Heredity in Korean Churches

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I. Introduction

For some years church reform groups in Korea have hosted various events seeking to
draw attention to a number of serious issues, ranging from financial irregularities to
personal scandals, facing Korean churches today. One such subject that has attracted
the media’s attention is the practice of hereditary succession, which has become an
issue hard to ignore both inside and outside the church. The reform groups have
waged a long-running battle to prevent this practice on several fronts. Several have
written about the problem, questioning its morality and otherwise reproaching those
churches accused of the practice. Even the high-profile journal Gidokkyo-sasang
(Christian Thought) has followed suit with articles on the subject. Without exception
all have been polemical in nature, as the practice of hereditary succession in the
churches has come under increasing attack. My purpose here is not to repeat their
arguments. Rather, it is to ask how this practice takes place and, more importantly,
why. In doing so, I will give a picture of the churches that are prone to hereditary
succession and venture an explanation of the phenomenon by relating it to the
sociocultural system of Korean society.

II. The Church as Enterprise

The churches experienced dramatic growth in the 1970s and 1980s as the economy
rapidly expanded. The number of church members jumped from 1.2 million in 1960
and 2.2 million in 1970 to 10.1 million in 1985, comprising 22% of the entire
population. At the same time, Korea witnessed “a massive urban migration” that
resulted in the relocation of 25 million people—about one-half of the entire
population1—by the same year, with the cities now accounting for 38 million or no
less than 85% of the population, including a heavy concentration in the Seoul
Metropolitan Area (Hong, 1997: 9-13). A sharp increase in industry’s share of
employment and gross output, at the expense of the agricultural sector, accompanied
this trend. This massive migration to the cities produced a large displaced population
that joined churches in large numbers to get a sense of belonging to a larger
community. Like the ‘Ibuk’ (North Korean) churches that attracted refugees who fled

1 See Byeong-seo Kim (1991: 417). The growth trend continued up until the 2005 census which indicated
the reduction of Christians to 18.3%. For details, see Chong (2006:365). For a social-historical analysis of
Protestantism in Korean history, see Chung-shin Park (1997; 2003).
to the South during the Korean War, these churches became a kind of magnet for migrants who found themselves plunged into a strange urban environment far from home. For these new urban dwellers, these churches provided a “Sunday home” where they could meet people from the same region. It was therefore not surprising that these churches were often labeled “regional churches,” with prefixes denoting a specific region such as ‘Gyeongsang-do’ (the southeastern provinces) Church or ‘Jeolla-do’ (the southwestern provinces) Church. As suggested earlier, the expansion in church members was shaped by the economic and demographic changes taking place in Korean society at the time.

It was also in these circumstances that large churches began to emerge. With large numbers flowing into the cities, the churches required bigger buildings to accommodate their growing numbers. Thus began the competition for ever-larger churches deploying a variety of methods and financial planning techniques for maximum gain. The government’s massive housing development projects presented another opportunity. In order to keep pace with the thriving construction boom that followed, some churches sold their church buildings and built new churches in proximity to the projects while others moved into newly developed residential areas. They also began to build remote annexes in places like seaside shelters and mountain retreats. Some went further to gain influence by founding new educational and social welfare organizations. This policy of expansion was not dissimilar to that of a business conglomerate seeking to expand its business lines through ‘Muneobalsik’ management practices, i.e., like an octopus spreading its arms. This was how the “mega-churches” of Korea were born.

Mega-churches may be defined in different ways, depending on church attendance figures. One study defines a mega-church as having a congregation with “a sustained average weekly attendance of 5,000 or more in its worship services,” by which it counts 35 such churches, most of them established prior to 1980 (Soongwoo Lee, 2007: 24, 25-26). As reported in The Economist in 2007, Korea has five of the ten largest Protestant churches in the world, including Yoido Full Gospel Church, the largest, with more than 800,000 members.

Quite unlike pastors who remain with their churches in a fixed location, mega-church pastors, who are all male, have remarkable entrepreneurial skills and know precisely where to build new churches, just like clever housing and land developers, as well as how to manage and oversee the church affairs of increasingly larger congregations. Not only are such skills used to look after the livelihoods of their flock and to deliver comforting sermons to individuals struggling to get by in an ever-changing urban environment, they are used when buying and selling real estate as an inspirational matter as well as in professional ways. Such mega-churches seek to provide a variety of amenities to their congregations, from cafés to halls for educational and cultural programs for all ages as well as venues for retreats and group meetings. Such octopus-like churches have become a trend-setter for churches as a whole.

