

What Is Korean Culture Anyway?

– A Critical Review –

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Abstract

Korean culture discourse became very popular during the 1990s. One of the recent currents in Korean culture theory is that the traditional value system still continues and has had an important role in present Korean economic situation. These currents are well represented by the group of scholars related to the journal *Jontong gua Hyundae* (Tradition and Modernity) and also by another group related to the International Association for Korean Studies. In order to analyze their position in depth, I chose one representative scholar, Choe Jun-sik.

My critique of Choe's works reveals that his delineation of Korean culture is a simplistic one. His tendency to ignore the contexts in which values are produced and reproduced makes him believe values are the causal factors in social dynamics. Diverse individuals, who are sometimes in conflict, are ignored and instead the united Korean nation and thus its boundedness are presupposed. Because he falls into this trap, even when he tries to introduce the concept of cultural traffic across the border into his work, he faces difficulties in giving proper meaning to the concept of cultural traffic.

Keywords: Korean culture, traditional values, continuity, boundary, cultural traffic, group dynamics, context

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Introduction

Korean culture discourse became very popular during the 1990s. Yu Hong-jun's *My Field-trip to Korean Cultural Heritage*, which sold over a million copies, is the best example. This discourse of Korean culture often took an essentialist view on Korean culture (Kweon 1998, 188, 191).

One of the recent trends in Korean culture theory is that the traditional value system still continues and has had an important role in present Korean economic development and downturn. These currents are well represented by the group of academics related to the journal *Jontong gua Hyundae* (Tradition and Modernity) and also by another academic group related to the the International Association for Korean Studies (Gukje Hanguk Hakhoe).¹

In order to analyze their approach to Korean culture in depth, I chose one representative scholar who is currently the most prolific academic writer on Korean culture. Even though they have many delicate differences, I believe that my critical review of a representative scholar will show various problems in their theoretical framework of Korean culture.

I chose Choe Jun-sik because he is not only the leader of the group² but is also the most prolific writer among them. He also received a lot of attention from newspapers because he was able to deal with controversial contemporary issues in Korean culture.

His books include *The Story of Korean Religion* (1995), *Do Koreans Have Culture?* (1997), *Reading Korean Religion Through Culture*, 2 vols. (1998, 2000a), *Who Says Koreans Have No Culture* (2000b),

1. Since the diverse currents of the approaches to Korean culture are well classified in Kweon Sug-In's paper in this issue, it is not necessary to explain them further here.

2. He has been the president of the International Association for Korean Studies from its foundation. He majored in history during his undergraduate studies at Sogang University and in religion during his graduate studies at Temple University. He is now teaching in the Department of Korean Studies at Ewha Womans University. He is also the chairperson of The Edu-Performance Group for Korean Arts (Hanguk Munhwa Pyohyeondan).

Korean Beauty: The Aesthetics of Free-spiritedness (2000c), Why Do Koreans Reject the Conventional Mode? (2002a), Beyond Cola Independence (2002b), and Sell Korea (2002c).

My critique of his discourse on Korean culture serves to both sharpen approaches to Korean culture study, and to delineate exactly what Korean culture is. A case critique of a discourse on Korean culture can reveal what the problems of present Korean culture discourses are and can urge scholars, including me, to rethink their approaches to the study of Korean culture.

There is a lack of meta-discourse on Korean culture among Korean scholars. Critiques on theoretical points of a specific scholar are avoided because it is often considered as a personal attack on that specific scholar. Instead, scholars try to focus on whether a certain aspect of Korean culture is right or wrong. By focusing on a specific item, they hope to discover what aspect of culture is right or wrong. But theoretical perspectives, even though they are more important in understanding Korean culture, are seldom critiqued and discussed.

My focus is not whether certain Korean cultural elements discussed in the author's texts are right or wrong. Instead, I want try to focus on his framework of conceptualizing Korean culture in order to reveal that his framework on Korean culture already presupposes what Korean culture should be and to show that Korean culture can be delineated in a very different way. Similar problems are also found in many other scholars' framework on Korean culture.

What Is Korean Culture?

"Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (Williams 1976, 76). This is mainly because "it has come to be used for important concepts in several distinct disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thoughts" (Williams 1976, 76). This is also true for the Korean concept of culture (*munhwa*); it is also used in widely different contexts and implies widely different meanings.

In order to understand the major currents of the concept of culture, Yi (2001) stipulates four major concepts of culture as below.

Civilization

In this sense, "culture" refers to the total achievement of human beings as being superior to animals "in the abstract sense of a general process of becoming 'civilized' or 'cultivated'" (Williams 1976, 78).

