

Women and men in Korean churches: reconciling divided social, political and spiritual traditions

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The Guardian (28 September 2006) reported that Confucianism is undergoing a revival in its homeland – China. Confucius' high moral values and vision of a stable, humane, and harmonious society are seen as one way of renewing the ethical foundations of Chinese life after the shift to ultra-materialistic capitalism. But this is Confucianism with a difference – in post-communist Confucianism, women will be regarded as equal to men.

Although Confucius (551-479 BCE) lived and taught in China, it was China's neighbour, Korea, which took his teaching most seriously. For five hundred years, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, Korean society was organised on the principles of Confucian teaching, as interpreted by the twelfth-century philosopher Zhu Xi (Chu Hsi). Confucianism is based on ancient texts that advocate conformity to the law of Heaven, or Ultimate Reality, which centres on loyalty – especially the filial piety of a son to his father. Other important aspects of the Confucian social order are: obedience to rulers, respect for elders, loyalty in friendship, and subservience of wife to husband. The “three Confucian followings,” laid down for women, were deeply ingrained in Korean society: a woman started by following her father, then she followed her husband, then she followed her son. In this strongly patriarchal tradition, women's and men's roles were strictly demarcated, and the domestic life of women was enclosed within the public world inhabited by men.

Confucianism includes an even more ancient philosophy that has profound implications for the relations of men and women. *Yin* and *yang* are the complementary forces that explain the whole of life. *Yin* (*üm* in Korean) is thought of as female, and *yang* as male. As images of male and female, they correspond closely to stereotypes of masculine and feminine found in other societies; however they are not only applied to gender distinctions but used to explain, and therefore unite or distinguish, all other polarities. *Yin*, female, includes the concepts of earth, dark, cold, old, weak, passive, intuitive, and absorbing; *yang*, male, includes their opposites of heaven, light, hot, young, strong, active, rational, and penetrating. *Yin-yang* philosophy is so significant for Korean culture that its symbol appears in the centre of the South Korean flag as a circle divided exactly into *yin* (blue) and *yang* (red) halves by a wavy line. This representation of *yin-yang* is horizontal with the *yang* – red, meaning heaven and male – above the *yin* – blue, meaning earth and female. This is indicative of the way in which *yin-yang* philosophy has tended to be used in Korea, not to promote harmony and reconciliation, but to sanction oppressive rule and male domination.¹

Confucianism, as practised in Korea, is perceived as men's religion, not only because of the social advantage it gives to men and because only men could perform the central rituals that honoured the ancestors, but also because its concern with the law of heaven, its social and political agenda, and its stress on order and book-learning are associated with *yang*. Instead, women have practised popular Buddhism, or the even more ancient rituals of shamanism, in order to solve domestic problems and bring blessing on their loved ones. The shaman may use forms of divination to tell fortunes and discern the spirits of Korean traditional religion, give practical or medical advice, and make offerings to the spirits. If matters are serious, she may communicate with angry or playful spirits in a trance-like state, and exorcise or placate them through ecstatic dancing to the beat of drums. Shamanistic practices are *yin* because of their association with the earth and natural forces, their preoccupation with home and family matters, and the unrestrained nature of their practice. So they are despised by the elite as "women's religion" and "superstition". Though, in time of trouble, many men will also turn to them.

The first Protestant missionaries in Korea in the late nineteenth century challenged Confucian norms when they started mass education for women, and encouraged them to read their Bibles and go out as evangelists. In this society, where women had to cover themselves outside, it was necessary in the first churches for women and men to be separated by a screen running from the front to the back of the church. The first woman was baptised by sticking the top of head through a hole in the screen so the minister did not need to set eyes on her! The church in Korea became indigenised through a series of revival movements. Ryu Tong-Shik (Yu Tong-shik) has argued that there were two distinct patterns of revival, or "Holy Spirit movement". The first, the movement led by Kil Sŏn-chu from 1907, emphasised Bible reading and dawn prayer meetings, and its leader was not only a religious but also a political leader. Ryu refers to this as "paternal", meaning that it followed a Confucian pattern and was led by the elite. The second was the movement led by Lee Yong-do in 1928-33. This was a more mystical movement, emphasising personal faith and healing. Ryu calls it "maternal", meaning that it was a mass movement, appealing to popular religiosity of a shamanistic type.² Still today, the Korean Protestant churches generally represent these two patterns of religious life within themselves as two different faces of Christianity: a Confucian face in the formal, male-led services on Sunday morning, and a shamanistic face in the more charismatic prayer meetings and cell groups held during the week, in which women may play a leading role. Though Korean society has been through many upheavals and changes in the twentieth century, ordination and writing theology remained the preserve of men until very recently.

