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the nation underwent a more urgent and dangerous transformation—a political revolution. The democratization movement against military dictatorship defined this period, with many activists risking arrest, torture, or even death in pursuit of political freedom. Only by the late 20th century—after the collapse of authoritarian regimes—did South Korea begin to experience a delayed wave of cultural emanci-

pation, akin to post-1968 Europe. Yet these expressions emerged with a distinctly South Korean flavor: filtered through global pop, digital modernity, and the stylized aesthetics of youth. "Gangnam Style" in this context was not merely a pop song, but a symbolic artifact of South Korea's belated, but exuberant cultural revolution.[12]

This belated "1968-style" cultural revolution in South Korea proved to be both expansive and radical in scope. It encompassed newfound freedoms in speech, gender equality, environmental consciousness, secularism, and even animal rights—domains long marginalized under authoritarian rule. In this context, Psy's "Gangnam Style" can be interpreted as a cultural manifesto for this phenomenon: a playful, yet incisive declaration of South Korea's vibrant and unrestrained entry into global pop culture. The song's explosive international success marked not merely a viral moment, but a shift in aesthetic sensibility, where satire, spectacle, and digital fluency converged to announce a new cultural voice. In its wake, K-pop and associated cultural forms surged into global prominence, with the Korean wave (*hallyu*) emerging as a direct extension of this delayed, but far-reaching social transformation.

Yet even Gangnam—the very embodiment of modernity, affluence, and aesthetic self-styling—was once home to multiple large-scale public cemeteries. The district originally hosted eight such burial grounds, including the Seoul Municipal Anju Cemetery in Banpo-dong (now part of Gangnam-gu), as well as others in areas like Sinsa and Hak-dong. However, as Gangnam underwent rapid urbanization in the 1970s, these cemeteries were either relocated to the outskirts or dismantled altogether to make room for apartment complexes, commercial districts, and public infrastructure (E. Lee 2021, p. 59). In a city predicated on youth, speed, and spectacle, there was little space—literally or symbolically—for death. Gangnam, like the rest of Seoul, joined in the national project of pushing death to the margins, ensuring that memory, mourning, and ancestral presence would remain invisible in the city's forward-facing surface.

Even in stylish Gangnam, where affluence and aesthetic polish define the urban experience, death remains inescapable. Yet here too, burial practices were systematically pushed to the margins. In northern Seoul, cemeteries were concentrated in areas such as Yongmi-ri, Byeokje-ri, Manguri, and Naegok-ri, with only Manguri still within reach of the city's edge.

In contrast, southern Seoul, including Gangnam, came to rely on newer infrastructure like Seoul Memorial Park, designed primarily for cremation and enshrinement rather than traditional burial. The near-total absence of cemeteries within Gangnam reflects more than a logistical gap: it reveals a deeper cultural aversion to death and burial, particularly among upwardly mobile migrant populations. For these communities, death was not something to be commemorated in visible, physical form, but something to be efficiently processed, spiritually reinterpreted, and spatially distanced from the living.

The transformation of burial practices in Gangnam reflects broader shifts in modern funerary culture. Revisions to the Family Ritual Standards Act restricted traditional burials to certified cemeteries, while cremation became the default, unless specific conditions—such as the deceased being over the age of 70—were met. As cremation rates surged, new forms of commemorative architecture proliferated: columbaria, landscaped memorial parks, and religious facilities tailored to urban aesthetics.

A prominent example is Seongnam Memorial Park, located near Gangnam. Surrounding areas like Gwangju and Yongin now host a dense network of memorial parks centered on columbarium complexes. Unlike traditional cemeteries, these spaces are carefully curated environments, often featuring individualized tombstones, manicured gardens, and stylized monuments that highlight personal identity and visual distinctiveness. Even the management offices resemble boutique cafés, offering visitors a sense of comfort and tasteful mourning. In this context, Gangnam has extended its signature urban style into the realm of death, recasting mourning as an opportunity for aesthetic self-expression and curated remembrance.

One of the most striking recent trends in funerary culture is the emergence of "companion burials," the practice of allowing humans and their companion animals to be interred together. What was once unthinkable under traditional norms, where only human family members were permitted in burial grounds, is now being normalized in Gangnam's evolving deathscape. This shift reflects a deeper cultural transformation: pets are no longer "owned," but accompanied, redefined not as property, but as emotional kin. The language itself has changed: "pets" have become "companion animals," a semantic shift that mirrors broader societal changes in human–animal relationships. In this way, Gangnam's funerary culture epitomizes its late-arriving but transformative cultural revolution, extending aesthetic and emotional individualization even to death itself.[13]

The burial of companion animals alongside their human owners epitomizes the full realization of the individualization of death. What was once an exclusively human and family-centered practice has now expanded to include non-human loved ones, signaling a profound redefinition of kinship, grief, and remembrance.

Traditional burial norms strictly prohibited the interment of animals in human cemeteries. Burial grounds were culturally reserved for blood relations, reflecting Confucian ideals of lineage and ancestral continuity. The inclusion of animals would once have been unthinkable—considered a violation of ritual purity and social order. Yet in the wake of Gangnam's cultural shift, this taboo has softened. Companion burials are now increasingly accepted, reflecting a broader trend in which death—like life—is shaped by personal relationships, emotional bonds, and aesthetic choices. The rise of pet funeral industries, complete with memorial parks and stylized urns, further underscores this transformation.