Way of Life

This concept of culture was popularized by anthropologists in the late nineteenth century. When anthropologists did fieldwork with tribal societies, they tried to show all aspects of their subjects' lives. While some British anthropologists, such as Radcliff-Brown emphasized social organization as the core of culture (Radcliff-Brown 1958; Firth 1964), others, such as Ruth Benedict (1934, 1946) and Margaret Mead (1935), considered personality the core of culture, since they thought that people act according to their personality in everyday life. Still other anthropologists tried to show all aspects of tribal life in ethnography, since they were not sure whether the core concept existed or not.

System of Thoughts, Meanings, and Symbols

From the 1960s, anthropologists focused on systems of meaning. Clifford Geertz (1973) defined culture as a web of significance and tried to reveal the multi-layered world of meaning through heavy description.

Arts and Leisure Activities

"Culture" in this sense is increasingly used by contemporary mass media to mean mass culture, play, taste, and the arts. Some scholars in various disciplines also use this concept of culture.

Even though Choe does not clearly define culture, his concept of

culture is similar to that of Benedict and Mead. Benedict saw that a cultural pattern integrates customs into a patterned whole. She considered “cultures as taking on distinct characters as an integrating principle which infiltrated and pervaded every component of life,” and Mead described Benedict “as believing that cultures were ‘personalities writ large’” (Applebaum 1987, 68). From this perspective, the individual personalities of the members of a society are tiny replicas of their overall culture, while their culture is the summation of their personalities.

Choe also believes that Korean culture contains “dominant values writ large.” He presupposes that major dimensions of Korean culture can be represented by the widely shared values of Koreans. Because values are handed down from previous generations, they cause people to act according to the existing values, persuading them to believe that this is the right and proper way to act. Accordingly, Choe’s concept of Korean culture focuses on the shared values of Koreans. This vision of Korean culture causes Choe to treat Korean culture as being represented by several prevalent values in Korea, such as high collectivism, authoritarianism (*gwonwijuui*), high anxiety, long-term orientation, and high enthusiasm (*sinmyeong*). These values, vested in Korean interactions or organizational relations, are considered the core of and unique to Korean culture. This concept of culture is continued in Choe’s various works. He explains (2000c, 2002a) Korean aesthetics through such values or norms as ecstasy, unconventionality (*pagyeok*), deviation (*iltal*), free-spiritedness (*jayubunbangham*), and rejection of the conventional mold (*teul geobu*). He also notes the influence of religion on values for human relations when he deals with religion as culture (1998, 2000a).

Choe’s theoretical tendencies indicate that his concept of Korean culture is greatly influenced by Hofstede’s concept of culture. Choe (1997) even professes in his introduction that he was greatly influenced by Hofstede’s writings (Hofstede 1980, 1991). Hofstede (1991; Hofstede and Bond 1988) compares data from various countries for variables such as individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and Confucian dynamics.

Hofstede’s work (1991) focuses on the culture of organizational relations, especially the value principles of human relations, because he thinks that the cultural base of human relations determines the effectiveness of the organization of a specific society. Since Hofstede is interested in the effectiveness and differences of cross-cultural organizations, he focuses on what causes the differential effectiveness among cross-cultural organizations in various cultures.

Even though Choe considers this framework of Hofstede to be a grand theory of culture and writes that it explains most aspects of cultural phenomenon (Choe 1997, 24), Choe does not explain why the five variables are important in understanding Korean culture. Hofstede uses five variables because he thinks they are important in understanding organizational behaviors. Does Choe also want to analyze Korean culture in terms of organizational behaviors and effectiveness? He seems to understand Korean culture from a behavioral perspective because he seems to think Korean behavior is determined by Korean values. Are values, then, the most important aspect of culture? For Choe, at least, they are.

Choe, however, does not clearly define culture in his works. Even the works (1997, 1998, 2000a, 2000b) whose titles include the word “culture” do not really define culture. Instead, he uses the term “culture” in various contexts. He sometimes treats traits of Korean values as Korean culture (1997, 1998, 2000a, 2000c, 2002a, 2002c), and he also considers heritage (2000b), or lifestyles (2002b) to be culture.

Who Says Koreans Have No Culture? (2000b) is a response to his earlier work, Do Koreans Have Culture? (1997). While the earlier work deals with Korean cultural principles in the forming of Korean human relations, his later work treats Korean religions, such as shamanism and Confucianism, as the basic framework for Korean values, and thus for Korean human relations as well. Why Do Koreans Reject the Conventional Mold? (2002a) also considers religion, especially the ecstasy and free-spiritedness of shamanism, to be the basic framework for Korean behaviors.

