Korean Culture Seen through Westerners' Eyes

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Abstract

In order to find out how Westerners have viewed Korean society and culture, I have read ethnographies that cover from the nineteenth century to the present. In the earlier days, missionaries and explorers wrote about Korea. They shaped the image of Korea as a "hermit kingdom" or a "country of morning calm." This image became the famous, symbolic expression, describing Korea. It is compelling to compare the earlier ethnographic descriptions with the very recent because of evidence of changes in Korean society as a whole.

Most anthropological studies from the 1950s have been thoroughly studied on the basis of first hand observation. The scholarly works helped the readers understand Korea. Until the 1970s, many anthropologists studied in rural villages or traditional villages. The village was seen as a community that was self-sufficient and autonomous.

Since the 1980s the research subjects have been susceptible to the sensitive social issues existing in Korea, and large, with eloquence and sophistication, the ethnographies described the manifestation of cultural diversity and complexity. However, it may be hard for Western audience who are unfamiliar with Korean culture to grasp a broader picture of the country.

Keywords: image of Korea, traditional culture, Confucianism, cultural diversity, Korean modernity

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Contrasting Images: Primitive but Literary

In the nineteenth century, Korea was introduced to Western countries as poor, dirty and primitive but possessing beautiful, untouched, scenery. Korea came into the sight of Westerners through books, reports and diaries of missionaries and travelers who visited the country. Missionaries played a large role in the introduction of Korea to Westerners. Beside the missionaries, there were travelers and explorers who were interested in the small, unknown country but they either passed by quickly or stayed only a short time period. In contrast, the missionaries dispatched to Korea lived among the native people during their mission in Korea. Their reports, diaries and writings included vivid and detailed descriptions about the Korean people, customs and landscape. Thus, during the period in which the missionaries were active in Korea, certain missionaries came to be known as gateways to the West's understanding of Korea.

The most famous book of this time period is Histoire de l'Eglise de Corée by Charles Dallet, a French priest. The book was published in 1874 in Paris. The title indicates that it is a history of the Korean Church but the book included good descriptions of Korean culture as well. For example, Dallet praised the level of cooperation within the Korean family. Following the Confucian tradition, mutual cooperation and reverence in the family were distinct characteristics of the Korean family. On the other hand, Dallet also pointed out certain negative aspects of patriarchy in the Korean family. He reported the cruel oppression under which Korean women lived. He writes of the yangban women who were confined in cell-like inner rooms. Without their husbands' permission, they were not able to venture outside the home; they were not even allowed to peek outside of their houses. Yangban women who were accidentally touched by other men were killed by their fathers, husbands or, sometimes, the women committed suicide, rather than live in disgrace (Dallet 1979–1980, 184-185).

Besides Dallet's book, other missionaries and visitors wrote similar descriptions of Korean women. These writings detailing the "dark" side of the Korean people and their customs imprinted in the

Western imagination an image of Korea as “primitive” or “savage.” However, in conjunction with such negative imagery, Dallet and other missionaries also hinted at the Koreans’ keen sense of etiquette and their strong literary tradition, both of which served as essential parts of the Korean yangban way of life. These contrasting images delivered by earlier European missionaries long lingered in and outside of the Catholic Church.

Following the European church model, American churches also dispatched missionaries to Korea in the late nineteenth century. The first American missionary, Horace N. Allen, arrived in 1884. He established a close relationship with King Gojong. From then on, more Presbyterian missionaries arrived in Korea. They preached religion and also worked as educators, diplomats and medical doctors. While performing religious and other community activities, they enthusiastically took notes, wrote diaries, and sent letters to acquaintances in the United States. Their writings on Korea were collected and published on a regular basis in The Korean Repository (1892, 1895-1899), a chronicle.