When the distinctively Korean *minjung* theology emerged in the 1970s as part of work for human rights and better working conditions, Ryu identified it as a "paternal" movement.³ Feminist theologians also described it this way, in the pejorative sense of "andro (male)-centric". Though its leading theologian Suh Nam-Dong described women's experience as epitomising the experience of the oppressed,⁴ feminist theologians found the *minjung* theologians – who were male – were preoccupied with anti-colonial and socio-economic categories, and did not take patriarchal oppression seriously. Furthermore, women were not the subjects, in the sense of the doers of *minjung* theology, and so they felt their experience and spirituality were

not recognised, even though they themselves were included among the *minjung* whom *minjung* theologians profess to be hearing.⁵ Consequently, though they also professed a theology of liberation, Korean feminist theologians generally saw it as the theology of an elite – that is, it follows a Confucian, top-down model. Instead they chose a different framework for their theology. Korean feminist theologians claimed to be recovering “a gut feeling” deriving from “our foremothers’ spirituality” in the shamanistic tradition, rather than using “masculine” ideologies,⁶ and so their “maternal” discourse and activity was largely separate from the “paternal” movement.

In 1991 at the World Council of Churches assembly in Canberra, the young Korean Methodist woman, Chung Hyun Kyung, opted to give her plenary presentation on the conference theme – “Come, Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation” – by playing the role of a shaman, accompanied by drummers and dancers.⁷ Chung’s presentation was roundly condemned by Korean church leaders on theological grounds as heretical, syncretistic and “intuitive” rather than “theological” but the reasons for the vehemence of the attack also have much to do with her low status as “young, obscure ... female theologian”.⁸ Furthermore, her affirmation of shamanistic elements of Korean faith was socially, as well as religiously, unacceptable. Far from hearing her plea for alternatives to oppressive, dogmatic theologies, the tone of the criticism was indicative of the patriarchal attitudes against which her message was directed. She was accused of “bewitching” the World Council of Churches.⁹

Chung’s presentation at Canberra was radical, and it did not represent a rounded Christian theological position, but in many ways, she connected with popular Korean Christian themes. Surprisingly for a liberal theologian, her spirit-language related more closely to a very different movement – Korean Pentecostalism. This is dominated by the “full gospel” theology of David (formerly Paul) Yonggi Cho (Cho Yonggi in Korean), who founded Yoido Full Gospel Church (YFGC), which now claims the largest membership of any local church in the world – 760,000. Though he rejects the spirits of shamanism as evil, like Chung, Cho uses the language of many spirits and embraces an agenda of problem-solving for theology.¹⁰ Both affirm the supremacy of the Holy Spirit or Spirit of life above all the others, condemn an evil force which is defeated though active, and recognise a complex spirit-world. However, in Cho’s case the spirit-world is supernatural, whereas Chung uses the language as a metaphor for socio-political forces.

Ryu classified Cho’s “full gospel” movement as “maternal”.¹¹ This does not necessarily signal female leadership, but Cho does readily recognise the tremendous influence of his mother-in-law, Choi Ja-shil in his healing and his ministry. His wife, Sung-hae Kim also has her own ministry, and is given the title “reverend” by the Full Gospel Church. Although all the church’s ordained clergy – as listed on their website¹² – are men, Cho’s cell group leaders are often women, and these are counted as church workers so, taking all the employed leaders together, there are almost as many women leaders as men. This is a much higher proportion of women leaders than is usual for Korean churches. It is true that Cho’s leadership style and teaching also display many “paternal” characteristics, and today the Full Gospel Church has political aspirations. Nevertheless, Cho began by his ministry in 1958 by proclaiming hope for the displaced masses in the wake of the Korean War. He addressed their poverty by his doctrine of blessing and their sickness by his

healing ministry. And it is informal, grassroots ministry and evangelism – mainly of women – that has been the basis of his church’s growth.¹³

