

# IV. KOREAN VALUES

- Values are conceptions of what is important and worthwhile.
- Our values are the basis of our judgments about what is desirable, beautiful, correct, and good as well as what is understandable, ugly, incorrect and bad.
- Most of our basic values are learned early in life from family, friends, schools, and the mass media.

◆◆ For comparison, can you name the most important values of Americans?

◆◆ Success

◆◆ Prestige

◆◆ Wealth

◆◆ Power

◆◆ Individualism (each person being responsible for success or failure)

◆◆ Family

◆◆ Freedom

◆◆ Democracy

◆◆ Patriotism

- ◆ Justice
- ◆ Equality
- ◆ Hard work
- ◆ Honesty
- ◆ The do-it-yourself attitude
- ◆ Belief in science and technology to solve problems
- ◆ Charity toward others

- **The most important values of Koreans**
- - success
- - prosperity
- - health and long life
- - prestige
- - power
- - filial piety
- - ancestor worship (Herbert Spencer: ancestor worship as the root of all religions)
- - the family (personal sacrifice for children; relatives?)
- - collectivism: in a collectivistic culture, interdependence is valued over independence, group values over individual wants and needs
- - emphasis on education
- - deference to the elderly
- - patriotism

- - emphasis on *chemyeon* (the face)
- - hard work
- - emphasis on hierarchy
- - emphasis on social harmony
- - emphasis on conformity
- - emphasis on loyalty
- - emphasis on personal relationships
- - politeness/emphasis on etiquette
- Other Korean values may include chastity, ethnic homogeneity, son preference and respect for authority as well as an emphasis on appearance (importance of *gwansang*) .

# 1. Korean Values: Shamanism

- ◆ Cultural values of success, prosperity, health and long life derive from Shamanism, while other values such as filial piety, collectivism, and deference to the elderly have roots in Confucianism.
- ◆ The fundamental worldview underlying the mental landscape of Koreans derives from Shamanism, which has traditionally exerted the most powerful religious influence upon the Korean people.

- ◆ Central to shamanism is animism, the belief that every animate and inanimate object, such as animals, stars, mountains and rocks, has spirit.
- ◆ Korean shamanism believes that spirits, including those of ancestors, nature, and prominent kings and generals in Korean history, wield power on the shifting fortunes of each individual.
- ◆ Shamanism also believes that these spirits must be appeased through shamanic rituals to ask for their blessings, especially when something bad happens.

- The adherents of shamanism try to appease the spirits through a shamanistic ritual called *goot*, usually entailing an elaborate setting of food, shaman's dance and music, in hopes of realizing their material wishes, such as longevity, health, male births and wealth.
- Difference between the-other-worldly religion and this-worldly religion.



- Out of many types of shaman rituals, *gosagoot*, a ritual to usher in good fortunes, is still popular today, although it is typically practiced without a shaman.
- It is commonly held on lunar new year's day at homes, companies, etc.
- Popular among sports teams
- Special occasions also call for the ritual, e.g., purchase of a new, expensive equipment; shooting of a movie, drama, etc.
- Table is set with plates of food, rice wine and pig's head.
- People bow in front of the table and stuff an envelope of money into the pig's mouth.

- The most striking characteristic of this folk religion is thus **its preoccupation with and emphasis on the fulfillment of material wishes**, fostering this-worldly and materialistic tendencies of Koreans.
- As such, shamanism has been the enduring core of Korean religious and cultural thought, exercising a profound influence on the development of Korean attitudes and behaviors as well as cultural practices, including religion.

- The influence of shamanism has been so profound that newly introduced religions, including Buddhism and Christianity, had to compromise with and absorb elements of Shamanism in order to be accepted by the Korean populace.
- For example, Buddhism deified *Sanshin* (the Mountain God) and *Chilsung* (the Spirit of the Seven Stars or the Big Dipper) of shamanism and set up shrines in their honor on temple complexes in order to win wide support.