Most of the descriptions of Korean people and customs were brief sketches. However, there were some scholarly pieces among those earlier accounts on Korea. The books by Isabella Bishop from England and George Ducrocqu from France were among these. Both Bishop’s Korea and Her Neighbors, and Ducrocqu’s Pauvre et Douce Corée contain ample and useful information about Korea; these books are frequently cited as historical and cultural sources of information about Korea from the early years of Western interaction. Neither of the authors, however, made any attempts to conceal Western supremacy or “Orientalism” in their accounts.

Thus, during the early years of Korean exposure to the West, images of Korea in the eyes of the Westerners were formed through books and reports written by missionaries, travelers and diplomats who visited Korea in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These books and reports form images that describe a “hermit kingdom” or a “country of morning calm.” The term “hermit kingdom” comes from the title of the book, Corea, the Hermit Nation by William E. Griffis in 1882. However, even before Griffis’s book came out, the term had already appeared in a magazine and a scholarly bulletin in the United States.[1] The Kingdom of Joseon, under the reign of Daewon-gun, father of King Gojong, strongly opposed an open policy toward any foreign countries and resisted Western influence. Joseon shut her doors to the outside world. Because of this policy, Korea remained the least known nation in East Asia in the West until the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, there were some aggressive explorers and travelers who landed on the peninsula out of curiosity. Most of them described Korea as primitive and poor but, from their reports, it seems that they felt a certain attraction to the unique landscape of this unknown land. They sensed tranquility and stillness in the mountains and rivers. “The land of calm” became a famous, symbolic expression for describing Korea.

Most Western visitors to Korea in those days had no or very little knowledge about the country that they were visiting. Many were passers-by who stopped in along the way during the journey from China to Japan. These visitors who barely knew Korea thought that the country was similar to either China or Japan in many ways. Geographical closeness to the larger, better known countries inevitably led to the assumption of cultural similarity. However, those who came to know the country better realized that Korea was a unique country in her own right. Under precarious political and military situations, Korea had maintained a long history of independence. In addition, even before the threat of direct domination by the surrounding cultural giants, Korea had developed her own unique culture. These facts made foreigners portray Korea as weary yet abiding, primitive yet wise, pitiful yet friendly. The early images of Korea were deeply rooted in the Westerners’ own cultural bias.

1. In May 1878, *New York Sunday Magazine* had an article on Korea under the title Corea, the Last of the Hermit Nations. The expression also appeared in 1881 in the *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* (Boulesteix 2001, 42).

Probing Tradition

Under Japanese colonialism (1910–1945), Korea entered into another phase of isolation from the outside world. The colonial government prohibited independent Korean diplomatic relations with foreign nations. In addition, various activities of Westerners in Korea were significantly suppressed. Western missionaries, educators, and doctors were censored. Travel to and within Korea was also tightly controlled. Access to Korea by Westerners was severely limited during this time, therefore limiting the number of Western authors' writings about Korea during this period.[2]

After liberation in 1945, the United States Army took over South Korea and established an interim U.S. military government, which ruled from 1945 to 1948. American army officials who knew little about Korea were frustrated by the lack of information about Korea written in English. The written materials authored by missionaries were out of date. Therefore, the Americans had no other choice but to gather information from the Japanese predecessors despite the language barrier between the two parties. Americans inevitably depended on Japanese data and personnel and the material from the missionaries. As a result, the Americans' view of Korea during this period was based upon colonial accounts and the old-fashioned, primitive view of Korea. The Americans were aware that the second hand materials did not provide sufficient and appropriate information. Therefore, the Army government collected the first hand material in various ways. Scholars and military officers participated in such government projects.[3]

2. *Korea s Fight for Freedom* by Frederick Mckenzie (London: Simpkin, Marshal and Co., 1920), *Modern Korea* by Andrew Grajdanzev (New York: The Institute of Pacific Relations, 1944), and *Korea and the Old Orders in Eastern Asia* by M. Frederick Nelson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1946) are some examples.

3. E. Grant Meade published *American Military Government in Korea* (1951); C. C. Mitchell, The New Korea Company Limited: Land Management and Tenancy Reform in Korea against a Background of United States Army Occupation, 1945–1948 (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1949). Mitchell who worked as director of the New Korea Company wrote his thesis on the basis of his work experience.