Korean churches are by no means under the sole control of the pastor. A board or body of elders chosen from among their members governs the affairs of the church.
There is a recognition, however, that the commanding pastor at the top of mega-churches acts on his own authority. It is he who had the original “vision” to build a large church, persuaded his congregation to follow, and realized his dream. He is, in every sense, the founding father who has transformed a small church into a big one. Not surprisingly, his congregation regards him as a person of “charismatic” quality, in Weber’s sense. He is neither a theologian nor a teacher; instead, he is a popular preacher who is capable of delivering “emotional preaching” with great oratorical skills (Weber, 1968: 260-261). Eventually he becomes a church businessman in possession of a large “fortune” with increasing economic power concentrated in his own self, just like the founder-owner of a big business conglomerate. This position gives him honor, fame, and distinction with a national and even worldwide reputation.

As the mega-churches continue to grow, they begin to promote a “growth movement” that enables them to acquire corporate advertising and management skills through amalgamating religious and business interests into a new theology of growth. In almost every symposium, seminar, or conference for the clergy, the sessions dealing with “church growth” that successful mega-church pastors preside over are always the most popular and sought-after sessions. There is a great affinity between church growth and business expansion in terms of organizational plans, management, and leadership models. To a large extent, mega-churches are an organized business company with a cross steeple, and the pastor an owner or CEO in a gown, depending on the relationship the pastor has with the church he serves, as I will explain below.

III. Performing Transmission

Mega-church pastors eventually reach the point of having to transfer their power to another, and the issue of succession emerges. But it is never a simple matter to find a qualified successor who can manage the operation of the church as effectively. Thus the issue of succession becomes a matter of grave concern to the church as it becomes determined to find just the right person to ensure a smooth transition. Without this transition, the church’s very institutional framework and identity cannot be assured, as the process of “routinization of charisma” proceeds apace.

The founding pastor bears the burden of finding the right successor capable of stepping into his shoes. To forestall a crisis, sometimes he will defer his retirement until such time as a successor in whom he can place his confidence is found. For the successor must not dilute or weaken in any way the founding pastor’s original vision.

At the same time, board members who have worked closely with him are equally concerned that this vision may be lost or diminished over time. They find it almost impossible to challenge the founding pastor’s wishes as they personally have witnessed the “miracle” that he has performed in building the mega-church in a short period of time. He has demonstrated his exceptional ability as a founder, developer, and sustainer; he has led the church to make investments in real estate in line with the government’s policy of promoting investments. Under his leadership, the church has
reaped large profits from such investments; he has been able to bring diverse church groups together under his umbrella. In such a position, he can assure himself that it is safe to promote his own son as his heir, and he finally sets out to engineer a smooth transfer.

Naturally, certain conditions must be met. He must have a son worthy of the transfer: the son does not automatically succeed the father. He has been carefully nurtured. First, he must enroll in some seminary; if he cannot get into the seminary of first choice, he must get into the next best school. Eventually, he goes abroad to study further, usually in the United States, to acquire a global perspective as well as to undergo diverse training (Ji, 2001: 97-98). His leadership training can take place either in his father’s church or outside, including pastoral experience in Korean immigrant churches in the United States. Thus he receives not only formal seminary training but on-the-job training as well.

As he approaches the transfer, he is introduced, formally and informally, to the core group of his father’s church. Having also had experience under his father’s direct supervision, he is presented as an individual who can succeed his father. Then, at the right moment, after all of these careful preparations, the father unveils his succession plan and officially proposes his son as successor.

The specter of instability and a slowdown in church growth that might arise if the transition does not go smoothly is ever present. As S. D. Kim, a pastor who successfully passed his mega-church down to his son, explains, the practice of hereditary succession was adopted in his church because of the possibility of church growth coming to a halt. The succession process was difficult, and many hardships had to be overcome. He could easily have left the church to start a new branch church with his son as pastor. It was actually a difficult choice for him to turn his church over to his son (Dong-a Ilbo, September 7, 2000; quoted in Seong-gwon Kim, 2002: 47). Since he had become so closely identified with the church, it was by no means clear whether the church could maintain its traditions and ensure a process of stable growth. In the end, only his son emerged as a definite successor.

