

Contrary to Propriety

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## Contrary to Propriety

Look not at what is contrary to propriety; listen not to what is contrary to propriety; speak not what is contrary to propriety; make no movement which is contrary to propriety.

–Confucius

I ADMIT THAT I stared, and that I judged him immediately, but I wasn't the only one. He stuck out– as large, robe-donning Russian men do– and there's a deeply rooted cultural aversion, in South Korea, to just that. His sandy hair was buzzed, save for a thin ponytail in the back, and a yellow mark resembling an arrow was painted down the center of his forehead. Down the street, an amp outside a cosmetics store blasted Hyuna's sensuous "*Ppalgaeyo (Red)*" – the K-pop idol's biggest hit– forcing her impossibly perfect vocals upon the myriad passersby of Seoul's Itaewon neighborhood. The Russian man stood near a subway exit with an armful of books, marketing a different religion. He offered me a copy of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which I refused, then asked if I'd heard of His Holiness Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, whom I had not. If only he'd mentioned the name of his organization, "The International Society for Krishna Consciousness [ISKCON]," or their nickname, "the Hare Krishnas," I'd have recalled seeing the group on-screen in *Airplane!* and *The Simpsons*, mocked as a fanatical cult. Instead, I walked away mystified, business card in hand. On the top of the card, two words were emboldened: "KRISHNA KOREA." A strange, almost nonsensical combination.

For the uninitiated: in the fall of 1965, a charming, elderly Indian man named Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada arrived in New York City with 70 cents and a revelatory new translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. His timing was perfect. The book– essentially a repackaging of Hindu Krishnaism for a Western audience– circulated widely among the free-thinking youth of that era, and Prabhupada amassed a number of young devotees. They lived together in communes, performed every action "in the service of Krishna," and proselytized on streets and in airports. The movement enjoyed some semblance of cultural relevancy throughout its first decade (with the support of icons like George Harrison and Allen Ginsberg), but those days are long gone.

So I was surprised to find an ISKCON community in Seoul, a city with its collective gaze fixed permanently on the "next big thing." Seoul is a city where pork belly comes piled-high on limitless platters, hard liquor is cheaper than water, "love motels" tower above every neighborhood, and pop stars are worshiped like deities. It is also one of the most culturally homogenous mega-cities on Earth. No place, to be sure, for an obscure neo-Hindu sect.

Being part of the "counterculture" was a source of power for Prabhupada in America; in Korea, the most Confucian-influenced society on Earth, it is taboo. To very briefly explain the way in which this 2,500-year-old Chinese social philosophy is manifest in modern South Korea, I will say this: the goal is societal harmony, achieved through obedience to a rigorous system of ethics and propriety, the disobedience of which constitutes a violation of one's duty to family and to society. Those who deviate

from the social mainstream— such as homosexuals, political radicals, and religious minorities— are ethically condemned, if discovered, and outcast from social life.

I introduced myself to Krishna Korea in an online forum, writing that I would like to do research on their community, and soon after received a reply from a young American convert. The community was small and transitory, he said, around 50 people, and mostly immigrants. I was welcome to visit the temple in Itaewon anytime I liked, and homemade Indian food was available after every service. I asked him if there were any Korean devotees. He told me there was one. What kind of person, I wondered, would be willing to take such enormous risks, to swim against the current, utterly alone? And why?

“WHAT INTERESTS ME most is the science,” said Tae-woo (not his real name) while scrolling through an electronic version of the Vedas, an enormous collection of ancient Hindu scriptures, on his iPhone. “Ok, so this is chapter five,” he said, handing me the phone, “and you can see there are many articles about the Sun. It says the distance between the Sun and Earth, the Earth and Moon, and the lifespan of the Sun. This was calculated 5,000 years ago, but these numbers are very similar with modern Western science.”

He asked to borrow my pen and began sketching a detailed Vedic model of the cosmos on my notepad. “If you enlarge the universe, there are many layers, 14, and we live at level seven. So we are here,” he explained, marking our location with an X. We were sitting at a picnic table on the campus of Sogang University, where Tae-woo would soon graduate with a degree in mechanical engineering. Needless to say, he did not match the image of a rugged, world-weary spiritual rebel I had constructed in my mind. Dressed in a white button-down shirt and khaki shorts, he was soft-spoken and intellectual, exuding a friendly and, at times, humorous energy. I asked what originally attracted him to Krishna Consciousness. “The food,” he replied, laughing.

