

CHAPTER 1

A Korean Ethnic Self (We)

What Is a Korean Ethnic Self?

How to understand the self is one of the most fundamental questions human beings have asked throughout history. Many religions as well as disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and sociology seek this answer in different ways. In the Western context, this fundamental question has been dominated by defining the concept of who “I” am and has been preoccupied with forming the concept of an individual, singular “I” rather than a communal self. The basic method for defining the self often focuses on how an individual is different from others. The differentiation from others is a critical concept for defining the self in modern Western society.

However, the understanding of the self in many Eastern contexts does not give much attention to the question of who “I” am. Koreans share this tendency with other Eastern cultures. Understanding the Korean ethnic self is not about who “I” am only. The concept of the Korean ethnic self does not start from differentiation between the “I” and others. Rather the concept of the Korean ethnic self starts with unification between the “I” and others. One of the most powerful and influential parts of the Korean self has been formed in the sense of a communal self and is called *Woori* (we). The concept of the communal self is crucial not only in Korean culture but also in Asian and many indigenous cultures in America. In these ethnic contexts, the concept of the “we” precedes the concept of the “I” in different sociocultural and political circumstances. Ethnic cultures from Asia and Africa in particular tend from their own historical and cultural backgrounds to be more oriented toward a communal, collective consciousness, whereas many European

and North American cultures tend to emphasize an independent, individual consciousness.

The concept of the communal self in Korea has developed out of Koreans' unique cultural and sociopolitical context. Even though it is not accurate to claim that the concept of the Woori (we) is the only and most important element in the Korean ethnic self that represents Koreans and the Korean self, it is fair to state that an important part of the Korean ethnic self is formed based on the collaborative and collective consciousness of the Woori (we). The concept of the Woori (we) has been culturally engraved in Korean self by Korean communal society. It was nourished and compelled by social and political forces throughout Korean colonial and postcolonial history. Therefore, it is important to understand how Koreans developed the consciousness of the Woori (we) as the core of the Korean ethnic self in Korean history even before Korean Christian history began in 1885.¹ However, a review of the entirety of Korean history to understand the concept of the Woori (we) is beyond the scope of this book. Therefore, I will choose a specific period from Korean history that includes Korean Christian history as an example to show how this Korean ethnic self has developed and formed under Korean colonial influence. Before I illustrate this process, I will define what Woori (we) is and how Koreans understand this concept as an essential part of the Korean ethnic self, "a" Korean ethnic self.

The Colloquial Linguistic Sense of the "We"

To understand the Woori (we), it is important to explore how the Korean word for "we" has been used and how it relates to the "I." Korean people commonly use "we" instead of "I." In the structure of the Korean language, Woori (we/our) is defined as both plural and singular, whereas *Na* (I) is defined as singular. The definition of Woori is "a word that indicates the person himself/herself or several people who are on the same side."² It is a word that represents a person or the community to which a person belongs. It is not just a plural form of "I" or the possessive form of "we" as in the concept of "we/our" in Western culture. The word of Woori (we) indicates an individual "I" especially in a Korean colloquial context. It means that a speaker can alternate between the words "I" and "we" in quick succession. In other words, Woori (we) does not mean only "we." It often means "I/my" as well as "we." In many cases, Woori (we) is a form for an individual "I" in a colloquial sense, regardless of grammatical errors in subject-verb agreement.

When Korean people speak English, one of the greatest linguistic difficulties is to understand the distinction between the singular and plural. In the Korean language, the boundary between singular and plural is not as rigid as it is in Western languages such as English or German, even though the distinction exists logically. In Korean colloquial usage, "Please eat an apple" is the same sentence as "Please eat apples." Unless there is a need to specify the number of apples, Koreans do not generally use plural nouns. In some sentences, it is even awkward to use plural nouns, even though plural nouns are correct grammatically. This tendency is not unique to the Korean language. Many linguists put Korean among the Altaic languages.³ All Altaic languages show similar characteristics such as avoiding "grammatical number, gender, articles, overt copula, inflexion, voice, relative pronouns, conjunctives, etc."⁴ In light of this explanation, ambiguity between definitions of "we" and "I" is a cultural linguistic habit in families of Altaic languages. In this framework, a clear distinction between "we" and "I" is simply blurred. These linguistic features provide a partial explanation of why the Korean idiom mixes the use of "I" and "we."

However, in colloquial Korean, a singular noun, rather than a plural one, tends to be the default in most cases. Whether there is one apple or two apples, apple is used in the sentence. If this were the case here, then the singular form "I" would represent both "I" and "we." However, in the case of the Korean "we" and "I," it is the opposite. "I" cannot represent "we," but "we" can serve as representative of both "we" and "I."

Another avenue for explaining ambiguity between "I" and "we" in Korean is to understand the tendency of the Korean language to demonstrate subject and/or object bareness (i.e., the lack of a functional particle).⁵ In its structure, the Korean language is an SOV language that is a predicate-final language in which the verb completes the sentence. Thus, the typical order of a Korean sentence is Subject-Object-Predicate. A tendency may be to include postpositional particles. However, when Korean people speak, they do not pay attention to functional particles unless there is particular emphasis on the distinction between the subject and the object. Thus, the strategy of information deployment and/or the management of information flow in Korean is different from English or other languages. The Korean language releases information focused on the verb. The subject and/or the object do not always need to be expressed marked, but the verb always does.⁶ Even though the subject grammatically comes before the predicate, many colloquial settings do not require the subject or even the object. Sometime it is even awkward

to use the subject or object unless the subject or the object needs to be emphasized. Again, the focus of a sentence is on the verb.