Distinct from those materials which had direct connection to the Army government, there were two ethnographies of Korea from the postcolonial period which were only indirectly related to the American occupation: Cornelius Osgood's The Koreans and Their Culture (1951) and Eugene Knez's doctoral dissertation "Sam Jong Dong: A South Korean Village" (1959). Both were interested in the traditional Korean way of life, having done anthropological fieldwork in agricultural villages.[4] Both Osgood and Knez believed that Korean villages had maintained the traditional way of life. They followed the community study method and recorded the details of the villagers' everyday life, family and kinship, religious rites and ceremonies, and economic and political activities.

It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that several anthropological studies of Korea were published: ethnographies written by William Biernatzki (1967), Vincent Brandt (1971), Mortimer Dix (1977), Dieter Eikemeier (1980), Clark Sorensen (1988a). They had similar approaches of the community study method as their predecessors, doing fieldwork in agricultural villages. These earnest, hardworking ethnographers tried to discover Korean traditional culture and its uniqueness. The old image of Korea as the "hermit nation" or the "land of morning calm" would have lingered over them. However, unlike their predecessors, they were trained anthropologists and academic discipline made it possible for them to significantly upgrade the level of the study of Korea in their scholarly works. Anthropologists did fieldwork and participant observation in Korean villages. Instead of holding onto the old images of Korea, they endeavored to dig deeper inside Korean society and culture by focusing on social relationships and functions. Anthropological approaches that were widely used in Western scholarship were adopted in the study of Korean society and culture. The village community was considered a homogeneous and integrated entity. Although each researcher

4. Osgood stayed in a village on Gwanghwa island located about 50 km west of Seoul. Bridges to the peninsula now connect the island to the mainland. Knez studied in Samjong-dong near the Gimhae area in Gyeongsangnam-do province.

brought specific research questions, basically, they studied the structure and function of the village community as a homogeneous unit. In addition, these early anthropologists in Korea shared a common enthusiasm for actively searching for traditional elements that they felt may disappear in the near future due to Korea's rapid industrialization and modernization.

Western researchers found that Confucianism, more precisely Neo-Confucianism, was a major influence on Korean culture, making it distinctive. Under the influence of Neo-Confucianism, traditional Korean culture established a lineage system that was strongly patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal. The Korean lineage system developed distinctively from China and Japan. The Western anthropologists sought characteristics of the Korean lineage system through structural and functional analysis. In the ideological dimension of the lineage system, corporatism, patriarchal authoritarianism and filial piety were subjects of analysis as well. Filial piety was considered the core and was the most highly praised virtue among the villagers in their studies. Filial piety to both living parents and dead ancestors was universally considered mandatory among the villagers. Accordingly, all descendants were required to commemorate their ancestors in an earnest manner. Ancestor worship in the Korean lineage system, having developed its form and ideology with its distinct rituals and moral codes, drew the attention of Western scholars (Biernatzki 1967; Brandt 1971; Dix 1977; Janelli and Janelli 1982).

In the sixteenth and seventh centuries, lineage members began forming clustered residences and eventually established village communities. Since then, Korean villages developed largely into two different types. One was a lineage village or the consanguineous village where, in many cases, one yangban lineage formed the majority of the village population.[5] The other, the non-consanguineous village, was where the village consisted of families of several surnames. In a

5. Biernatzki studied the village of Gyeongju Kim (Biernatzki 1967); Dix did his fieldwork in the village of Sinjong Hong (Dix 1977); and the Janellis conducted their fieldwork in the village of Andong Kwon (Janelli and Janelli 1982).

