

## Spiritual and Social Practice in Ancient Korea

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### Abstract

During the course of history, most of the religious traditions expanded their domain of influence beyond the center of their source and became popular among the varied ethnic groups. The various spiritual groups played a significant role in the dissemination of spirituality to Korea, where other cultural groups amalgamated with local culture and practices. Moreover, culture along with the spiritual tenants traversed from India to China and further to Korea where cultural amalgamation took place. This paper aims to underline how Indian and Chinese culture entered to Korean peninsula and further assimilated with local culture. This paper underlines two aspects: Ancestor worship and the Kolpum(Golpum) system, which influenced the shape of Korean social structure during the course of history.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, Shamanism, Buddhism, Animism, Kolpum, Ritual, Ancestor

### Introduction

Korean peninsula attested presence of Buddhism in 372CE, which is the official date of the introduction of Buddhism during the Three Kingdoms(57 BCE to 668 CE) period. The presence of manifold literary historical records on state dynasties, who ruled the Korean peninsula for centuries, attest reconstruction of historical narratives. Moreover, Korean historical text such as Samguk Sagi, Samguk Yusa, and Nihon Shoki(Japanese:Chronicles of Japan) that, together with the Kojiki, comprises the oldest official history of Japan, are instrumental in understanding the ancient Korean history and culture. The Chinese records on the Qin Dynasty buttressed by Samguk Sagi which notes that the Koguryo received an envoy from China who brought a Buddhist scripture and image, along with a monk named Sundo].Master Sundo (Shun-tao in Chinese) The Korean Buddhist Research Institute, ed The History and Culture of Buddhism in Korea (Seoul: Dongguk University Press, 1993(40).Another kingdom named Paekje received Buddhism from China, in fact, an Indian monk named Marananta was instrumental in introducing Buddha's teachings to the royal king of Paekje. Korean historical records note that the Indian monk was given a warm welcome by the royal court with due respect].Ilyon, Samguk Yusa, trans. Ha Tae-Hung and Grafton K. Mintz(Seoul, Yonsei University Press, 1997(175).The third kingdom named Silla received Buddha's teachings from Koguryo].Takasaki Jikido".A History of East Asian Buddhist Thought: the Formation of a Sphere of Chinese Canon-based Buddhism Acta Asiatica 66)1994(14),but there is disputability over the introduction of Buddhism to Silla as some scholars note that there were Buddhist followers and temples in the regions controlled and ruled by Silla kings in the 4th century CE.

The stereotyping of the statements that Buddhism came from China to the Korean peninsula in the 4th century CE].Koreana, Korean Cultural Heritage, Thought and

Religion, Vol II(Seoul: Korea Foundation, 1996(44[.primarily, miss the mark to take into account the mode of the transmission of narrative traditions. The dogmatic narrative was one of the significant modes for transmission of extraterrestrial culture whereas economic and cultural interactions belonged to the other mode. But in the Korean case, both political and economic, as well as, cultural interactions were instrumental as the contemporary Korean rulers were engaged with Chinese rulers. Dissemination of distant religious practice is typically reliant upon the political and economic condition of the society to which this certain treatise is lent. In this perspective, East Asian countries attested to deep political volatility, which played a vital role in the fermentation of religious culture, particularly Buddhist culture in East Asian regions in the ancient period.

#### Ancestral Worship and Social Stratification in Korea

Buddhism traveled to China and Korea in different phases and political contexts. The adoption and assimilation of Buddhism in Korea was a very slow and continuous process. Buddhist thought and practices, right from its introduction in Korea had permeated all levels of society. It had replaced the existing Shamanistic practices from the strips of Korean society. It needs to be mentioned that Shamanism had been ancient religion in Korea, which was preceded by other prevalent indigenous spiritual cults comprising spirit worship, mountain worship, river worship, tree worship, and nature worship. During this cultic evolution, evil spirits that took delight in disturbing the harmony of the human ecosphere were also worshipped. Consequently, we find the Korean religious landscape was dotted with the phenomenon of Animism, Totemism, and Ancestor worship.