This tendency effects interpretation.⁷ The assumption is that people will figure out the subject and the object from the context. The structure of the Korean language assumes that the subject and the objects are already known; all participants are known in the conversation. That is why Korean is often called a “situation- or discourse-oriented language.”⁸ Koreans make a sentence within a particular situation. The subject of a sentence or the object of a sentence does not become definite until the sentence or the conversation itself are finished. Speakers leave some details unexpressed, and others need to make an effort to understand this circumstance and to participate in the conversation. Speakers give more room for others to pay attention to or interpret the subject or the object of the sentence. Without interpretive effort from others, it is hard to continue a conversation. Omission of the word or “free word order”⁹ leads both speakers and listeners to make an effort to reconstruct meaning during a conversation. In the case of “we” and “I,” the distinction between the two disappears or requires others to make a serious effort to discern it. In many colloquial contexts, the distinction between “I” and “we” exists and does not exist at the same time in speech. The tendency of subject and/or object bareness allows the concepts of the “we” and the “I” to alternate meaning without a clear distinction. In a conversation, “we” can be interpreted as “I” without an explicit change in speech.

However, if one measures the frequency of using the grammatically singular “I” in Korean sentences, the singular “I” is hardly used as the subject compared to the plural “we.” Even if someone would logically need to use “I” as the subject, a speaker of Korean uses “we” instead. For example, whereas a person says in English, “My husband is with my mother in my room,” this is commonly spoken in Korean as “Our husband is with (our) mother in (our) room.” Instead of “I” or “my,” Koreans use “our” more often without identifying the subject or the object.

The meaning of “we” includes one and many as well as individual and communal belongings. It includes “I” and infinite “I”s. There is no clear boundary between the word “I” and the word “we.” “We” is always “we” and in many cases, “we” is “I.” “We” can also mean that the subject of “I” is the subject of “we and I” at the same time. The word has varied, simultaneous meanings.

Language is a reflection of culture. It changes as people use it and reflects their lives. In turn, the usages of the language do not remain confined to linguistic settings. As a new language influences culture or

culture creates a new language, the usages of alternating the word “we” and the word “I” reflect the understanding of the identity of the “we” and the “I.” As the usage of the words “we” and “I” are often interchangeable, so too is the identity of the “we” often interchangeable with the identity of the “I.” The meanings of “we” and “I” are negotiable not only in colloquial Korean usage but also in the consciousness and unconsciousness of Korean minds.

As we have explored earlier, the Korean language itself reflects a distinctive relationship between “we” and “I.” The usages of these words are generated and reflected by the formation of the identity of the “we” and the “I” in Korean culture and society. The next question, then, is how the concept of the “we” shapes Korean culture and society.

The Cultural Sense of the “We”

The Korean people’s communal collective consciousness is deeply engaged with the consciousness of the Woori (we). The meaning of this Korean ethnic self (we) has been culturally and socially formed by the Korean agricultural lifestyle as well as by sociopolitical circumstances. The experience of the Woori (we) starts with a family, a local town, a province, and the nation. It centrally includes the neighbor. In other words, the concept of the Woori (we/our) starts from the practice of knowing who we know. The condition of forming a Korean ethnic self (we) requires knowing who we know before forming a notion of who we are.

A similar process is recognized in Freudian psychology, specifically in the ideas of Erik H. Erikson. When a baby is born, before the infant recognizes who she or he is, she or he would recognize who the parents (caretakers) are first. In this stage, it is hard, from the perspective of the baby, to distinguish between him- or herself and the parents. The baby and the parents are one as it seems that the baby and the mother are one before the birth. The awareness of the self as a distinct person develops later in the oral stage.¹⁰ “Knowing who others are” is the first step not only in the formation of the Korean ethnic self but also in the concept of the self in Western psychology. Amy Bazuin-Yoder notes, “Erikson refers to a human propensity of ‘grouping’ in which individuals identify themselves as a ‘member’ in order to connect meaningfully to a greater whole.”¹¹ However, his emphasis is not on grouping but on the cognitive process of defining identity individually that is the ultimate goal of the later stages of human life.

Knowing who we know is not the same as knowing who we are in the formation of the Korean ethnic self (we). It is a precondition of who we are. The boundary of knowing who we know is settled. At the same time, it is not settled. It is always in transition. It extends the existence of who we are. Woori is the word that Korean people use to include and invite anyone, any being, and anything, in many cases, regardless of who "I am." The sense of the Korean ethnic self (we) is within and then beyond any known borders and boundaries. It requires thinking about the possibilities of who we can be.

