

Korea: Culture and Values

A Teacher's Guide



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Unit Four: Religion and Ethics

Materials: Background, slides

Objectives: Students will be introduced to the basic tenets of Korean religious and ethical traditions.
Explore the role of these systems in both traditional and modern Korean society.
Appreciate the impact of religion and ethics on the arts.

Background: **RELIGION AND SOCIAL VALUES**
by Seok-Choon Lew

The social values of contemporary South Korea reflect the synthesis and development of diverse influences, both indigenous and foreign. Shamanism, the oldest indigenous religion, goes back to prehistoric times and is based on belief in a world inhabited by spirits. The Shaman is the sorceress or priest who attempts to mediate with the spirits or to appease them, thus preventing natural disasters and curing illness. Shamanists believe that these spirits have the power to influence or change the fortunes of people.

Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism were introduced to Korea from China long before the Christian era. Taoism and Buddhism are highly disciplined philosophic religions that stress personal salvation through the renunciation of worldly desire. On the other hand, Confucianism is a social ethic that provides a this-worldly-oriented moral code of conduct, whose chief virtues are filial piety and a combination of loyalty and reverence. The worship of ancestral spirits, as prescribed by Confucian ritual, forms a dominant mode of religious expression.

The introduction of Christianity in Korea is a relatively recent phenomenon, compared with other foreign value systems. This introduction took place during the nineteenth century. Despite its short history in Korea, Christianity played a significant role in the modernization of the country and in the struggle for national independence against Japan. Encouraged by these contributions to national development, about a tenth of the South Korean population is now Christian.

Given the great diversity of religious expression, the role of religion in South Korea's social

development has been a complex one. A concern with moral principles is deeply rooted in the Korean tradition. The Confucian ideal of the superior individual who chooses to act on the basis of an abstract ethical code is a fundamental part of a Korean world view. Therefore, most Koreans seem to take for granted the conventional sociological notion that normal behavior is motivated by shared values rather than by a determinist factor of an economic nature or by an individual's rational assessment of alternative courses of action. Similarly, the failure to act properly is almost invariably attributed to an inadequate education in morality.

Thus, in Korea, the ethical emphasis is on social obligation and propriety rather than on the struggles of an individual conscience to achieve personal salvation by means of direct transactions with the supernatural. Moreover, religious beliefs practiced in contemporary Korea tend to be syncretistic. There is no exact or exclusive criterion by which each believer can be identified because there is nothing contradictory in one person visiting and praying at Buddhist temples, participating in Confucian ancestor rites, and even consulting a Shaman. The contrasting perspective of Western Christianity adds to the complexity of the contemporary situation. This is probably one reason why Christianity, when proclaiming exclusive possession of the truth, appeared to lack harmony with the tradition of exiting faith, especially Confucianism.

Excerpted from "Life in South Korea Today" *The Social Studies* (July/August 1988).

Introduction

Below are some suggestions for discussion to introduce this unit.

We have spoken about how a nation might be organized in terms of the functions that people perform. What are other ways in which people can come together in social groups? For example, sports teams, political parties, or religion.

Discuss why people come together in these kinds of groups. One reason may be shared beliefs. Discuss the kinds of beliefs people might share. In eighteenth-century Korea there were several religious systems that the people shared.

Slides

Slide 9 *Epitaph Tablets and Container*
Dated 1710
Porcelain painted with underglaze blue

Exercise

Q: What are we looking at?

A: Flat blocks with writing. A dish with a cover.

Q: Can you tell what they are made of?

A: They look solid. They are made of porcelain.

Q: Why would you write on a material like this?

A: It would last.

Q: What are some kinds of things you might want to write?

A: It would be something important or valuable, given the material. These tablets contain a record of the birthday, origins, and achievements of a deceased person.

Q: Where might you place something like this?

A: They were placed in front of a grave. Sometimes they were buried with the deceased person.

Q: Why would you do this?

A: To remember someone, to pay respect to someone, perhaps to gain the blessings of the deceased, to make sure that the deceased received what was due them in the afterlife.

Q: Who might you do this for?

A: An important person, a family member, someone you loved and respected.

In Confucianism, it is crucial that proper relationships between people be maintained for the world to function properly. Family relationships are one of the most important of these. Respect towards one's parents and piety towards the spirits of the ancestors are a keystone of Confucian belief. Therefore, important rituals are performed for ancestors. A family shrine is established when the head of a family dies. Memorial services are conducted throughout the year to honor him and earlier generations. Inscribed tablets, the number of which varied depending on the importance of the person eulogized, as well as ritual vessels of various shapes to hold food and flowers, candles, and pictures were placed on the altar of the shrine.