Due to his pleas for church stability, the church goes along and unilaterally announces his son’s appointment. Any dissent is viewed as separatist and contributing to unnecessary friction and complications. The church declares that any kind of search for rival candidates would only engender dangerous conflict within the congregation. To ensure a smooth transition, the son is most suitable. The church is not apprehensive about possible splinter groups. Of course, in a mega-church, it is entirely possible that the practice can engender opposition. As a former member of such a church attests, a lone demonstrator at the entrance to the church was dismissed as making a big fuss about nothing and certainly not representing the church as a whole (Moon, 2012). This is the way mega-churches deal with problems that might arise in hereditary succession. In other words, the institutionalization of personal charisma is completed.²

² For the list of outstanding cases, see Gye-seon Lee (2009: 151).
However, in practice not all successions go smoothly. Just as several steps are necessary for them to succeed, so many obstacles may appear along the way. For example, if the son is abroad, for example in the United States, even though an ordained pastor, he is too far away, not well known to the congregation, and unable to receive the on-the-spot training under his father’s supervision that he needs. It is important that he be physically present and actively working under his father.

An additional obstacle relates to the decision-making structure of the church. A study comparing two churches—one succeeding in the transition, the other involving the son assuming the role of pastor in a newly built branch church—points to the former taking place in a Methodist church organized hierarchically, with the latter in a Presbyterian one organized horizontally with an independent consistory (Seong-gwon Kim, 2002: 74-86). We can make too much of the factor of denomination. What is important is whether there is an organizational structure of consistories and elders sufficiently autonomous to table motions at formal meetings and even to declare the pastor’s intentions as “totally unacceptable.” Such a structure, if operating properly, makes it difficult for a founding pastor scheming to transfer the pastorate to his son and puts him in an awkward and embarrassing position.

Of course, hereditary succession faces unique difficulties in established churches with a long history, although it is not impossible. In those churches, usually in the historic districts of the city, no pastor can dare to claim “ownership” of the church by virtue of his managerial or entrepreneurial skills, even when he claims that in some sense he is the founder of the church and the man who turned it into a mega-church. The practice, therefore, is to be found mainly in new churches in recently developed residential areas, not in well-established older churches.

As Weber noted, the successor to the charismatic head of the church need not be recognized as having the same qualities as the founder. In the case of hereditary succession in Korean churches, what is important is not the qualities of the successor so much as the fact that his position is acquired through “hereditary succession” (Weber, 1968: 57) or institutionalized charisma. Only this enables the head of the church to assure his congregation that stability is ensured. The church is always on the side of stability and continuity.

IV. Discussion – Sociocultural Systems

In Korean society, it is not necessary for mega-churches to be concerned about diversity and divergent proclivities. The church is rather like a sect that tends to be exclusive, not inclusive. It emphasizes a high degree of internal cohesion and solidarity, making the church more conscious of the bonds among its members. This is made possible by the organizational characteristics of the church. As noted above,

3 The widespread practice of “dolligi” (circular swapping), i.e., exchanging Pastor A’s son for Pastor B’s son, is an open secret. In a strict sense, this is not “heredity” as such but may be called “detoured heredity.”
the church is founded, expanded, and sustained by a charismatic pastor who is the sole leader and whom the congregation is expected to follow. Despite its size, the mega-church is similar to a sect in the sense that it demands internal cohesion and exclusiveness and does not allow for diversity.

The pastor’s charismatic quality is a prerequisite for a successful transfer, but it alone cannot explain the phenomenon. He has to secure the support of not only the selection committee but that of the entire congregation. In order to do this, the pastor mobilizes basic sociocultural values that shape Korean society. Converging in these values, church members recognize each other, connect themselves to one another, and are mutually supportive. What this means is that hereditary succession takes place within the framework of sociocultural values held in common.

In what follows, I will make these values explicit. Korean churches are no exception to two fundamental characteristics of Korean social structure, namely, economism and familism. One may ask what these terms mean.

Briefly, by “economism,” I mean that securing an economically prosperous existence is regarded as the supreme goal in Korea today. Human beings have always sought material well-being, but Korea’s national policy of economic development at all costs since the time of Park Chung-hee’s military government has acted as a kind of “political religion” and explains why he was able to stay in power for nearly two decades. Economic prosperity was an “opiate of the masses” in the sense that it allowed oppressors to make people torpid about the social and political deprivation that they experienced from the loss of human rights and freedom. This economic ideology reversed the slogan of “freedom before bread,” taught since the founding of the nation after liberation, into that of “bread before freedom.”

