

From the Land of Morning Calm to Dynamic Korea

Archetype and evolution of Korean people's character

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ABSTRACT: Contemporary Korean society is often described as dynamic, a view shared by both Koreans and foreigners. This perception contrasts sharply with Korea's historical image as backward and stagnant. To understand this shift, we must explore whether Korean culture and society have fundamentally changed or if we had a misconception of Korean culture.

Some attribute Korean dynamism to the “*bbali-bbali*” (hurry-up) spirit, a cultural trait. Others point to Korea's rapid economic transformation over the past seven decades, which fostered a strong work ethic and a can-do spirit. However, these explanations raise further questions: Why are Koreans so driven by the “*bbali-bbali*” mentality? What underpins their work ethic and dedication to economic growth?

This paper aims to provide a social scientist's perspective on Korean cultural dynamism, focusing on the Korean character, social structure, and social mobility. First, it examines the social character of Koreans, defined by core traits developed through shared experiences and lifestyles. Second, it traces the emergence and evolution of Korean social character from ancient times through significant historical periods, such as the *Hwarang* in late Silla, *Chondo-gyo* in late Joseon, and the March First Movement of 1919. These periods highlight the continuity and adaptability of Korean cultural traits, such as egalitarianism, collective spirit and enjoyment, often overlooked in interpretations focused solely on Confucianism or characteristics of the declining late Joseon society. In the last 70 years, the egalitarian and humanistic Korean character manifested itself and shaped in the process of building a new

republic, encouraging education, overcoming hardships due to the Korean War, the democratic struggle and the pursuit of rapid economic development.

By adopting a historical and evolutionary perspective, we can better understand the link between ancient Korea, late Joseon, and contemporary Korea, integrating contrasting views of Korean culture as both stagnant and dynamic. The paper concludes with conjectures on how current changes might impact Korean dynamism and with a discussion of the theoretical relevance of our perspective.

KEYWORDS: archetype of Korean character, Korean Dynamism, the land of morning calm, hermit nation, Confucianism

논문초록: 현대 한국 사회는 역동적이라고 한다. 한국인과 외국인 모두가 공유하는 견해다. 이러한 인식은 후진적이고 정체되었다는 과거와 커다란 대조를 이룬다. 이런 인식의 변화를 이해하기 위해 우리는 한국 문화와 사회가 근본적으로 변화했는지, 아니면 우리가 한국 문화를 오해했는지를 탐구해야 한다.

어떤 이는 한국의 역동성을 '빨리빨리' 정신이라는 문화적 특성에 기인한다고 보며, 또 다른 이는 지난 70년간의 급속한 경제 변혁을 거론하면서 경제가 강한 노동 윤리와 할 수 있다는 정신을 키웠다고 말한다. 그러나 이러한 설명은 왜 한국인들이 '빨리빨리' 정신에 그렇게 몰두하는지, 그들의 노동 윤리와 경제 성장에 대한 헌신의 근간은 무엇인지에 대한 추가적인 질문을 제기한다.

이 논문의 목적은 한국인의 성격, 사회 구조, 사회 이동성에 초점을 두고 한국 문화의 역동성에 대해 사회 과학자의 관점을 제공하는데 있다. 먼저, 공유된 경험과 생활 방식을 통해 형성된 핵심적 특성으로 정의되는 한국인의 사회적 성격을 검토한다. 둘째, 고대 한국에서 출현하고 신라 말기의 화랑, 조선 말기의 천도교, 3.1 운동과 같은 중요한 역사적 시기를 거치며 진화해 온 한국인의 사회적 성격을 추적한다. 이러한 시기를 보면 유교나 조선 말기의 쇠퇴하는 특성에만 초점을 맞춘 해석에서 종종 간과되어온 평등주의, 집단 정신, 즐기는 삶과 같은 한국 문화적 특성의 연속성과 적응성이 뚜렷이 나타난다. 지난 70년 동안 평등주의적이고 인도주의적인 한국인의 성격은 새로운 공화국을 건설하는 과정에서, 교육을 장려하고, 한국 전쟁으로 인한 어려움을 극복하며, 민주화 투쟁과 급속한 경제 발전을 추구하는 과정에서 분명히 드러났고 형성되어 왔다.