As we explored from the perspective of linguistics, the subject/object identifiers of "we" and "I" are void sometimes. This means that the two are not sharply distinguishable, leaving the boundary open. The boundary of the Woori (we/our) is not fixed. When people try to know who "we" know, identification of who we are is open. This gives space to extend more invitations for people to create who "we" can be. Knowledge of someone and of some groups is not a prerequisite of who "we" are in a static sense. Rather it conveys a process of extending an invitation to make the Woori (we). As long as people do not identify who they are, they can change their boundaries and try to extend them. It requires "a genuine dialogue" with others and a readiness to accept others as included in the "we."¹²

However, at the same time, we also experience that people who participate in a conversation tend to assume who "we" are in their own context. They already identify subject and object in the conversation without expressing them. It is already known. It is exclusive. The boundary is fixed, and there is no open invitation to create who we can be. The assumption of defining the "we" sometimes sets up a stronger boundary than the one created by language. The assumptions are deeply embedded and hidden. It is hard to break a boundary that is already tacitly defined. As we previously mentioned, the Woori (we) is defined as a word that indicates the person himself/herself or several people who are on the same side. With an emphasis on "on the same side," the notion of the Woori (we) becomes exclusive. It creates a strong barrier against going beyond who we know *already*.

The formation of the Korean ethnic self (we) exists within this tension. The boundary of the Woori (we) is already known and assumed, but at the same time, it is in the process of knowing, extending, and embracing open invitations to others. If the boundary of the Woori (we) is fixed and known, then identity provides comfort. There is no challenge to remove barriers but only an affirmation of who we already are.

The barriers become a comfortable boundary. And yet simultaneously the boundary of the Woori (we) always offers possibilities for extending its boundary and including others in open invitations. Thus, the Woori (we) is fixed but open.

Here I introduce the story of Korean origins as an example of how Korean cultural traditions form the Korean ethnic self (Woori) and are embodied in this tension. It is believed that Korea originates from one founder, King Tan'gun, in the third millennium BC. In the Korean creation myth, Tan'gun descended from a half-divine-half-human father (Hwanung) and a half-bear-half-human mother (bear woman). He was born from the spirits of divinity, humanity, and nature. His presence is symbolized as a union between earth and sky/heaven and between humanity and nature simultaneously. He has been seen as a representative of the Korean race (민족, *minjok*) who signifies Korean homogeneity. Because of this mystical belief, it is commonly said that "Korea has one bloodline and is one race. We are one." This is a mystical claim; it does not literally mean that Koreans have the same DNA or one ancestral root, even though they show some tendency to this.

Nonetheless, this affirmation is usually misunderstood by non-Koreans as denoting a superficial, obstinate, narrow-minded, and profoundly wrongheaded sameness:¹³ "We are one." The concept of the "we" is a dangerous one in the eyes of non-Koreans. It is interpreted to mean that the Woori (we) is Koreans and Koreans only. This concept of the "we" cannot include others. It is true during the struggle against colonial power, this concept has been used negatively both by Korean national leaders and by leaders from dominating colonial countries such as China, Japan, the United States, among others. As Woori (we) is defined as "a word that indicates the person himself/herself or several people who are on the same side," the emphasis of Woori (we) in this context is placed intensively on the idea of "on the same side." In this sense, the affirmation "we are one" is commonly understood as an exclusive unity within the ideology of Korean patriotism under colonial power while the concept also serves as a survival consciousness for the common Korean people. In this situation, the concept of the "we" becomes exclusive from and even against others.

However, the concept of the Korean ethnic self (we) does not originate from this exclusive, boundary-making movement. As we reflect on Tan'gun's story, indicating a symbolic togetherness between earth and sky/heaven and between humanity and animals, the identity of the "we" as the Korean ethnic self manifests a togetherness between people and

other living beings and even between living beings and spirits. The concept of the “we” is the consciousness that Koreans have developed since the dawn of Korean history within their complex, multicultural, multi-religious, and social context. Inclusive influences of Shamanism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and even Christianity have contributed to the development of this solid Korean ethnic identity as the *organic form of togetherness* in their living history. The meaning of “on the same side” within the definition of Woori (we) is expressed as togetherness, not exclusiveness. Within the mentality of the Woori (we), Koreans feel that they are to live and move on *together*. Because of togetherness, the Woori (we) is growing and growing organically. It makes continuous connections between the “I” and others. In the process of growing, it requires generosity in Koreans’ lives not only for themselves but also for others. Without generosity, it is impossible to grow. Within this act of generosity, love and inclusiveness are necessary. The Woori (we) is an organic, growing, communal identity. It is a unit of life lived together. This Korean ethnic identity cannot be formed only from an individual self or an individual family. The boundary of the “we” has extended its limits and has opened its horizons to invite others. The consciousness of the Woori (we) conveys both boundary breaking and boundary connecting.

In this sense, the Korean ethnic self (we) does not start from a single, individual concept of the “I.” It includes more than individuals. It is beyond the sum of individuals. The consciousness of the “we” includes people, nature, land, earth, and beyond. It even includes spirits and metaphysical beings in some senses. Knowing someone or something, people extend their own boundaries. “We” are one body and one spirit connected to “*sim*, a visceral knowledge that joins thought with emotion and that has an honored position in Western civilization in the thought of Plato.”¹⁴ *Sim* is the mind at motion in knowledge, truth, and righteousness. The formation of the Korean ethnic self (we) occurs within this movement. In moving toward knowledge, truth, and righteousness at the center of *sim*, “we” as the one body and spirit discern what is right and what is wrong, what is truth and what is not truth, and what is righteousness from what is not.