This policy was a success. Koreans have come to invoke economic logic in every conversation at the expense of morality and the common good. They find economic affluence the only measure and sign of success in all spheres of life (Yong-Shin Park, 1995a: parts 1-2).

“Familism,” on the other hand, is inherent in Korean social structure. Korean society has been molded by Confucian ideals, expressed in the moral principles governing basic human relationships, namely, ruler-subject, husband-wife, and father-son. Among them, filial piety emphasized obedience to one’s parents as a principal virtue, reinforced through ancestor worship that honored the family members of previous generations. Certain “universalistic” elements could be found in the Confucian value system, but in Korean society, of supreme importance was the family-centered particularism (Yong-Shin Park, 1979: 91-93). Koreans are motivated by this spirit of

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4 Its economic policy justified itself by showing off that it relied on the persuasion of economic development advanced by R.R. Rostow’s “stage theory.” It was designed to eventually reach the “age of high mass consumption” via the stages of the “precondition for take-off,” and the “drive to maturity” (Rostow, 1960).
familism to work not for themselves but for the welfare of the family as a whole. Any division between individual interests and the family’s welfare has been discouraged by familistic cultural factors. Consequently, the individual’s motives, interests, and activities are formed within a familistic or quasi-familistic framework. Even though many other traditional values seem to have weakened, familism is very much alive and remains strong.⁵

Within this pattern of value orientations, Korean society has kept itself moving on a path to economic prosperity. The pursuit of material rewards, stressed more than ever, took place within this pattern. Familistic social values have not thwarted but actually fostered the goal of seeking economic prosperity. Familism has encouraged hard work to contribute to the family’s social standing more than anything else. Every bit of energy was mobilized for familial ends whenever and wherever it seemed the family would be better off and rise in the social world.

This interplay of economism and familism “underlay the success of the military government’s push for economic development” (Yong-Shin Park, 1994: 116). In other words, this was the key to it. If leadership could be found in the military government, it was in its ability to mobilize traditional values for economic development purposes. Familistic consciousness is like a container that can take and hold anything, insofar as and as much as it is deemed profitable for the family. It is also like a rubber band that can stretch during moments of collective excitement or crisis at the national or local levels but always springs back to its original shape.⁶ In this sense, it can be argued that Korea took a different path to modernization than did the West, not by shattering but persisting within the “fetters of the sib,” to borrow Weber’s phrase (Weber, 1951).

It may well be more accurate to call it an example of “familistic capitalism” (Yong-Shin Park, 1994: 116, 122; Yong-Shin Park, 1995a: chap. 1).

Despite all kinds of critiques of and objections to this process of development, the pattern of values that interconnects economism and familism remains firm and is a powerful driver in all spheres of social life. It can be seen in the culture and organization of businesses. The more important the positions are, the more they are closely related to the founding family by blood or marriage, and by local and school ties (Kwang Chung Kim, 1985).⁷ In a similar vein, an anthropological study (Choong


⁶ Nationalism has been the subject of many analyses. Gi-Wook Shin’s study on the subject is impressive (2006/2009). He starts off with the concept of “nationalism” by looking into how “ethnic nationalism” has been constructed in Korean history. Much can be learned from this study. However, I still prefer the concept of familism as an analytic starting-point to see how the primordial sense of familial attachment and commitment evolves, generating strong feelings of unity and bonds at various levels, and adapts itself to changing circumstances, regardless of ideology and regime.

⁷ Though I generally concur with his analysis, I tend to disagree with his point that there was a sign of positive change, pointing to the increasing institutionalization of professional management, in Korean business. It would be inevitable for the portion of professional managers to be increased as the business conglomerate expands (Yong-Shin Park, 1994: 118; 1995a: 2-23).
Soon Kim, 1992) shows that businesses in Korea in their formal organization are little different from “the rational bureaucratic model of the West.” But informally, the founder has the freedom to hire and promote his kin and frequently blurs the boundaries between his business as a formal organization and his business as a “clan organization.” There is little resistance among workers to the “Confucian hierarchical order” in which the founder is heavily invested and exercises his duties of “treating employees like family.” The workers remain faithful to this organizational structure (Ibid.: 205-206).

The churches are little different from the businesses, since they operate under the same social-cultural systems. As soon as they become larger, the churches lose their sense of “community” in the sense that St. Paul demands of the Church (Banks, 2002) and instead become pieces of property worth millions. The sheer growth of church properties requires that the pastor be not merely the provider of pastoral care but a property manager and administrator. Just like the sole proprietor of a business firm where the owner and business are one, the pastor who claims that he founded the church and built it into a mega-church does not distinguish between the church and his person. They are one and the same.