역사적이고 진화적인 관점을 채택함으로써 우리는 고대 한국, 조선 말기, 현대 한국 간의 연관성을 더 잘 이해하고, 한국 문화를 정체적으로 또는 역동적으로 보는 상반된 견해를 통합할 수 있다. 이 논문은 현재의 변화가 한국의 역동성에 어떤 영향을 미칠지에 대한 추측과 우리의 관점이 가진 이론적 유의성에 대한 논의로 결론을 맺는다.

핵심어: 한국인 성격, 원형, 역동성, 조용한 아침의 나라, 은둔의 나라, 유교

1. Dynamic Korea

Contemporary Korean society is often called dynamic. Such a remark is made not only by Koreans, but also by foreigners (Breen, 2017; SaKong & Koh, 2010; Tudor, 2012). It is amazing that there is a general consensus about Korean dynamism, given that just one hundred years ago Korea (then, Joseon Dynasty) was called the Land of Morning Calm (Lowell, 1885) or Hermit Nation (Griffis, 1888).¹ What can we make of the reversed perception of Korea? Have Korean culture and the Korean society changed? Or might we have a misconception of Korean culture?

To explain Korean dynamism, some point to the Korean culture, whose key feature is described as *bbali-bbali* [빨리빨리, hurry-up] spirit (Breen, 2017; Hong, 2014; Tudor, 2012); some refer to the dramatic transformation of economy in the past seven decades, which encouraged the strong work-ethic and can-do spirit and thus made people dynamic (e.g., SaKong & Koh, 2010). Culture or economy may explain Korea's dynamic development. Such accounts, however, beg the question. What is the source of the Korean obsession with *bbali-bbali*? What is the basis for the work ethic and what propelled Koreans to devote themselves to economic growth? In this essay, I attempt to provide a social scientist's view of Korean cultural dynamism, focusing on the Korean character, characteristics of social structure and social mobility. First, I start with the social character of Korean people, i.e., the core character traits common to most members of Korea which has developed as the result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group (for social character, see Fromm, 1965, pp. 304-306). Second, I sketch the emergence and evolution of Korean social character with a broad historical brush. Social characters are durable, persistent and yet, adapting to changes in society. The Korean social character was formed in ancient Korean society, which we call the archetype of Korean character and evolved through the *Hwarang* in late Silla, *Chondo-gyo* in late Joseon and the March First Movement of 1919. So, interpretations of Korean culture, based on the sketchy ideas of

1 For a long time till Korea's economic transformation in the past five decades, ideas of 'morning calm' and the 'hermit nation' came to symbolize Korea's natural beauty, social backwardness and closed-door foreign policy; they were spread by two best-selling books (Griffis, 1888; Lowell, 1885) on Joseon's politics and society in the 1880s. These two American authors stayed quite a while in Japan and had a bias because their main sources were Japanese literature. For a similar view of foreign travelers at the time, see J. Park (2001).

Confucianism or characteristics of the late declining Joseon society, are apt to focus on the misfortune and misery of the country while ignoring the long-standing Korean cultural traits of egalitarianism, collective spirit, humanism and enjoyment. They are one-sided or misguided. Instead, my interpretation, though inevitably sketchy due to the lack of space, traces the cultural traits of the Korean character through four momentous periods in Korean history and shows the continuity and evolution of Korean cultural character. Only by taking a historical and evolutionary view can we make sense of the link between ancient Korea, degenerate late Joseon and contemporary Korea and integrate contrasting views of Korean culture, e.g., stagnant vs. dynamic, backward vs. forward looking, etc. Third, I relate current social and political developments in the past 100 years to the Korean character's evolution. I conclude the essay with some conjectures on the current changes in Korean society and their possible impact on Korean dynamism.