Korean historical findings, especially the presence of Dolmens (Table-Top) from the Bronze Age and before the Iron Age throughout the Korean peninsula (present provinces located in North Korea bordering with Manchu region) attest to the practice of Ancestral Worship. The period stretching from first century BCE to 1st century CE was the transition phase of Korean history when bronze culture faded into the iron culture]. Kim Won-yong, Art and Archaeology of Ancient Korea (Seoul: Tackwang Publishing Co, 1986 (264-6, 8 [The Jecheon was first traced to the Dangun Joseon myth, which was further visible during the Goguryeo (Koguryeo) (Silla, and Buyeo (Puyeo) (Kingdom and the tradition was governed by the monarch. It seems that the Ancestor worship was popular even before the introduction of Confucianism. Once Confucian values were applied by the state to control and regulate political legitimacy, Korean society started to follow the various rituals proposed by scholars and attested by monarchs.

Rites of offering sacrifices to gods, spirits, ancestors, etc., are observed and considered imperative not only in Confucianism but also in various religious traditions. It needs to be mentioned that in the ancient religions of the Mediterranean culture, sacrifices were a major instance of filial piety in East Asian countries, numerous rituals and rites could be traced in inscriptions found near the burial sites. Today, religion is recognized as an individual's private sphere, but in ancient times, when religion was recognized as a public sphere, ancestral rites that externally expressed individual and community filial piety were naturally emphasized in East Asian countries.

Korean traditional ancestral worship was formed by mixing regional characteristics of Korean values with the Chinese culture centered on China. The historical records reveal that the king of the Shang Dynasty (Ji, Yin Dynasty in ancient China, had created the custom of ancestor worship for his ancestors, and historically he excluded the native gods. The Chinese kings emphasize on Li (classical Chinese character) that is translated as ritual, rites, customs, propriety and worship]. Roger T. Ames, Henry Rosemont, Jr, The Analects of Confucius: A

Philosophical Translation(New York: Ballantine Books, 1999(51[.

Thus, we find that ancestral worship(Li( began from this culture and gradually common masses also started to worship their ancestors. Later on, the Shang Dynasty was ruined by the Zhou Dynasty, but Zhou rulers inherited the ancestral rite methods of Shang royal families, and gradually the customs spread by Zhao Ga from above. In addition to this, the former influential aristocrat was appointed as feudal lords to continue the ancestral rites for the ancestors of the Shang Dynasty. This was because of the myth and belief that if the former family's ancestral rites were cut off, the spirit of the former ancestors would bring disaster to the royal family.

Historically, Samguk Sagi mentions the ancestral rites and the history of tea culture being introduced and cultivated in China. It underlines that the ceremonial rites were presumed to have been performed as a holiday ritual since the Silla Dynasty, thus it suggests that it was initially a tea ceremony for offering tea. After the introduction of Buddhism to Silla and Goryeo, when Buddhism became the state religion, one may underline that it was formed through a combination of seasonal customs, rites, and Buddhist leanings. However, during the Joseon Dynasty, when the policy of suppressing Buddhism was implemented, Buddhist annual customs could not be left as is, so seasonal customs also changed to Confucian methods.

However, during the Joseon period when Confucianism was adopted as a guiding force for politics, the Joseon king could not perform ancestral rites to heaven, but only they performed ancestral rites to the dynasty's ancestral deity known as Jongmyo and the earth deity known as Sajik. Soon after the declaration of the Korean Empire by Joseon, The Hwangudan was built and ancestral rites were held to heaven as well. In addition, it had the meaning of filial piety, which provided legitimacy to the Joseon family's rule. Confucian Analects ( 1 :1 2 (states that 'Achieving harmony is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety. Ancestor reverence as the defining religious sensibility']Roger T. Ames, Henry Rosemont, Jr, The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation(New York: Ballantine Books, 1999(30.[.

