15 Karma in the Digital Age: Moral Cosmology and Ethical Rebirth in the Korean Webtoon *"Marry My Husband"*

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Abstract

This paper situates the Korean webtoon Marry My Husband as a contemporary narrative that articulates moral cosmology through digitally mediated storytelling. Drawing on the Buddhist 'karma' concept (ŏp 業), Confucian ethical self-cultivation, and the mythic notion of cyclical time, the study contends that the webtoon reconfigures the revenge narrative into a framing of ethical rebirth and moral realignment. The protagonist's return to the past serves as a moral corrective, where suffering gets reinterpreted as karmic consequence rather than arbitrary injustice. Through qualitative textual and visual analysis, the paper shows how moral causality undergirds the progression of the narrative through which justice emerges via ethical agency rather than divine or institutional intervention. Locating this webtoon in the discourse of lived religion, this study indicates how contemporary Korean digital media functions as a site where traditional religious ethics get re-imagined to engage questions of fate, gendered suffering, and moral responsibility in the digital age.

Keywords: *Korean Webtoons, Buddhist Karma, Moral Cosmology, Confucian Ethics, Lived Religion, Digital Popular Culture*.

Introduction

In recent years, Korean webtoons have become one of the most influential cultural forms in South Korea and beyond, serving not simply as entertainment but as narrative spaces in which ethical values, social anxieties, and cosmological assumptions are articulated and contested. Scholars of religion and culture have increasingly recognized that popular media often functions as a site of moral reflection-especially in societies in which religious ethics continue to shape everyday

life beyond the formal boundaries of religious institutions.[1]As vertically scrolling digital narratives consumed in intimate, everyday contexts, webtoons tackle questions of fate, justice, suffering, and moral responsibility in ways that profoundly resonate with contemporary audiences.[2]Despite their rising prominence within Korean cultural life, webtoons have received relatively little sustained attention within Korean religious studies, in which popular culture has so often been treated as peripheral to doctrinal traditions or organized religious movements.[3]

Marry My Husband, a South Korean webtoon, constitutes a strong case study regarding how traditional ethics and moral cosmologies are transformed and reapplied in new media narratives. Initially, it would seem to present a rather common popular story type in which a wronged female character, after suffering from betrayal, illness, and subsequent death, is accorded a definitive chance to go back in time and change her history. However, in actuality, it contains a moral realm that advocates principles of ethical agency, moderation, and, more importantly, a progressive development of predestined moral consequential instead of blind luck.[4]

The Korean religious tradition has been characterized by a syncretic blending of Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist philosophies and indigenous religious practices, which have created a common moral horizon rather than clearly demarcated religious systems.[5]In this way, Buddhism has offered a cosmology within which suffering can be comprehended within a logic of karmic cause and effect (ŏp 業), and Confucianism has stressed ethical moral cultivation and behavioral conduct.[6]This pluralism has long characterized Korean religious and social history and has contributed to shaping moral sensibilities even in non-religion-construction circles.[7]In this way, a moral logic that emphasizes acts, responsibility, and self-control, mediated by ideas of karma, has continued to shape Korean-storytelling narratives, whether religious or secular.

In Korean religions, research on so-called “new religions” (sinhŭng chonggyo 新興宗教) showed that cases of “religious creativity” can be found when religions react to times of crisis or modernization and an ambiguous sense of morality.[8]Although webtoons are, of course, not a form of “new religion” or a religious movement of any sort, their activity is another form of response to present-day anxieties about morality, “translating” traditional morality into a form of storytelling that

[1] Robert N. Bellah, Religion in Human Evolution (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 503–10.
[2] Heidi Campbell, Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds (New York: Routledge, 2013), 72–75.
[3] Don Baker, “Religion and Popular Culture in Korea,” Korea Journal 52, no. 1 (2012): 6–9.
[4] Jin Y. Park, “Narrative Ethics and Korean Religious Thought,” Journal of Korean Religions 8, no. 2 (2017): 45–47.
[5] James Huntley Grayson, Korea: A Religious History (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 1–15.
[6] Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 40–44.
[7] Don Baker, Korean Spirituality (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008), 112–15.
[8] James Huntley Grayson, Korea: A Religious History, 240–41.

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is more relevant to modern people's lives.[1]This would mean that webtoons take a notable place in a never-ending process of negotiations between “religion” and “morality” of modern Korean society.

This paper approaches *Marry My Husband* through the prism of moral cosmology, defined as a view of the universe as morally ordered and responsive to human activity. Moral cosmology reminds that justice unfolds immanently through the operation of moral causality, rather than the intervention of divine judgment or action by authorities.[2]This is clearly highly congruent with Buddhist doctrines of karma and rebirth, Confucian conceptions of ethical self-cultivation wherein moral clarity and responsibility result over time from disciplined action, and so on.[3]The narrative logic of this webtoon reflects this cosmology in that the ethical disequilibrium can balance itself within its frame through the evolution of an outcome rather than direct vengeance.