2. From the Land of Morning Calm to Dynamic Korea

When foreign missionaries visited Korea in the late nineteenth century, they were surprised to find the country, not so small, civilized, mostly agrarian, peaceful and living a quite idyllic life. So, they called it the land of morning calm (supposed to be awakened sooner or later) or hermit nation, a politically isolated country. That epithet, "morning calm," echoing over the two-thousand-year-old name of Joseon [조선, 朝鮮; literally "morning freshness"] may describe some aspects of Korean people when they work together among themselves. Yet, were Koreans traditionally calm, superstitious and passive? Was the Korean society backward and lacking vitality and passion? Do the epithets describe Korea's long history and tradition?

Some observers at the time noticed the opposite. They witnessed, in a short span of time, the *Donghak* Peasant War (1894-1895), the rise of Righteous Army (1907-1910) and the March First Independence Movement (1919), where ordinary people rose against the corrupt domestic power and foreign imperial forces. Especially during the March First Movement, about two million common people participated, demanding independence against the cruel Japanese suppression. The March First Movement shocked the unprepared Japanese colonial government; it also shook the idea of Korean people as backward and passive. Fred A. McKenzie, journalist and author of *The Tragedy*

of Korea (1908), expressed his astonishment (McKenzie, 1920, pp. 5-6):

The peaceful uprising of the people of Korea against Japan in the spring of 1919 came as a world surprise. Here was a nation that had been ticketed and docketed by world statesmen as degenerate and cowardly, revealing heroism of a very high order . . . The Koreans took their stand—their women and children by their side—without weapons and without means of defense. They pledged themselves ahead to show no violence . . . It seems evident that either the world made a mistake in its first estimate of Korean character, or these people have experienced a new birth. Which is the right explanation? Maybe both.

Was the awakening of common people a new birth or re-birth? Those characteristics of ordinary Korean people shown at the end of Joseon dynasty would be better seen as re-awakening or re-vitalization of Korean character.

Keen observers of Korean society never failed to recognize the vitality and Korea's dynamic search for better before the active pursuit of economic growth in the 1960s. To name a few, Hahn-Been Lee (1968), scholar and practitioner, saw the rapid replacement of old bureaucrats with new bureaucrats inspired by a developmental time (future) perspective in the late 1940s and 1950s, quite a remarkable phenomenon in a traditional agrarian society. Historian Bruce Cumings saw the restless society in 1945-1950 right after the liberation from Japanese colonial rule. Cumings (1981) characterized people who came back from abroad as half-peasant and half-proletariat. Economist Tony Michell (1988) observed that the Korean people, already in 1960 before modernization took off, was "poor, but modernized" in their attitude toward change. Political scientist Lucian Pye stated that, in comparison to Chinese and Japanese Confucianism, Koreans believed (Pye, 1985, p. 58):

. . . virtue should and would be rewarded; therefore, the elite could afford to take risks. At the same time, uncertainty as to who were the legitimate elite created a state of dynamic insecurity and produced people who were self-starters, having risk-taking attitudes . . .

With his clear analytic scheme of power, authority and legitimacy in a comparative perspective, Pye went beyond the stereotypes of "Asian

Confucian values” and characterized the Korean version as “aggressive Confucianism.” What a radically different understanding of Korea. A far cry from morning calm or hermit nation.

While I agree with Pye’s analysis of the Korean character, I hasten to say that his cultural explanation, based on a variant of Confucianism, needs to be complemented. Pye’s analysis is better than others: it provides a theoretical lens and allows us to look into the Korean variant in a comparative perspective. Yet, there are four theoretical matters to consider. First, by taking Confucianism as a starting point, Pye fails to ask what Koreans were like before the advent of neo-Confucianism in Korea. In fact, Confucian ideas were officially accepted only in the fourteenth century. Second, it is not clear to what extent Confucian ideas affected the lives of ordinary people. Confucianism as state ideology may have been an official ideological facade, effective for elite competition, yet common people did not give up their ways of life much as evidenced by *Donghak*, Righteous Army and the March First Movement at the end of the Joseon Dynasty. Third, so-called Korean submissive characters, constructed from Confucian ideas of authority and power, are better seen as a (temporary) variant of archetypes of the enduring and dynamic Korean character. Fourth, any national character, including the Korean one, would last only when they reflect and serve the current social structure and power structure (Fromm, 1965). When things change, the characters also change. Pye’s analysis may be adequate only for the late Joseon period.

