

Book Notes

Religious and Philosophical Traditions of Korea by Kevin N. Cawley.
New York: Routledge, 2019. xxiii, 197 pp.

Kevin N. Cawley's *Religious and Philosophical Traditions of Korea* is the latest introductory text in a growing list of English studies on Korean religion and philosophy. It traces the historical development of Korean intellectual traditions, focusing on key figures, concepts, and texts. By referencing up-to-date studies and making occasional comparisons with the theories of Western philosophers such as Derrida and Heidegger, Cawley provides Western readers with a concise and readable overview of the history of religion and philosophy in Korea.

Religious and Philosophical Traditions of Korea consists of six chapters, as well as a prologue and an epilogue. In the first chapter, Cawley acknowledges the Western connotations of the categories “religion” and “philosophy” while introducing an alternative term, “pathway,” to better refer to the individual traditions of Korean religion based on the concept of *Dao* [K. *Do*] 道. His description of each pathway as a “route to becoming a better person” (2) effectively demonstrates how religion in Korea represented a *modus vivendi* of sorts, rather than an adherence to a certain dogma or faith. He then provides an overview of the main religious traditions of Korea: Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism and Shamanism. In Chapter 2, Cawley begins his journey through Korea's extensive intellectual history. Opening with the cultural significance of the Tan'gun [Dangun] myth and describing the arrival and development of Buddhism during the Three Kingdoms period, this section culminates with a detailed look into the texts and ideas of Wŏnhyo [Wonhyo] and Ŭisang [Uisang], two extremely influential Buddhist monks of early Korea.

Chapter 3 covers the progress of Korea's intellectual history, spanning from

the emergence of Sŏn [Seon] Buddhism during the Unified Silla period to the founding of the Chosŏn [Joseon] dynasty. Cawley illustrates the dynamic religious landscape of Koryŏ [Goryeo], focusing especially on the conflict between the numerous Buddhist schools by introducing the ideas of Ŭich'ŏn [Uicheon] and Chinul [Jinul], two monks who attempted to reconcile the textual Kyo [Gyo] lineages and the meditative Sŏn lineages in different ways. Cawley then moves on to the rise of Neo-Confucianism and the subsequent dynastic transition from Koryŏ to Chosŏn. Here, Cawley examines the conflicting views of the Confucian scholar Chŏng Tojŏn [Jeong Dojeon] and the Sŏn monk Kihwa [Gihwa], and presents Confucian critiques of Shamanism to highlight the establishment of Confucianism as a unified, exclusive state ideology. Chapter 4 further elaborates on this “Chosŏn Confucian ideology” through the philosophies of T'oegye [Toegye] and Yulgok. Following their contributions to the metaphysical Four-Seven debate, Cawley discusses the arrival of Western teachings and Catholicism. He emphasizes the role of women and the Chŏng [Jeong] brothers in the development of the early Catholic church in Korea, and provides a close examination of Tasan Chŏng Yag'yong's [Dasan Jeong Yagyong] texts in particular, stressing the “Christo-Confucian transcultural transformation” (111) that took place.

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the emergence of new religions in a more modern, changing cultural context, the first being Ch'oe Che-u's [Choe Jeu] Tonghak [Donghak] (Eastern Learning), which arose in response to the influence of Sŏhak [Seohak] (Western Learning). Other new religions such as Chŭngsando [Jeungsando], Daesoon Jinrihoe [Daesun jillihoe], and Taejonggyo [Daejonggyo] are also introduced. Cawley goes on to explain the development of early Protestantism in Korea and the active role women played in propagating it. Chapter 6 explores the survival and change of Korean religious traditions throughout the period of Japanese colonial rule and its aftermath. After briefly looking into some of the more recent religious movements, Cawley concludes his journey through Korean history with a special emphasis on the persistent influence of Shamanism, as it finds ways to adapt to the increasingly technology-driven modern era.

Religious and Philosophical Traditions of Korea is commendable first and foremost for its readability. Surprisingly dense for a book of its length, it is well-organized and presented in a clear, coherent fashion. Cawley does an admirable job in selecting and prioritizing the relevant material, shedding light on the social context in which various religious traditions were received and developed by the Korean people. As books on Korean religion almost invariably do, *Religious and Philosophical Traditions of Korea* emphasizes the highly multi-religious nature of Korean culture and society. It draws attention to the historical

coexistence of the three “main” East Asian religions—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—as well as the long-enduring tradition of Shamanism and the surprisingly strong presence of modern-day Christianity, which are some key characteristics of Korea’s active religious landscape. By focusing on the interactions between Korea’s religious traditions and how they often manifest in inseparable and syncretic ways, Cawley effectively shows how dynamic the intellectual history of Korea really is.