In Part 2 of Who Says Koreans Have No Culture?, he divides cul-

ture into the spiritual and the material. He introduces cultural heritage materials as evidence of the splendor of Korean culture. However, in dealing with cultural heritage materials, he merely explains why each Korean material heritage is positive or superior in terms of technique and aesthetics. He introduces taegwondo (a Korean martial art), Korean mass culture (movie and pop songs), gimchi (pickled cabbage), and bibimbap (mixed rice) as examples of positive Korean cultural materials. Yet in *Beyond Cola Independence*, he treats lifestyles as culture.

The key to Choe's concept of Korean culture, though, is values. His numerous references to Korean culture can be replaced by Korean "values," "norms," or "personality" with no loss of meaning. For him, Korean culture is virtually synonymous with Korean "values." With respect to Korean culture, he is less concerned with its structure of the wills of Koreans than with the values that inform people's actions. He sees Korean culture as a concept to be subjected to socio-psychological analysis.

This concept of Korean culture has several serious problems. First, it reduces the diverse nature of Korean culture to a few socio-psychological traits. His narrow concept of culture leads to a distorted view of the complex Korean culture as the simple dynamics of a few value systems. By replacing Korean culture with Korean values, he ignores the greater diversity in Korean culture and oversimplifies and overgeneralizes the dynamics of Korean culture.

Second, the study of Korean culture based on values tends to overemphasize the continuity and importance of values through Korean history. Prevalent values are thought to shape Korean minds, and thus also to shape Korean behavior. Once values are rooted in the Korean mind, it is very difficult to change them. In this system of connections, there is no way to change values from within the system.

In anthropology, basic modal personalities or national characters were once used to explain culture in the same manner as Choe uses values. Like those anthropologists who focused on personality and culture, Choe tends "to view culture and personality (or values or norms), as so intimately related and interdependent as to constitute merely dif-

ferent labels or, at most, different ways of looking at the same phenomena" (Kaplan and Manners 1972, 135, my parenthetical).

Korean culture consists of not only Korean values and norms, but also patterns of Korean meaning and behavior. If culture can be seen in this way, values play a considerable but only partial role in a culture. Values partially cause actions. But this approach is inadequate because the causal influences between values and actions are intertwined. Other cultural aspects of meaning, thought and cognition also influence actions. The interplay of values and acts should also be more carefully approached. Other social, economic, political, and cultural elements should also be more carefully considered in understanding human actions. In light of these problems, it is not appropriate to narrow Korean culture to Korean values.

Group Dynamics in Korean Culture

Since Choe believes Korean culture consists of prevalent Korean values, he defines Korean culture as those values which have appeared historically and most frequently in Korea. Korean culture is considered to be enacted by most Koreans. In this context, Korean culture is also treated as uniform because Korean culture is described as consisting of the prevalent values of homogeneous Koreans.

With the exception of *Why Do Koreans Reject the Conventional Mold* (2002a), he seldom explains the relationship between culture and class dynamics. In that work, he tries to explain that the culture of the mass could ascend into the main stream culture in the late Joseon dynasty because of their economic ascendance during this period and the collapse of the existing status order. However, his explanation of the socioeconomic influence on culture in the late Joseon dynasty is very brief and unsystematic. He provides only a single contingent explanation of the relationship between culture and other social classes. In most of the work (Choe 2002a), he only explains the popular traditional aesthetics of each art genre during the late Joseon dynasty and how they appeared. This is not a satis-

factory explanation of what kinds of structural relationships existed between culture and other social dimensions. He confesses that he is not interested in these kinds of socioeconomic relationships (Choe 2002a, 48).

For Choe, there exists one big “Korean culture.” Choe presupposes that Korean culture is unique and unitary. He is not concerned with friction within the culture but only in unity. This position cannot explain various different groups’ acceptance of traditional values, nor does it convey that there are real differences and diversities in contemporary Korean culture. Cultural variations in Korea can be much more profound than unity. The possibilities of subcultures and cultural conflicts are not properly addressed in his texts. Cultural conflicts or value conflicts are very dominant in present-day Korea among generations, regional groups, and genders. Yet he does not have any tool to theoretically approach the widespread cultural conflicts in contemporary Korea. This is because he considers values to be an inheritance from the past, not the products of group dynamics.

Values are socially constructed. Culture is “not generated in a socioeconomic vacuum, but [is] produced by and reproduce[s] the material conditions generated by the political and economic structure of a social system” (Mumby 1988, 108). Differences in the political and social positions of each actor affect that actor’s differential understanding and acceptance of existing social values. Nor can we imagine Korean culture as an integrated totality “in which each part contributes to the maintenance of an organized, autonomous, and enduring whole” (Wolf 1982, 390). In other words, there is not one big “Korean culture,” but various Korean cultural sets.