The narrative strategy of going back into the past serves as a mythic and moral tool, rather than simply a speculative daydream. The idea of cyclical time, which speaks so powerfully through Buddhist and East Asian ideology, enables moral transformation and reappraisal by opening up again moments of moral failure and decision.[4]In “*Marry My Husband”,* the belief in reincarnation enables the protagonist to redefine suffering as meaningless injustice transformed into a call for moral enlightenment rather than simply an incentive for moral outrage and action.[5]

Suffering as gendered suffering is a pivotal discourse in the story, which symbolically echoes societal realities. In contrast, the webtoon does not position the suffering as a passive thematic construction. Suffering, instead, becomes the hub for the ethics of agency and the ethics of moral correction. Thus, the refusal to resolve the suffering by violent means and the consequent weakening of the wrongdoing by its own ethical foundations make the story position itself in the ethics of restraint, truth, and the consequences of karmic policy.[6]

Recent work in lived or digital religion has highlighted that religiosity and religious meaning are often made elsewhere than in ritual space, but in the realm of lived practices and media consumption.[7]Through such a lens, webtoons can be viewed not merely as a modern-day manifestation of moral texts, which convey ethical codes to mainstream readers in their lived habits and experiences. Rather, webtoons allow readers to engage with pre-defined ethical systems through their

[1] Jin Y. Park, “Wŏn Buddhism, Christianity, and Interreligious Dialogue,” Journal of Korean Religions 5, no. 1 (2014): 114–16.
[2] Robert E. Buswell Jr., The Zen Monastic Experience (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 87–90.
[3] Tu Weiming, Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 67–72.
[4] Mircea Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 34–36.
[5] Jin Y. Park, “Mythic Time and Ethical Renewal,” Journal of Korean Religions 6, no. 1 (2015): 22–25.
[6] Sally B. King, Socially Engaged Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009), 19–21.
[7] Thomas A. Tweed, Crossing and Dwelling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54–56.

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inherent webtoon format, which involves moral reflection by virtue of being serialized.[1]

Nevertheless, in spite of the increased popularity of Korean popular culture in recent times, a lot less has been explored in terms of the role of webtoons as tools of religious ethics and moral cosmology. While the existing literature has primarily explored the production process of such texts or their aesthetics in a transnational context, moral content has been less explored.[2]I will try to fill this gap in the literature by discussing the role of the particular Korean webtoon "*Marry My Husband*" in the context of Korean religious ethics and morality in the following paper.

From a methodological perspective, this paper uses qualitative text and image analysis, examining structure, character, and ethical motifs. Instead of being concerned with the webtoon and its possible correspondence to religious teachings, this paper analyzes the manner in which ethical concepts are realized through the structure. Comparative religious analyses further place such components within the frameworks of Buddhist and Confucian ethical traditions.[3]

In tracing*Marry My Husband* as a story of moral cosmology, I seek to suggest that Korean webtoons can be read as locations where religious ethics continue to live on and develop in digital culture. In imagining a universe that operates on principles of ethical causality, as opposed to arbitrary fate, the webtoon engages Korean religious sensibilities and tackles contemporary issues related to gender, justice, and ethics.[4]

Karmic Rebirth and Moral Cosmology

The mechanism of karmic rebirth serves as an extremely productive theoretical tool for analyzing the moral universe presented in *"Marry My Husband".* Far from serving as a purely fictional plot device, rebirth in the webtoon instead serves as an instrument of moral justice, whereby moral disequilibrium is perpetually cycled back, reviewed, and adjusted. Such an interpretive framework has clear ties to the Buddhist moral cosmology, within which rebirth is not construed as some kind of magical occurrence but rather the extension of moral causality according to deliberate agency.[5]In codifying rebirth according to this set of moral terms rather than some kind of moral, spiritual, or ultimately, magical terms, the webtoon establishes an entire universe according to the logic of ethics rather than chance or divine will.

In Buddhism, the idea of ŏp (karma) fundamentally involves intentional action and its consequence rather than destiny or predestination. It has been pointed out

[1] Heidi Campbell, Digital Religion, 81–84.
[2] Dal Yong Jin, New Korean Wave (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 95–98.
[3] Robert A. Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 7–10.
[4] Jin Y. Park, "Religion and Moral Imagination in Contemporary Korea," Journal of Korean Religions 9, no. 1 (2018): 3–6.
[5] Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr., The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 386–88.

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through classical Buddhist scriptures that ŏp or karma originates on the basis of volition (cetanā), thereby making human agency a prime mover of ethics.[1]More specifically on this point, Buddhist scholarship of the modern period explains the functioning of karmic causality as being non-Mechanical and dependent on consciousness, volitions, and ethical character.[2]It should, therefore, be clarified here that the idea of ŏp or karma does not pertain to predestination or determinism; rather, it constitutes ethics as its own pedagogy of transformation. Rebirth, under this paradigm of ethics, does not pertain to either reward or punishment.

The use of rebirth in the webtoon's story is reminiscent of this moral ideal of rebirth. Indeed, the second life of the protagonist is not a life of immortality from suffering nor from moral repercussions; it is instead a deepening of moral awareness. Memories of the past of betrayal and pain become a moral awareness in themselves, allowing the protagonist to identify exploitation, misplaced loyalty, and moral compromise in their lives. Thus, the act of rebirth becomes an extension of the consciousness of karmic awareness itself and not the forgetting of the pre-existing action. Thus, the story's format aligns with the Buddhist ideals of rebirth in terms of the continuity of moral character as opposed to the continuity of the self.[3]

The moral cosmology, as constructed through this story, posits the existence of a morally-responsive universe. This logic of consequence rests neither on a transcendent deity meting out justice, nor on a pre-existing notion of justice, to be realized through human morality. Instead, it finds a parallel within the attitude of other Asian civilizations, where morality is internally grounded, and immanence defines the ethical paradigms of these civilizations.[4]Within the Korean religious tradition, the internal logic of morality has, till date, remained the interaction of Karmanic logic and Confucian morality. While Karmanic logic informs the cosmological framework of consequence, the Confucian tradition informs the language of morality and moderation.