lineage village, the formal code of behavior and hierarchical order among lineage members were strictly observed. In particular, descendants in a yangban lineage held higher and authoritative status over commoners or sangmin. Confucian ethics and etiquette, ye or yejeol, supported such a hierarchical order and socially appropriate behavior for each class. Most Western anthropologists studied lineage villages to examine traditional Korean social structure and relations. However, Brandt, who studied a non-consanguineous village, argued that egalitarianism among commoners or sangmin was as important a principle of social relations as the hierarchical principle in a Korean village. The villagers were believed to be peace-loving. They wished to live in a balanced social atmosphere by fostering an egalitarian ideology within a society in which authoritarian and hierarchical social relations based on Confucian ideology were embedded (Brandt 1971). According to Brandt, in a non-yangban village, the lineage system was less important than in the yangban village. He described informal and friendly relationships among sangmin class neighbors contrasting them to the formal and hierarchical relations of yangban lineage members. However, such an egalitarian ideology existing in a non-yangban village did not always produce mutual cooperation and amiable relationships. Brandt and Eikemeier described how limited goods influence a poor agricultural village, largely drawing upon "the image of limited good" in Foster's argument (Foster 1979).[6] The villagers inevitably competed with each other for scarce goods. As Eikemeier noted, certain equality existed among all rural villagers in Korea because everyone suffered from the lack of material resources. Therefore, the villagers were conscious of sustaining equilibrium particularly in economic matters (Eikemeier 1980, 9). Brandt also witnessed the ideology of communal property from the perspective of "moral economy."[7] Those who accumulated property were expected

6. Foster, in his study of peasant economy in Mexico, indicated that peasants employed a different logic than the economic maximization assumed to be operative in capitalist societies. He argued that the scarcity of resources available to peasants influenced their conception of "good" in general (Foster 1979).

7. The theory of moral economy was widely used to explain peasant economic

to redistribute it to other villagers; otherwise, they would fail to mobilize their status to a higher social rank (Brandt 1971, 77). In these studies, Korean village life was portrayed with "the image of limited good" and a "moral economy" along with rigid formality based on Confucianism.

Like Brandt, some researchers turned their attention to those who were in marginal social groups in Korea, such as women. Researchers believed that issues of Korean women were crucial to understanding Korean society and culture. In the earlier days of study, as discussed above, missionaries and visitors described Korean women as extremely isolated by and from their family and society as a whole. They were seen as obedient and submissive, existing under the patriarch family system. They were even described as deprived of basic human rights and imposed with tremendous burdens, all in the name of women's virtue. However, Laurel Kendall and other researchers saw different aspects of Korean women through a "view from the inner room."[8] This group of scholars rescued the image of Korean women from that of seemingly worthless and insignificant social actors in the orthodox Confucian country. Kendall was particularly attentive to the nature of Korean shamanism and the role of women in ritual practices. Previous writings on Korean religions demonstrated the clear division of religious practices by gender. For example, men were in charge of ancestor worship while women were in charge of shamanistic rituals in the household (Gifford 1898, 61; Kendall and Peterson 1983, 6). However, Kendall argued that in Korean religions there was no such clear gender distinction within the different categories of religious rituals such as Confucianism, Shamanism, and Buddhism. So, according to Kendall, it would not be

behaviors during the 1960s and 1970s. Scott argued that peasants obeyed a moral economy in which the preservation of viable relationships within the local community was believed to be more important than individual success in a competitive market economy (Scott 1976).

8. This phrase is taken from the title of the book edited by Kendall and Peterson, *Korean Women: View from the Inner Room* (New Haven, Conn.: East Rock Press, 1983).

appropriate to say that shamanism was a religious arena solely reserved for women. Although women took a major role in the practice of shamanism, men also took part. She delineated how deeply shamanism permeated the everyday life of Koreans. Confucianism and Buddhism in Korea were also affected by elements of Shamanism and visa versa. The fact that a woman as a household's shaman held an important role meant that her status in the family was not insignificant (Kendall 1985a). Kendall's study on Korean shamanism shed light on the proper understanding of religion in Korea and the status of Korean women. However, it did become problematic that Kendall's readers who were not familiar with Korean culture identified Kendall's sources in her book, the shamans and their clients, as representative of all Korean women.

Culture Matters?

