

(a) Liminality as the Mechanism of Sacred (聖)—Secular (俗) Transformation of Indigenous Modernity

Liminality as Mechanism of Sacred-Secular Transformation

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Research background

Problem statement and research aim

Exploring the differences between Eastern and Western concepts of modernity and the possibility of their integration. An analysis of the indigenous modernity of Donghak and Daesoon Thought through the concept of liminality.

An overview of Donghak and Daesoon Thought

Korea's representative indigenous thought—systems of thought that pursued modern change by a path different from Western modernity. A liminal character that crosses the boundary of Sacred (聖) and Secular (俗).

The need for the study

Exploring its possibility as an alternative modernity model in an age of uncertainty and ambivalence in modern society. Presenting new possibilities for integrating Eastern and Western thought through liminality.

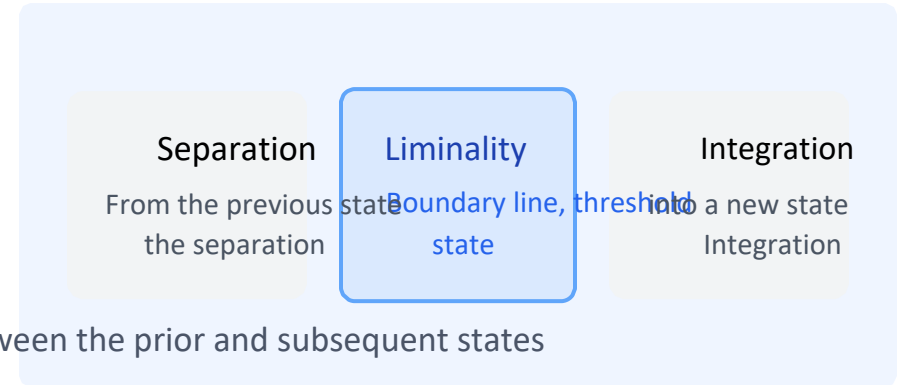
Defining the Concept of Liminality

The location of liminality — Liminality is a concept derived from the Latin “Limen,” meaning boundary or threshold, a term first

proposed by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his study of rites of passage.

Key features

- Border-ness (境界性) and transitivity: an ambiguous, indeterminate intermediate state between the prior and subsequent states
- Emergence and possibility: a creative space that breaks from the existing order and opens new possibilities
- Ambivalence (兩價性): the two-sidedness in which crisis and opportunity, death and rebirth, liminality has expanded



Beginning from a simple theory of rites of passage, liminality has expanded into a theory explaining wide-ranging change in society, culture, history, and religion.

The three stages of the rite of passage and liminality

Arnold van Gennep analyzed that rites of passage worldwide commonly have a three-stage structure. In the second of these, the transition process, “liminality” plays a central role.

The constituent stages of a rite of passage

Every rite of passage passes through the following three stages:

Rite of separation (分離儀禮, rite of separation): a break with the existing world.

Rite of transition (轉移/過渡, rite of transition): the liminality stage

Rite of incorporation (統合儀禮, rite of incorporation): the acquisition of a new identity and return

1 Rite of Separation (Separation)

The stage of separation from one's existing social status, state, and position. One breaks with daily life, and one's former status and role are dissolved.



2 Rite of Transition / Liminality (Liminality)

A “liminal” state that is neither one thing nor the other. One departs from the existing order and is placed in an ambiguous, indeterminate state.



Traits: ambiguity, emergence, ambivalence (兩價性), equality, anonymity, destructuring



3 Rite of Incorporation (Incorporation)

The stage of reintegration into society upon being granted a new identity and status. One is reborn as a new social being different from before.