Nonetheless, the ethical cosmology of *"Marry My Husband"* does not emphasize violent deeds of revenge as a form of correcting imbalance. By contrast, the ethical focus of the characters' actions pursues ethical non-intervention as a principle, allowing the characters' deeds to produce their own consequence. This form of narrative corresponds with Buddhist ethical restraint, which prevents counter-violent revenge and holds the self-defeating character of unethical behavior.[5]Ethically transgressive behavior on the webtoon finds its imbalance self-collapsing under its

[1] Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 40–44.
[2] Rupert Gethin, The Foundations of Buddhism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 119–22.
[3] Jin Y. Park, "Karma and Moral Agency in Korean Buddhism," Journal of Korean Religions 6, no. 2 (2015): 41–44.
[4] Tu Weiming, "The Moral Universal from the Perspective of East Asian Thought," Philosophy East and West 44, no. 2 (1994): 269–72.
[5] Sallie B. King, Socially Engaged Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 19–23.

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own ethical gravity, implying the organic realization of ethical justice through non-intervention.

And in this regard, the concept of rebirth itself functions with a critical approach to linear interpretations of justice. Indeed, linear moral narratives are commonly characterized by a restoration of wrongdoing or injustice through encounter, punishment, and redemption storylines that provide closure. However, in regard to a logic of circular temporality, closure itself becomes problematic, rather pointing to ethical repetition.[1] The Buddhist cosmology has thus long made use of circular temporality in pointing to ethical accountability through and through. Thus, rebirth, in terms of ethical failure, does not provide closure but rather an opening. This, in turn, points to how the webtoon itself narrativizes with regard to ethical openness.

Suffering in gendered terms takes on a central role in the karmic pattern. The initial life of the protagonist is beset by emotional exploitation and physical degeneration, which is not presented in the text as 'exceptional' but, in fact, is embedded in social and relational realms. While Buddhist ethics might be charged with dealing with suffering in ways potentially conducive to its normalization, on the other hand, recent approaches to its interpretation underlie the understanding of 'karma' in its role in 'forcing' ethics through 'enlightened' topology.[2]This pattern reinstates 'suffering' in ethics and its transformative, awakening role in ethics through reevaluating the pattern of relationships.

This attention to ethical awakening corresponds to the Confucian ideal of ethical cultivation, which sees ethical clarity as developed through consideration for unsuccess and disharmony. Moral self-cultivation (suyang 修養) entails sensitivity to imbalance and transformative practice in one's behavior.[3]The protagonist's transformation becomes, therefore, an ethical education site, wherein self-control, discrimination, and accountability substitute for innocence and emotional self-reliance. By merging notions of karmic cause with Confucian ethical discipline, a Confucian-Christian hybrid ethical cosmos becomes instantiated.

The lack of divine interference in *"Marry My Husband"* further reinforces the moral cosmology of the webtoon. Whereas religious stories often incorporate divine judgment or grace, the webtoon places the notion of justice solely within the realm of ethics. East Asian religious studies researcher Griffith White suggests that this kind of moral cosmology prioritizes responsibility as opposed to obedience and clarity as opposed to correctness.[4]The world of the webtoon does not punish or punish through judgment; the world of the webtoon reacts.

[1] Mircea Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 34–36.
[2] Rita Gross, Buddhism after Patriarchy (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 152–55.
[3] Tu Weiming, Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 67–72.
[4] Don Baker, Korean Spirituality (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 101–05.

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Rebirth, in this story, reflects also moral knowledge and memory. The retained memories of the main character serve as ethical capital, providing insight into decision-making and restraint in advance. In the tradition of Buddhist philosophy, memorization of past acts is often metaphorically associated with karmic seeds (bīja) shaping perception and response.[1]In the webtoon, the non-material concept is transformed into a story where the accumulation of karma is visually remembered experience. Ethical development, in that respect, is not about forgetting trauma but about re-signifying it ethically.

The story further resists framing rebirth as personal empowerment divorced from communal responsibility. While the protagonist realizes strategic gain, her ethical success depends upon resisting manipulation, exploitation, and moral compromise. Confucian ethics warn against an instrumental rationality severed from moral intention, emphasizing sincerity (sŏng, 誠) as that which is foundational to ethical life.[2]The webtoon echoes this principle insofar as it depicts ethical restraint as strength of a sort highly contrasted with those characters who pursue advantage through deception or coercion.

From the standpoint of the phenomenology of religion, the karmic cosmology presented through this webtoon serves as a quotidian ethical pedagogy. There is a moral universe presented here wherein the reader sees the value of patience, clarity of thought, and ethical consistency rewarded, albeit on a cumulative basis.[3]This same episodic structure further reinforces this form of ethical pedagogy through the principle of deferral, such that the reader finds a moral fulfillment rather than a logical one.

The importance of the idea of rebirth, then, is to be found, not in the supernatural notion of rebirth itself, but in the ethical ideas it contains. The Webtoon *Marry My Husband* reinitiates this idea of moral cosmology, no longer as spectacular rebirth, but as a consideration of justice and suffering, allowing the Webtoon audience to consider these issues through the idea of moral cosmology, and showing that it remains a functioning aspect of Korean society as a whole.

With its characterization of an ethical universe and its causality, this webtoon supports its own vision of justice as it is grounded in ethics and not domination. This cycle of karmatic reincarnation presented in this work is not escapist or dogmatic; it is an ethical form of storytelling. Finally, *"Marry My Husband"* thus appears as a moral work of our contemporaneity and as a vector for continuing and renewing Korean ethics in its digital form.