Another aspect needs to be mentioned that until the Goryeo Dynasty, ancestral property was distributed equally between sons and daughters, and one may not find gender discrimination in terms of ancestral rites. Koryo King Songjong says that 'nothing surpasses filial piety(hyo)it constitutes the core of all virtues]'.Cited by Bruce Cumings, Korea;s Place in the Sun(New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1997(57 [,.Even during the early Joseon Dynasty, ancestral rites were performed without distinction between men and women, and there were instances where married men visited their married sisters homes to perform ancestral rites for their deceased fathers].Martina Deuchler, The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992157[. However, during the course of history, the consciousness of dearness became stronger after Confucianism became the core of the Joseon rule, which finally made the eldest son accountable for performing ancestral worship, who accordingly received Two/Third of ancestral property alone as a reward, however, other brothers received rest property equally, depriving daughters from ancestral property. The equal inheritance among siblings, and inheritance among first and second wife became more complex, which considered social status of women for entitlement of property and ritual rights].Ibid 208[.

The ancestral rite is a ritual offered to a Spirit or departed soul. This broad concept refers to temple rituals in ancient religions and Confucian practices. However, modern Korean people organize it as ancestral worship. There are ancestor memorial ceremonies equivalent to ancestral worship in other countries,

but in modern Korea, ancestral ritual chiefly refers to the Confucian ceremonial rites. In Confucianism, it was central to hold ancestral rituals for the four great-ancestors (father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather). (Afterward, ancestors of the 5th great-great-grandfather or higher were held at the same time in the 10th month of the lunar calendar instead of on individual death anniversaries, and ancestors who made great contributions were held at Bulcheonwi, where ancestral rites were held continuously without moving or stopping over time. The word Xiao means filial piety or filial responsibility was the central point of the family in Confucian way]. Roger T. Ames, Henry Rosemont, Jr, The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999) (58).

There were Three Ancestral Rites:

1. Chuseok (Charye): (Korean New Year and the ritual rites held four times in one year.
2. Gi-Jesa (Gije): (Ancestor Death Anniversary, which was organized early in the morning.
3. Sasiye (Sije): (Rites perform for up to seventh generation ancestor yearly as per lunar Calander.

What is pertinent to note is that ancestor worship was also assimilated with Buddhism during history. The Buddhist ritual rite known as Shishik was performed by chanting Buddhist Sutra for the final departure of the deceased spirit into the Buddhist realm of Tushita. The Confucian rituals were primarily limited to royal affairs but gradually became popular among the common masses. The ancestral worship was practiced by common masses and we do not find any social restriction.

The Golpum or Kolpum (Bone Ranking) System Social Stratification in Korea  
Confucianism deepens the division of society and we find very clear social stratification. But before examining the Josean social stratification, we need to understand the prevalent social structure of ancient Korea which provided the base for deeper social division. It is imperative to note that the extent of social division in ancient Korean society was not as clear as in the Indian subcontinent. However historical records reveal that Korea had its norm of social stratification based on bone superiority. This bone ranking system bore a symbolic character and very specific division. There is a huge prospect that the phenomenon of Ancestor Worship was related to their bone purity and superiority. The origin of the ancestors of the six tribes of the Kaya Clan from six golden eggs, as well as the mythical births of the Sok, Pak, and Kim clans of Silla serve as pointers in this regard. All these clans had been claiming their divine progenitors, which provided troops to assert their superiority over the Korean common masses in the ancient period.

After the spread of Buddhism to the Korean peninsula, the Dharma provided the theoretical underpinnings for primitive views. The prevalence of primitive spirituality and its syncretic nature facilitated the acceptance of Buddhism. We find that by smoothly integrating primitive thought and Buddhist thought, Unified Silla emerged as the ideal Buddha land. Henceforth, Buddhism was viewed as an indigenous religion, rather than an import from abroad. In this way, the process of the indigenization of Buddhism in the Korean kingdoms was set in motion.

The Buddhist idea of Karma is distinguished between Good-Karma and Bad-Karma, manifested in the dictum, as you sow, so shall you reap thereby meaning that one obtains the fruit corresponding to the nature of his actions]. Peter Della Santina, The Tree of Enlightenment (Taipai: Chico Dharma Study Foundation, 1997) (76). It is in this context that the idea of Karma proved to be a

boon for the old aristocracy. It justified social stratification and counted against any change.

The doctrine of Karma provided a considerable theoretical background to the king and his nobles on which both could enjoy their privileged status.

