[page 13] **Why Not Believe in Evil?**

C. Fred Alford

*The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington’s (1996, pp. 312-318) recent book, imagines, among other conflicts, a World War Three between China and the United States, what he calls a global civilizational war. It is not, certainly, a work that plays down conflict and differences among what he calls civilizations. Nor is it a book that shrinks from the dramatic. Twice he refers to evil, toward the beginning and toward the end of his book (pp. 56,319). Toward the beginning he says that he is not interested in trivial commonalties among peoples, such as the fact that “human beings in virtually all societies share certain basic values, such as murder is evil …”

It is ironic, the man who sees fundamental conflict and fault lines everywhere misses the fact that people in all societies do not agree that murder is evil, not just because they do not agree about the definition of murder, but also because they do not agree whether evil exists. Most Koreans, I have found in my research, do not believe in “evil,” though of course it is not that simple. The concept of evil is complex, as I (Alford, 1997) have argued in *What Evil Means to Us*, my study of Evil West, so to speak. What is missing in Korea is the sense of evil as a malevolent, marauding force in the heart of man and the cosmos.

Some anthropologists of evil—there is such a subfield—argue that every society has a concept of evil. Evil is a virtually universal category, but what they generally mean by “evil” is something very bad. Certainly Koreans possess terms for very bad. Ak, and sa ak, are among the strongest. What Koreans lack is a sense that all, or even most, very bad things possess something in common, what we would call “evil.” If one were to translate ak as evil, then evil would become just a word, with nothing in common to link its objects, much as bad day, bad hair, bad dog, bad boy, and bad air lack a common denominator other than being bad.

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What else is new, you might ask? Of course Korea lacks a western concept of evil, for Korea is east, and the east lacks the west’s penchant for dualism. Ruth Benedict (1947, p. 190) made this point in 1947 in The Chrysanthemum and the Sword, her study of Japanese culture, and she was not the first. Evil is part of a whole set of Western distinctions, such as that between being and becoming, form and void, that has never been convincing to the East.

To “discover” that Koreans do not believe in evil is no discovery at all, if by the term discovery we mean the unearthing of something new. Still, it can be useful to question what seems so obvious. What, after all, does it mean to not believe in evil? Do people who do not believe in evil see the world through rose colored glasses? Or do they just refuse to do the addition, so to speak, refusing to assimilate bad Japanese, bad North Koreans, and bad morals to a single quality of extreme badness, what the west calls evil?

Common experiences using slightly different words is what I expected to find, based upon my preliminary interviews with a small number of Korean- Americans. In other words, I expected the Korean denial of evil to be relatively superficial, a nominalist defense against an essential experience. Push Koreans a little bit, and I would find many of the same elements of evil I found among the informants who contributed to What Evil Means to Us, above all a need to create malevolent enemies in order to contain and express feelings of doom and dread.

What I found was something vastly more complex, a world in which it hardly made sense to say that Koreans deny evil, as the term “deny” presumes an experience to be denied in the first place. Rather, Koreans organize experience in such a way that evil does not have the possibility of appearing, possibly not even as an experience.

Koreans believe they have a choice about concepts like evil, essentially dualistic concepts that divide the world in two. Whether the concept of evil, no matter how it is held, must invariably do this is another question. Many Koreans talk as if they and their culture have chosen to reject such concepts, because they are superficial, false, and destructive. This hatred of dualism is, of course, not without its own irony: Korea is home to the most heavily fortified border in the world.

One young Buddhist put it this way. “The West is infected with dualism. You Americans destroyed the Indians because of dualism. The West had two World Wars because of dualism. You are always finding and fighting an enemy.”(All unattributed quotations, including this one, come from author interviews.)

“What about the Japanese occupation of Korea,” I asked. “Wasn’t that [page 15] dualism?”

He thought a moment. “No, the Japanese didn’t want to fight us. They wanted to absorb us. It’s just the opposite.”

Not so different, perhaps, for the “absorbees.” but that is not the point. The point is that it is possible to organize what seem to be very similar experiences, such as Western and Japanese colonialism, under vastly different categories, even apparently opposite ones.

A WORKING HYPOTHESIS

In order to get a grant to study something, it is necessary to pretend that one knows what one is actually setting out to discover. This pretense is known as a working hypothesis. My working hypothesis was that because Korea is such a religiously eclectic and syncretic society, individual Koreans would experience evil by sector, so to speak. Evil would be divided into different areas of life governed by different religious principles. About family relationships, most Koreans, not just Confucians, would define evil in Confucian terms, lack of final piety and so forth. About metaphysical issues, most Koreans, not just Buddhists, would define evil in Buddhist terms, such as the ignorant clinging to things and people. About other matters, such as evil as the caprice of the world, most Koreans, not just shamanists, would define evil in shamanistic terms, illness and bad luck the result of not paying proper attention to the spirit world.

