

The influence of Taoism on Korean culture

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Taoism can be thought to be a sort of polytheism, which is constituted by various folk beliefs of ancient China mainly based upon Taoist doctrine of immortality, where elixir mountain hermits or gods are to be worshiped. Therein, Taoism is considered not to be founded by a guru or gurus, but just a folk religion. Taoism is not a worldwide religion like Buddhism, Christianity or Islamism, but it is the most outstanding and typical religious (philosophical) system in East Asia as well as the Chinese Buddhism or Confucianism. The oriental thoughts have been constituted by these three religious (philosophical) systems. And they turned into the basis of the culture in eastern Asia, and also have a great influence on the culture, history, life-style and nationality in the three countries of China, Korea and Japan. (1)

The root of Taoism dates back to a considerable old age. The inscriptions on animal bones and tortoise shell excavated from Yin-Dynasty ruins were found to have augural words and to be a record that the people in Yin-Dynasty had sought divine revelations from the god of ancestor. According to the result of augur shown by the God of ancestor, people in Yin-Dynasty read good and evil omens, weal and woe and judged the future climate, also determined their actions of hunting or offering a sacrifice to the ancestor. Such a divination by using tortoise shell shows that people in this era believed that human's fate should be predestined in Yin-Dynasty.

A Chinese scholar of religion, Ge Zhaoguang, claims in his book "Taoism and the Chinese culture"(2), that Taoism was formed as one of the matured religious systems after the fourth century and became prosperous in Tang Dynasty pervading various aspects of the social life.

After maturing in China, Taoism prevailed in the Korean Peninsula and then in Japan, strongly influenced the thoughts and daily life of these three countries. Thus, Taoism has become the typical base of the Eastern culture as well as Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism.

As for studies on the Japanese side, Fukunaga Koji reports that Taoistic thought strongly influenced the formation and development of Japanese

culture And also the thought or belief of the Shinto religion, the core of the Japanese ancient thoughts, was affected by the theology of Taoism. On the other hand, some scholars claim that Taoism didn't develop to be an independent philosophical or religious system in Korea and it was absorbed by the other system like Buddhism .(3)

Herein I think that there are many cultural elements which attribute to Taoism in Korea. However, there was very few researches done on the influence of Taoism on the Korean culture.

The Korean culture is all the more complicated and varied with long history. Generally speaking, the Korean culture has taken in the exotic culture like Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism on the basis of its inherent culture, mixed them together and developed them into its own culture. It is the product of fusion of the religions so now it is quite difficult to distinguish between exotic cultures and the inherent culture. It's also difficult to break up and separate each of the exotic cultures, especially the Taoism is harder to be distinguished than Confucianism and Buddhism. This may be because that Taoism has been absorbed into the base of the Korean culture, and Taoism is characterized by its masses culture and popularity which is common in the Korean culture.

However, a more significant reason is that many of the cultural elements in the Korean inherent culture or its primitive folk culture is similar to or almost identical with the cultural elements of the Chinese Taoism. Especially in Korea, Taoistic culture was thought to be Korean own culture and the doctrine of immortality, the core of Taoism, is regarded to be the Korean primitive thought. Taoism is thought to be Korean specific culture but an exotic one , therefore the Taoistic cultural elements have not been picked up as one of the exotic cultures in Korea. More often than not, the words of Taoistic thought has been used in terms of the Korean specific cultural thought. Maybe this is the reason why there have been very few studies conducted on the influence of Taoism in Korea.

Taoistic cultural elements can be easily noticed while living in Korea. So I think that Taoism has great impact on the Korean culture.

The national flag of Korea is referred to the Taeguk flag and the Taeguk mark in the center of the flag consists of blue and red. Taeguk implies "universal life" in the art of divination and the red and blue color of the central circle collectively represent the universe outlook of Taoistic thought

in which the whole universe is not only opposed but also unified and harmonized at the same time.

Generally the design or color of the national flag reflects its history of culture, tradition and religion etc. Two colors, blue and red, used in the Taeguk mark of the Korean flag implies the symbol of the Heaven and Earth in terms of the art of divination. The national flag is the symbol of a country. Using the Taeguk mark on the flag can also be considered that Taoism has a strong influence on the Korean politics.

The Taeguk mark, the symbol of Taoism, is widely used and thus very popular among the Korean people.

Kite flying is one of the most common activities in China, Korea and Japan. In these countries, people prefer to use the colorful figure in the kite designing. In Korea, most of the time, they put the Taeguk mark of the Korean flag on the kite. This reflects how popular it is among Korean people.

