

## **Catalysts for Hereditary Succession of Head Minister in South Korean Churches**

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### **Abstract:**

Along with the compressed economic development of South Korea, its churches grew exponentially till the mid-1990s. Enjoying the affluent Korean economy, Koreans have more disposable income, and the churches have become wealthier, which was an element to deviate further from what they do and who they are. When the employment market in the neo-liberal context became tighter than ever before, a good number of churches completed the hereditary succession of head ministership.

This article analyses news reports published between 2000 and 2022 to ascertain socio-cultural and economic factors, internal and external to the churches, to stimulate the phenomenon. I have downloaded news reports about “church heredity” (Gyohoi Sesüp) from the KINDS (Korea Integrated News Database System), covering from January 1, 2000 to June 9, 2022. Data included 72 news reports, of which titles contained hereditary succession (“Gyohoi Sesüp”), and 24 editorials (9 from KINDS and 15 from news outlets not covered by KINDS), covering from 2000 to 2022. Of the 72 news reports, 31 have been published since 2013. In total, the text amounts to 144 pages, single-spaced A4.

Data analysis shows that some Korean churches have struggled and drifted to conflate into the surrounding secular “culture” to gain profane benefits—money, honour, and power, in the legitimate name of “Christ” (Niebuhr 1951). In a sluggish economy, head ministers and their sons conspired to continue their religious commitment, provide the continuity of religious leadership to the church and hold on to the “church that lays the golden egg.” Undemocratic decision-making, Confucian habitus, and shamanistic spirituality seeking prosperity have been the catalysts.

Korean churches’ individualistic pursuit of growing their own churches has been a non-negotiable goal to achieve, despite their awareness and desire of the need to meet the requirements between “Christ” and “Culture” (Niebuhr 1951, See Figure 1). The clergy’s ethos to grow the church reflects the economic development of Korean society underpinned by rapid industrialization and urbanization since the 1960s. The supposedly affluent but neo-liberal Korean society since the 1990s brought about a significant number of hereditary successions and severe public condemnations, regretting the churches’ double-standard. Within the congregation, the head minister’s religious authority is uncompromisingly “intimately-powerful” and enables him with all the potential rights to drive the church’s directions on how to embrace duties and opportunities between “Christ” and “Culture.” The ones who carry out heredity make the best use of their religious authority to start with, use networks

within and outside the congregation, and the heredity process is facilitated by Confucian culture. Ministers' all actions are legitimized by their religious authority, and they achieve profane goals in the name of "Christ." Moreover, the congregants are preoccupied with shamanistic Christianity and blessing and are reluctant to raise questions to the clergy, who solely occupy the pulpit and summons to them regularly. The church offers the minister optimum conditions to seek hereditary succession.

#### **Keywords:**

Korean Protestant churches; simony; hereditary succession of head minister; church growth; Richard Niebuhr; Christ; culture; pariah capitalism; secularization; critical realism.