[1] Robert Sharf, "Thinking through Shingon Ritual," Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies 26, no. 1 (2003): 53–56.
[2] Rodney L. Taylor, The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 95–98.
[3] Thomas A. Tweed, Crossing and Dwelling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54–56.

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Confucian Ethics and Moral Agency

The karmic cosmology of Buddhism offers the ethical principle of causality underlying "*Marry My Husband",* while the ethics of Confucianism offer the ethical discourse through which the practices of agency, control, and self-cultivation are made meaningful. In the Korean tradition, the ethics of Confucianism have been traditionally practiced as an ethical system for action, and its native habitus is the relation between the social and the metaphysical. From the ethical perspective of Confucianism, moral agency is neither spontaneous nor individualistic: it is developed through the power of ethical reflection and the constant moderation of desires and intentions.[1]This makes the ethical transformation of the heroine highly intelligible through the lens of moral recalibration.

At the heart of the ethical teachings of Confucianism is the idea of self-cultivation (suyang 修養), which refers to a process of moral upbringing that is fulfilled on a day-to-day basis. Unlike Western ethics, whose emphasis is on grand actions and revelations, the beauty of the teachings of Confucianism is that it focuses on moral growth and development.[2] Ethical action, therefore, is irrevocably tied up with a preoccupation with relationships, roles, and responsibilities. In the webcomic, the return to the past for the heroine is not a catalyst for her to have unfettered and unconditional power, but a reminder of the need to relearn the ability to be ethical.

Instead, it is understood through the lens of misalignment in terms of intention, feelings, and behavior. This translates to the moral subject's potential to make corrections through reflection and control.[3]This is closely aligned with the logic found in "*Marry My Husband",* where the sufferance experienced by the protagonist in her past life is positioned as a result of her ignorance and improper internalization of wrongful relational values in her past life. This mistake is not effaced in her next life but made visible so that corrections can be made.

The relational outlook constitutes one of the most prominent characteristics of Confucian ethical agency. The assessment of ethical behavior takes place not in relation to itself, but rather with regards to its impact upon societal harmony and balance in relationships.[4]The Confucian school has consistently taught that ethical discernment can only be attained by engaging with, rather than withdrawing from, society as a whole. In this regard, the webtoon's preoccupation with social settings, especially those that involve work and family, subscribes to Confucian ethical precepts. The protagonist's ethical agency derives not from boundary-setting, non-manipulative, and rebalancing efforts, but from something else altogether.

[1] Tu Weiming, Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 67–72.
[2] Rodney L. Taylor, The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 95–98.
[3] Philip J. Ivanhoe, Confucian Moral Self Cultivation (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 1–5.
[4] Don Baker, Korean Spirituality (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 112–15.

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The Confucian value of sincerity (sŏng 誠) is particularly pertinent in this context. The concept of sincerity denotes harmony between inner ambition and outer behavior, providing the basis for moral integrity.[1]People with a low degree of sincerity individuals whose behavior involves manipulation, deception, or exploiting others will ultimately ruin themselves in the moral cosmology of the story. In contrast, the moral success of the heroine is characterized by her growing integrity among her intentions and actions, sometimes involving self-control over revenge.

In regard to ethics, the Confucian tradition places a strong emphasis on the governance of the passions. Ethical cultivation does not entail the elimination of the passions but the coordination of the passions and ethics.[2] "Too much resentment, the wish for revenge, and unchecked anger" all stand in the way of attaining ethical insight. In "*Marry My Husband*," the hero's ethical development consists in the fact that he resists the impulse to act in accordance with his passions, especially the passion for revenge. This reflects the Confucian preference for deliberate action over acting in passion.

The handling of power in the narrative again highlights its Confucian ethical outlook. In the webtoon, power is not made to seem legitimate when it is exercised through coercion and deception. In the narrative, figures who attempt to gain benefit through power and deception lose relevance and stability. The misuse of power without moral legitimacy has traditionally been condemned through the ethical outlooks of Confucianism. This is because power and authority should be rooted in morality and virtue as opposed to coercion.[3]

In this light, one must recognize the ethical landscape in which gendered moral expectations become so pivotal. Confucianism has been traditionally problematized for reinforcing hierarchies and gendered norms; however, contemporary scholarship underscores that Confucian ethics is non-monolithic and has been reinterpreted in different contexts.[4]In *Marry My Husband*, the moral agency of the protagonist consists in refusing such gendered expectations of self-sacrifice that enable exploitation. Relational ethics are not rejected altogether in her ethical recalibration but are premised on the imperative of reciprocity and sincerity within relationships. The reworking of relational ethics here suggests a critical engagement with Confucian moral norms rather than their uncritical reproduction.

Moreover, Confucian ethical agency does not measure ethical success by social success. Moral cultivation can involve, first, a state of misunderstandings in the long run. This is because a webtoon integrates the above principle to illustrate that

[1] Tu Weiming, "Li as Process of Humanization," Philosophy East and West 22, no. 2 (1972): 187–88.
[2] Irene Bloom, "Mencius and Human Nature," Philosophy East and West 47, no. 1 (1997): 21–23.
[3] Wm. Theodore de Bary, Asian Values and Human Rights (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 35–38.
[4] Martina Deuchler, The Confucian Transformation of Korea (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1992), 212–16.

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self-control in ethics is expensive in the short run while promoting more stability in the long run. [1]This is demonstrated in the act of the hero not using others for his/her personal goals while also not fast-tracking punishment for those who wrong him/her.