From this perspective, segments of various Korean cultural elements coexist, are loosely connected, and are sometimes thrust against each other. Korean culture, or major patterns of Korean values, should be considered, to a significant degree, to be contingent upon group dynamics. Who wants to preserve traditional values and impose them on which groups, and why? Who has the privilege to call certain values Korean values? These questions should be answered in order to properly understand the dynamics of values in contempo-

rary Korea. It should also be understood how diverse groups act differently on values and how this differentiation produces cracks and ruptures in the existing culture. Diverse—sometimes opposite values coexist in Korea. Values are probably associated with different groups to different degrees, and have different meanings for different groups.

Choe does not address individual differentiation. There is far more variation than Choe suggests. Shweder (1991) argues that individual differences in conduct are narrowly context-dependent and do not generalize across contexts (Triandis 2002). Shweder (1991) further argues that objective conditions do not predict the accommodation of an organism to its environment. Thus, global values can hardly exist in Korean culture.

However, according to Choe’s logic, already existing values or culture, especially shamanism and Confucianism, have the power to impose themselves universally on Korean minds, thus impelling Koreans to act in a certain way. This is circular reasoning: once Koreans fall into this trap, there is no way out of it. The unity and continuity of existing Korean culture seem to be unbreakable in his explanation of Korean culture. Once basic values are inscribed in their minds, Koreans seem to have the same values for lifetimes and for generations.

This perspective cannot explain the very rapid change in Korean culture that occurred in the twentieth century, nor can it explain the current serious value conflicts between different generations and genders. Vertical and horizontal differentiation of Koreans are not considered in his conceptualization of Korean culture.

Boundary of Korean Culture

What is the boundaries of Korean culture? Choe does not even allude to this. He mentions the influences of outside cultures in only two works: *Why Do Koreans Reject the Conventional Mold?* (2002a); and in the preface of *The Silk Road and Korean Culture* (IAKS 2000). In the former work (2002a, 14), he says that, “Since Korean art was

under the considerable impact of China, the Chinese cultural environment greatly influenced the formation of Koreans' art consciousness. China had a significant influence on Korea from early Korean history to the Joseon period."

From 2000, especially in *The Silk Road and Korean Culture*, Choe mentions that he regrets ignoring the influences of Chinese and Central Asian cultures on Korean culture. "We place too much emphasis on the uniqueness of Korean culture. We imagine that we have kept Korean culture unique. On the other hand, some believe Korean culture to be derivative of Chinese culture. But when I discussed this issue with scholars who specialized in Asian Studies, I found that the idea of a closed Korean culture is just an illusion. Korean culture was not a culture that independently fell from heaven" (IAKS 2000, preface). He also says in *Who Says Koreans Have No Culture?* (2000a, 47) that "[o]ur unique tradition is also a fantasy. When we use the concept of our unique tradition we tend to think that we produced our culture and that our culture remains intact. This is not true. Most of Korean culture came from the outside."

Although Choe says that he wants to focus more closely on the influence of Central Asian and Chinese culture on Korea (IAKS 2000),³ he does not answer the question of the boundaries of Korean culture. Because his conceptual framework of culture already presumes the unity of a culture, it is very limited when he tries to incorporate traffic across cultural boundaries into the concept of Korean culture. Even in the same text (Choe 2000b) where he says that a unique Korean tradition is a fantasy, he continues to emphasize the inheritance of such unique Korean traditions as collectivism, blood relationships and the chaos of shamanism. This contradiction is visible in his many works.

For example, in *Why Do Koreans Reject the Conventional Mold*, (2002a), he insists that Dangun⁴ is a shaman, and thus Korean culture started 4,300 years ago with shamanism. He insists that this

3. Choe wrote the preface to *The Silk Road and Korean Culture*.

4. The mythological founder of Korea.

shamanism has been one of the core thoughts of Korean art for the past 4,300 years. According to him, shamanism has continued as the core religion for ordinary people throughout Korean history, while Buddhism and Confucianism have been the religions of the upper classes (Choe 2002a, 12). This logic, in fact, is based on the presupposition that Korean culture has been constrained and has remained mostly the same.

This concept of Korean culture is expressed well in the following sentences: "Koreans, like shamanism, are basically free and unrestrained and dislike orderliness. Koreans dislike order and moderation from birth. Koreans like to enter into ecstasy quickly because they feel stifled by order. I found this to be why Koreans like to drink excessive amounts of alcohol. . . . By drinking alcohol quickly, Koreans seem to escape order and achieve a free disorder as soon as possible. Thus, Koreans do not drink alcohol moderately, but guzzle it in order to achieve ecstasy. Koreans are satisfied only when they are drunk. Moreover, drinking situations often end in chaos or confusion (nanjang). The ecstasy tradition reappears for Koreans in drinking" (Choe 2002a, 39).