To respond to the issues raised above, we need to trace the Korean character of risk-taking attitude or “dynamic insecurity” beyond the Joseon dynasty and to commoners’ life and look at the social structural basis for the formation of the Korean character. Solving these theoretical issues is a tall order, partly due to the lack of my knowledge and mostly due to the lack of documental evidence on the ordinary people in ancient times. Yet, it is worth trying. My essay attempts to trace the evolution of the dynamic Korean character and explain current Korean dynamism as a manifestation of archetypal dynamic Korean character.

3. Archetype of Korean Character

This essay is premised on the belief that there emerged an archetype of Korean character around two thousand years ago in an ancient Korean tribe of Manchuria and the Korean peninsula and that the Korean character continued and evolved over time, reflecting the characteristics of changing social structures and ideas. To characterize the Korean character is not easy. First, the Korean character is generalized from mythology, folklore, norms and observations—foreign and native. It is subject to various interpretations. As we have seen, it could go in opposite ways: morning calm type or risk-taking type. Second, continuity or modification of certain characteristics over time makes it hard to pinpoint which features are prominent in a certain period. Still, it makes sense to talk of archetype if we find common continuing traits in traditions and practices. Having said that, I trace three key moments in the history of the Korean tribes to understand the common traits, bequeathed to the current generation.

3.1 Ancient Koreans: Heavenly God and Egalitarian Value

Ancient Koreans here refers to people of Joseon, founded by Dangun [단군]. This Joseon is conventionally called Gojoseon (old Joseon). What were the Koreans like? Let's take another foreign observation; this time a Chinese one. As depicted by a Chinese history book (A.D. 3 century), Koreans worshipped the lord of the heaven [하느님, *Haneu-nim*] and the earth when they finished sowing in the spring and harvesting in the fall. At the ceremony, all people of the town got together; danced, ate and sang together for several days and nights. This was strange to Chinese observers, because in China, only the emperor (son of the heaven) could worship or participate in the ritual. In ancient Korea, heaven symbolized, among others, the sun and brightness. The son of the heaven was to help people. The motto of the heavenly god was *Hongik Ingan* [홍익인간], that is, “to benefit broadly the human world or devote to the welfare of humanity.” Koreans felt they were equally the offspring of heaven, so that they could sing, dance and drink together. Ancient Koreans dreamed of the world where every tribe or tribal state lived together, realizing their own potentials. As seeds grow and blossom freely in the void, Korean tribes wanted to go along and live together with their own customs (M. Y. Lee, 2011, p. 58). The ideal of each seed living alongside other

seeds is the core of ancient Koreans' view of a desirable life and state.

According to the foundation myth, Koreans are descendants of Dangun, grandson of the lord of the heaven. In that myth, we found a story of heaven (father of Dangun coming down from the heaven to help people below), earth (bear-turned-woman who accepted the seed of Dangun's father) and a man (Dangun). The myth symbolized the perfect unity of heaven, earth and men. The grandson of the heavenly god, Dangun, is an example of a good leader who came down from the heaven with the ideal of *Hongik Ingan*. People worshipped the lord of heaven. In the ritual to the heavenly god, Koreans drank and danced together, respecting the heaven. They came to feel they were equally the offspring of the heaven, and they experienced the god in their midst. Humanism lies at the center of this narrative. The goodness of human society comes only from people, ordinary people's righteous acts. It does not come from the rulers, or the government.