In fact, Tae-woo developed a taste for Indian philosophy long before he tried the cuisine. While studying the brain in a middle school science class, he became interested in theories of consciousness and subconsciousness. One thing led to another, and soon enough he was reading Émile Coué and attempting self-hypnosis in his bedroom. After three years of failed attempts, however, he turned to Hatha Yoga, which was much easier. In those days, Tae-woo’s motivations were purely practical: “I really wanted to go to Seoul National University, which is the top university in Korea. So I wanted to improve my concentration and memory.” He didn’t get his pick of schools, but the yoga did help him feel “more calm, and more free.”

At 19, Tae-woo discovered Krishna Consciousness. “I realized that Hatha yoga is based on Hindu philosophy, so I searched online and found the Krishna temple in Itaewon,” he said. He attended the temple on and off for about four years, and studied Indian philosophy and the *Bhagavad-Gita* during his breaks from school. Eventually, when he was 24, he devoted himself to Krishna.

I asked Tae-woo if his life had changed much since becoming a devotee. “Yes,” he replied, “I’m a vegetarian now. And I get up early, around 3:40 a.m. every day.” He also recites the Hare Krishna mantra every morning for about an hour.

Tae-woo's family and friends know nothing about any of this. "I can't tell them. They would regard me as strange," he explained, "Almost all Koreans regard anything other than the three main religions [Catholicism, Protestantism, and Buddhism] as strange. Because I'm Korean, I should follow Korean culture, but I should follow Krishna culture as well. So I separate. Not combine together. When I meet up with my friends, I just follow them. I'm a little scared. But I hide, so they don't know about me."

I ATTENDED A Krishna Korea service for the first time on a Sunday night in late February 2015. Daily services have been held in the living room of an Indian devotee's small, second-story apartment in Itaewon ever since the original temple space flooded in 2007, and there was no money for renovations. I came in quietly and sat against the back wall. The air was a stuffy potion of incense, body heat, and steam from the kitchen, where our host stood preparing a traditional Indian meal. The others, numbering around 40, were seated cross-legged, with their eyes closed, swaying and chanting:

*Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare*

*Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare*

After about an hour, someone read a passage from the *Bhagavad-Gita*:

*For one who worships Me, giving up all his activities unto Me and being devoted to Me without deviation, engaged in devotional service and always meditating upon Me, who has fixed his mind upon Me, O son of Prthā, for him I am the swift deliverer from the ocean of birth and death.*

The devotees were a diverse group, hailing mostly from India and Russia, but also Nepal, China, and the U.S. The Russian proselytizer was there, and so was the American convert. One nationality conspicuously under-represented was, of course, the Koreans. Tae-woo was at home, studying.

Then, in the middle of the service, a young Korean man appeared. Like a tourist in an exotic land, he stood alone near the back and fiddled with a fancy camera, his stylish Nike street-wear clashing awkwardly with the local dress. He snapped several photos of the devotees singing and chanting, then left without a word. "Who was he?" I asked the American convert. "I don't know," he shrugged, "that happens a lot."

ON MOST AFTERNOONS, Tae-woo is holed up in his tiny one-room apartment, studying for final exams. He never proselytizes with the other devotees. He has sold books while travelling abroad, but never in Korea. He says he wouldn't feel comfortable, and he's too busy with school anyway. On the streets below, Kias whiz, smartphones buzz, and the slogan of a clothing company on a nearby billboard translates to, "Your things are your identity." But inside the apartment, on a table beside his desk, Tae-woo grows an assortment of Indian herbs— *Tulsi*, *Gotu Kola*, and *Brahmi*— of which he eats one leaf every morning and hides when his parents come to visit. The tiny room is, like Tae-woo himself, an unlikely but endearing mix of cultures, less a rogue improvisation than an exercise in counterpoint.

I once asked Tae-woo about his plans after graduation. "I'll just go to a normal company," he said, "...But maybe, when I'm around 40 or 50 years old, I want to go to India forever. It would be difficult. My parents wouldn't like that. I didn't tell them yet,

but they wouldn't like it." "Why not now?" I asked. "Because I have a family and friends and things I have to do," he replied.

I returned to the Itaewon temple a few weeks later, accompanied by a Korean friend, for an early morning service. We watched for an hour while Tae-woo, an Indian woman, and a Nepalese man read scriptures and sang holy songs. After the service we sat in a circle and the Nepalese man, Deepak, asked my friend if she had any questions. "Well, I'm a Christian," she replied, "and lots of people in my church go there because they want to go to heaven. So I'm wondering- why do you do what you do?" As Deepak explained the duty of devotional service and the promise of eternal union with Krishna, Tae-woo stood nearby, aloof to our conversation. He murmured a blessing in Sanskrit, then placed an offering of Indian food before the deities. He knelt down with his hands pressed together, as if in surrender, and touched his head gently to the floor.