Choe's concept of Korean culture, based on prevalent Korean values, makes the boundaries and unity of Korean culture self-evident. When Korean values become Korean culture, Korean values presuppose the existence of a bounded Korea and Korean people. The term itself, "Korean values," presupposes a boundary for the concept of Koreans. This concept of an autonomous, self-regulating and self-justifying culture has trapped Choe in circular logic. Koreans and Korea are considered self-evident. These self-evident concepts legitimize the boundedness of Korean culture. In turn, the boundedness of Korean culture again justifies the boundedness of Korea. Even though he admits the significant influence of foreign cultures, his conceptual framework of Korean culture limits the theoretical incorporation of foreign influences in Korean cultural dynamics.

Within the concept of a closed Korean culture, the compass of observation and thought has been narrowed to Korea. Has there ever been a time when the Korean population existed independent of larg-

er encompassing relationships, unaffected by larger fields of influence? No. Thus, the theoretical formulation of the concept of Korean culture should include the openness of the boundaries. The scholar who best illustrates this point is Eric Wolf.⁵

Eric Wolf traces “the connections among various cultural orders within a global, unevenly developing but unified, social process” (Roseberry 1989, 11). This critical process “rejects those anthropological styles that draw analytical boundaries around particular villages, regions, or ‘cultures’ and then treat those analytical entities as different by definition” (Roseberry 1989, 11). According to Wolf (1982, 18) “[i]n all such cases, to attempt to specify separate cultural wholes and distinct boundaries would create a false sample. These cases exemplify spatially and temporally shifting relationships, prompted in all instances by the effects of European expansion.” “We can no longer think of societies as isolated and self-maintaining systems,” he declared (Wolf 1982, 390).

Wolf (1994) continues to encourage anthropologists who follow the narrow path of particularism in their studies of culture to “take much greater account of heterogeneity and contradictions in cultural systems” (1994, 7). Conceptions of culture and people will indeed remain “perilous ideas,” as Wolf calls them, if social scientists continue to avoid the broader global cultural landscapes that in fact unite us, and focus only on particularistic studies of societies and cultures that separate us and allow us to stand proudly apart.

This is also a very appropriate critique of Choe’s writings about Korean culture. Korea and Korean cultural boundaries are equated in Choe’s works. He treats Korean culture as a bounded system and an independent entity. He presumes the unity and uniqueness of Korean culture. He equates the boundaries of Korean culture with the boundaries of Korea. But studies of Koreans and Korean culture should not take the Korean peninsula or South Korea as self-evident boundaries of Korean culture. Korea and Korean culture cannot be equated. They

⁵ Wolf (1982) did this kind of critique on anthropology’s approach to culture in a global scale.

exist on different levels of reality.

Cultural exchanges with other countries and the existence of Korean cultural elements that originated from other countries call attention to the complexity of Korean cultural boundaries. Even shamanism, which Choe considers to be the major source of a unique Korean culture, was introduced into the Korean peninsula through Manchuria. This points to the importance of “cultural traffic” (Alveson 1996, 80) in Korean culture. In order to properly understand the role of cultural boundaries, it is necessary to properly understand the role of cultural traffic over these boundaries.

Within the last 100 years, South Korea has changed from a Confucianism-dominated country into a Christian hegemony. North Korea has become an atheist country. Choe’s discussion of Korean culture skips these kinds of very important cultural changes, which occurred in the last century, because he still largely maintains the fantasy of a closed and self-preserving Korean culture. From my point of view, only a few segments of present Korean culture can be seen as traditional, because most parts of present Korean culture were newly produced in the twentieth century or came to Korea through cultural traffic in the twentieth century. Thus, a Korean from the Joseon dynasty would have great difficulty understanding present Korean culture. However, in Choe’s framework, the major elements of Korean culture continue from the early period of Korean history and the late Joseon dynasty until now.

This concept of Korean culture presumes the clear continuity and boundedness of Korean culture. Does the unity of Korean culture exist? Who spreads this unifying idea? Ruling classes spread the view of continuing and unifying Korean culture through the state system, mass media, education, etc.; other classes also actively participate in this process of unifying Korean culture because they look at Korean culture with the assumed terms that sanction unified Korea. By presenting Korean culture as a continuity-preserving and independently developed entity, they can make Koreans believe that they are members of the same nation with the same history and culture.