The process of forming the Korean ethnic self extends or breaks the boundaries of who “we” are to include more than each individual and community. It is inevitable to have pain in order to form who “we” are and understand who “we” need to become as a communal body. At the same time, it is a natural process that the individual “I” should be a

part of a communal body from the beginning of its life as is reinforced throughout its life. It does not mean there is no conflict between the “I” and the “we.” Understandings and negotiations (to be who we are) are painful, but they are a natural progression in the process of forming the Korean ethnic self (we). Therefore, in the process of becoming the Woori, the making of meaning by breaking and reshaping boundaries happens naturally and necessarily. As a result, the process of forming the Korean ethnic self (we) itself elicits the power from Koreans to overcome human conditions together.

This process is clearer if we explore the formation of Korean women’s self. For Korean women, the concept of the Korean ethnic self (we) is much stronger. The women’s sense of self is a reflection of a communal self. As Mary John Mananzan and Lee Sun Ai note, “The self and the community are one.”¹⁵ Koreans cannot think of themselves without considering the others who are defined within the boundary of the “we.” In fact, within Korean culture, the sense of a woman’s individual self was never fully understood as an independent individual. Korean women barely recognized the consciousness of an individual self within themselves. It is partially true that Korean women’s experience of an individual self can be discussed and shared in the discourse of otherness from men that Western feminism has elucidated.¹⁶ However, even in this feminist discourse of otherness, it is quite interesting to understand the distinct meaning of otherness for Korean women.

For Korean women, otherness is not experienced as the other who is different from the “I” or is opposite to the “I.” They often experience the other not as “the other” (singular) but as “the others” who are still a part of the Woori (we). Korean women always include themselves and others at the same time in the concept of the Woori (we). In fact, others come first in their concept of the Woori (we). For example, Korean women put husband, children, family members, unrelated neighbors, and even spirits (ancestors) as the “we” before themselves.¹⁷ They do not use the concept of the Woori (we) as a tool to separate the “we” from others. Rather they exercise the concept of the “we” as an implement to invite and connect with others.

Korean women recognize neither their individual self in isolation nor the “we” solely as the other. Their sense of self is developed and nourished in a family-centered setting and community-oriented context.¹⁸ From the beginning of their psychological and spiritual growth in the Korean context, the subject of the “I” is not the subject for Korean women. The Woori (we) is the self they identify with from the beginning

of their lives. Whether women experience the concept of the “we” as only others or the concept of the “we” as both oneself and others in the organic form of togetherness, women’s sense of self belongs to the wholeness of the “we.”

In the context of women’s lives, the concept of the “we” and the concept of the “I” are the same and completely interchangeable. However, this is not simply a union between a communal sense of the “we” and the individual sense of the “I.” Korean women in their domestic settings recognize the family and understand themselves only as part of a family. There is no independent, individual “I.” For them, “we” think, therefore “we” exist. Even for young Korean women who have more consciousness of an individual self because of modern culture and education, the unconscious sense of the “we” persists in their thinking. Under the mix of patriarchal cultural expectations and oppression, they are constantly oriented to seek the well-being of the “we.” For example, before marriage, Korean women’s concept of the “we” is formed within the boundary of a natal family. After marriage, it expands to include their husband and children and finally includes extended family, relatives, and beyond. Their relational being starts from the concept of a communal self (we) and finishes with a bigger communal self. Their concept of a communal self (we) is neither about exclusion from others nor about distinction from others. It is about union between the “we” and others and becomes the “we” together.

It is true that their effort to support the well-being of the “we” requires suffering and often leads to self-sacrifice. Even though, in many cases, they recognize these struggles, they have not yet distinguished themselves from the consciousness of the “we.” Rather they accept sacrifice to be a part of the “we” as “positing” their selves.¹⁹ At the same time, from modern culture and education, they recognize their individual self with consciousness and question who they are as individuals still within the boundary of the Woori (we).

The ultimate goal of the formation of the Woori (we) is to achieve the status of living well together in complete interdependence regardless of human conditions and/or despite human conditions. In overcoming human conditions together, the Korean ethnic self (we) is formed and acts interdependently, interweaving minds and hearts. The growth and development of the Korean ethnic self (we) has been an organic process throughout Korean history. It is an organic form of communal growth in the physical, psychological, and spiritual senses. There are no forms of an independent, individual self in the Korean ethnic self (we), not

because Korean consciousness of the “we” does not include a form of the individual but because their sense of the “we” is the complete form of the “I.”

This tendency is also manifest in many different Korean religious traditions. In many cases, spiritual practices do not formulate or discuss the form of an individual self. If it is discussed, the concept of an individual self is often interpreted as an ego or egoistic self that needs to be enlightened and eventually dismissed. The goal of Buddhist teaching, for example, is to achieve the stage of egolessness. Rahula Walpola notes,

According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of “me” and “mine,” selfish desires, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements and impurities and problems. It is the source of all the troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all the evils in the world.²⁰

In Buddhist teaching, an individual self is seen as something that needs to be dissolved completely. The liberation of the self from matter is the ultimate goal for their teaching. In order to achieve that goal, the self needs ultimately to be eliminated. However, an individual self is also defined as the center of the whole human personality. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, when the self is experienced as “a timeless monad and particle of God,” this is interpreted as “the result of the absorption of all the powers of the human personality into the self: they are not destroyed but fused into a unity.”²¹ The concept of the self is expressed as something to eliminate as well as something to be fulfilled. Even though this seems contradictory, it is not. Complete egolessness is the completion of the self as a form of unity. In other words, the complete erasure of an individual ego is the complete form of the self in the “we.” This concept is similar to Paul’s teaching.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female: for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances that he might create in himself one new humanity in

place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. (Ephesians 2:15–16)