As the Korean economy developed to a certain degree through the 1960s and 1970s, Western scholars became interested in the social and economic changes taking place in Korea. Donald Christie (1972) may have been the first American anthropologist to study the Korean business sector.[9] He started his fieldwork in 1968 when Korea was still identified as an underdeveloped country. About twenty years later, Roger Janelli studied the rise of a new middle class in accordance with economic development in Korea. Christie and Janelli are comparable in certain ways. Both worked temporally as clerks in each of the companies that they studied in order to closely examine the subject matter. Secondly, they had a similar research question in mind: to what extent had culture influenced Korea's economic sector? Thirdly, both did not study the business activities of the companies per se. Rather, they were interested in investigating the social relations within the company, for example, the relationships between

9. Christie worked as a clerk in Federation of Koran Industries (FKI) to carry out his anthropological fieldwork.

employers and employees or the relationships between high and low ranking office workers. Regardless of such common aspects, the results of the two studies were opposite, which implied that the difference was related to the difference in social situations and the research methodology. Putting aside any methodological differences between the researchers in order to keep this discussion short, there seems to be some obvious differences between the two studies. First, there was a twenty year gap between them. Second, the field sites were different in terms of the character of the companies. Christie found that cultural factors negatively influenced Korea's economic development. According to his observation, in the late 1960s, businessmen did not work hard since they did not take pride in their jobs. They spent more time with friends, not with coworkers, during their leisure time or afterwork hours. In contrast, such leisure activities were unlikely for Japanese counterparts who devoted themselves to their work and company. Christie observed that many office workers were unenthusiastic about work and discontent with their current jobs. Instead, they were more apt to search for jobs that they regarded as having higher social status. This was, he argued, was the most serious obstacle in the development of the business sector in Korea.

After the time when Christie studied the Korean business sector, the social situation in Korea changed a great deal during a short period. In the company where Janelli worked in the late 1980s, office workers were devoted to their job.[10] In addition, the company emphasized cooperation, harmony and devotion. The ethical code that this highly modernized company adopted, in fact, borrowed from the conventional or traditional Korean code of ethics and morality. By doing this, the company arranged its structure to a family-like system with the paternal authority of the owner-manager. The cultural construction of the company structure was believed to be highly economical. Janelli pointed out that Korean capitalism was "a unique human creation that is socially constructed and culturally informed" (Janelli 1993, 235). Korean culture shaped Korean capitalism into a distinctive form and nature. Therefore, Korean capitalism does not just borrow from nor simply adopt Western capitalism.

10. One plausible explanation why office workers in the two companies showed different attitude toward work may be laid on the different characteristics of the companies. While Janelli s firm was a branch company of the most prominent conglomerates in Korea, Christie s firm was an organization for promoting business.

As long as there was an emphasis on culture construction, the function or role of culture remained important. Korean culture took responsibility for the malfunction of the economic system when the country was underdeveloped. Yet, as Korea emerged as a developed industrial country, the cultural contribution to the development was emphasized. However, Janelli also believed that not all cultural factors functioned positively in the economic arena. For example, Korean businesses tended to conceal their ultimate goal to attain maximum profits. Outwardly, they emphasized loyalty to the greatest good for the company, the nation's economic development and patriotism. However, when the company invested its capital in real estate, the investment was kept secret or intentionally covered up. It was considered as undesirable investment, although many Korean entrepreneurs were deeply involved in real estate investment. Another example was in human resource management, which showed traits unique to the Korean business world. Often an employee's capabilities were not the sole factor in recruiting or laying off workers; various other factors, such as networks of educational backgrounds, localism, and nepotism, seemingly unrelated to the actual work, were involved in the processes.

In the literatures about the Korean economy and culture, Korean traditional norms and values were either the object of praise or blame depending upon the situations the researchers had encountered. The judgment of culture seemed to hang precariously on the economic situation of the times.

