Ancestor Worship and Korean Society (review)

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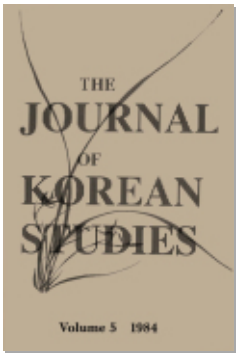

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Book Reviews

Ancestor Worship and Korean Society By Roger L. Janelli and Dawnhee Yim Janelli. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1982. 228 pp.

The publication of *Ancestor Worship and Korean Society* marks the coming of age of anthropological studies on Korea. As the Janellis remind us in their introduction, the study of ancestor worship has a long pedigree in the disciplines of social anthropology and folklore. Ancestor cults are not cultural universals; the best-known examples are from African and Chinese ethnography. Classic studies offer speculations on the relationship between the form and content of an ancestor cult and patterns of social organization and psychological make-up. The Janellis' study addresses this body of theory and promises added insights from another ethnographic context. The topic is also of intrinsic interest to Koreanists, given the tenacity, ideological freighting, and historical significance of ancestor worship in Korean life. In short, this is more than just another village study.

By the Janellis' modest claim, they "hope to show how the ancestor cult of one rural kin group is interconnected with that group's social organization, its ideology, and the social experiences of its members" (p. viii). Informants are identified—following the conventions of folklore—and are presented as the articulate interpreters of their own belief system and social structure. Ethnographic examples are clear and telling and bespeak the authors' several years of association with the village they studied. However, to

set the Kwŏns of Twisŏngdwi in time and space, the Janellis have combed a growing body of ethnography and read widely in Korean social history. The bibliography is splendid. A tribute to the Janellis' perseverance and meticulous scholarship, this study also reflects the incremental work of anthropologists and social historians specializing in Korea.

The monograph begins with a social and historical sketch of the Twisŏngdwi lineage, a branch of the Andong Kwŏn. Outside the national arena for several centuries, the Twisŏngdwi Kwŏn wielded sufficient local prestige for a prominent descendant to claim, "We aren't great gentry, but nobody looked down on us either" (p. 14). A description of family life uses observations from Twisŏngdwi to flesh in a synthesis of prior studies. This section contains few surprises but enhances the volume's utility for non-Koreanists and for course syllabi. A discussion of family division and inheritance practices highlights the ways in which Korean custom—sequential and unequal partitioning of family wealth—circumvents the bitter conflicts inherent in Chinese family division, a single partitioning argued out among shareholding brothers. The Janellis overemphasize the likelihood of a Chinese father's retaining authority over an undivided family until his death. Other contrasts between the two systems of domestic organization, however, are effectively mustered to explain significant differences in the two ancestor cults, to account for such phenomena as the relative infrequency of geomancy disputes among close Korean agnates. They note that Korean inheritance practices also diminish the potential for much woman-centered conflict but do not probe the significance of this observation in their later discussion of women and religion. The authors do devote considerable attention to the position of women as necessary background for their interpretation of women's religious orientations, but this section seems unduly influenced by prior stereotypes. For example, to support their discussion of the bride's hardships, they provide several instances of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law conflict, but it is the mother-in-law who routinely gets the worst of it. This table-turning, probably a consequence of changes in the institution of marriage, passes without comment.

Having established their social context, the authors present a detailed but always readable discussion of the ancestor cult. "Becoming an Ancestor" describes Korean funeral rites, geomancy, and mourning customs—procedures that transform the dead into "ancestors." The question "Who are the ancestors?" is intimately connected with notions of propriety, kinship, and obligation. The Janellis' discussion of ancestors without heirs, concubines, and twice-

married women reveals some areas of ambiguity and indicates some of the adjustments individual households make to provide for those agnates who do not receive commemoration elsewhere.

In Twisŏngdwi, the lineage segments who collaborate in performing domestic rituals do not always conform strictly to the standard definition of a Korean ancestor-worshipping group within eight degrees of relationship. The Janellis show how minor adjustments are, again, a consequence of circumstance and preference where common worship reflects other corporate functions of kinship in an agricultural community: "That is, members of each segment (of the lineage) participate in rites for collateral kin because they are obligated to each other—not to the dead" (p. 112).