There is no individual self. All beings are one. Based on the biblical tradition, John D. Zizioulas interprets this concept as integration of the “many” into the “one.”²² Through Christ, all people (many) are one. In this concept, all are one in Christ and “many” belong to one. The concept of an individual self is merged in a unity. It becomes a part of the communal self and individual separation from the communal self is not considered. An individual self needs to be submerged into the concept of a communal self without an individual personal consciousness. The concept of an individual personal self is neither a communal self nor an individual self alone but is a part of this relational communion. An individual self is not independent from this relational communion with a communal self. There is no independent individual self but an engaged self in relation with others.

This understanding can be considered as parallel to the process of forming the Woori (we). However, there is one significant difference. In the concept of the Korean ethnic self, this communal self can be independent of the individual self. This has happened in many Korean historical incidents. In other words, the Woori (we) has a tendency not to accept an individual self as part of the “we” independently. It can exist itself either with or without an individual self. The Korean ethnic self is a communal consciousness of Koreans whether excluding or not excluding the individual self. This attribute is not necessarily either negative or positive. However, when it is employed under Korean sociopolitical colonial reality, this concept has been abused and serves to mislead the Korean people. Especially when this attribute is co-opted by Korean military culture and nationalism and contrasted with the concept of Western individualism and autonomy, the consciousness of the “we” becomes a dangerous concept. For the survival of the nation, community, and families, the consciousness of the “we” is the core of communal survival and is not interchangeable with the “I.” This tendency is discussed at length in the next chapter.

The Colonial and Postcolonial Sense of the “We”

The formation of the Korean ethnic self amid the struggle against colonial oppression is particularly complicated because both external and

internal forces must be considered. In order to understand these complications, it is necessary to look into the sociopolitical strictures, patriarchal and hierarchical cultural constraints, and the military environment as well as into psychological and physical inner self-development and the nature of people's interaction with these forces.

Within the patriarchal and hierarchal colonial culture, the formation of the Korean ethnic self has been involved with processes of communality different from the colloquial linguistic and cultural senses of the "we" discussed earlier. Under continuous colonization by China and Russia from the beginning of Korean history, under the experience of Japanese colonialism, and under the postcolonial influence of the United States, the lives of people in Korea have been constantly threatened and invaded. As citizens of a small country among powerful countries, the Korea people had to sacrifice their lives in order to save their country, communities, and families. At the expense of their individual lives, their country was reestablished and their community was reconstructed.²³

Because of these circumstance, the process of forming a Korean ethnic self arose from the need for the independence and survival of communal living units. Addressing an organic communal as well as an individual need to become fully independent from any external power requires the form of union between individuals and the communal body. However, it does not require equal effort between individuals and the communal body. Under colonial reality, it is instead guided by the conviction that for the sake of this union, individual sacrifice is demanded. Communal survival takes precedence over the survival of an individual. "We" exist, therefore "I" can exist. Indeed, from these unavoidable circumstances and colonial experience, Koreans believed that the sacrifice of an individual self was more than necessary. It was treated as an honor. In death an individual was glorified and sanctified.²⁴ Communal survival and independence put the "we" in position to force individuals to efface personal needs. All individual efforts were devoted to the ideal of what Teilhard de Chardin calls "being together with others" and of unifying individuals in "the *axis* of all individual and collective life" with their sacrifice.²⁵

This is a survival mentality that Korean colonial history has embraced. An individual exists only in relationship to a communal body. The individual self cannot exist by itself outside of the community. The recognition of an individual self starts from the sacrifice of an individual self and not from the advantages or freedoms of an individual as the

concept of the self is understood in the Western context. Recognizing an individual self is acceptable only in the service of individual sacrifice for the sake of saving the communal body. Sometimes, in the extreme, the only reason for the existence of an individual is to support the common good and a communal survival.

Whereas the communal concept of the “we” under colonial power forces individuals to sacrifice themselves in defending communal independence, the colonial power itself whispers into the ears of the colonized to become the “new man” who is equal to the oppressors. The colonizers try to convince the colonized to believe that they can be equal to the colonizers. Paulo Freire notes, “Their [the colonized] vision of the new man or women is individualistic; because of their identification with the oppressor, they have no consciousness of themselves as persons or as members of an oppressed class.”²⁶ The consciousness of the “we” fades away under the pressure of colonial power. The colonial power persuaded the colonized Koreans to be independent individuals who are free from the Woori (we). This gives the colonized Koreans the delusion that freedom or independence is a personal choice, not a communal decision. Now in the eyes of the oppressed, it is not colonial oppression but the Woori (we) that is the barrier to freedom. As long as they are independent or free from the communal pressure of the “we,” they as individuals can enjoy quality of life even under colonial power. As long as individuals do not fight to achieve freedom for “all,” individual freedom and independence are achievable. This colonial manipulation feeds a false freedom to choose. Freire notes,

The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world. This is the tragic dilemma of the oppressed.²⁷

Koreans have lived in this dilemma. Between fighting for communal freedom and achieving individual freedom, they have to choose. On the one hand, the colonized Koreans persuade individuals to take action together. The “we” demands individuals to be responsible for sustaining the communal body to attain communal quality of life and well-being. The consciousness of the “we” asks individuals to see that each individual is a part of this “we.” From the side of the oppressed in the colonial power struggle, leadership from the oppressed induces individuals to believe that they are obliged to protect the communal body, so that it is necessary to expect the sacrifice of individuals. On the other hand, from the side of the oppressors, it is taught that because the communal body is not greater than the sum of individuals and is reducible to its parts, an individual is equal to the “we.” Therefore, it is an individual’s choice to be free from sacrifice and obtain individual independence regardless of the condition of the “we.”