The Development of Liminality Theory

1

Van Gennep's rite-of-passage theory

Arnold van Gennep

~early 20th century

Key concepts: the discovery of liminality in the rite of passage; the three-stage structuring of separation–transition–integration

Significance: the first discovery in anthropology of “passage” as the common attribute of ritual, though temporarily diminished by Durkheim's criticism

2

Victor Turner's rediscovery and expansion

Victor Turner

1960s–80s

Key concepts: liminality and communitas, Social Drama theory, the structure–anti-structure–structure model of change

Significance: expanding beyond ritual theory into a general principle of social, cultural, and religious change, and connecting with Performance Studies

3

Expansion into the analysis of modern society and modernity

Edith Turner, Zygmunt Bauman, Shmuel Eisenstadt, and others

1990s–present

Key concepts: the communitas of everyday life and disaster, Liquid Modernity, Multiple Modernities

Significance: expanding into an integrated framework for interpreting Eastern and Western modernity, applied to discussions of post-modernity and to the analysis of indigenous modernity

Victor Turner's Social Drama Theory

Social Drama is a concept Victor Turner put forward by extending Van Gennep's concept of the rite of passage to all domains of society, culture, and religion, viewing it as a kind of “play” set against society.

Features of social drama

- Universality: explaining the change of “a universal socio-cultural phenomenon occurring worldwide”
- A dialectical process: the cyclical change of structure → anti-structure → structure
- Psychological function: helping one pass smoothly through painful life transitions

The four stages of social drama

1. Breach — the violation of existing social norms or rules



2. Crisis — the spread of conflict and the deepening of confrontation



3. Redress/Healing (Redressive Action) — the operation of formal and informal mechanisms for solving the problem



4. Reintegration/Schism — social reintegration, or the onset of a new division

Structure and anti-structure

Structure (Structure): the hierarchical, differentiated organizational form of existing society

Anti-structure (Anti-structure): a communitas form emphasizing equality and solidarity; a state in which the existing order is temporarily nullified

The Concepts of Communitas and Anti-structure

Communitas

A concept Victor Turner introduced to denote a special interrelationality of humans; it is a communal experience formed in the state of liminality.

Key features

- ✓ Equality: an equal relationship in which all existing social status, class, and rank vanish
- ✓ Solidarity: the formation of a strong sense of community and belonging
- ✓ Spontaneity: the formation of immediate, direct relationships rather than structured patterns

“The case of the Ndembu people: during the coming-of-age rite, children—cast alone into an unfamiliar environment—form a strong sense of solidarity and cooperation in order to survive, experiencing communitas.”

Anti-structure

A concept contrasted with existing social structure and order; a state that temporarily departs from or reverses the framework of structured society.

Key features

- ✓ Anonymity: ritual participants are represented in identical dress and a state of non-possession, so that personal identity is weakened
- ✓ Role reversal: social status and authority are reversed, so that the weak temporarily hold authority
- ✓ Suspension of social structure: the phenomenon in which existing social norms and order are temporarily suspended

Relationship diagram: structure → anti-structure → new structure

* In Turner's social drama theory, it acts as the core mechanism of crisis and change

Liquid Modernity and Multiple Modernities

Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity

(Liquid Modernity, 液體近代)

Interpreting modernity as a state of extreme fluid change caused by permanent liminality

- ◆ The failure to establish alternative values after overcoming feudal values
- ◆ **An indeterminate, continually changing state, like a liquid; emphasizing ambivalence (兩價性, ambiguity), a characteristic of modernity**
- ◆
- ◆ Explaining the despondency and indeterminacy of modern people

Shmuel Eisenstadt's multiple modernities

(Multiple Modernities, 多重近代性)

Presenting an encompassing modernity through a redefinition of the concepts of Sacred (聖) and Secular (俗)

- ◆ Rejecting a single Western model of modernity
- ◆ Recognizing multiple modernities emerging in diverse cultural contexts
- ◆ **Emphasizing the liminality that lies in the shifting boundary of modern and pre-modern**
- ◆ Presenting the possibility of modernization while maintaining cultural identity

Its connection with liminality

An interpretation beyond dialectics

Explaining, through liminality, the problems and uncertainties of modern society that Hegel's dialectic could not address



Ambivalence and ambiguity

The result of throwing out the baby with the bathwater — a side effect of overturning existing values



An analysis of post-modernity

Explaining the coexistence of instability and emergence in a modern society where liminality has been perpetuated