None of these theologies – *minjung*, feminist, or full gospel – is typical of mainstream Korean Christianity, which is broadly described as conservative evangelical and represented mainly by Presbyterian and Methodist denominations. The situation there is illustrated by two buildings near the centre of Seoul. One is the headquarters of the Presbyterian Church of Korea, built to commemorate its centenary in 1985. It is five stories high with two basement floors – a fine building made with the best materials. Apart from secretaries, almost all its office-holders are men. Very nearby is another impressive building: twenty-two storeys high and very well equipped with office, hotel and conference accommodation. It is the headquarters of the women’s association of the same denomination. While being excluded from the leadership of the patriarchal institution of the church, women have nevertheless been faithful in the roles assigned to them within it, and at the same time, they have developed a powerful parallel organisation of their own to fulfil Christ’s commission in their own way.

Women have been ordained in the Presbyterian Church of Korea for more than a decade, but old patterns persist, and women pastors tend to be responsible for the Sunday school, music, or other specialities, rather than ministering as leaders of congregations. Surely now that, in Christianity, both paternal and maternal forms of religion are part of the same organisation of the church, there is the possibility of overcoming some of the long-held prejudices of each gendered form of religious expression toward the other, and see both as contributing to fullness of life in Christ? By bringing both together, the church is playing a reconciling role in Korean society between different realms, which have long been associated with men and women respectively: between formality and informality, rationality and intuition, discipline and emotion, between politics and domestic life, passion and compassion, establishing justice and interceding for healing. As a body, in which there is no longer male and female (Gal 3.28 NRSV), the Korean church is both paternal and maternal in ministry and mission.

¹ Cf. Jong Chun Park, *Crawl with God, dance in the Spirit! A creative formation of Korean theology of the Spirit*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998, p 156

² Ryu, Tong-Shik, *The mineral veins of Korean theology (Han’guk shinhak-üi kwangmaek)* rvsd edn. Seoul: Tasan Kulbang, 2000; first published 1982, pp 414-19

³ Ryu, Tong-Shik, *The mineral veins of Korean theology (Han’guk shinhak-üi kwangmaek)* rvsd edn. Seoul: Tasan Kulbang, 2000; first published 1982, pp 419-22

⁴ Suh, Nam-Dong, “Towards a theology of *han*” in Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia (ed.), *Minjung theology: people as the subjects of history*. London: Zed Press, 1983, 55-69, see p 58

⁵ Choi, Hee An, *Korean women and God: experiencing God in a multi-religious colonial context*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005, pp 4-5, 98, 103-104; Chung, Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the sun again: introducing Asian women’s theology*. London: SCM Press, 1991, pp 109-111

⁶ Lee, Oo Chung, *In search of our foremothers’ spirituality*. Seoul: Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1994

⁷ Chung, Hyun Kyung, “Come, Holy Spirit – renew the whole creation” in Michael Kinnamon (ed.), *Signs of the Spirit*. Official report of the seventh assembly of the World Council of Churches, Canberra, 1991. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991, 37-47

⁸ Bong Rin Ro, "Theological debates in Korea after Canberra" in Bong Rin Ro & Bruce J. Nicholls (eds.), *Beyond Canberra: evangelical responses to contemporary ecumenical issues*. Oxford: Regnum Books, 1993, 53-59, pp 54, 55-58

⁹ Han, Sung-hong, *Streams of Korean theological thought (Han'guk-shinhak-sasang-üi hürüm)*, Seoul: Presbyterian College and Theological Seminary Press 1996, Vol. II, pp 517, 513, 497

¹⁰ David Yonngi Cho, *The fourth dimension: more secrets for a successful faith life*. Vol II. Secunderabad, India: Ben Publishing, 1999; first published 1983

¹¹ Ryu, Tong-Shik, *The mineral veins of Korean theology (Han'guk shinhak-üi kwangmaek)* rvsd edn. Seoul: Tasan Kulbang, 2000; first published 1982, pp 422-26

¹² <http://www.fgtv.com/>

¹³ David Yonngi Cho, *The Holy Spirit, my senior partner: understanding the Holy Spirit and His gifts*. Milton Keynes, UK: Word Publishing, 1989, 20-29