Do-San-Seo-Won, located in the suburbs of Andong city in Gyunsanbuk-Do district, was a private educational institution of Confucianism in the Korean dynasty era, which was established by a Confucian scholar Lee Toe-Gye in 1560. Lee Toe-Gye played an important role in the development of Confucianism and formed the Yeongnamhakpa, which placed emphasis on reason and respect by thorough self-contemplation. The remarkable thing is that the Taeguk mark was printed on the central gate of the Do-San-Seo-Won. It shows that Taoism pervaded in the Korean Confucianism. Many memorial buildings of Taoism like the pavilion of Mountain God, the pavilion of Sevenstar or the hall of underworld were set up in the Korean Buddhist temples. This also proved that Taoism has influence on both of the Buddhism and Confucianism in Korea.

Sirun pan, the sumo ring of Korean Sumo-wrestling also represents the Taeguk mark. The color of blue and red, which implies Heaven and Earth respectively, surrounds the yellow sand in the center. According to the Moon, the sun and the 5 element theories, yellow represents the center.

Sumo wrestling was propagated into China from India along with Buddhism and then organized as a Chinese style Sumo-wrestling absorbing the Taoistic elements. After passing through China Sumo-wrestling was propagated into the Korean peninsula and then into Japan. Japanese

Sumo-wrestling has deep relation to Taoism. The Sumo ring was formed by mixing Japanese Shintoism and the Moon, sun and the 5 element theories of Taoism together. The shape of the Sumo-ring is round and it represents Yang as well as the Sun. On the other hand the shape of banking of the Sumo-ring is rectangular and it represents Yin. The Sumo-ring is thus formed in the manner that Yang matches with the Heaven and Yin with the Earth. The present state of Sumo-wrestling in Korea and Japan is considered to be influenced by Taoism rather than Buddhism.

Hahoe village in the suburbs of Andong city in Gyunsanbuk-Do district is well known for its traditional life-style taken over from the era of the Korean dynasty. In the village Tuiren (antithetic couplet) or Menshen (door god) are placed on most of gates of houses. To some extent, this Korean custom has common relation to the one of China to some extent although their shapes are a little bit different from each other. The roots of the custom can be traced back to the Shan hai jing Sutra of Taoism.

Nowadays, Chinese people put Tuiren (antithetic couplet) or Menshen (door god) on the entrance of their houses to exorcise evil spirits, to greet the new year and bring the happiness. Chinese Tuiren (antithetic couplet) is written on the red paper with Chinese ink or gold dust. Menshen (door god) is mostly colorful in China but is mainly written in simple white papers with Chinese ink in Korea. These two things are put on the gate as talisman not only for greeting the New year but also for the whole year. In the Hahoe village, many door god with the figures of tigers can be well noticed besides the Menshen (door god) with the letter of tigers in Chinese.

While living in Korea, it is realized that Taoism has an effect on the traditional gardening. The Korean garden is made by avoiding the artificial affection. People let everything in the garden follow the nature and enjoy the nature. The natural life is the character of the Korean gardening. This style was established base on the Taoistic thought, which accepts the nature as it is. In Korea, garden is made in rectangular shape with the round island in the middle. This is based upon Taoistic thought of the round Heaven and the rectangular Earth. And this thought has been widely spread in East Asia with actual model.

Taoism, centering on the Taoist doctrine of immortality, has a strong effect on the way to keep in good health of the Eastern people. The way of thinking on the death and life exerts a great influence on the sense of value or the world outlook of each person. Everybody wants to have good health and long life. The belief that Gods of Taoism can make people's

dream come true widely spread in the East. The way to keep in good health is familiar to the Eastern people besides the other method of Taoism, such as magic or prayer for the sake of eternal youth and longevity.

The way to keep in good health of Taoism does not only bring the eternal youth and longevity but also put the final goal of the life in question. Its ultimate aim is to achieve the highest spiritual attitude that the God and the Men combine into one finally. From this point of view, the way to keep in good health and long life is just the method but not a final goal of Taoism.

Besides Sumo-wrestling, talisman and the way to keep in good health, there are lots of common things in the East Asia such as local custom or annual event, which attributes to Taoism. For example, calendar, good and evil omens, position beliefs, divination, twelve Earthly Branches, born year, physiognomy, misfortune year, incantation etc.

As mentioned above, I think the investigation of the Korean Taoism can also be made in terms of ethnology, folklore and cross-cultural study.

References

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