The dynamics between the teachings of Confucianism and the Buddhist idea of karma is also a strengthening force in the moral cosmology of the narrative. Karma is the mechanism for which the consequences of immorality exist, and the teachings of Confucianism define the conduct for the moral actor to follow in such a situation.[2]The moral system, therefore, established is one where moral integrity is valued over the fulfillment of emotions. The agency of the hero, therefore, is no longer a force in the directed outcomes.

In light of lived religion, the Confucian ethical paradigm situated within the webtoon is itself a sort of moral pedagogy. The reader is encouraged to assess the characters not only through their successes or failures but, more fundamentally, through the contents of the ethical character of their actions.[3]The gradual unfolding of unethical practices reinforces the teaching that moral incoherence is ultimately self-defeating. Such narrative pedagogy is reminiscent of Confucian pedagogical techniques, which rely on moral exemplarity and reflection rather than on doctrinal teaching.

The episodic form of the webtoon reinforces Confucian moral temporality. Ethical cultivation unfolds over time, through repeated situations that test intention and restraint. Every episode offers the possibility of ethical decision-making and replays the Confucian knowledge of moral life as iterative, rather than resolved, through a singular act of decision.[4]In this sense, the webtoon's digital structure takes on an ethical form, medium and message aligning.

Through the emphasis on ethical agency in terms of self-cultivation, control, and relationally grounded ethics, *Marry My Husband* portrays a Confucian ethics of moral imagination in a modern digital storytelling medium. The ethical transformation of the heroine proves that ethical agency is not necessarily bound up in domination, revenge, and transgression, as in many traditional heroines of patriarchally configured Confucian societies, but in clarity, control, and Confucian ethics' objective rationale.

In locating the moral agency of Confucian ethics within daily life, the web-toon promotes a notion of morality that is neither heroically transcendent nor passively submissive but rather one of continuous moral toil. Confucian morality, as articulated in this text, is not one of liberation from suffering but of a navigational

[1] Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds., Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 57–60.
[2] Jin Y. Park, "Karma and Moral Agency in Korean Buddhism," Journal of Korean Religions 6, no. 2 (2015): 41–44.
[3] Robert A. Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 7–10.
[4] Thomas A. Tweed, Crossing and Dwelling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54–56.

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ethics of that suffering. In regard to such a reading, "*Marry My Husband*" is a contemporary moral text that returns Confucian moral ethics to a digital Korean cultural field in dialogue with a Buddhist cosmology.

Mythic Temporality and Ethical Correction

The ethical logic of *"Marry My Husband"* is deeply intertwined with the unique manner in which it addresses time. While the story involves time reversal, its import is anything but speculative, acting instead as a mythological model in which ethical correction potentially emerges. Under its rubric, time is thus envisioned not so much as a disinterested, linear series of incidents but, rather, as a medium with its own ethical quality, one in which time is responsive, corrective, and recurring. This model closely aligns with the understanding in East Asian religions in which time is envisioned neither as linear, moving towards an inevitable end, but, instead, is imbued with its own ethical dimension, one in which renewal is potentially available.[1]

Theoretical debates on mythic temporality highlight the concept of how the cycle of time offers the opportunity to revitalize the primordial moment to restore ethical lapse. The conceptual formulation on sacred time by Mircea Eliade argues the idea of repetition as "a movement back to the origin" to regenerate meaning and order.[2]Despite its universalistic implications, the ideological focus on ethical resuscitation through the mechanism of repetition is quite useful to decode the narrative dynamic where the medium of time offers the platform for moral regeneration. In "*Marry My Husband*," the heroine's temporal journey offers the opportunity to revive the past rich with moral lapse.

In Buddhist cosmology, the nature of time is inextricably tied to moral causality. The cycle of rebirth (saṃsāra) is not a closed cycle but a morally informed process dictated by the principle of karma (ŏp業).[3]Rather than denying the existence of the past, rebirth reproduces the moral traces of the past in the form of an obligation to be met in the future. Indeed, the Buddhist conception of time resists linear stories of redemption in favor of a logic of watchfulness and moral correction. The narrative of the webtoon follows this logic inasmuch as it offers rebirth as an opportunity for moral deciphering of the past rather than a refiguring of the past as effaced suffering.

"The remembered experience of the past life is the key to the mythical temporal construct in which the protagonist's story resides. Remembered suffering becomes the basis for the development of the ethic in the webtoon. The concept of karmic seeds (bīja) in Buddhist philosophy determines one's perception and

[1] Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 93–95.
[2] Mircea Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 34–36.
[3] Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 32–36.

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character and, therefore, one's reactions to the events in a given life, and into the next life in turn.[1] In the webtoon, the philosophical construct is literally interpreted.

Also, the mythic temporality of the webtoon refigures the notion of justice as a transaction rather than a moment. While linear narratives tend to provide justice as a result of conflict or climactic resolution, the cycle of time defers closure and allows for the premise of ethical patience. Indeed, East Asian ethics maintain this patience as a tenet and recognize immediate retaliation as problematic.[2]The webtoon's disavowal of immediate justice indexes this ethical philosophy.

This spatiotemporal structure is, in turn, reinforced through the episodic structure inherent in the format of the webtoon. Each installment remains essentially an instance of ethical probing, unusual in its recurrence through familiar scenarios from the world of social relations from office environments to more intimate instances, and even more vulnerable ones. [3]This recurrence, in essence, relates to the process of ethical learning, which attracts through its iteration and not its instantiation. [4]The medium, hence, reinforces the message.