In summary, from the side of the oppressor, the survival of the “I” is used as a trap to prevent the oppressed from communal uprising in a freedom fight for all. It insinuates individual freedom as the ultimate goal of the oppressed. The oppressors manipulate the oppressed to imagine that individuals can make a free choice to be independent from the struggle for communal survival. From the side of the oppressed, the survival of the “we” is used to guarantee the ultimate survival of the “I,” and consequently it justifies individual sacrifice for the survival of the individual but loses the meaning of the individual survival in the process despite individual sacrifice, even though the oppressed strives to maintain the consciousness of the “we” as the wholeness of the “I” in their struggle. It often negates individual survival and emphasizes individual sacrifice only. It is true that sometimes these community-oriented behaviors provoke strong resistance from individuals within the community, and many individuals choose either silence or individual privilege instead of sacrifice. The interaction between the “we” and the “I” abides by the needs of communal survival as well as by the needs of individual freedom from both the “we” and the “I.”

Even as Koreans under colonial influence have lived in this tension, the consciousness of the Woori (we) has become a dominant force in forming a Korean ethnic self (we) within Korean colonial history. According to Frantz Fanon,

The settler’s [colonizer’s] work is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the native. The native’s work is to imagine

all possible methods for destroying the settler. . . . But it so happens that for the colonized people this violence, because it constitutes their only work, invests their characters with positive and creative qualities. The practice of violence binds them together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upward in reaction to the settler's violence in the beginning. The groups recognize each other and the future nation is already indivisible. The armed struggle mobilizes the people; that is to say, it throws them in one way and in one direction. The mobilization of the masses, when it arises out of the war of liberation, introduces into each man's consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny, and of a collective history.²⁸

The colonial force thus throws Koreans “in one way and in one direction.” It calls on each individual to achieve a common cause. Even though the consciousness of the oppressed is still aware of the individual as a part of the communal body and recognizes the value of an individual within the consciousness of communality, the Korean ethnic self (we) resists the authenticity of the value of individuality and begins to emphasize the consciousness of communality as its center.

Minjok ideology is the best example of this shift. This ideology is often understood as a form of Korean nationalism. It was introduced and developed in the early twentieth century during Korea's Japanese colonial period. The word *minjok* (민족, 民族) translates as race, nation, or people.²⁹ It has been in popular use since the Japanese colonial period. According to the National Institute of the Korean Language (국립국어원), *minjok* denotes a social community that lives in the same place together for a long time sharing the same language and culture throughout history.³⁰ *Minjok* is more than a race or nation; it encompasses race, nation, ethnicity, culture, language, and history. Henry H. Em defines *minjok* as a modern and democratic construct, and Benedict Anderson defines it as imagined community produced in the mind by Koreans longing for national independence.³¹ It was often presented as a form of anti-imperialism during the Japanese colonial period. Many nationalists claimed that *minjok* was first and the Korean nation was first (*minjok chisang*, *kukka chisang*).³² Even after the Japanese colonial period, Koreans have identified themselves as *minjok*. They emphasize that each individual Korean is not merely an individual person or self; rather, he or

she is a part of the minjok community. Minjok and “I” are not separable. It is indivisible.

The value of the Woori (we) has therefore been defined through the concept of minjok. As an antithesis against the colonizers’ approach to individualistic freedom, the concept of minjok has led Koreans to be united together as an organic body and mind. The relationship between the “I” and the “we” is bounded by minjok. National independence as the cause of forming minjok becomes absolute. The survival of minjok is representative of the survival of individuals on the surface, but the survival of individuals can no longer be representative of the survival of minjok. Even though the consciousness of minjok does not originate from the negation of the individual self, negating the individual self becomes a by-product of this process. The interaction between minjok and an individual self conforms only to the demands of minjok in this process. The survival of minjok requires an intentional sacrificial action from many individuals without guilt and shame. It dilutes the existence of the “I.” In the face of threats to community survival, individual resistance becomes collaboration, and the “I” becomes a part of the convoluted “we.” Expanding from the “I” to the “we,” from individual bodies to the communal body, from “I” and “you” to “he/she” and “it” together, the survival of minjok as the “we” preserves the value of identified and unidentified individual Koreans and maintains relationship among them.