I did not confirm my working hypothesis, and I did not disconfirm it either, nor did it become irrelevant, just too categorical. I was made aware of this early in my research, when a Korean informant told the story of his brother’s funerals. In the morning the family went to the Confucian shrine. Later two shamans came to the house to purify it. In the evening they all went to the Buddhist temple, so the monks might say prayers for his spirit. While spending a couple of days at home before returning, the informant noticed a pair of his underwear were missing. His mother had taken them to the shaman to be blessed. She was worried he was working too hard.

My working hypothesis was correct in so far as it suggests something of how the elements of the western concept of evil are redistributed in Korea, but it was incorrect in so far as it suggests the sectors have boundaries. It would be more accurate to say that about family relationships and evil, most Koreans draw upon Confucian, Buddhist, and shamanistic elements, and more besides, leading to a mix that is all of the above and then some. One can say the same [page 16] thing about the other sectors, nor does it make much difference what religion the informant belonged to. Koreans said remarkably similar things about evil, no matter what their religion, including Christianity.

MAPPING THE NON-EXISTENCE OF EVIL

What I was doing in my research, though I did not fully understand it until later, was mapping the non-existence of evil, discovering where, when, and why it disappeared. Mapping might evoke the image of tracing the Korean disbelief in evil to its source. The image is misleading, though some ways of thinking surely have more influence on the non-concept of evil than others. The Tao’s insistence on anti-dualism, echoed in Buddhism and much else in Korean culture besides, is fundamental. To see the world in terms of “more than one, less than two” inhibits the development of the type of dualistic thinking that makes a sturdy concept of evil difficult, if not impossible.

While the Tao is important, and I shall return to it, it would be dubious to suggest that the influence is so direct. Non-dualism is not just or even primarily a philosophical commitment, but a personal one. One of my informants was a judge in a district court in Kyongsangnam-do, province. When asked whether he had ever confronted evil in his courtroom, he told a story.

“Several years ago a man was arrested for attacking his neighbor and breaking his nose. Two hours later, the victim persuaded his attacker, who was even more drunk than the victim, to box. Because the original victim had some experience as a boxer, he beat the man who broke his nose severely. The next day the boxer with the broken nose brought charges against his neighbor.

“When the two men came before the judge, only one was in handcuffs, but after hearing the story, the judge decided that both were guilty, and so arrested the plaintiff. Then he put both on probation.”

It was, he said, his finest moment as a judge. He does not believe that he is a very good judge, but in this case he says he was brilliant, comparing himself to Solomon, a frequent image of wisdom among Koreans, especially Buddhists, at least when speaking with me. It is a western image of wisdom Koreans can appreciate.

In Korea the judge generally acts as jury. He must determine the facts as well as pass judgment. This judge is overwhelmed by the complexity of the cases that appear before him. Not only does he have difficulty determining the facts, but even when he knows what happened he generally does not know why, or who is really to blame. “Some people don’t think, some are brought [page 17] up wrong. Even when you don’t want to do something bad, fate takes over. You can’t always help yourself.”

I pursued the topic of evil with the judge, saying “You still have not answered my question. Has anyone ever appeared before you who you would call evil?”

Finally he got angry. “How could I call someone evil. I would have to know their whole life history, and if I did, then I would have to sentence them to death. What else could I do.”

“A KOREAN SOLOMON WOULD HAVE MADE THE TWO WOMEN SISTERS”

The judge was interviewed with others present. He and they were students in an adult English language class with which I spent several days, transforming their classes into seminars on evil and their nights into informal discussions of evil at coffeehouses and restaurants. Captivated by the image of Solomon, another student recounted the story from the Old Testament of the Bible. “The western Solomon figured out which prostitute was lying by almost chopping the baby in half. Then he killed the pretended mother, giving the baby to its real mother. A Korean Solomon would have found a compromise. He would have made the two women sisters, so they could have cared for the child together. That’s the difference between east and west.”