Diversity Observed

The 1980s were considered a landmark in contemporary Korean history. During this period, Koreans experienced a kaleidoscope of political conditions from the Gwangju Democratization Movement to the establishment of a civil government. The ongoing political turmoil in the 1980s resulted in progress in democracy and the rise of civil society. Under unstable political and social circumstances, the Olympics were held in Seoul in 1988. The world watched the Seoul Olympics with worry and wonder. For Western audiences, two contrasting images, the enduring political unrest and the extravagance of the Seoul Olympics, may have overlapped. The scholars' view of Korea was not much different from that of the masses. Some researchers focused on the rise of a new middle class accompanying the nation's economic boom.[11] Yet, others turned their attention to the political upheavals and the systematic suppression of the citizens' discontent. The study of Korea during this time period simultaneously revealed two contrasting dimensions of social changes.

Those who studied the new middle class noted that it consisted of those who grew up or at least were educated in the cities. After graduating from college, most of those consistuting the new middle class entered stable companies as managers or managers-to-be. These new middle class members, along with owners of the companies, classified as the bourgeoisie, made great contributions to Korea's economic development during the 1980s (Janelli 1993).

Among those who studied the social and political turmoil in Korea, two anthropologists are of note. Linda Sue Lewis was one of the few Western eyewitnesses to the Gwangju Democratic Movement and Nancy Abelmann also directly observed the Gochang Tenant Farmers Movement in 1986. By documenting these political incidents, both anthropologists dealt with conflict and class struggles in Korean

11. In order to differentiate from the old middle class, the term of new middle class was used. The new middle class is seen to come into being in the development of industrial capitalism in Korea (Janelli 1993).

society. The Gwangju Incident was one of the most important political events in contemporary Korean history. Demonstrations in Gwangju started at a peaceful student rally against the dictatorship government in May 1980. The rally soon turned into a bloody people's revolt. Lewis documented the uprising both as an eyewitness and through the memories of the Koreans. In the late 1990s, she went back to Gwangju almost two decades after the uprising to conduct subsequent fieldwork. In her writings, she confirmed that in the memory of the people, the incident remained a symbol of the victory of Korean democracy, the people's struggle of bloodshed against the dictatorship, and anti-Americanism. On the other hand, the Gwangju Incident also shaped diverse, debatable, and confused memories of the people. As a result, according to her investigation, the Gwangju incident still remained a subject of controversy and different claims for Korean people (Lewis 2002). Together with her experiences at the time of incident and her previous study on the mediation process at a local district court, Lewis studied Korean cultural characteristics in dealing with conflicts. As a social process, conflict is often resolved through the public expression of grievances by both sides such as informing the neighbors, forming a local consensus, and mustering popular support. Above all, this was a process that relied heavily on third party intervention for a successful outcome. It was through the public airing of the dispute that the antagonists solicited the intervention of others even in the Gwangju case (Lewis 1988).

Abelmann also met a group of agonized protesters, the Gochang tenant farmers, in the late 1980s. These tenant farmers rented out agricultural land owned by one of the conglomerates in Korea, Samyangsa. The history of land ownership could be traced back to the 1930s when the family of the company's founder reclaimed land in the Gochang area. Landownership was problematic under the Land Reform Act of 1949. The company and the tenant farmers had different perspectives and interpretations of the past which were the basis of their dispute. Abelmann focused on the discourse on the past and the politics of the tenant farmers who are classified as minjung (the so-called non-elite mass). Although the discussion in her book

was based on thorough research and observation, she documented the history and current events from a viewpoint favorable to the minjung and the minjung supporters in Korea. Abelmann viewed the tenant farmers as a group of social reformers, following the argument of minjung historians. However, in her subsequent visit to the village of the tenant farmers after the protest, she noted that the former protesters had hastily retreated back into their routine lives. The villagers' everyday lives had hardly changed. Even though the village women had played an important role in the protest, the status of women in the village remained unchanged from prior to the protest. After reading Abelmann's thick book, I still had the same question in my mind that I had in the beginning: What made these tenant farmers mobilize? How do we read objectively the discourse of the past? These farmers had not always cried out as a form of collective discontent in dire situations. When, then, did farmers turn into angry protesters and when did they not? The farmers were, at one point, very active in advocating for the normative good, but they also readily adapted themselves to the practical good at another point in time. The idealistic, romantic view of the peasant protesters that Abelmann cherished has been debated widely among social movement theorists.