- Korean Buddhist monks, moreover, have been more than ascetic devotees to world-renouncing discipline, for many have functioned as fortunetellers and performed rituals usually reserved for shamans: for begetting children, especially sons, for prosperity and longevity.
- That is why the fortunetelling establishments usually use Buddhist symbol (inverted swastika) on their signboards.
- In general, lay Buddhists in Korea do not practice meditation.
- What they practice is to pray to Buddha gods for material wishes. And Korean temples encourage such practice.

- Protestantism has been also influenced by shamanism.
- Example: Yoido Full Gospel Church, the world's largest church with more than 700,000 members today.
- The church's evangelical slogan that has attracted large audiences—and inspired other churches to emulate—is the threefold blessings of Christ, i.e., health, prosperity and salvation.

- The influence of shamanism is also felt in the prevalence of fortunetelling among contemporary Koreans:
- - a large number of fortunetellers and fortunetelling cafes
- - online fortunetelling services
- - electronic amulets in cell phones
- - 72% of Koreans have patronized a fortunetelling service at least once in their lifetime.

◆ Out of the wide ranging forms of fortunetelling, the most popular forms are:

1. *Sajupalja*: Divination based on birth date and time;
2. *Goonghap*: Fortunetelling on marital harmony;
3. *Gilit*: Foretelling of auspicious days;
4. *Gwansang*: Physiognomy: The art of discovering temperament and other characteristic qualities of the mind from the outward appearance, especially by the features of the face.  
-“prosperous-looking” features: white complexion, a long nose, double chin, and a round, plump nose; “unfavorable features”: dark complexion, crooked nose, and sharp chin; small birthmarks above the lips are usually considered lucky, while relatively larger ones are considered unlucky);

5. *Poongsujiri*: geomancy or *fengshui*; and
  6. Belief in auspicious names, e.g., Gwan, Gyun, Soongyeong, Byeongwon, Jonggi, Boksu, Moogi, Hongsu, Hyeongsu, Yongseo, Am, Sogyong, Soondae, Jaehae, Yeongchang (detention center), Moosik, Seongbyeong, Guishin, Eumsoon, Byeontae, Maechoon, etc.
- Some names sound hilarious when the last name and the given name are pronounced together in that order—again, these are real names—e.g., Goyangi, Omanwon, Obaekwon, Gangaji, Bangguinyeo, Baesinja, Nosookja, Seongmunje, Jugeunae, Pihaeja, Pibada, Gimchigook, Seonggyo, Byeontaesook, Gangdonyeo, etc.



## 2. Korean Values: Confucianism

- ◆ John Berthrong (American scholar):  
Confucianism is the “cultural DNA of East Asian people.”
- ◆ Confucianism and the Confucian tradition are indispensable for understanding the Korean past and present.
- ◆ Confucianism has long been accepted and revered by Koreans as an essential system of ethics or moral codes.
- ◆ Many scholars have observed that “Koreans out-Chinese the Chinese in their devotion to Confucianism.”

- ◆ Korea is said to be the most Confucianized society in the world, more so than Japan and China, where Confucianism originated.
- ◆ Every Korean can be said to be Confucian, for he or she acts in a Confucian manner every step of the way in social interactions.
- Surveys show that Koreans in general subscribe to Confucian values such as filial piety and loyalty and observe the basic Confucian rituals such as burial rites and ancestor worship.
- In terms of “conviction” and “practice,” therefore, practically every Korean, including Buddhists and Christians, is said to be Confucian, and Koreans’ attachment to Confucianism is much more pronounced than that of Chinese and Japanese.

# MERITS AND DEMERITS OF CONFUCIANISM

Q: What are the merits of Confucianism?

Merits

- deference to societal interests
- encouragement of the learning
- emphasis on self-cultivation and education
- respect for ethics and morality
- diligence and hard work

# Demerits

- respect for hierarchy → inability to question those in authority
- hierarchical orientation → reverence for titles
- hierarchical social structure → grant only obligations and no rights to the subordinate partner of any relationship and the virtues recommended take on a tone of conformity and passivity as social mores destined for the support of a ruling elite.
- emphasis on learning → disrespect for manual labor
- boy-preference
- attachment to the family → nepotism, factionalism, clannism