As in China, concern for the ancestral soul's well-being motivates the performance of domestic ancestor worship. Also as in China, economic and political considerations, rather than sentiment, inspire the commemoration of lineage ancestors. Here the similarities end. The Janellis argue that where the raison d'être of the Chinese lineage was its control of land and other resources, in Korea intangible prestige assets—officeholding, erudition, marriage alliances, and notable ancestry—were more important. Late traditional Chinese society was far more overtly egalitarian than late traditional Korean society, and the down-country branches of eminent yangban lines took great pains to sustain their claims to distinguished pedigrees. The Janellis note that unlike the Chinese, "Koreans take no pride in the achievements of ancestors who rose from poverty and obscurity" (p. 137). Insofar as Chinese and Korean lineages have played for different stakes, their strategies are reflected in their very different dynamics of social organization. Chinese lineages reveal a high degree of internal segmentation as wealthy sublineages retain control over their own resources by endowing their own estates within the larger lineage. In Korea, where ancestry was more significant than wealth, local lineages were motivated to claim membership in larger lineage organizations and to sustain deep genealogical roots. With respect to internal structure, a sublineage was likely to endow its own estate only where it claimed an illustrious officeholding ancestor who was worthy of special commemoration. The Hahoe Yu are one such special case. Elsewhere, as in Twisŏngdwi, a common interest in asserting tenuous claims to renowned ancestors enhanced the solidarity of the local lineage. In contemporary Korea, these considerations are less compelling and the Janellis describe how younger lineage members have effectively lobbied for simpler and more economical rituals. Domestic rituals, motivated by religious concern for the dead, are less affected by

changes in class structure and still reflect the social groupings that cooperate in rice agriculture. Thus, they persist.

To round out their presentation, the Janellis also discuss the conceptualization of malevolent ancestors in informants' accounts and in the shaman rituals designed to placate these potentially dangerous beings. They argue that while shaman rituals and formal ancestor worship are different means for achieving diverse but often compatible objectives, other differences between these two bodies of religious activity "seem to represent a fundamental inconsistency in beliefs about ancestors" (p. 163). The Janellis attribute this fundamental difference to the profoundly different socialization experiences of men and women: women marry out and experience the husband's household as an initially hostile environment. Thus, the Janellis argue, women are more likely than men to perceive the familial dead as malevolent beings. Indeed, women supplied the Janellis with most of their examples of ancestral malevolence and women are the primary participants in shaman rituals. The Janellis use this insight to examine a nagging contradiction in the ethnography of East Asian ancestor cults: native-born anthropologists describe the ancestors as essentially benign while foreign-born anthropologists have recorded numerous ascriptions of ancestral malevolence. The Janellis argue that most native-born observers share indigenous male perceptions whereas patrilocal brides and uxorilocal grooms (including one well-known Japanese folklorist) are sensitized to the potential hostility of kin and ancestors. The argument is intriguing but not, for this reviewer, compelling. The Janellis' own examples include ascriptions of ancestral malevolence provided by males, and patterns of ancestral affliction do not routinely parallel the conflicts daughters-in-law experience among the living. Neither does the evidence suggest that uxorilocal husbands are more likely to participate in north Taiwan seances than other men. The Janellis are on more solid ground when they suggest, on the strength of detailed background information, that ascriptions and nonascriptions of malevolence follow upon informants' personal feelings toward the remembered dead. Insofar as the Janellis have splendidly illuminated some special features of Korean kinship in their discussion of the ancestor cult, one wishes that they had also considered some of the ways in which these special features color women's experience.

This mild disagreement within the family of anthropology should not detract from my admiration of the Janellis' solid and stimulating monograph. Koreanists in other disciplines should also find much of interest here. Insofar as debates persist concerning the

nature of status, mobility, and land tenure in traditional Korea, social historians may be skeptical of anthropological analyses based on some necessarily tentative assumptions. One would hope that they might yet be as attentive to the Janellis' work as the Janellis were to social history, perhaps with similarly intriguing results.

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Child of Conflict: The Korean-American Relationship, 1943–1953. Edited by Bruce Cumings. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983, 335 pp.

A rapid reassessment of the foreign policy of the Truman administration is being furthered through the opening of additional American and British archives. The greatest challenge faced by Truman and his colleagues lay in the protracted struggle in Korea between 1950 and 1953. Truman showed decisiveness in handling key issues: notably, the commitment of American resources to oppose North Korea in late June 1950; the crossing of the thirty-eighth parallel and the curious encounter with General MacArthur at Wake Island in October 1950; the determination to survive the days of despair in December 1950-January 1951; the dismissal of MacArthur in April 1951; and the resolute refusal to return prisoners of war to North Korea or China contrary to their wishes. However, Truman was only one and not necessarily the most important of those concerned with the formulation of American policy. Many aspects of the Korean conflict have been controversial or obscure. Why was American policy towards the Korean peninsula erratic and at times contradictory between 1945 and 1950? How interested in Korea were the various parts of the bureaucracy in Washington? What were the intentions of the governing elites in Seoul and P'yongyang? Who provoked whom, or were both sides responsible? What was the relationship between North Korea and the Soviet Union? Did Stalin encourage Kim Ilsŏng in an adventurist policy or not? Where did Peking figures in events before large-scale Chinese intervention? To what extent were Taiwan and Korea linked before Truman's formal statement at the start of the war? Why did it take so long to end the conflict and was this due to malevolence or incompetence?

These questions and many others are examined in this important new volume of essays edited by Bruce Cumings. It is in some