However, perhaps unsurprisingly for a study covering over two millennia’s worth of material, Cawley’s book also contains more than a few factual errors that readers must be aware of. They range from minor statistical mistakes, such as the number of passengers on the Sewol ferry on April 16, 2014 (xv), to more prominent cases of mistranslation and historical inconsistencies. Some examples include his misspelling of the word “Maripkan” (28), the Silla title for kings, as well as his explanation that the Taedong River “forms a natural border between North Korea and China” (48); in reality, the river passes through Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea.¹ He also gives the wrong Korean title for the *Flower Garland Sutra* (35) and mistakenly alternates between “Olive Green Church” and “Olive Tree Church” in referring to the religious movement founded by Pak Taeseon (only the latter term is correct), all the while failing to mention that the movement has currently been renamed Cheonbugyo. Furthermore, he confuses King Sosurim for King Kwanggaet’o [Gwanggaeto] as the Koguryō [Goguryeo] monarch who adopted Buddhism as the state religion (25), mistranslates the eighth of King Taejo’s “Ten Injunctions” (53–54),² and incorrectly lists the Neo-Confucian scholarly lineage of the late Koryō dynasty (66).³ These mistakes most likely originate from language barriers and Cawley’s dependence on secondary material and translated sources. Readers will therefore have to be careful in determining the accuracy of some of the facts presented in this book.

In addition to providing a general overview of Korean religion, one of Cawley’s main objectives is to demonstrate how these traditions continue to have a significant bearing on Korean culture today. To achieve this, he attempts to frame recent social issues in a more religio-philosophical light, suggesting possible religious explanations for said events. In the process, Cawley tends to overinterpret the influence of two traditions in particular: Confucianism and Shamanism.

1. The rivers that form the border between North Korea and China are the Amnok and Tuman rivers.

2. The original text refers to the area “south of Chahyeon and beyond the Gongju river,” rather than the city of Gongju alone as Cawley implies.

3. Yi Saek is not the son of Yi Chehyōn [Yi Jehyeon] but of Yi Kok [Yi Gok], who is in turn the disciple of Yi Chehyōn.

There is no doubt that Confucianism still lingers in contemporary Korean society, but its influence is rapidly diminishing amid globalization and the introduction of alternative ways of life—a fact Cawley seems to overlook in favor of asserting its steadfast relevance, particularly regarding the Sewol ferry disaster of 2014 and the subsequent impeachment of then president Park Geun-hye.

Furthermore, his focus on the philosophical dimension of Korean religion undermines his analysis of the role of Shamanism, which cannot be fully explained without a thorough consideration of its ritual and practical aspects. This is especially evident in his account of Shamanism in modern-day Korea. Tracing its history up to the modern era, Cawley presents a very optimistic diagnosis of the state of contemporary Shamanism by saying that “the *mudang*, their rituals and songs continue to be important and show no signs [of] diminishing in modern Korea” (77). However, we must approach this remark with caution, mainly because it is an inaccurate observation of the reality of modern Shamanism. While Shamanism continues to survive today against all odds, its influence is quite clearly in decline. The technological adaptations of the *mudang* and their increased presence on the Internet, which Cawley refers to as an “evolution” of sorts, are actually a response to this fact—it is a desperate attempt on the part of the *mudang* to adjust themselves to the changing times and keep their tradition alive in a secularized world that progressively finds less and less need for Shamanistic practices.

Cawley’s *Religious and Philosophical Traditions of Korea* demonstrates just how complex Korean religion is as a subject of academic research. But although there is definite room for improvement, these shortcomings do not take away from the fact that Cawley paints an impressively clear and concise picture of the intellectual history of Korea. Overall, he provides a decent introductory material for easing international readers into the relatively recent, complicated field of Korean religion. As Korean religion forms an integral part of Korean society and culture, I am certain scholars of Korean Studies worldwide will benefit from this book.

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Divorce in South Korea: Doing Gender and the Dynamics of Relationship Breakup by Yean-ju Lee. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2020. 192 pp.

In the span of just over a decade, South Korea transformed from a country