3.2 *Hwarang* and *Pungryu-do*²: Unity of Nature, Art and Life

The goodness of Korean society disappeared when kings and the authorities, intent on conquering and concentrating power, restrained the liberty of people and ruled solely by the power of the sword, not the word. This is what happened during the period of the Unified Silla Kingdom (676-935). Silla was a warrior state and a highly stratified caste society. There was only one legitimate belief system, i.e., ideological Buddhism, protected by the state. Silla was a suffocating state. Who is going to correct the evil government and state? The people or the authorities?

Hwarang-do, which emerged under the severe turmoil and travail of the late Silla, tells us what was the Koreans' ideal man. The *Hwarang* are a group of young men who followed *Hwarang-do*, the *Hwarang* (or *Pungryu*) spirit. The *Hwarang* trained themselves in three ways (Ryu, 1999). First, they enlightened each other of the duties of being human. The duties included teachings from Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism; second, they enjoyed each other through singing and dancing. Singing and dancing was considered a religious activity for the fellowship of God and humanity. Third, they went to famous mountains and seas; they played in nature and communed with the heavenly god. *Pungryu* is the enjoyment through song and dance, and *Pungryu-do* is

2 *Pungryu-do* literally means Tao of *Pungryu*, "the way the spirit flows."

man's search for communion with God through song and dance. Its ideal is the unity of nature (mountains and waters), art (song and dance) and life (duties of a good man).

Pungryu-do expressed the ideal of unity of the heaven, earth and man. This idea of unity was existent at an incipient stage in the ancient foundation myth. Now, Koreans had, as an ideal, the advanced form of unity in *Pungryu-do* which adopted advanced cultures. *Pungryu-do* is the mixture of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism integrated by the Korean humanist spirit of the unity of the heaven, earth and man. So, Choi Chi Won (857-908?) stated "*Pungryu* is inclusive of the three religions, and this enlightens the people."³ In a similar vein, Shin Chae Ho (1880-1936) said "the *Hwarang* was what made Korea authentic Korea when Chinese culture attempted to mold Korea according to its own image." This spirit continued to enlighten Korean people. The Korean ideal was to live on his own land (earth), following the way of human beings which is in accordance with great teachings.

3.3 *Donghak* (Eastern Learning): *Innaechon*⁴ and *Donghak*

The Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) was a kingdom built on the sharing of powers between the Yi royal family and a group of powerful literati-landlord families. Joseon had been successful in containing the demands of common people with its rigid form of neo-Confucianism after its foundation in 1392. With the changes in the international arena, Joseon came to face tough challenges in the late sixteenth century and seventeenth century: a seven years' war with Japan (1592-1598) and two wars with the newly established Qing dynasty (1627 and 1636). The country was trodden and devastated by foreign troops. Against such calamities, Joseon with its highly rigid neo-Confucianism was unable to modernize its system. Old factional struggles among the royal family and literati-landlord class raged on.

In the mid-19th century, Joseon faced the internal dislocation of order and the tax system, on the one hand, and external foreign invasion of the country and foreign ideas, called *Seohak* (Western Learning), on the other hand. In such a national crisis, Choe Je-u (1824-1864) established *Donghak*

3 Choi stayed 16 years in China as a student and bureaucrat during his youth, which gave him a perspective to distinguish Korean cultural traits from those of China.

4 *Innaechon* (인내천, 人乃天) means "a man is the heaven."

(Eastern Learning) to counter Western learning and it grew later to be a religion, *Chondo-gyo* [天道教, literally the Religion of Heavenly Way] (Young, 2014). Its core teaching is epitomized by *Innaechon*, “a man is the heaven.” It venerates the lord of heaven [한울님, *Hanul-nim*] as the ultimate principle of good and justice. *Innaechon* turns the neo-Confucian distortion upside down. Every one of us is the heaven; so neither the king nor the parents are the object of worship. Everyone is precious; no one needs to remain a serf; the local people are no longer the object of local officials’ exploitation. Since a woman is also the heaven, there should be no gender discrimination. Choe Je-u was ingenious in propagating key ideas of *Donghak*. He summarized *Donghak* teaching with an incantation of thirteen simple Chinese characters: 1. *Sicheonju* [시천주] Serve the heaven (*Hanul-nim*); 2. *Johwajeong* [조화정] Laws of nature be in harmony; 3. *Yeongsebulmang* [영생불망] Never forget “man is a holy being”; 4. *Mansaji* [만사지] Come to know “everything (the above three)”.