Time

Choe also does not pay enough attention to time in his discussion of Korean culture. As I said above, his concept of Korean culture based on prevalent values makes it difficult to incorporate the dimension of time.

He clearly introduces the concept of history in *Why Do Koreans Reject the Conventional Mold?* (2002a). He insists that Korean aesthetics cannot be applied to all Korean history, but only to the period after the late Joseon dynasty. Even in this work, where he talks frequently about history, history is just a succession of different periods, and especially of different religions. The succession of religions is treated as the succession of aesthetics. For him, present-day Korea is a part of the period of the late Joseon dynasty. He says, "one hundred years is not a long span. A value system, even though it may require a long time to take root, will easily continue for several hundred years once it has taken root. . . . So, I always insist that contemporary Korea—including North Korea—is an extension of the late Joseon period in terms of Korean cultural history" (Choe 2000b, 22).

Choe (2000b, 33-34) also applies the same logic to the continuity of familism and patriarchy in Korea. Since it became prevalent from the mid-Joseon dynasty, it is also important now. As evidence of this continuity, he mentions the patriarchal collectivism, the authoritarianism, and the emphasis on rank in contemporary Korea. He continues to insist that if we can understand this phenomena, we can understand most parts of Korean society. How, then, can we explain the rapid change and disintegration of patriarchal collectivism and the ranking system that occurred during the last several decades? He does not try to explain this phenomena.

Choe (2002a) also insists that Korean history started with Dangun, a shaman, and that shamanism is still the core of Korean aesthetics and culture. The influence of shamanism has continued throughout Korean history.

Choe's main problem comes from his framework for Korean culture, where the essence of Korean culture exists and continues for

several hundred years at least. Since he presupposes the unity and continuity of Korean culture, the essence of Korean culture is required to justify the unity and continuity of Korean culture. The essence of Korean culture is described as prevalent traditional values, unique and largely unchanging to Koreans. Why does it last for so long? Because the values are inscribed into the minds of Koreans from generation to generation. How can the values so inscribed persist for several hundred years? He simply assumes that, and does not explain how traditional values are inscribed into the minds of Koreans, and how and why they stubbornly remain there for such a long time. Without explaining how these real processes occur, most of his statements cannot be justified.

Because of his lack of a theoretical formulation of time and temporal dynamics, his explanations are often contradictory. He once mentions that the American culture introduced after the liberation of Korea in 1945 is the most powerful culture and has transformed the fundamental cultural framework of Korea, not only in everyday life but also in religion (Choe 2000b, 183; 2002b).

He states two different positions: that contemporary Korean culture is a continuation of mid-Joseon tradition, and also that contemporary Korean culture has been fundamentally transformed by American culture. Aren't his statements about the continuity and uniqueness of Korean culture contradictory to his statement about American culture? Choe does not even seem to realize that he has so severely contradicted himself. Since he does not have the theoretical framework to explain the multiplicity of diverse temporalities⁶ in Korean culture, he falls victim to many problems and contradictions in explaining the dimension of time in Korean culture.

"There are only cultural sets of practices and ideas, put into play by determinate human actors under determinate circumstances. In the course of action, these cultural sets are forever assembled, dismantled, and reassembled, conveying in variable accents the divergent paths of groups and classes" (Wolf 1982, 390-391). If it is very

6. The term was used by G. Sider (n.d.).

certain that “culture is constructed, maintained, and reproduced by people” (Alvesson 1996, 81), it should be explained how each Korean cultural element has been constructed, reproduced, or discarded, and by whom. Who wants to maintain and preserve which Korean cultural elements and why? History cannot be seen as a simple series of periods or distinct units of time. Only when social dynamics and temporal dynamics are connected can the historical change of cultural elements be properly explained.

Because he constructs culture from prevalent values that are treated as simply being passed down through the generations, he has difficulty integrating temporal dynamics into his Korean culture. In order to consider the multiplicity of diverse temporalities, it is important to incorporate the logic of friction, fissure, and conflict into cultural dynamics. Without this kind of consideration, the concept of culture as the continuity of unique and prevalent values usually functions only to maintain the status quo.

Superior and Inferior Culture?

Since Choe treats culture as values which may imply effectiveness in certain working situations, his framework of culture can delineate the superiority/inferiority in culture. In fact, the titles of such works as *Do Koreans Have Culture?* and *Who Says Koreans Have No Culture?* already imply the superiority/inferiority dimension of culture. Because he considers major aspects of Korean culture in terms of effectiveness or of superiority, he can ask Koreans to adopt a better and more refined culture.