The Golpum or Kolpum (Bone Rank System) Korea was in use during the Silla period (57BCE-935CE) which determined the person's political rank and social status. The Bone Rank System was based on a person's hereditary bloodline, which was first introduced by King Beopheung as a government law code in 520 CE. It was systematized as a stable social institution coupled with the various organs of the complex political apparatus viz. the establishment of the department with the consolidation of the royal authority, Buddhism was recognized as a royal religion. Keeping these developments in mind, the rigid social system needs to be traced from the time of the consolidation of the royal class.

The Silla kings were from the Pak Clan line, the sacred bone line that was abolished in the 7th century and thereafter, we find the royalty embraced the true bone rank along with lesser royals, ministers and, aristocrats. Though the causative factor behind the evolution of two high classes Songgol and Chingool, within the Silla royal house of Kim, is not entirely clear, there lies an ambiguity over the possible names of the originator of this system, i.e. Hyokkose, a founder of Silla or King Pophung who officially recognized Buddhism.

A probe into the degree of assimilation presupposes an assessment of the structure of the Bone-Rank system. The chief structure of the system is as follows: Two High Kols (bone-rank) and Six Tus (Head-Rank) viz Songgol (sacred-bone) and Chingool (True Bone) with Head ranks advancing up to a maximum of the six ranks. It seems that the True Bone could advance from the lowest rank through the top, and The Six Head Quality men could advance only up to the six ranks. The Five Head Quality up to the tenth rank the Fourth Head Quality up to the Twelfth or provincial six] Wanne J. Joe, ed., Traditional Korean: A Cultural History (Seoul, Hollym, 1997) (63-4).

The Korean Kolpum (Bone Ranking System) was also influenced by the doctrine of Karma. The Kolpum means the quality of bone, usually translated as Bone-Rank, which amounted to an able system, though within the officialdom, where it was rigidly preserved]. Wanne J. Joe, 33,4, 38-9]. The Kolpum system granted a variety of special privileges ranging from political assignment to advantages in daily life in accordance with the degree of respect by virtue of a person's bone rank. It regulated the socio-political status, house structure, carts, waves, and color of individuals. The qualities of the bones were classified into five grades. Songgol (Holy Bone) was the first, the second highest Chingool (True Bone) Ruktup'um (literally six-head quality) was third, and then five-head quality and the lowest bone rank was the four-head quality. The Bone Rank System in the course of time became hereditary]. Wanne J. Joe, 63].

During the course of history, only members of the Head Rank Class were considered for aristocratic and military roles. The affiliation, with the Head Rank Line, was essential for an individual for state civil and military roles. This rank system also restricted people to limited social interaction, matrimonial alliance, and land tax. Depending on the membership of a specific rank, associated people were only allowed to enjoy explicit housing with designated size and beautification. Not only this, but the rank was also applied to segregate the masses for use of particular transport, domestics, and tools. Later it appears that the social stratification breaks the mobility and people inherited their community and professional status from their clan. It appears that Koryo social structure was

highly stratified, and social status was rigid-predominantly based on genealogy. It means the alteration was not relaxed ],Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*

a: *A Study of Society and Ideology*(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992–32[.

Similar to the Indian caste system, one's birth was the utmost determining force to achieve high bone rank.

#### Conclusion

The ancestral rites performed following the Chinese way of ritual performance were combined with Confucianism in the early medieval and modern periods. And it emerged as a system of ancestor worship. It was used with both religious meaning and as well as a political tool. Even after the separation of religion and state, the emperor presided over ancestral rites to heaven and used ancestral rites as a tool to justify his authority and vested interest by worshiping his ancestors. Notwithstanding this fact, it is commonly maintained that the formation of rigid social stratification definitely followed the cleavage of the Silla royal family, in the process of a power struggle. During the middle period of Silla, the king and the royal family adopted Buddhist names and claimed to be hailing from the class of Songgol(sacred bone)].(Lewis R.,Lancaster, ed, *Buddhism in Koryo: A Royal Religion*, Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies(University of California, 1996,4[.During the course of history, it appears that Silla had changed the nature of its state apparatus from the clan confederacy to the monarchical system. The Ancestor worship and Golpum system became more complex during the early Joseon period when the state adopted Confucian social order.

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