Choe Je-u believed that by reciting the incantation and invoking the faith in the heaven-earth-man relationship, believers could save the country. *Donghak* is a reshaped version of ancient Koreans’ belief and *Pungryu* (Cho, 1999). *Donghak* shares the equality of people with ancient Koreans and *Pungryu*. Yet, it personified the heavenly god and taught that each man is the personified heaven. By respecting and serving the heaven, one can become the heaven, a savior. It is no wonder that *Donghak* followers increased rapidly in a society, rigidly stratified, lacking the well-established religious idea of savior.

In *Donghak*, the pantheistic heavenly god (*Haneu-nim*) became the personified heaven (*Hanul-nim*). This is a change of immense significance. This change was influenced by Christianity. Though the Christians were initially perceived as subversive, ideas of equality and the promise of afterlife appealed to many ordinary Korean people who suffered in the corrupt and miserable Joseon. It is not coincidental that Korea, a non-Western country, has a large number of followers of Christianity, because the ideas of equality and the promise of afterlife is not foreign to Korean people.

4. Dynamic Korea: People, Politics and Economy

We examined three moments of Korean history to find an archetype of the Korean character and its evolution. We found that Koreans take pride in

being descendants of God; they had egalitarian values; living together and living in nature was the ideal and ingrained in their thought; and humanistic ideals treating all humans as equal reached the highest level of preaching man-is-the-heaven: ordinary people were the agents of society. For them, there was no discrimination between the rulers and the ruled; between man and woman; you can be a savior. What is impressive is that the Korean character was refined in highly stratified Silla and enhanced when the country was on the brink of collapse. In times of hardship, Korean people responded collectively and actively to overcome the impasse. We can see how Korean character worked after Korea became a colony and regained its independence.

4.1 The March First Independence Movement

The Korean character was revealed characteristically in the peaceful March First protests of 1919 when the country was under the Japanese colonial rule. The March First (Independence) Movement was organized by *Chondo-gyo* leaders with help from Christian leaders and students (Young, 2014). The March First Movement demanded independence without resorting to arms. Leaders might not have anticipated the enormous support from ordinary people; yet, all Koreans became involved in demonstrations: old and young; low and high in social status; men and women, *Chondo-gyo* believers, Christians and Buddhists; residents in cities and countryside across the country, etc. About two million people participated during the March and April protests of 1919 even when the Japanese resorted to bayonets and guns.⁵

The Movement was “a world surprise” (McKenzie, 1920). Yet, it is not a surprise to Koreans. It is the highest peak and the greatest lake in Korean history, demonstrating Korean character, as aptly put by Jinbong Kim (2000):

The March First Movement is likened to be the highest peak in the rugged range of mountains of modern Korean history and also likened to be the greatest lake into which all the streams of independence movements flowed and from which all the later streams flowed down. . . It provided new awakening and courage to our national consciousness and national spirit.

⁵ The number of demonstrations, reported by the Japanese police, reached over 1,200 and demonstrators, over one million. By one Korean estimate, there were 7,509 deaths and 46,948 arrests.

The Movement did not secure independence for the country, but it brought about major changes in the independent movement and had an impact on the Korean character. First, the Provisional Government was established after the Movement. Second, the Republic was to be instituted when the country regained independence. Third, the solidarity and national aspiration for a peaceful nation-state was consolidated and it left long-lasting impacts on the democratic minds of Korean people.