This tendency is apparent especially in the case of women. As we have discussed earlier, the individual self has never been presented as a women’s self within Korean history. The concept of the individual woman’s self was not part of the Korean woman’s consciousness, and it never came to the surface of her mind until communal survival was at issue. When communal survival is at stake, Korean women recognize their individual female bodies as their individual existence, not because they think about their own survival, but because they think about their individual bodies as their resource for sacrifice in order to save the Woori (we). Within their consciousness suddenly arises an individuality grounded in the female body. This body itself becomes a separated consciousness of the individual woman’s self. In her consciousness, a voice whispers her, “With *my* sacrifice, *our* family can survive.” The Korean woman *disconnects* her own individual self from the communal body for the survival of the communal body. The movement from communal survival to the awakening of individual consciousness, and from individual consciousness of sacrifice to communal survival is the circle that forms the Korean ethnic self. Under the power of colonial influences,

the survival of the Woori (we) is now the center of the Korean woman's individual self and the goal of her sacrifice.

On the other hand, unlike the intentions arising from the consciousness of the oppressed, the concept of the Woori (we) has also been constantly used and manipulated by elites of the government since early in Korean history and embraced by the dictators of Korea for their own benefit throughout modern Korean history. A basic attitude underpinning this deception and exploitation is a violent military mentality. To bolster national independence or national economic growth, the value of individuals is crossed out and only the claim for the survival of a communal body becomes conceivable.

Frantz Fanon notes, "The dialogue between these political parties [the nationalist political leaders] and colonialism is never broken off,"³³ as is manifest in Korean modern history. After national independence in 1945, this colonial mentality was continuously adopted by national leaders. As Freire describes, these national leaders became the colonizers of their own people.³⁴ They followed the same pattern, oppressing their own citizens as had the colonizers. These elites used force to inscribe a distorted Woori (we) consciousness into the minds of Koreans.

At first, these elites claimed that they were a part of the oppressed, and perhaps they worked for the survival of the communal body for a while. Possibly, they had been born into the lower class. They sacrificed themselves to liberate the oppressed and colonized. They may have been fighters against the colonial oppressors. They became noted among the colonized. Their work and leadership were recognized in public and admired by the masses. Many people even asked these elites to work for them on behalf of the Woori (we) to lead the country.³⁵

However, at a certain stage of their lives, these elites distinguished themselves from the people and located themselves above the oppressed. They did not belong to the oppressed classes anymore. They saw themselves as elites who were civilized, wise, intellectual, and elegant while they treated the oppressed as the ignorant, violent, angry, and disaffected masses. They saw the people as subjects to subdue and control. They started to see the people through the eyes of the colonizers. Thus the dehumanization of the people was initiated by the colonizers and perpetuated by these national leaders who used to be opponents of colonizers.³⁶ They did not carry out the task of liberation with the people and for the people. Instead, this task was carried out by other grassroots movements without them. They were obsessed with power, authority, and personal success. Their perception of themselves as a part of the

Woori (we) was a false cover in order to better control the people. They believed that they themselves were the Woori (we). Their ideal was to be independent from the colonizers, but it did not mean they became liberators for the Woori (we). At a certain moment of their existential experience, they themselves became colonizers of their own people and reinforced the ideology of the colonizers.

Korean national leaders and elites showed this similar pattern more intensely in 1970s and 1980s. At the expense of the grassroots, a patriarchal military culture under the control of these elites and leaders manipulated the sacrifice of individuals and implanted the concept of the “we” as the just cause of sacrifice. Since the Korean War, Korea has shown amazing economic development as its national leadership has manipulated the consciousness of the “we” to exploit the labor and the human rights of its people. The exploited individual bodies of the grassroots were violated without recognition. For example, consider the case of comfort women and the cheap labor of female workers. Korean women were put in a position to be exploited more than Korean men. Their sacrifice was not recognized but disdained by mainstream Korean society.³⁷ The military Korean government and postcolonial influences controlled the concept of the Woori (we) as the inevitable justification for self-sacrifice and created a vicious circle to perpetuate colonial and postcolonial psychology.

In seeking to purge away the toxicity of the colonial mentality along with the Korean patriarchal, hierarchical military culture, the formation of the Korean ethnic self has developed within a tension between the communal/social crisis on the one hand, caused by the power of the oppressors, and the national leadership acting in the name of the oppressed and Korean cultural traditions on the other. The complexity of this process is neither binary nor singular. Its dynamics has multiple layers that must be considered. In order to explore more clearly the sense of a Korean ethnic self, it will be helpful in the next section to explore how the concept of the Korean ethnic self is different from the Western concept of the self.

A Korean Ethnic Self versus a Western Concept of the Self

In the formation process of the Korean ethnic self, the concept of the Woori (we) has been a significant part of its formation sociopolitically, culturally, and historically, whereas the concept of the “I” has been comparatively absent. The consciousness of the Woori (we) is a distinctive

part of the Korean ethnic self quite different from the formation of the self in Western culture. How different then? It would be interesting to understand the Western concept of the self and its formation in comparison with the concept of the Korean ethnic self.

The signifier of self-identity in the Western context is presented as the “I.” This does not mean that it is “the” self in the West. It is not valid to claim that the formation of the self in the West does not include the development of a communal sense of the self. However, it is fair to understand that the “I” has been one of the most powerful signifiers for forming the self in the West. The names of the “I” identity are expressed in different terminologies in various studies that explore its formation process: the “I,” ego, cogito, self, separative self, autonomous self, independent self, personal identity, oneself, and so forth. Many philosophers and theologians have discussed the “I” as the foundation of human existence, whereas feminist philosophers and theologians have criticized its inherent symbolic notion of patriarchy and individualism. Psychologists and sociologists understand the “I” identity development process as foundational human development, whereas feminist psychologists interrogate the goals of this process and offer different identity-formation processes for women.