Furthermore, Confucianism is a philosophical tradition that sees time through a more ethical lens because of its ideals of self-cultivation. This is because self-cultivation is a process of reflecting upon and controlling one's actions over a period of time. This is an ethical process because ethical amendment occurs over a period of time rather than an instant of conversion with a temporary twist of morality. The return of the webtoon through time enables such an act of self-cultivation of morality because time is allowed for such a change.

Moreover, the mythic temporality of *"Marry My Husband"* defies nostalgia. This is because the past is not presented as a nostalgic ideal, but as a site of interrogation. In this sense, the past as a site of ethical failure serves as a means of illuminating the importance of responsibility rather than nostalgia. This stands as a Buddhist tenet concerning the transient nature of attachment to form.[5]The webtoon reflects this tenet because the past as a site of attachment becomes a means of ethical inquiry.

"The implications of 'gendered suffering' take on special meaning in this way of thinking about time." The heroine's initial life cycle illustrates how time can solidify unjust systems when the lack of ethics is not addressed. Mythic time brings an end to this solidification, opening time to the possibility of ethics. "Feminist approaches to Buddhist ethics in particular have argued that awakening to ethics must transform,

[1] Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr., The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 123–25.
[2] Don Baker, Korean Spirituality (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 101–05.
[3] Catherine Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 74–78.
[4] Philip J. Ivanhoe, Confucian Moral Self Cultivation (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 1–5.
[5] Rupert Gethin, The Foundations of Buddhism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 190–93.

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not simply reinterpret, sources of structural suffering."[1]Ethical correction in the story includes a refusal to cooperate with exploitive systems and to let their results happen without intervention.

The lack of divine intervention also helps in understanding the moral implications of mythic time in regard to justice. Justice does not come from outside the flow of time but in the flow of time itself. There is an internal moral order of this flow of time that matches the religious sentiment of the East Asian culture in considering the moral value of harmony over the moral value of judgment.[2] Time becomes the agent of moral righteousness that will disrupt the instability of the unethical arrangement.

"Mythic temporality" also positions its readers within an ethical perspective of anticipation as opposed to control. The technique of delayed gratification inherent within this cyclic structure induces an ethical perspective of patience and imagination. As observed in literature on "lived religion," anticipation has been determined as an integral component of moral formation and its relation to the orientation of an individual within his/her span of consequence.[3]The webtoon thus induces its audiences within this perspective of anticipation.

The ethical correction made possible through mythic temporality is therefore both collective and individual in nature. While the protagonist undergoes metamorphosis, the ethical world of the narrative involves all its characters in the temporal logic of ethics. The collectivization of ethics through time corresponds to the ethics of relations in the Confucian tradition.[4]Ethics in this tradition is not a function of isolation but the transformation of relations through time.

In reframing time as ethically responsive *Marry My Husband* participates in a broader tradition of moral storytelling in which temporal repetition serves didactic ends. Mythic temporality does not deny contingency; it organizes it ethically. Through cyclical return, delayed consequence, and remembered suffering, the webtoon articulates a moral cosmology in which time itself becomes an agent of justice. Such a vision challenges contemporary cultures of immediacy, offering instead a model of ethical patience grounded in Buddhist and Confucian sensibilities.

Ultimately, mythic temporality in *Marry My Husband* facilitates ethical correction freed from the appeal to transcendence or violence. Reopening time to moral insight, the narrative secures a notion of justice undergirded by coherence, restraint, and continuity. It thus suggests how digital popular culture can breathe life into religious understandings of time and be involved in an effort to rethink the

[1] Rita Gross, Buddhism after Patriarchy (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 152–55.
[2] Tu Weiming, "The Moral Universal from the Perspective of East Asian Thought," Philosophy East and West 44, no. 2 (1994): 269–72.
[3] Robert A. Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 7–10.
[4] Rodney L. Taylor, The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 95–98.

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contemporary preoccupation with responsibility, suffering, and moral repair. As articulated here through webtoon form, this temporal ethic might point out that mythic time is still a potent resource for moral imagination in contemporary Korean society.

Webtoon as Lived Religion

The ethical power of *"Marry My Husband"* can be most clearly discerned when one considers that the story itself can be read within the context of lived religion. While lived religion finds religious meaning in theology and religious practice, lived religion examines how modes of ethical sensibility, cosmology, and moral arguments can be inscribed within everyday practices, narratives, and media consumption practices. [1] *"Marry My Husband",* as such, becomes a living moral text that mediates Korean religious moralities as a contemporary form that consumers read and live through on a daily basis.

Lived religion experts point to the importance of religious meaning-making as a function of religious practice that is, what happens in people's lives as they act, affect, and imagine in their daily lives.[2]Digital media is fast becoming a central location of meaning-making in many societies that may find themselves not participating in religious activities as much, but having a deep desire for ethical and cosmological meanings. Webtoons as a form of storytelling where the content is consumed through devices in episodic fashion enables a return engagement that is more devotional in nature than purely entertainment. The function of scrolling through the cartoon, waiting for its next update, is a function of religious practice.

In "*Marry My Husband", the* process of ethical causality occurs over time, allowing the reader to exercise patience in watching the consequences accrue. Such an exercise of patience allows the development of moral anticipation. According to scholars of digital religion, moral anticipation is enacted through the moral component of anticipation, leading to an orientation of the self towards responsibility in relation to anticipated outcomes.[3]The organization of the webtoon allows the reader to take up an ethic of patience in keeping with the ideals of Buddhism and Confucianism.