4.2 Founding of the Republic of Korea, Land Reform and the Korean War

After the regaining of independence, Koreans established a liberal democratic political regime. It is natural for Korean descendants to establish a republic where all are equally living together as active agents. After the liberation, there were two moments which strengthened Korean character. First, land reform. The Korean government responded to the increasing demand for agricultural land reform in 1949 and 1950. The reform had many elements. The compensation to landlords was less than the market price, leading to big losses for the landlords. The reform banned farmland ownership by non-farmers, stipulated the maximum amount of landholdings per farmer, and prohibited tenant farming. Through the reform, the government tried to get the support of farmers for nation-building. Agricultural land reform contributed not only to state-building, but also to redistributing wealth and reducing income inequalities. Everyone was now placed on a more or less equal footing, and individual effort and ability rather than family wealth became the most important determinant for individual success. The Koreans' characteristic diligence and their emphasis on education were motivated by this perception of equal opportunity (K-Developedia, 2024). The reform also contributed to the expansion of education, especially private higher education institutions, because some big landowners established education foundations to avoid the forfeiture of their land.

Second, the Korean War (1950-1953). The Korean War was one of the most destructive wars. About 2.5 million (North and South Korean) people died and many left their homes. The government was not well-prepared to support the people. In hardship, starvation and migration, some aspects of Korean character were reinforced. People learned to endure and work together to survive and overcome the ordeals; in such circumstances, the family which had been the cornerstone of Korean social fabric became more important;

with the government in disorder, people had to rely on family support. Another effect of the War was the complete collapse of the traditional status system, which had been weakened since the mid-19th century. Now, in a homogeneous Korean society, there were few natural or artificial obstacles to social mobility. If you were educated and willing to work hard, you could become somebody, whether you were from a poor peasant family or from a remote corner of the country. People were mobilized individually and encouraged to move upward by the existence of fair entrance exams to colleges and private enterprises. This explains why Korea has the highest level of college enrollment rate and why the college entrance competition is so high. In such a system within a country with an ingrained egalitarian spirit, you are highly encouraged to be dynamic.

4.3 Electoral Competition and Power Shifts

Immediately after the establishment of the new republic, Korea developed a very competitive two-party system. There are three factors to it. First, the homogeneity of people and the single-member plurality electoral system. Single-member plurality led to the rise of two major parties. Two major parties emerged, because people did not want to waste their votes in such a system. In addition, homogeneity of the electorate in linguistic, racial and regional terms did not help splinter parties to win a seat in parliamentary elections. It is also true of the presidential election. The presidential elections between two party candidates were highly competitive. Second, high literacy rate. Hangul, the Korean alphabet, is easy to learn, which led to a high literacy rate of the electorate. It is not easy to manipulate informed voters. A high literacy rate combined with the homogeneity of voters to produce a very competitive election. Third, ideological confrontation between the North and the South. The Korean War removed the Left-wing parties virtually from the political space, because the progressives were seen as sympathizers with the North. As a result of the elimination of the Left, two major parties were very close to each other in terms of their platforms. Such a similarity between two parties also contributed to the competitive race and frequent transfers of power. In the last 40 years, no party kept presidential power for more than two terms. A political party should be responsive to the demands of the people to keep power. People's high expectations and prompt party responses worked to keep politics and people's reaction in motion.

4.4 Rapid Transformation of the Economy

The Korean economy has undergone the most dramatic transformation in the past 60 years (SaKong & Koh, 2010). The agrarian economy of 1960 turned into a knowledge-intensive, innovation-led economy. To explain the economic success, many point out the role of government policy, chaebol's competitiveness, an emphasis on human capital and adaptation to global trends. From our perspective, the Korean character and consequent political competition were indispensable in the process.

The land reform and expansion of education which became the basis for the production of a highly capable workforce (human capital) were possible because the Korean people demanded equal distribution of land and because the crumbling status system in a homogeneous society made education a key to individual upward mobility.