Q: What do you think the other object could have been used for?

A: It held the tablets.

Slide

Slide 10 *Assembly at the Western Paradise*

Dated 1703

Hanging banner; color on silk

Exercise

Q: Who is the most important figure in this picture? How can we tell?

A: The figure in the center. He is bigger and is seated on a pedestal, has a larger circle around his head and a circle around his body.

Q: Is he an ordinary human being or someone special? How can we tell?

A: He has a lump on the top of his head, very large ears, a halo around his head. He is someone special. He is the Buddha and the characteristics mentioned above are the special signs that identify him. In Korea, many people follow his teachings, which tell people how they may escape from the sufferings of the world, and reach the state of nirvana just as he did.

Q: Describe the other people in the picture.

A: They are smaller, more elaborately dressed (you may want the children to compare the clothing to that of the Buddha, which is simpler), arranged around the Buddha in a circle, each holds different things. They are bodhisattvas who postpone reaching nirvana to help other people. They remain in the world and, therefore, wear elaborate jewels and clothing, unlike the Buddha who wears a simple monk's robe.

Q: In what kind of place is he sitting?

A: The background is the sky. This is the Amitabha Buddha in his Western Paradise. Buddhists worship him so that they may be reborn in the Western Paradise, instead of having to be reborn in this world.

Q: Where would a picture like this be placed? and why?

A: In a temple so that anyone who wanted to could ask for the Buddha's blessing.

Q: Can you think of any other kinds of blessings people would ask for?

A: Success and happiness in their lives.

Slide

Slide 11 *Mountain Spirit*

Late Choson

Hanging scroll; color on silk

Exercise

Q: What is the central image? Describe his appearance, dress.

A: An old man with a beard. He holds a walking staff and a fan.

Q: What else do you see?

A: He is seated beside a pine tree and is accompanied by his messenger, the tiger.
(Tigers are native to Korea.)

Q: Can you see what the man and the tiger have in common?

A: Both are old.

Q: With what do we associate old age?

A: Wisdom, closeness to the spirits, nature. Nature as good. Why? Nature deities as protective and merciful.

This is the Mountain Spirit. He is the most popular figure in the native Korean religious tradition, which looks to the forces of nature and is important in the affairs of men. The Mountain Spirit is usually shown as an old man with a beard.

According to Korean mythology, the ancestor of the Korean people was a great hero named Tan'gun, who founded Korea. When Tan'gun died he became the Mountain Spirit. His popularity results from his ability to bestow children. Traditionally, the first duty of a wife was to bear children, especially males who would continue the family. In addition, the Mountain Spirit was said to grant long life.

Q: Where might you place this?

A: A special place, where people could come to see it.

Although the Mountain Spirit was part of the native tradition, his popularity was so great that almost every Buddhist temple had a shrine dedicated to him in which a scroll like this would have hung. People came to pray and leave offerings at these shrines.

Slide

Slide 5 *Sun, Moon and Five Peaks*

Exercise

Q: We have already seen this screen. We looked at it to examine what role in Korean society?

A: The role of the king.

Q: Into which of the religious traditions would this screen fit? and why?

A: The idea of the proper role of the king as head of the state who ensures the proper balance and harmony in the world is Confucian.

The notion of the importance of nature—the mountains, sun, moon, and water—is part of the Korean tradition that sees the forces of nature as critical to the proper functioning of the world.

Additional Slides

The following are suggestions for additional slides that may be used to expand this unit:

Topic Confucianism

Slide 4 *Royal Edict* (see Unit 2) and

Slide 5 *Sun, Moon, and Five Peaks* (see Unit 3)

Discuss the proper role of the king in the Confucian system.

Slide 6 *Writing Table* and

Slide 12 *Wrapping Cloth* (see Unit 5)

Discuss the role of proper family relationships in the Confucian system.

Discussion

Lower School

1. Discuss how each of the three religious systems would be incorporated into the life of an individual.
2. Confucianism was adopted as the national religion during the Choson dynasty. Discuss why it was a system suited for this role.
3. Many Koreans today are Christians. Discuss the ways in which this system could/could not be integrated into Korea's traditional religious and ethical systems.

Middle School

1. Discuss the value systems that are inherent in each of the three religious traditions.