

Book Reviews

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Post-Colonial Self: Korean Immigrant Theology and Church, by Choi Hee An. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015, 185 pp., US \$75, ISBN: 978-1-4384-5735-2 (hardcover)

When first approached, I was reluctant to write a review of Choi Hee An's *A Postcolonial Self: Korean Immigrant Theology and Church*. First of all, my research focuses on the history of Koreans in Korea. This is work by a theologian on Koreans in America, so I was stepping beyond the boundaries of my expertise. Secondly, I knew that, if I write anything negative in my review, I may be accused of abusing my privileged status as an elderly white male to denigrate the work of a young Korean woman scholar. However, I decided I was willing to take that risk because I believe that scholarship should be beyond ethnicity, gender, culture, and age. There are certain rules of scholarship that should apply to any scholarly work. Those rules include clarity and originality of argument as well as ample use of reliable evidence to support that argument. This book does well on the first rule. Unfortunately, it falls short on the second.

Her argument is tightly constructed. She begins by stating that her goal is to show how immigrants from Korea are transformed by their experiences living in the US, and how they have coped with what she describes as their marginalized lives in an alien land. She promises in her introduction to show how Korean churches help immigrants overcome that marginalization by constructing what she labels a "post-colonial self."

In her first chapter, she discusses an aspect of traditional Korean culture all who have spent much time in Korea can recognize: the greater emphasis on a communal identity than is the norm in the US. She calls this "woori" consciousness, using her own unique romanization for a Korean-language term meaning "our" or "us" that is usually romanized as "uri." Arguing that women in particular suffer from "woori" consciousness because traditionally their identity within their strongly patriarchal society was defined by their roles within their family, she emphasizes that "a woman's individual self was never fully understood as an independent individual" (p. 17). She goes on to argue that this "woori" consciousness was reinforced during the time Korea was under colonial rule, since Koreans had to unite to fight the colonial oppressor and, moreover, were expected to be willing to sacrifice their individual lives for the greater good of their ethnic community.

In her second chapter, she discusses the contradictions Koreans living in the United States face. On the one hand, they are encouraged to adopt the individualistic orientation of their new country. However, she insists without providing any supporting statistics, the racism of American culture denies them the upward mobility individual effort is supposed to be earn—she ignores the latest census data that shows that the average Korean-American family income is higher than the average US family income. Instead, they are treated as members of a separate and distinct group labeled “Koreans,” a “woori” that is kept apart from the dominant white society. Frustrated, they flock to Korean-American churches, which serve as a “communal gathering to create a Korean ethnic space free from the needs of individuals” (p. 99).

In her third chapter, she describes the solution which she says Korean-American Christians have found. First of all, partially contradicting what she claimed in the preceding chapter, she writes that second-generation Korean-Americans “do not experience job-related racial conflict. They achieve social mobility” (p. 125). That gives them the confidence to accept their status as a separate and distinct group within American society and also reach out to other such groups. In doing so, they transform themselves from being guests in the US to becoming hosts. Korean women, she argues, play a particularly important role in this transformation from guest to host by using the *bapsang*, the shared meal table, to embrace non-Korean Americans as constituent elements of the “woori” formed by the Korean-American community.

Choi concludes in her final chapter that Korean-Americans have learned, though the sharing of food by inviting others to their *bapsang* which she calls “radical hospitality,” that they are part of both a “woori” of ethnic Koreans as well as a “woori” that includes non-Koreans. In so doing, she says, they have escaped the colonial self that made them complicit in their own oppression and have created a post-colonial self that allows them to rise above the marginalization to which they were previously subject.

This is an interesting and original argument. However, it has a fatal flaw. She never allows Korean-Americans, other than herself, to talk about how they experienced marginalization when they immigrated to North America, and how they escaped that marginalization through “radical hospitality.” She tells us how she thinks Koreans felt under colonial rule back on the peninsula, how they felt when they left that familiar environment to live in a society with more emphasis on individualism than they were accustomed to, and how they produced a new

“post-colonial” theology that allowed them to reconcile the demands of the communal orientation of Korean culture with the individualistic orientation of American culture. But we have to take her word for that. She cites non-Korean theorists of post-colonial and feminist theory, such as Franz Fanon and Jean Baker Miller, but not any of her fellow Koreans.

Making her argument even less persuasive, she makes several serious factual errors. For example, on p. 21 she writes that Korea was “under continuous colonization by China and Russia from the beginning of Korean history”—this is not a typo because a similar statement shows up on p. 46. I am a historian of Korea, but I don’t recognize the Korea she is talking about here. The Korea I study has one of the longest histories of existence as an independent country within stable borders of any country on earth. The thirty-five years Korea was under Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945 hardly qualifies as “from the beginning of Korean history.” Before Japan conquered Korea, the Joseon dynasty, with nothing but Korean kings, ruled over the peninsula for over five centuries. And it was preceded by another Korean dynasty, Goryeo, which lasted almost as long.

She also writes that “the Korean ethnic self has formed in interaction with Christianity and colonialism” (p. 47). Once again she describes a Korea I don’t recognize. Koreans have known that they were a separate people, neither Chinese nor Japanese, for millennia. This is a particularly puzzling statement because she insists that Koreans defined the Korean ethnic self in terms of communities rather than autonomous individuals. If that is the case, then Christianity, by introducing to Korea the novel notion of the importance of the individual soul and its individual relationship with God, undermined rather than created the “Korean ethnic self.”

Further betraying her lack of knowledge of Korea’s history and traditional culture, she tries to explain the traditional lack of concern for the individual self with a reference to what she calls the “Buddhist teaching” of the *Bhagavad Gita* (p. 19). The *Bhagavad Gita* is a Hindu text and has nothing to do with Buddhism and therefore was not a text Koreans in the past were familiar with. Instead, she should have looked at Confucianism, which has an explicit concept of the communal self. Confucianism assumes that individuals are nothing more than the sum total of the various roles they play in society. Confucianism, not Buddhism, shaped the Korean sense of “woori.” Moreover, Confucianism is also responsible for the patriarchy she decries in this book. Yet she hardly discusses

Confucianism at all. Instead, she puts most of the blame for the tension between the demands of a communal identity and the expectation of America's individualist culture on an imaginary ancient colonial past.

Some of her other statements are vacuous, telling us nothing substantial. For example, she writes "Because of the long colonial and postcolonial history, the family has become a basic unit of survival in Korea" (p. 144). Are there any societies in which the family is not the basic unit? Korea is not distinctive in this regard. This statement tells us nothing special about Korea. Nor does her implication that Korean culture is unique in its emphasis on sharing food with others. I live in Vancouver, which is full of Sikh houses of worship which make sharing food with Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike a regular part of their spiritual life. I know of many other religious communities which do the same.

As noted at the beginning of this review, Choi Hee An has laid out a clear and original argument. Unfortunately, that is not a good enough reason to recommend this work to readers, since that argument is not supported by sufficient reliable data to make it convincing. Read this book if you want to learn how Choi Hee An thinks. Do not expect this book to tell you anything about the actual theology of Korean-Americans or their churches.

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