He uses such phrases as: “Korea is a cultural state,” “cultural level is high,” “superb culture,” “culture is shallow,” “people lacking in culture,” “cultural force” (*munhwaryeok*). These imply that culture can be ranked on a superior-inferior scale.

According to Choe, community consciousness, cultural integration, altruism, a sense of public orderliness, and autonomous (*jaju-jeok*) culture are conceived of as aspects of good culture. However,

he does not explain why these are elements of good culture and others are elements of bad culture. It seems to me that his criteria for goodness or badness in culture is based on two dimensions: ethical correctness and social effectiveness. Since he states that economic or social crises are caused by bad cultures, or vice versa, he evaluates culture by its role in economic and social achievement. It seems to me that, for Choe, an ethically correct culture is the same as an effective culture. He presupposes that the traditional Joseon spirit or Korean spirit are ethical and effective at the same time. Since his concept of culture comes from values, it is understandable that the ethical dimension is important to him. It is also understandable that effectiveness is important for him, because his concept of culture also comes from organizational behavior.

From a similar point of view, he insists that there are two perspectives for Korean culture: ethnocentrism and defeatism. According to him, ethnocentrism takes the attitude that Korean cultural elements are superior, while defeatism takes the attitude that Korean culture is inferior to Western culture (Choe 1997, preface). In order to avoid the problems of both extremes, he recommends cultural relativism (Choe 1997, 21). Here, he again shows his inconsistency in offering contradictory suggestions. On the one hand, he uses terms which make it possible to judge cultures as inferior or superior, and on the other hand he also recommends cultural relativism, which insists that cultural comparison is impossible.

Additional Problems

Choe’s approach to Korean culture is idealistic. He considers culture to be a major causal factor in social dynamics. Economic growth and political inequality are treated as the results of culture. For example, “Korea became an important country, at least in the area of economy, to some degree through rapid economic development. How was this possible? It is because our culture is not bad. This miracle could not have been achieved in a country that does not have a fine cul-

ture” (Choe 2000b). The reason why Korea can occupy 40 percent of the domestic movie market is also because Korea has inherited a fine culture from its ancestors (Choe 2000b, 10). The reason why Korea experienced the financial crisis in 1997 is also Korean culture. According to Choe, the shallowness of Korean culture caused the financial crisis of 1997 in Korea (Choe 1997).

How can the same Korean culture sometimes cause financial crises, but at other times cause rapid economic growth? How can he explain the fact that, while Korea’s economy developed rapidly over the last four decades, the same Korea with the same culture—since he regards basic Korean culture as unchanged for the last few centuries—experienced the disruption of the existing economic system in the late nineteenth century and the Japanese colonialism of the first half of the twentieth century? If we have had a fine culture for centuries, shouldn’t Korea continue to experience the same economic development?

Because of his idealistic bias, he does not properly approach the complex dynamics of cultural, political, social and economic processes. He usually focuses on the cultural process alone, and even when he pays attention to other processes, he usually attributes causal force to the cultural process. Since he does not have a great interest in the economic and political dynamics, his theoretical framework for the Korean political and economic processes is not provided.

Because of his idealistic stance, his solutions to the problems of Korean society are also idealistic. In his 1997 work, he heavily criticizes the value system of Koreans. He says that Korean public morality is weak because the community consciousness of Koreans is limited to their families and neighborhoods. In order to overcome this limitation, Koreans need to nurture community consciousness beyond their neighborhoods through festivals, and traditional festivals held in rural villages should be revived in contemporary Korea. By developing the spirit of Joseon into a modern symbol, with which all Koreans can sympathize, Koreans can overcome the shallowness and develop a Korean spirit that can contribute to the world.

He also suggests in *Who Says Koreans Have No Culture?* that “the

real reformation of politics and the economy must be preceded or accompanied by cultural reformation. Politics and the economy are driven by people whose worldviews and values are dominated by that society’s culture. Thus, if culture is rightfully established, politics and the economy can achieve something. Accordingly, the real power of a country comes from the cultural force” (2000b, 255-256). In order to achieve this goal, he suggests that Koreans need to find fine Korean culture and aesthetics, to strengthen the continuity of Joseon culture into contemporary culture, and to establish the correct center of Korean culture. This will take Korean social integration to a higher level. It is noteworthy that he emphasizes the revival and reestablishment of Joseon spirit, the tradition of unique Korean values.

His overemphasis on traditional Korean values reveals a conflation of Koreans with Korean culture. There are many Koreans who do not have enough traditional Korean culture. Because he focuses on traditional culture, his ideal type of Koreans are those who have a traditional Korean spirit or culture. Thus, he effectively ignores the importance of those Koreans who do not embrace traditional Korean culture. In this framework, it is very difficult to deal with new generations raised with modern Western values because it becomes difficult to call them Koreans. His concept of Korea does not deal with political dynamics, since he focuses only on culture. His concept of Korea, by focusing on tradition, makes the assimilation of immigrants into Korean society difficult, and also makes it difficult for Koreans to adopt multi-culturalism or globalism.

