

ASIA 377 History of Korean Thought  
Donald Baker (University of British Columbia)

This course is labeled “the history of Korean thought.” It would be more accurately called “the history of Korean beliefs and values.” We will be spending most of our time looking at religious and philosophical beliefs and values but will also look at beliefs and values about the natural world, including the body, and therefore we also discuss medicine as well as the martial arts.

Korea is a fascinating site for an exploration of beliefs and values. It is the only country I know of in which the Buddhist and Christian communities are not that different in size. Moreover, in term of the percentage of its population that are Protestant Christians, it is the most Protestant country in Asia. It also hosts some of the world’s largest Christian congregations. However, in terms of active Confucian shrines per capita as well as in terms of the percentage of the population that regularly participates in Confucian ancestor rituals, it is also the most Confucian country in Asia. On top of that, shamanism is alive and well in Korea, even in major urban centres. In fact, there are many more shamans in Korea than there are Protestant pastors or Buddhist monks. And Korea is home to several new religions, a few of which (the Unification Church and Won Buddhism) have grown to become world religions.

Outside of religious organizations, several traditional beliefs and practices continue to thrive. Traditional medicine clinics and hospitals can be found throughout Korea (Koreans call it Oriental Medicine, but it is the Korean variant of Chinese medicine). Geomancy (Feng-sui) is still widely believed and practiced. There are centres throughout Korea teaching various versions of the internal alchemy practices often identified as Daoist by non-Koreans. And Korea is the home of several martial arts that incorporate many traditional beliefs and values in their teachings and practices (including the assumption that physical exercises can be used to build a moral character).

Though this is a history class, we will not confine ourselves to the past. Instead, we will look at the past in order to gain a better understanding of how the Korea of today came to be. Much of this class will involve discussions of what Koreans believe and do today, though that discussion will be informed by our knowledge of what Koreans believed and did in the past.

For a course of this nature, you need to keep an open mind. We are going to encounter a number of beliefs, values, and spiritual practices that are quite different from what you are accustomed to in Vancouver in 2017. We are also going to encounter significant contradictions within the realm of Korean beliefs and values. We are not concerned with whether those beliefs and values are

correct or not, or whether those practices are a waste of time. Nor are we going to try to resolve any contradictions we take note of. This is not a theology or philosophy class. Our task in this class is not to judge Korean beliefs and values but to try to understand why Koreans, both in the past and today, believe and act they way they do.

Class Requirements and Expectations:

Textbooks:

Don Baker, *Korean Spirituality* (Available as an ebook in the library)

Robert E. Buswell, Jr. ed. *The Religions of Korea in Practice*

Laurel Kendall, *The Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman*

I will also provide some additional reading material, via downloadable files from the website, to fill in the gaps the three textbooks don't cover, particularly in the area of science/natural philosophy.

The class will be lecture-discussion format. That means you will be expected to have read the assigned material and be prepared to discuss it in class. The questions on the syllabus are a guide to what will be discussed (not just lectured on) in class. Pay particular attention to the translated material in *Religions of Korea in Practice*. We will discuss that material in class. We will also discuss the material in *Korean Spirituality* and in *The Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman*.

Your grades will be based on your participation in class [10 %], as well as on one term paper (10-15 pages) [30%], a mid-term examination [25%], and a final examination [35%]. Even though there are not very many of you in this class, I may use TopHat to check and see if you are comprehending the material.

Your term paper, due the last day of class, should be 10-15 double-spaced pages long. It should discuss at least **two** different spiritual traditions (folk religion, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, or a new religion) in terms of what they have in common and how different they are from each other. If you prefer, you can instead look at what Korean pre-modern science or medicine have in common with one of those spiritual traditions. You are strongly advised to supplement the textbooks with material available in Koerner Library. Relying only on the textbooks will not be enough. However, you should check with me to

make sure the material you intend to use is acceptable. Be particularly careful of websites, especially Wikipedia.

We will be using **turnitin.com** in the class. Be very careful not to use material produced by someone else unless you cite your source, and place exact quotes in quotation marks. (Be sure to give not only the name of the source but the page number or, in the case of an acceptable website, the url and the date it was accessed.) If you are uncomfortable using TurnItIn.com, you may instead turn in your notes you used in writing the paper at the same time that you turn in the paper.

Plagiarism will be dealt with severely. The penalty for plagiarism can range from a 0 for that assignment to a failing mark for the course and a report to the dean for academic misconduct. If you are not sure what constitutes plagiarism, check out the following website:

<http://learningcommons.ubc.ca/resource-guides/avoid-plagiarism/>

## Lecture schedule for ASIA 337, 2017

We will begin with the folk religion of Korea, of which Shamanism is the most dramatic component. Then we will move on to Buddhism and see how that Chinese import was Koreanized. Next we will examine the impact of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, both as moral philosophy and, in the case of the latter, as natural philosophy. By natural philosophy, I mean Sino-Korean cosmology, mathematics, astronomy, geography, and medicine. We will also take a look at the philosophy behind the martial arts of Korea, which will mark the beginning of our focus on modern Korea. After that, we will study the Korean adoption and adaptation of Christianity. Finally, we will discuss some of the new religions of Korea, including Won Buddhism, Ch'ondo-gyo, Taejong-gyo, Daesun Jinri-hoe, and the Unification Church. We will also look at Dahn World as an example of modern Korean Daoism.

Sept. 6 Introduction to Korea's religious culture

11 Spirituality in Korea, past and present

Read *Korean Spirituality*, chapter 1,  
*Religions of Korea in Practice*, pp. 1-31

What does the term "religion" mean in a Korean context?