Justice is treated as immanent, not transcendent. There is no divine authority intervening to reward virtue or punish wrongdoing. Rather, unethical imbalance tends toward destabilizing itself over time. This immanent moral order echoes East Asian religious sensibilities in which harmony and coherence displace judgment and command.[4]Returning repeatedly to this narrative, in which unethical behavior

[1] Robert A. Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2–6.
[2] Meredith B. McGuire, Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12–15.
[3] Heidi Campbell, Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds (New York: Routledge, 2013), 72–75.
[4] Don Baker, Korean Spirituality (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 101–05.

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corrodes relationships and restraint stabilizes them, readers learn to read justice as ethical unfolding, not external enforcement.

All this happens in conjunction with reader identification. Lived religion scholarship foregrounds narrative identification as central to ethical imagination.[1]This emotional alignment invites readers into the assessment of consequence, but indeed even more: intentions, motives, and restraint. The refusal of violent revenge by the protagonist models a moral stance favoring clarity over dominance. Such modelling is pedagogical, extending an invitation to the readers for a template in ethical reasoning relevant beyond the narrative world.

The pedagogical effect is further magnified by the digital intimacy of webtoon consumption. Unlike collective religious practices, webtoons are frequently consumed in solitude, within private space, at times of rest or transition. It is precisely such contexts that enhance emotional resonance and reflection. As several scholars have observed, private devotional practices-such as the reading of moral tales or meditative texts-have long provided key sites for ethical formation.[2]Webtoons continue this lineage into digital space, where ethical reflection becomes stitched into everyday rhythms rather than cordoned off as sacral time.

Importantly, *Marry My Husband* does not require any overt religious belief on the part of its readers. Lived religion frames remind us that religious meaning often functions tacitly, framing sensibility more than belief.[3]The ethical world of the webtoon is decipherable in and of itself, independent of doctrinal teachings, yet it resonates with Buddhist karmic reasoning and Confucian moral self-cultivation. It is through this implicit religiosity that ethical tropes circulate well beyond the pool of explicitly religious persons to encompass those who might define themselves as secular yet who nonetheless draw upon a religiously inflected moral ecology.

The webtoon's concern with more mundane social milieus such as offices, homes, friendships, and marriages further locates its ethics of morality into the experiential realm. Indeed, Confucianism's emphasis on mundane relationships is rooted in their understanding of morality as primarily realized through everyday interactions. [4]This is because morality, or ethics, is made visible and experienced through a dramatization of everyday ethical choice, so that readers are reminded that morality is not an exceptional zed process of action, but rather a continuous one.

The gendered experience heightens this lived religious function. The protagonist's ethical awakening is founded upon an experiential crucible of betrayal, illness, and exclusion, which, needless to say, speaks to the experiential reality of

[1] Thomas A. Tweed, Crossing and Dwelling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54–56.
[2] Catherine Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 74–78.
[3] Meredith B. McGuire, Lived Religion, 98–101.
[4] Tu Weiming, Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 67–72.

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many lived lives.[1] A feminist lived religion would insist that ethical signification often takes place in relation to and through the process of suffering, yet not, however, for the sake of vengeance. Rather, the suffering here functions as an ethical stimulus, and the ethical reading that follows seeks to transform the life circumstances of the lived-self.

Community is also a subtle component of the lived religion of webtoons. Indeed, even if reading is a solo experience, the presence of webtoon comment sections, fan talk, and shared meanings establishes the kind of interpretive community. As scholars of web religion have suggested, interpretive communities operate much like congregations. Communities establish “morality through the process of congregational thinking.”[2]Meaningful talk about the ethical behavior of the webtoon's heroes and heroine reaffirms the standards of morality, and extends the webtoon's moral pedagogy.

The repeated engagement that comes through the nature of storytelling also resonates with ritual theory. According to ritual studies experts, repetition is a fundamental principle in moral discourse since one can instill morality through rehearsal.[3]This is because each chapter draws upon themes of morality trust, betrayal, self-control and provides repeated opportunity to exercise moral judgment. To that extent, such repeated engagement promotes a moral sensibility sensitive to the power of consequence and self-control, much like Confucian moral cultivation.

From the perspective of lived religion, the boundary between sacred and secular becomes porous. The webtoon does not mark itself as religious, yet it does religious work by shaping moral imagination and cosmological understanding. This blurring reflects broader trends in contemporary religious life, where ethical meaning migrates into cultural forms outside traditional institutions.[4]*Marry My Husband* exemplifies this migration, showing how digital narratives can sustain religious ethics in transformed contexts.

Panel pacing, visual repetition, and episodic suspense are aesthetic features that also contribute to the webtoon's lived religious function. Isolation, clarity, restraint, and collapse are moral states reinforced through visual cues. As scholars of visual religion highlight, images can articulate ethical meaning autonomously from verbal articulation.[5]In this webtoon, visual rhythm works in tandem with narrative temporality to reiterate ethical causality, leading reader interpretation at an affective level.

[1] Rita Gross, Buddhism after Patriarchy (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 152–55.
[2] Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner, Networked Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 63–66.
[3] Catherine Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice, 88–91.
[4] Robert N. Bellah, Religion in Human Evolution (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 503–06.
[5] David Morgan, The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 9–12.

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Most importantly, the lived religion of *"Marry My Husband"* does not deal with ethical tension through closure. The preeminent focus on consequence within the webtoon translates into the preeminent focus on process within the lived religion of *"Marry My Husband".* Ethical life, as such a focus suggests, is a project that is never completed. It is a matter of constant negotiation.[1]By defying closure, the webtoon replicate[s] the openness of ethical life.