Often we learn most from what is misremembered or misunderstood. The Biblical Solomon (1 Kings 3.16-28) does not kill the false mother, nor does he “almost” chop the baby in half; he only pretends, in order to discover the true mother, but the Korean woman who misremembers the story is making an important point about how she sees east and west. The west divides, chopping things and people, up. The east creates relationships modeled on the family. From her perspective, the Korean Solomon has not achieved a compromise. A compromise would be chopping the baby in half. The Korean Solomon has made the conflict disappear, by placing it within a relationship within which it can be resolved by the expectations inherent in traditional relationships such as older and younger sister.

Does the judge see so much complexity because he does not want to divide the people who come before him into good and evil, or does he not want to divide the people who come before him into good and evil, because he sees so much complexity? Both perhaps. Which came first seems impossible to determine. What is clear is that Koreans hate dualism, and it is this hatred that lies behind the reluctance to see evil—or rather, allot it a category of exis-[page 18] tence. This hatred of dualism is shared by most Koreans, though it finds its sharpest theoretical expression among Buddhists.

TAOISM IS THE BASIS OF ANTI-DUALISM

Sometimes it is argued that shamanism is the basis of Korean thought. A western missionary, Homer Hulbert, put it this way in 1906 in a contemporary guidebook to Korea.

As a general rule we may say that the all around Korean will be a Confucianist when in society, a Buddhist when he philosophizes, and a spirit worshiper (shamanist) when he is in trouble. Now when you want to know what a man’s religion is, you must watch him when he is in trouble. It is for this reason that I conclude that the underlying religion of the Korean, the foundation upon which all else is mere superstructure, is his original spirit worship. (Tomasz, 1993, p. 51)

I would not want to practice a contemporary version of this arrogant insight, substituting Taoism for shamanism. (It is both, I believe), My point is, I hope, more subtle.

Most adult Koreans, according to newspaper surveys and my experience, visit fortune tellers, or send their wives on their behalf. Many visit a shaman. One Western lawyer who worked for many years in Seoul complains, “It’s not unusual for me to do a lot of detailed work on a client proposal, and then have the client go and consult a fortune teller. He will always take the fortuneteller’s advice over mine.” (Clifford, 1994, p. 161) Certainly the living and dead keep company in Korea as they do not in the United States. This is the topic of Han Mahlsook’s Hymn of the Spirit (1983), about a world in which the dead mingle with the living, and the different religions blend, frequently within the same person. Toward the end of my stay it no longer surprised me that a Buddhist would approach me, an American professor, at a Buddhist temple, asking for a recommendation for a sympathetic shaman. I had previously talked with her about my interviews with shamans and fortune tellers.

If Koreans are superstitious, it does not profoundly affect their views of evil. To be sure, many less educated, and not only less educated, talk about revenge from beyond the grave, but the model—the reasoning—is strictly human, the dead taking their revenge for much the same reason as the living do, but perhaps more effectively. It is easy to overestimate the importance of superstitious and spiritual beliefs, particularly in Korea where figures such as[page 19] the shaman are so dramatic. In many ways the Korean view of qui-shin, ghosts of the departed who remain in this world to trouble their relatives and enemies, is less superstitious, or at least requires less of an act of spiritual and metaphysical imagination and faith, than belief in an omniscient and omnipotent God. Certainly these qui-shin operate according to principles that are virtually human, denizens of a world that mirrors our own. The world of the supernatural is not a higher or lower universe, but a parallel one, where almost every aspect of human relationships is faithfully reflected.

One wants to say that it is not shamanism but Taoism that most profoundly affects the Korean view or non-view of evil. Only putting it this way would ignore the origins of Taoism in shamanism. Consider, for example, the *Ch’u-tz’u* (Songs of the Land of Ch’u), written over three-thousand years ago. It would be more accurate to state that the Korean view of evil is most profoundly affected by a type of philosophical shamanism captured by the Tao Te Ching, and Chuang Tzu, in which oneness, or at least “not two-ness” is the highest value.

Though it is perhaps tendentious to distinguish between Taoism and philosophical shamanism, it is useful insofar as it recalls the connection between the shamanism of everyday Korean life and the more abstract teachings of the Tao. Because shamanism is so sensational, because a visit to the colorful shaman is on the agenda of every tour group, it is easy to miss the more subtle but important point While stories of qui-shin and the shaman, who speaks in their voice, are dramatic, it is actually the more subtle and abstract teachings of the Tao that influence everyday views of evil in Korea. In shamanism, the spirits inhabit a world remarkably porous to our own, the dead going back and forth between them. The world of everyday life and the spirit world are not one, but neither are they two. The Taoist term “not two” comes closest to the mark. It is this view of “not two,” rendered abstract, transformed into a worldview not a superstition, that best explains, at least in so far as the best explanation is most general, the Korean non-view of evil.