What is the difference between religion and spirituality?

How has religiosity changed in Korea since the 19th century?

What have been the central problems of the Korean spiritual search?

13 folk religion and shamanism Read *Korean Spirituality*, chapter 2  
plus *Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman*, pp 1-30

What is the difference between animism and shamanism?

Is shamanism a religion?

Are village rituals religious?

18 Read *Religions of Korea in Practice*, pp. 233-352

plus *Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman*, pp. 32-84

What sorts of spirits do shamans interact with?

Do you see any evidence of monotheism in Korean shamanism?

Do you see any Buddhist influence on Korean shamanism?

Sept. 19 last day to drop without a W.

20 More on Shamanism

Finish *Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman*, pp. 85-127.

What is the social status of a shaman in 20th-century Korea?

Does Yongsu's mother believe in what she does or is she simply a skillful actor?

What is the shamanic explanation for illness and misfortune?

How does a charismatic shaman become a shaman?

25 Buddhism, philosophical and popular

Read *Korean Spirituality*, pp. 30-42

How is Buddhism different from Korea's folk religion?

What is the difference between philosophical and popular Buddhism?

Is it fair to label Korean Buddhism "syncretic"?

27 Read *Korean Spirituality*, pp. 94-112

What is the difference between anthropocentric and anthropomorphic religion?

Are Buddhists theists?

Are Buddhists monotheists?

Can someone be a Buddhist and yet not believe in God?

Is Buddhism a religion or just a philosophy?

Oct. 2 Read *Religions of Korea in Practice*, pp. 35-160

What was the relationship between Buddhism and the state in traditional Korea?

Do Buddhists believe in miracles?

What was the relationship between Buddhism and geomancy?

What is the role of the Healing Buddha in Korean Buddhism?

4 Discussion of Korean Buddhism:

- What impact has Buddhism had on Korean culture?
- How is Korean Buddhism different from Buddhism in other countries?
- Who are the most important Buddhist thinkers in Korean history?
- Which are the most important deities in popular Korean Buddhism?

No class on 9th--Thanksgiving

11 Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism

- Read *Korean Spirituality*, pp. 42-57
- What is distinctive about Confucian ethics?
- What is the purpose of Confucian ritual?
- What is the difference between Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism?
- How important was Daoism in pre-modern Korea?

16 Read *Religions of Korea in Practice*, pp. 163-230.

- Did Confucians worship Confucius? Was he seen as divine?
- What was the Confucian criticism of Buddhism?
- What was the relationship between Confucianism and geomancy?
- What was the relationship between women and Confucianism?

18 Read *Korean Spirituality*, pp. 112-113, 122-28, plus “the ethics of Koreans.”

- Should Neo-Confucianism be described as atheistic?
- What is the relationship between religion and morality in Korea?
- What religion has had the greatest influence on Korean ethical principles?

**23 Mid-term**

25 traditional science Read “Medicine in Korea”

Available on-line via UBC Library. Find

- Is Korean traditional medicine any different from traditional Chinese medicine?
- What role does Ki (Qi) play in traditional medicine?
- What is “four constitutions” medicine?

30 Read “premodern science”

- Does traditional science have anything in common with pre-modern religion?
- What role does the pattern perspective play in pre-modern science?
- What was the relationship between astronomy and astrology?  
(What are portents?)
- Which traditional sciences have survived into the modern world?

- Nov. 1 What role does P'ungsu (Feng Shui) play in Korean culture?  
What role does Ki play in P'ungsu?  
Can P'ungsu be considered a form of pre-modern science or is it mere superstition?  
Are the martial arts of East Asia a form of spirituality?

6 Christianity

- Read *Korean Spirituality*, chapter 4.  
Is it accurate to call Christianity theocentric rather than anthropocentric?  
How did Christianity change Korea's religious culture?  
How did Korea's Protestant Christianity manage to grow larger than the Catholic community, despite starting much later?

13 No classes--Remembrance day

- 15 Read *Religions of Korea in Practice*, pp. 355-443  
Does Christianity belong in a book on Korean religions?  
How does Catholicism in Korea differ from Catholicism elsewhere?  
Is Protestant Christianity in Korea different from Christianity elsewhere?  
What is the status of women in Korean Christian circles?

- 17 Read *Korean Spirituality*, pp.114-116, 132-144.  
How did Christian theology change the way Koreans think about gods?  
How do Christian worship services differ from traditional religious rituals?  
Why do you think group pilgrimages have become popular in Korea recently?

- 22 North Korea Read *Korean Spirituality*, pp. 145-151  
What is the state of religion in North Korea today?  
Does a discussion of Juche thought belong in a book on Korean religion?

- 24 Read *Religions of Korea in Practice*, pp. 517-533  
What is the core idea behind Juche thought?  
How does Juche thought define a human being?  
Do you see any Confucian elements in Juche thought?

- 27 New religions Read *Korean Spirituality*, chapter 5, plus 116-121,128-132  
What is new about "new religions"?  
What is the "religion of the heavenly way"?  
What are the Chŭngsan family of religions?  
Is the Unification Church a Christian denomination?

29 More on New Religions. Read “Constructing Korea’s Won Buddhism” and “Dahn World”

Is Dahn World a religious organization?

Is Won Buddhism a new religion?

What is the religion called Daejonggyo?

Dec. 1 Read *Religions of Korea in Practice*, pp. 449-513

Do you see any Christian influence on Korea’s new religions?

Are Ch’ondogyo rituals theocentric or anthropocentric?

How does Taejonggyo criticize the Christian concept of God?

Is Won Buddhism really a new religion?

Why do some people believe in Chŭngsan’gyo?