In this context, death has become not just an end, but a final act of identity expression—individualized, aestheticized, and emotionally curated. Gangnam-style death is no longer about ancestry or collective memory: it is about choice, style, and the curation of meaning in a world where even mortality can be made one's own. (See Figure 7).



Figure 7. The concrete shrine (Chung 2017) of Seoul—Cheonggye creek[14]. City of Seoul.

9. Conclusions: Comprehensive Reflections on Cemeteries and Burial Practices

In conclusion, Gangnam, shaped by the so-called Concrete Generation, has overlaid its utilitarian foundations with new aesthetic elements—colors, graffiti, and design—to create a style uniquely emblematic of its identity. Although this cultural revolution arrived later than similar movements elsewhere, it successfully introduced personal and aesthetic expression into the traditionally austere domain of death and cemeteries. Put differently, burial grounds—once confined to the symbolic realm of mourning—have been transformed into heterotopias infused with individuality and visual intentionality.

Seoul's cemetery culture is particularly distinctive from a global perspective (Kee 2017, pp. 103–8). In the aftermath of the Korean War, cemeteries were systematically eradicated from urban areas, severing spatial and cultural ties to ancestral memory. These sites were relocated to the urban periphery, labeled undesirable, and largely excluded from the logic of modern urban planning.

This disappearance—and the broader public aversion to cemeteries—reflects not only spatial marginalization but also an emotional and symbolic estrangement from death. Seoul, and by extension Gangnam, offered little care or integration for the deceased throughout the 20th century.

However, these separations are not irreversible. The emergence of columbaria, private memorial parks, and religious facilities signals a gradual transformation in attitudes toward death: a move away from avoidance and toward personalized commemoration.

In contemporary Seoul—now living firmly in the era of "Gangnam style"—cemeteries are no longer just spaces of death. They have begun to incorporate stylistic trends such as cremation, pet burials, and curated memorial experiences, reflecting a departure from long-standing conventions.

It is within this transformation that the entrenched divide between life and death—between the domains of the living and the resting—may begin to soften. Through style, Seoulites are not only redefining how they live, but how they die—and ultimately, how they remember.

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Notes

1 This picture belongs to the National Archives of Korea and is publicly accessible at https://theme.archives.go.kr/viewer/common/archWebViewer.do?bsid=200200098092&dsid=000000000029&gubun=search (accessed on 24 May 2025).

2 The Joseon Dynasty was established upon the ideology of neo-Confucianism. The government banned graveyards from areas near royal palaces. Village inhabitants maintained their ancestor's graves, which were within walking distance of the village. This was different from public cemeteries, which were further relegated and managed by Japanese government.

3 "Hell Joseon" (Korean: 헬조선; RR: *Heljoseon*; MR: *Helchosŏn*; lit. Hell Korea) is a satirical South Korean term that became popular around 2015. The term is used to criticize the socioeconomic situation in South Korea (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hell_Joseon, accessed on 24 May 2025).

4 There are many differences between refugees and religious pilgrims. According to Coffey (2020), how to handle religious dissenters and religious refugees was a pressing problem in a Europe divided by faith. Some states pursued a zero-tolerance policy toward dissenters, creating refugees in the process. Medieval Spain had been a multi-faith society comprised of Catholics, Jews,

and Muslims, but early modern re-Catholicization forced hundreds of thousands of Jews and Muslims into exile. Many settled in the Islamic world, including the Ottoman Empire, which was more accommodating to Jews and other minorities than most Christian states. For example, prosecuted many religious dissenters as a threat to church and state. Under Elizabeth I, English authorities executed some separatists for sedition, burned half a dozen anti-Trinitarians for heresy, and hanged between 120 and 130 Catholic priests for treason.

5 This picture belongs to the Seoul Museum of History and is publicly accessible at https://museum.seoul.go.kr/archive/archiveNew/NR_archiveView.do?ctgryId=CTGRY328&type=A&upperNodeId=CTGRY331&fileSn=300&fileId=H-TRNS-77352-331 (accessed on 24 May 2025).

6 This picture belongs to the Seoul Museum of History and is publicly accessible at https://museum.seoul.go.kr/archive/archiveNew/NR_archiveView.do?ctgryId=CTGRY1024&type=A&upperNodeId=CTGRY1036&fileSn=586&fileId=ecb87161-66ee-4742-967d-b97a8307fc46 (accessed on 24 May 2025).

7 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fj-ynzx2cSw (accessed on 24 May 2025).

8 See https://yfgc.fgtv.com/y1/0401.asp (accessed on 24 May 2025).

9 See https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=1208 (accessed on 24 May 2025).

10 Two calendar systems is a kind of "heterochronia" in Michel Foucault's term. Michel Foucault borrowed the term *heterochronie* from the biological language in his 1967 *Des Espaces Autres* to interrogate the modern Western construction of time and its relationship with hegemonic historical narratives. Heterochronia does not refer to time as an abstract dimension of physics, but rather to time as a social and political construction. In this essay, I would like to focus on the heterotopia rather than heterochronia.

11 This picture belongs to the Public Data Portal and is publicly accessible at https://www.data.go.kr/en/index.do (accessed on 24 May 2025).

12 See https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/opinion/column/1049786.html (accessed on 24 May 2025).

13 See https://www.animal.go.kr/front/awtis/shop/undertaker1List.do?menuNo=6000000131 (accessed on 24 May 2025).

14 This picture belongs to the City of Seoul and is publicly accessible at https://mediahub.seoul.go.kr/archives/919167 (accessed on 24 May 2025).

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