His works also contains many inconsistencies. As I mentioned earlier, he shows a contradictory position in relation to cultural relativism and cultural superiority/inferiority. His evaluation of Korean culture swings between both extremes. In addition, his concepts of culture are not consistent, because his culture often connotes different meanings in different contexts and in different texts. While he describes Korean culture as mixed with foreign cultures in one work (IAKS 2000), his earlier and later works emphasize the uniqueness of Korean culture (Choe 1997, 1998, 2002a).

His titles are often not consistent with the content of the works.

For example, while the work's title is "Do Koreans Have Culture?", the work itself does not discuss whether Koreans have culture. Instead, this work explains the nature of culture. A more appropriate title would be: "What Kind of Culture Koreans Do Have?" And while he insists that "We do not need to use English, except when it is truly necessary" (2002b, 43), he uses too many English words in his works.

He also makes unfounded statements and speculations. For example, he said, "I think the view of time of the 100-meter dash is based on a Christian view of time, which clearly divides the starting point and the end point of time" (Choe 1997, 22). But I believe that short distance running began in the ancient Greek period, because the sport of short distance running is seen in Greek mythology.

He insists that free-spiritedness (*jayubunbang*) is the core of the Korean spirit. But his explanation is not persuasive. "I think free-spiritedness was the result of the fusion of the spirits of the masses and the upper classes in late Joseon. The masses depended on shamanism and folk Buddhism. Shamanism expressed the pristine propensity in original forms, and the masses also expressed their feelings unrestrained through shamanism. I call all this propensity 'free-spiritedness'" (Choe 2000b, 99). "In general, Koreans seem to have a strong inclination toward the unrestrained or chaos" (Choe 2000b, 101). It seems to me that *jayubunbang* is not the core of contemporary Korean culture. As I mentioned earlier, I also doubt whether the core of Korean culture or values can continue one or several hundred years into the future. He does not provide enough evidence in his works.

Concluding Remarks

My critique of Choe's works leads one to rethink the approach to Korean culture and the formulation of a more complicated framework to understand Korean culture. It reveals that Choe's delineation of Korean culture is a simplistic one. His understanding of Korean cul-

ture is idealistic. One must understand the more complicated dynamics of Koreans in different classes and groups in order to put the cultural dynamics into the right context.

My concept of Korean culture, displayed through my critique of Choe's works, is fundamentally different from Choe's. He, by focusing too much on the continuity of traditional Korean values, puts too much emphasis on values. He fails, in general, to understand how values are produced, reproduced, reshuffled, and discarded. He also fails to put values in social, political, or economic contexts.

His tendencies to ignore the contexts where values are produced and reproduced make people believe values are the causal factors in social dynamics. From this point of view, he may say that once values are inscribed in the Korean mind, they will continue for several hundred years. Thus, he believes that the shamanism of early Korea is still important in Korean culture and that the tradition of the late Joseon dynasty still comprises the core of Korean culture. This approach does not reveal what roles various different understandings and different attachments of diverse groups take in social dynamics. Real, diverse individuals, who are sometimes in conflict, are ignored, and instead the unified Korean nation is presupposed. The unified Korean nation and the unified Korean culture justify each other.

This tendency can make culture a self-perpetuating entity, even though culture does not exist separately from human beings. In order to put Korean culture back into human dynamics, it is necessary to pay close attention to how Koreans create, produce, adopt, reformulate, reproduce, and discard cultural elements. In another words, Korean culture should not be treated as a separate entity but as something existing in people.

From this point of view, Korean culture is the culture adopted by Koreans. But Choe focuses more on traditional culture than on Koreans. This tendency pushes Choe to overemphasize the importance of traditional culture and to trivialize the importance of group dynamics. Because he fell into this trap, he has difficulty in giving the proper meaning to cultural traffic, even when he introduces it into his work.

The same problems are also found in many works of the academic group related to the journal *Jontong gua Hyundae* and also by another academic group related to the International Association for Korean Studies.

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GLOSSARY

bibimbap	비빔밥	munhwaryeok	文化力
gimchi	김치	nanjang	亂場
gwonwijuui	權威主義	pagyeok	破格
iltal	逸脫	sinmyeong	神明
jajujeok	自主的	taegwondo	跆拳道
jayubunbangham	自由奔放함	teul geobu	틀 거부
munhwa	文化		

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