NEW ANCESTRAL SHRINES IN SOUTH KOREA

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ABSTRACT

Since the collapse of the cold war’s geopolitical order in the early 1990s and the related decline of communism or anti-communism as viable political ideologies, there have been several important changes in the political life of South Koreans. One notable change is found in the domain of ancestor worship. Many communities are now reshaping their ancestral rites into a more inclusive form, introducing demonstratively into them the memories of the dead who, previously labelled as supporters of communism, had been invisible in public memory. In places where people experienced the global cold war as a violent communal conflict, the above development involves difficult negotiations between the community’s politically bifurcated ancestral heritages. This article examines a set of new ancestral shrines erected as part of this communal effort to repair the broken genealogical condition, and enters into critical dialogue with an influential idea in contemporary scholarship about social development beyond the cold war.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the decades of authoritarian anti-Communist rule ended in the late 1980s, and the cold war’s geopolitical order collapsed in the wider world shortly thereafter, there have been several important changes in the political life of South Koreans. One notable change is found in the

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domain of ritual life or, more specifically, in the activity of death commemoration and ancestor worship. In an increasing number of communities across the Republic of Korea (ROK), people are now actively reshaping their ancestral rites into a more inclusive form, introducing demonstratively into the ritual domain the politically troubled memories of the dead, which were excluded from the public sphere under the state’s militant anti-Communist policies.

Some argue that, for South Koreans, the prospect of genuine political democracy is inseparable from imagining an alternative public culture, free from the hegemony of anti-communism as an all-encompassing state ideology (Cho-Han 2000: 317; Kwon Hyuk-bum 2000: 30; see also Whitfield 1996). In this context, overcoming the legacy of anti-communism is considered a necessary condition for the political community’s progress towards a post-cold war era, and thereby for joining the outside world, which, it is believed, has moved away from the grid of bipolar politics. Because the experience of the global cold war was an exceptionally violent one for Koreans, involving a catastrophic civil war, the above conceptualisation of historical transition has involved myriad reflections and disputes about the nation’s violent past and its enduring effects. This has been the case at the community level as well as nationally. The changes in ancestral rituals mentioned earlier should be considered in this broad contemporary historical context, and as efforts to repair the broken communal identity by restoring the normative aspect of its hidden genealogical heritage, which was outlawed by the state and stigmatised as a dangerous ‘red’ (i.e. Communist) element in public consciousness (Yun 2003: 148-52).

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2 In this article the idea of ‘global cold war’ is used deliberately, in distinction to that of the ‘cold war’. The term ‘cold war’ refers to the prevailing condition of the world in the second half of the 20th century, divided as it was into two separate paths of political modernity and economic development. In a narrower sense it means the contest of power and will between the two dominant states, the United States and the Soviet Union, which (according to George Orwell, who coined the term in 1945) set out to rule the world between them under an undeclared state of war, being unable to conquer one another. In a wide definition, however, the global cold war also entails the unequal relations of power among the political communities, which pursued or were driven to pursue a specific path of progress within the binary structure of the global order. The cold war’s dimension of a contest of power has been an explicit and central element in cold war historiography; the aspect of a relation of domination is a relatively marginal and implicit element. Following Westad (2005), I use the term ‘global cold war’ as a reference that incorporates both of these analytical dimensions.