In terms of positioning webtoons as a field for the study of the lived religion, I believe that my thesis can also aid in enlarging the definition of religious studies in a Korean context. I also believe that my thesis can prove that religious ethics and morality have not only been preserved in temples, texts, and movements, but also in webtoons. "*Marry My Husband*" is one example of a webtoon that serves as a modern instance of a religious text that implements Buddhist and Confucian moralities in terms of the ways that the act of reading can foster anticipation and reflection.

Ultimately, grasping webtoons as lived religion lets the scholar acknowledge that religious ethics continue, even while cultural forms change. The moral cosmology vocalized in *Marry My Husband* is an inheritance not confined to abstract thought but fulfilled in practice, played out in one's fingers tapping on a screen. By translating ethical patience and restraint with karmic consequence into everyday media consumption rhythms, the webtoon affirms that lived religion remains a relevant, life-blood force coursing through the pulse of contemporary Korean society-even, and perhaps especially, in its most popular cultural expressions.

Conclusion

This paper has approached *Marry My Husband* as a contemporary narrative through which Korean religious ethics and moral cosmology are rearticulated within digital popular culture. Rather than working with the webtoon as a secular entertainment text or as a revenge fantasy, the analysis has illustrated that its narrative logics are formed by an ethical causality, moral agency, and mythic temporality deeply resonating with Buddhist and Confucian traditions. By treating rebirth, restraint, and ethical correction, the webtoon constructs a moral universe whereby justice unfolds immanently, governed by coherence rather than coercion.

By foregrounding karmic rebirth as an ethical mechanism rather than a supernatural spectacle, the narrative reactivates a Buddhist understanding of continuity shaped by intention and consequence. Rebirth serves not as escape from suffering but as an opportunity for ethical reorientation, reinforcing the view that moral responsibility endures across time. This karmic framework resists deterministic readings, stressing agency, awareness, and restraint as central to ethical life. In so doing, the webtoon aligns with Korean Buddhist interpretations of karma as a moral

[1] Thomas A. Tweed, Crossing and Dwelling, 159–62.

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pedagogy situated within everyday experience rather than as a metaphysical system abstracted from social reality.[1]

The Confucian ethics add more to this moral cosmology with regard to ethical agency as self-cultivation achieved through relational contexts. The way the protagonist develops is through careful reflection, self-management, and authenticity, as opposed to struggle and domination. The Confucian focus on ethics is on the congruence of intention and deed, confirming the importance of moderation and NOT impulsive expression. This clashes with the conventional norms of the present day, where empowerment is identified with reprisal.[2]

The foregoing analysis of mythic temporality has aimed to demonstrate how the webtoon's cyclist allows for ethical correction without having to resort to transcendence or violence. Time itself is rendered as a moral medium within which an imbalance is revealed and redeemed. In reopening the past to ethical insight, this narrative resists linear models of justice promising final resolution and instead affirms an East Asian ethical sensibility in which moral life is understood as ongoing, iterative, and responsive. This temporal ethic challenges cultures of immediacy by inviting patience and attentiveness to the slow unfolding of consequence.[3]

Approaching the webtoon through the lens of lived religion has further demonstrated how religious ethics persist outside institutional frameworks. The practices of reading, anticipating, and reflecting on serialized narratives function as forms of everyday ethical engagement. Webtoons, consumed in intimate digital contexts, shape moral imagination through repetition, identification, and anticipation. *Marry My Husband* thus functions as a moral text that performs religious work without explicit doctrinal reference, allowing Buddhist and Confucian ethical logics to circulate implicitly within contemporary culture.[4]

The present study contributes to Korean religious studies by expanding the scope of inquiry beyond temples, texts, and movements to include digital popular narratives as sites of ethical meaning-making. This indicates that moral cosmology continues to be an important framing notion through which individuals interpret suffering, responsibility, and justice in even overtly secular contexts. By tracing how ethical causality, restraint, and temporal correction are narratively enacted, this paper demonstrates that webtoons can serve as meaningful resources for understanding the continuity and transformation of religious ethics in modern Korea.[5]

At the same time, this analysis does not claim that webtoons replace religious institutions or practices. Rather, it shows how ethical sensibilities shaped by

[1] Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 40–44.
[2] Tu Weiming, Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 67–72.
[3] Mircea Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 34–36.
[4] Meredith B. McGuire, Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 98–101.
[5] Don Baker, Korean Spirituality (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 112–15.

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religious traditions migrate into new cultural forms. The moral universe of *Marry My Husband* is not reducible to Buddhism or Confucianism alone; it emerges from their historical interweaving within Korean culture. This hybridity reflects the broader character of Korean religious life, where ethical frameworks often operate beyond clear institutional boundaries.[1]

Future studies could build upon this case by investigating reader reception, symbolism, and cross-case studies involving multiple webtoons, digital stories, or platforms. These might shed further light upon the role of digital media in the construction of ethical imagination and the role of religious discourses in shaping moral thinking in changing cultural environments. It might be useful to carry out cross-case studies involving other digital stories in East Asia, in particular, in order to determine the uniqueness of the Korean moral cosmology in the digital era.

Concluding, "*Marry My Husband*" is a paradigm for the reception and production of lived religion on webtoons, where cosmological morality is constructed through narrative, not doctrine. Instead of approaching justice through a punitive model, the webtoon translates justice along the axis of ethical unfurling and consequently connects with the longstanding Korean religious sensibilities about suffering, responsibility, and restoration, and also attends to contemporary issues in these areas, especially about suffering, responsibility, and restoration mediated through the notion of justice and rights on the basis of the feminine and feminine bodily experience. Thus, this research work suggests the significance of popular digital culture to religiosity in the contemporary Korean context.

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