In the 1980s, seeing demonstrators on the street was not a rare event. But in the 1990s, the social situation in Korea changed again. Street demonstrations disappeared for the most part. James Thomas wondered what had happened in Korea, where protests had frequently occurred in the 1980s (Thomas 1993). When he visited a shantytown in Seoul, he heard angry voices from squatters who were discontent with the resettlement plan of the city government. Yangdon is one of many squatter settlements in Seoul. In his ethnography, Thomas is interested in the nature of Korean development but he did his research on the dark side rather than the bright side of economic development. He raises some questions about development and its impact on the welfare of Korean society, especially that of the members of the urban under class—their way of life, their hopes and their frustrations. As his research proceeded, he was puzzled by the fact that the squatters did not take collective action. Their many complaints, desperation, and dire need did not directly lead to this. Rather, they remained patient, valorizing their suffering, and built their expectations for the future on their children's educational success. This study contributed more broadly to our understanding of the relationship between poverty, individual choice and collective resistance. Thomas's study on squatters broadens the understanding of the minjung as multivoiced and multifaceted.

Mixed Images of Korea Modernity

Kendall's recent work was on the social and cultural processes related to contemporary weddings in Korea (Kendall 1996). However, she did not concentrate solely on contemporary weddings, but on the historical development of Korean wedding traditions during the past several centuries. She was well aware that her position in the field as a Western woman might place her in a privileged position and lead to a less profound understanding of Korean women and weddings. With her keen insight and eye for detail as an experienced ethnographer, she noted that Korean wedding practices were constantly changing. The traditional and Western style weddings were jointly performed in different locations in the same wedding hall. She also described the complicated economic and political implications of marriage styles: arranged marriages, marriages based on love, as well as, the half-and-half marriages. These different styles of marriage coexist and matchmaking is not simply considered as old-fashioned. In sum, she focused on the various exchanges that were crucial to the Korean wedding, and primarily on the economic burden many of these exchanges impose on lower and middle class families. Kendall details these various exchanges, including household goods, gifts between the bride and groom, gifts given to the significant kin of the groom and so on. Kendall's precise and eloquent ethnographic description of the details of a Korean wedding in contemporary society demonstrates primarily the everchanging cultural complex of weddings in Korea and secondly, the fine-tuning of both Western and

traditional ways of ritual practices.

The urban lifestyle and the middle class of Korea have caught the attention of Western researchers since the 1990s. Denise Lett recently published In Pursuit of Status, an ethnography of Korea's new urban middle class (Lett 1998). To Lett, what is unique about the making of a new urban middle class in Korea is the fact that traditional Confucian legacy lingers in contemporary Korea. She notes the inherent difficulties in separating the new middle class from the old in the context of contemporary Korea. In one context, she argues that traditional elements in contemporary Korea were not merely based on the impulse to return to the past, citing Rozman, stating that "contemporary characteristics must be seen not as straight-forward manifestations of the past, but as part of a changing historical context" (Lett 1998, 39). However, Lett is convinced that the two historical periods, the late Joseon and contemporary Korea, share many common characteristics in terms of social and cultural aspects. As she states, "(T)his situation in which women in the nineteenth century did work and contribute to their household income but were invisible persisted into the 1990s" (Lett 1998, 61). Women's work ethic and attitudes and 3D disease in old and new Korea were good examples that demonstrated the continuity of culture (Lett 1998, 42-45). The consciousness of social status that was historically and culturally embedded in Korean society was also a good example. Koreans, Lett argues, possess an underlying drive to attain social status. Her argument is correct in that many Koreans are obsessed with social status. Yet, this very obsession has made Korea successful in developing high quality of human resources. For example, Koreans put much effort into education in order to climb up to a higher level in the social strata. Lett's image of Korea's urban middle class is well displayed in the areas of occupation, family, lifestyle, education, and marriage. However, her description of contemporary middle class culture is hardly distinguishable from that of the yangban class in Joseon. Unlike Kendall's fine analysis of the cultural contestation between tradition and modernity, Lett draws her analysis of contemporary culture upon tradition.