In the west, the model of birth and creativity is dualistic, God working on formless matter to create the world. In this dualistic model there is a place for evil, perhaps even a necessity for it: it is one of the oppositions that must be overcome. Only through the conflict of good and evil is progress possible. In the East, the model of birth and creativity is singular, though even that way of putting it is not quite right, as it assumes a dual against which singular takes its meaning. The model is the Tao, a oneness that has the quality of nothingness, is so far as it is so vast and capacious it has room for all things without opposition. The Tao says simply “the great fashioner does no splitting.” (Tao[page 20] Te Ching, no. 28).

From this perspective, creation comes not from conflict, but from the creation of unities out of dualities, unities being understood not so much as fusion as “more than one, less than two.” In creating unities out of conflict, one is coming closer to the original simplicity of nature. This is what the Korean Solomon would do, transform two women fighting over a single child into sisters. It is this ideal that the Korean judge tries to uphold, finding guilt where there is innocence, and vice-versa. Not in order to reverse dualities, creating new polarities. That would be the ideal of the Western dialectic, each apparent synthesis the motive for a new conflict. But in order to find the underlying natural unity behind the apparent opposition.

Here, the Korean says, is real creativity, finding a natural harmony out of apparent conflict. Creativity means to restore the oneness, the less than two-ness, of nature, or as Confucius, influenced more than a little by Taoism, says “Men are close to one another by nature. It is by practice they become far apart.” (Analects, 17.2) The judge, finding a deeper unity in two men’s conflict, means to restore something of man’s original nature.

RESEARCH APPENDIX

Rather than go into detail regarding questions and subjects, I seek here only to convey the flavor of my research. Interested readers may write me regarding details (falford@bss2.umd.edu).

I spoke with over two hundred Koreans from all walks of life. Some interviews lasted as little as twenty minutes. A number took over three hours. In several dozen cases I interviewed the subject a second and third time. Most were interviewed individually, but a number in groups.

The Koreans interviewed were about as religiously diverse as the population. While the Koreans interviewed were younger and better educated than the population as a whole, special efforts were made to interview older and less educated Koreans. The following is a list of my recruitment strategies:

1. Visiting restaurants in the middle of the afternoon, when staff was not so busy, to talk with older, generally less educated women.

2. Visiting coffeehouses in the evening and talking with patrons

3. “Evil dinners” were held, in which I invited a group of Koreans to drinks and dinner to talk about evil I paid and they talked.

4. Handbills were posted at several universities, inviting students to talk about evil. My sponsors doubted if any would respond. ‘‘Koreans do not do [page 21] things that way,” said one. In fact, a number responded.

5. Pagoda (T’apkol) Park in Seoul is a favorite place for older men to spend their days. Many were eager to talk at length.

6. Taxi drivers were interviewed. This is the only group that was sometimes paid, as the driver ran his, or occasionally her, meter as we talked.

7. Several teachers at English language institutes (hagwon) allowed their adult upper-level classes to become seminars on evil. Students had a chance to practice their English, and the researcher learned much.

8. One hundred fifty students from Hankuk University of Foreign Studies wrote essays on evil. Koreans are often more self-revealing in writing than in conversation. In addition, each was interviewed, generally in a group of about 15.

9. I visited a dozen different classes at three universities, one outside Seoul, talking with the students. Several students called me later, and we met and talked further.

10. Several shamans, a dozen blind fortune tellers, and other “scientists of divination” were interviewed, most at length.

11. Special efforts were made to interview Buddhist monks, Confucian scholars, Christian ministers and Catholic priests. Almost two dozen were interviewed. One priest talked about confessions he had heard, in general terms of course, a mode of access to guilty feelings about evil thoughts and deeds that would otherwise be unavailable.

12. Several dozen professionals and experts in relevant fields, such as psychiatrists, philosophers, sociologists, were interviewed.

My Korean is far from fluent, and I could not conduct interviews in it without the assistance of a translator. I had the same translator throughout my research project. We spent hundreds of hours working together, at least as many before and after interviews as during, trying to organize and make sense of the responses.

Many Koreans, particularly students and professionals, speak excellent English, and in these cases I conducted the interviews in English. In most cases my translator attended these interviews as well, partly in order to help with difficult words, partly in order to keep current with my work, and partly so she could tell me if I was hearing different things in English than in Korean.

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