Pastors are motivated to succeed to no lesser extent than business owners. They have learned their organizational skills from the big businesses that accompanied rapid economic development. Like the businesses, their churches engage in diversifying their assets, using the increased income from a growth in the size of the congregation. Like the octopus mentioned above, they add buildings, they found educational institutions, and they start publishing companies. Mega-church pastors think of personal success in terms of growth in membership and church income.

Members of the pastor’s family get involved in the church business, whether in management or administration of the various organizations under his control. For his family members, there is no reluctance to take part in their father’s church business, just as there is none in the case of businesses. In a society where businesses are passed down to family members, these pastors have no compunctions about doing the same. His congregations have become used to him and tend to defer to him on decisions. The stronger the pastor’s grip on power, the freer he is to appoint his relatives to various church administrative posts. It is no wonder that this freedom easily extends to the question of succession.

Mega-church congregations constantly hear sermons citing Biblical passages pertaining to personal and familial “blessings.” These sermons interpret material affluence and prosperity as God’s blessing. The so-called “Threefold Gospel” of the Yoido Full Gospel Church epitomizes a gospel of prosperity that integrates the “spirit, soul, and body” as a whole, as if they are all one and the same (http://english.fgtv.com/gospel/threefold.htm). All of the mega-churches, while differing slightly, teach that prosperity is a blessing from God. Like mega-churches in America, Korean ones claim that God wants churches and Christians to prosper.8

8 For the American case, see Wuthnow (1997: 234-238); for the Korean case, see Hyung Sam Park (1997).
They make no attempt to go beyond the dominant values of economism and familism.

V. Conclusion

The practice of hereditary succession (sseup) in Korean churches has come under criticism both in and outside the Christian community. It has attracted dismissive press coverage, and its practitioners have become figures of derision. It has been attacked by liberals for failing to live up to the principles of fairness and openness, while defended by conservatives for ensuring church stability and security. Whichever side one stands on, what is clear is that the whole matter has tarnished the church.

The practice of sseup immediately calls to mind North Korea’s heinous “power transition” from Kim Il-seung to his son Kim Jeong-il first and now to Kim Jong-un. It bespeaks a negative connotation for the general public and generates feelings of disapproval for both the transferor and transferee.

The practice is appalling. Korean Christianity has not been able to recover the transformative capacity that it demonstrated in the last decades of Choseun society and early years of Japanese colonial rule (Yong-Shin Park, 2000; 2007). Then, the churches were the agents of change in breaking down the age-old practice of ancestor-worship that held up the primacy of family-centered consciousness. Christianity then provided a dimension of transcendence in Korean history by making every “natural” pattern of social relationships relative, depriving them of their ultimate, as Robert Bellah long ago so lucidly demonstrated in his seminal article, “Father and Son in Christianity and Confucianism” (1970). There is a need for the churches to break down the limited and narrow focus on church affairs and raise individual members to engage in a wide range of activities that contribute to a vital civil society, including their participation in movements for social transformation (Yong-Shin Park, 1995b; 2010; 2011).

Heredity in Korean churches operates with the help of the symbiosis between the social-cultural values of familism and the ever-growing dominance of economism. It is therefore to miss the crux of the issue by becoming disgusted with individual cases of hereditary succession in the churches. One must go beyond disgust to understand the structural causes that pervade every aspect of social life in Korea.

The earlier transformative capacity has gone. The churches instead have become pillars of the political and economic establishment, enjoying positions of power and wealth. They live comfortable lives within the confines of economistic and familistic consciousness and are unable to live in tension with the dominant sociocultural values. In this sense, the churches of today have betrayed their forebears. A sharp social and

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9 The Samsung conglomerate’s attempt to effect a similar transition is another example of sseup that generated the same negative public opinion. It was able to achieve a transition of power to the third generation successor only because of an illicit securities transaction that involved the courts in a high-profile ruling.
political schism exists in their self-understanding of what their mission is about. But wherever they stand, they are fused with the mainstream and far from fundamentally shaking the idolatry of economistic and familistic symbiosis. Whatever else it may mean, to express faith must mean not merely to justify the existing religious and social order but to throw oneself into tension with this order, always challenging its validity and legitimacy to claim, in Tillich’s terms, the “ultimate of the ultimate” (Tillich, 1957).
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