Implication

As a native Korean, it is quite interesting to read the ethnographies and the writings of missionaries and travelers on Korean culture. I have read books and manuscripts that cover a relatively long period of time from the nineteenth century to the present. The earlier books and reports by Western missionaries, explorers and diplomats were full of exotic customs and the traditions of our ancestors that are now even foreign to natives. Not only did these writers leave behind scripts but also pictures of people, streets and natural scenic views. The writings and pictures are important historical material that vividly show us the culture and history of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. It is compelling to compare the earlier ethnographic descriptions with the very recent, because of the evidence of changes in Korean society as a whole. The remarkable changes over a hundred and fifty years refresh our memories of the past. In addition, the Western researchers' eyes are so keen and insightful that I learn much from them. It is surprising how much I, as a native anthropologist, have overlooked important characteristics of Korean culture. Reading the ethnographies filled with informative accounts leads me on an interesting journey to meet the "unfound us'" in everyday life. This is one of the significant contributions made by the ethnographic work of Western scholars.

I should confess, however, that there are times when I feel at a loss when I come upon unfamiliar aspects of Korean culture even though the researchers were careful to describe them eloquently. When I come across these idiosyncratic cases, I am frustrated and even a little shameful. Such kind of emotional distraction may come from either guilt resulting from my ignorance or shame resulting from unwanted exposure by foreigners. I hastily criticize the work, labeling it as a shallow description. However, I know that superficial descriptions of Korean culture and society are rare among the ethnographies I have read, with the exception of those from the earlier reports, books, and short descriptions by missionaries and visitors. Most are thoroughly researched, carefully written scholarship based

on firsthand observation. Unlike in other disciplines, anthropological works by Western scholars are less debatable in terms of objectivity or relativism. This is mainly because of the methodological advantages. Scholars usually stay close to their subjects and collect firsthand materials through direct observation. Through these intimate experiences, it is difficult to miss even the subtle implications of the behaviors of the subjects.

What have the responses of Western readers to the ethnographies been? As shown above, from the outset, Korea was seen through a series of contradicting images—calm but reckless, primitive but literate. Such contradictions might be hard to understand for the writers who did not probe deeply into Korea. However, from the 1950s, scholarly works helped Western readers to understand Korea, a remote country distant from them. Until the 1970s, many anthropologists studied rural villages or traditional villages assuming uniformity of social structures, ideology and moral codes that cuts across society in general, a seemingly homogenous group in particular. The village was seen as a community that was self-sufficient and autonomous. Their view of the Korean village, then, loomed large next to the image of the "hermit kingdom" and the "morning clam." In a self-contained and homogeneous village disconnected from the outside, villagers were assumed to maintain their everyday lives under the rule, ye, of Confucianism and friendly interpersonal relations.

Since the 1980s, Western anthropologists have investigated distinctive characteristics of Korean culture in cities and economic sectors outside of rural villages. Their chosen research subjects were susceptible to the sensitive social issues in Korea during the 1980s and 1990s, such as the rise of a new middle class, political upheavals, consumerism in ritual context and everyday life. With eloquence and sophistication, the ethnographies described the manifestation of cultural diversity and complexity. In many cases, each researcher focused on a specific area and a subject matter in an in-depth study. This approach helped both readers inside and outside of Korea understand more deeply the particular topic and area in Korea.

On the other hand, it may be hard for a Western audience unfamiliar with Korean culture to grasp a broader picture of the country. It is inevitable to point out that "no one can imagine the whole picture of a jigsaw puzzle with only some of the pieces." It goes without saying that the native anthropologist who studies his or her own culture under the current practices of the discipline of anthropology in particular, and present academia in general, would be just as much in danger of falling into such a trap.

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