Political democratization is important to incorporate the workforce into a service-centered, knowledge-intensive economy. Koreans achieved democratization in the 1980s. It was the result of several factors: growing discontents with the government economic policy focusing on the chaebol and suppressing the working class, a competitive electoral system and the rise of a middle class which espoused democratic values over economic benefits. Yet, beneath all of these factors lay the features of Korean character. For example, the March First Movement spirit which emphasized non-violent participation of ordinary people in the movement was called upon by democratization leaders. Demands for equal payment for equal jobs and humane treatment of blue-collar workers were core to the labor union movement. The cries for those demands were well received in Korea because they struck a sympathetic cord in the Korean egalitarian ethos.

4.5 Korean Dynamism at a Crossroads

I have tried to relate dynamic economic and political changes to the Korean character. Egalitarianism, derived from homogeneity, and humanism were the source of Koreans' solidarity and perseverance in the face of crisis and zeal for mobility through education. The Korean character has been the key to the resilience, integration and motivation of ordinary people.

Yet, there are symptoms of a decay of the Korean character. Sociologist Hagen Koo (2001) found that the Korean labor movement in the mid-1990s

was at a crossroads. He wondered if the relatively secured workers in big enterprise would fight for solidarity with workers in unstable job markets. It turned out that a division among workers emerged and worsened after the financial crisis of 1998. Egalitarian and solidarity values are giving way to atomized individual mobilization; we are moving from living together to self-help society.

With the widening gap of wealth in society, good education which had been a public good and a stable means for social mobility for a long time is turning into a private good. The rich get high quality education outside of school while others are left in a classroom where increasing student disparity of educational preparedness undermines quality education.

The two-party system functioned to increase the responsiveness of political parties to voters' demands and served to democratize the politics. Now, two major parties, faced with increasing social and economic polarization, a decreasing number of middle-class swing voters and SNS-based opinion polarization, have bogged down into a stalemate; the two-party system is inadequate for the increased diversity and polarization of the current Korean society. For example, it is no more homogeneous; foreign-born citizens are now over 5% of the population. Yet, prospects for a splinter party are slim. The Korean political system needs innovation.

Will or can Koreans reverse the decaying of the Korean character? Will Korea be dynamic as in the 1970s-1990s? As suggested, it depends, above all, on re-vitalization of the archetypal Korean character.

4.6 Evolution of the Korean Character as a Perspective

When the Korean character is under serious challenges, will it be fruitful to use the idea of archetype of the Korean character? The answer is in the affirmative.

First of all, the idea of Korean character and its evolution was useful in integrating contrasting views of Korean society. For example, we can put the Confucian-values-based interpretations of Korean society in its place. In fact, even though Confucianism was introduced into Korea during the fourth and fifth centuries, Koryo (918-1392) society was plural in its religious values (J.-k. Park, 2017); Confucian ideas and practices became influential only in the mid- and late-Joseon (Deuchler, 1992; Duncan, 1994) and, as religious practice, Confucian practices in Joseon had limited influence in private realms;

“together, and often in complementary ways, Confucianism and popular religion shaped the behavior of Joseon period Koreans” (Walraven, 1999, p. 162). Also, in our perspective, we could see how the ancient Korean character was revived and refined in *Donghak* and *Chondo-gyo* and actualized in the March First Movement. Our perspective leads us to take a broad view of Korean dynamism.

Second, we can relate the evolution of Korean character to current developments by how ordinary, egalitarian people’s ideals were materialized in political and economic development. This makes a good contrast with religious studies or political thought studies, which tend to focus on theoretical aspects of religions and thoughts in a certain period.

Third, even though it is a simple idea, our perspective allows us to flexibly apply the Korean character evolution to a history of Korean development from ancient times on. When compared with a multivariate perspective, the advantage of our perspective should be clear (e.g., M.-k. Park, 2016).

Fourth, yes it is true that a simple idea of Korean dynamism will be less relevant to an analysis of an increasingly polarizing Korean society. Yet, understanding how Korean dynamism has evolved is an important stepping stone to understanding how and in what aspect Korean society is losing its dynamism.

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Professional Profile

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