“I think, therefore I exist” has been the fundamental axiom of understanding human existence in Western philosophy from Descartes to Kant, Fichte, and Husserl. The “I” is the fundamental subject of Western philosophy throughout Western history. Paul Ricoeur helpfully reviews the concept of the “I” in Western philosophical and theological discourse in the course of developing his own understanding of one’s self, the “I.” Critically reflecting on Descartes’s *Meditations*, he demonstrates that the understanding of the “I” starts from the understanding of God. In his interpretation, the existence of God in Descartes’s logic is used to confirm the existence of the “I.” Even though the “I” has a finite and limited nature, divine veracity confers the existence on the “I” in this logic. God maintains the existence of the “I” and covers the finite and limited nature of the “I” from temporality to permanence. God’s contemporaneousness is linked to the “I” of the *cogito* in its core existence. In this logic, the “I” is assured of the resemblance between the “I” and God. The “I” (cogito) is now posited as the empirical and transcendental ground next to God.³⁸

This understanding is acceptable as long as the “I,” as the human being, stands next to God and as long as the existence of the “I” is left

without further identification. Ricoeur does not identify who the “I” is but leaves the “I” as anonymous. In Descartes and his followers, the power of cognition is assumed not only as the proof of human existence but also as legitimating human superiority over other beings. It creates a hierarchy. The power of thinking does not belong to other beings but only to the “I.” It puts the “I” at the top of the hierarchy, even though Descartes posits the “I” in a neutral place without naming who the “I” is. The problem is not the “I” itself. Ricoeur believes that whether the “I” is posited absolutely (without requiring the other) or relatively (requiring the other), the positing of the “I” (or positing of the cogito) has been the key issue in the understanding of human existence.³⁹ As he questions, the problem is how the “I” is posited by *what* and by *whom*. Using the logic of God’s existence, the “I” absorbs the power of God and resembles God. Resemblance between God and the “I” becomes equalization between God and the “I.” And then the “I” becomes God. As the cogito is posited as the empirical and transcendental ground, the “I” posits itself as a representative of human existence, and it uses God as a secondary resource to prove human existence. Depending on where the “I” stands or depending on where the “I” is posited, the “I” inhabits a position of power.

Both Descartes and Nietzsche contest the human existence holding the “I” in a position of power. Setting up a contrast between Descartes and Nietzsche, Ricoeur shows how the concepts of the “I” have been interpreted differently. Whereas in Descartes the positing cogito is the certainty of the self, Nietzsche sets the positing cogito as the shattered one, the uncertainty of the self.⁴⁰ Despite these contrasting interpretations of the “I,” nonetheless, for both of them, each “I” is the fundamental, guaranteed subject who examines the human existence. The “I” is *the* existence of *each*, even including the existence of God in this discussion. The certainty of the “I” (Descartes) or doubt of the “I” (Nietzsche) confirms that the basic concern for the human existence is recognition of the “I,” of each individual.

Utilizing a semantic approach, Ricoeur describes the recognition of individuality in a linguistic sense. Indicating how people refer to a person as a thing of a particular in our conversation, he recognizes a person as a basic distinguishable entity on the basis of the opposition between “I” and “you.” The individual person, the “I,” is defined as the basic particular. Ricoeur extends the concept of individualization beyond language systems to analyze the relationship between “I” and “you”:

“We ascribe to ourselves certain things.” I do not deny the force that this alignment of ascription to ourselves in accordance with the attribution to something may possess: the “we” here receives so little emphasis that it becomes the equivalent of “one.” Ascribing is what is done by anyone, by each one, by one, in relation to anyone, each one, one. The force of this each one will have to be preserved, for it makes a designation that is distributive rather than anonymous, in an analysis of the self stemming from the theory of utterance.⁴¹

Ricoeur explains that each person (the “I”) is the basic existence of the self: the “I,” not the “we.” The existence of the “we” is not given much attention. It does not have the meaning of a genuine form of the “we” (as the “we” of community) but is only a secondary existence derived from the “I.” The “we” is not the sum of the “I.” The meaning of the “we” is considered as “one’s own” or “each.” Everything, including the “we,” belongs to the “I.” The “I” becomes exclusively an independent self that exists on its own. However, even though everything belongs to the “I” and this independent self exists on its own, this independent self cannot exist without the other. In fact, it requires the other. As Ricoeur explains the existence of the other in relationship with the “I” in the dialectic of selfhood and otherness, the “I” needs the other. Without the memories of others, the memory of the “I” cannot be completed.⁴² The other constitutes the core of the “I” because the necessary path of injunction is from the other, and/or selfhood is a part of self-attestation enjoined by the other. In order to complete the “I,” the other exists.

Although Ricoeur recognizes the suffering of the other and brings the concept of sympathy to recognize the existence of the other, he also provides another explanation to recognize the existence of the other:

to self-esteem, understood as a reflexive moment of the wish for the “good life,” solicitude adds essentially the dimension of lack, the fact that we need friends; as a reaction to the effect of solicitude on self-esteem, the self perceives itself as another among others.⁴³

Whether sharing the “good life” together comes from sympathy for the suffering of the other or whether it arises from the need of having friends, recognition of the other is a necessary part of recognition of the self. In this understanding, Ricoeur sees the self as *another* among others