A comparison of Eastern and Western modernity

East (東洋) West (西洋)	
Mode of thought	Correlative thought, yin-yang theory Dialectical thought, dichotomy
The emergence of modernity	Indigenous development and the medieval crisis (Mongol invasions, the plague) and exchange with other civilizations
Direction of development	Internalization from the cosmos (Heaven) to the individual (the human) Expansion from the individual to the cosmos
Interpretation of liminality	包越), the doubling method (加倍倍法), transformation (化) Rite of passage (儀式), drama, community
Korean characteristic: the trait of “grafting-transformation” (接化) —	the integration and transcendence of heterogeneous elements
“Both West and East build liminality through the View of Heaven (天觀), View of Earth (地觀), and View of Humanity (人觀), and thereby realize modernity; yet the West, which expands from the self to the cosmos, and the East, which expands from the cosmos to the self, differ in the form of modernity's liminality.”	
The features of indigenous modernity	
Among the three East Asian nations, Korea's Donghak and Daesoon Thought embodied a liminal modernity through an indigenous view of the three realms (Heaven, Earth, Humanity), and, with the character of “grafting-transformation” (接化), show the trait of integrating existing and new elements.	

Western liminality

The mode of expanding from individual rationality to society

Individual → cosmos/society

- The incorporation of the individual into society through the rite of passage: progress through dialectical development
- (thesis–antithesis–synthesis); liquid modernity (Bauman): a state of permanent liminality

Eastern (Korean) liminality

The mode in which the cosmic principle is internalized in the individual

Individual → cosmos/Heaven

- The cyclical system of thought of yin-yang and the Five Phases |
- Donghak's Sicheonju (侍天主) — serving Heaven within me | Daesoon Thought's Power (色觀) — including and transcending

The features of indigenous modernity

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Indigenous Modernity and Donghak/Daesoon Thought

Donghak Thought and liminality

● The Sicheonju (侍天主) idea

In the concept of serving Heaven, it contains a liminal character that crosses the boundary between the divinity within the human and the secular

● Life thought and correlative thought

Kim Ji-ha's research: the life-centered thought found in Donghak Thought is a generative method of thinking different from Western dialectics—a feature of indigenous modernity

● The Gaebyeok (開闢) idea

A liminal, transitional idea at the boundary between the existing order and a new order, serving as a change mechanism of modernity

Daesoon Thought and liminality

● Haewon-Sangsaeng (解冤相生)

A concept of resolving grievance and living together in mutual life-giving; according to Lee Young-ran's research, it is a liminal trait that creates a third element out of an adversarial relationship

The features of indigenous modernity

Unlike Western modernity, Donghak and Daesoon Thought constitute a Korean model of liminality through a balance of correlative thought and subjectivity

- The rearrangement of Sacred (聖) and Secular (俗): approaching religious sacredness and everyday secularity integrally, without separating them
- The doubling method (加一倍法) and grafting-transformation (接化): realizing liminality through a Powol-like mode of change that adds new elements upon the existing base
- Immanent transcendence: creating a third space beyond opposition, like the “aesthetics of white shade” presented in Kim Ik-du's research

Differences from Western modernity

Western modernity: individual → expansion to the cosmos

Donghak/Daesoon Thought: cosmos → internalization into the individual

Mode of change: oppositional dialectics vs. correlative liminality

The contemporary application of liminality

The Contemporary Meaning of Liminality

Domains of applying liminality in modern society



The domain of everyday life and culture

- The breaking down of boundaries in festivals, performing arts, and popular culture
- The liminal character of romantic love and its contemporary interpretation
- The shifting boundary and changing meaning of work (labor) and leisure



The socio-political domain

- The liminality of civil resistance movements such as the Gwangju Democratization Movement
- The blurring of the boundary between identity and reality in digital space
- The formation of communitas and the emergence of a new order in a period of complex change

Its role in disaster and crisis situations

Edith Turner emphasized that communitas serves as an important coping mechanism in disaster situations. Even in the COVID-19 pandemic, when media or institutional responses alone could not resolve matters, religious coping together with the spontaneous formation of communities contributed to overcoming the crisis.

“A crisis situation, through aspects of liminality, becomes an occasion for the emergent formation of community.”

Its connection with post-modernity

As an alternative theory explaining the ambivalence and uncertainty of modern society that dialectics cannot, liminality—especially in the liquid-modernity condition characterized by “permanent liminality”—allows the indigenous liminality approach of Donghak and Daesoon Thought to be presented as an alternative modernity model.

Contemporary significance

Beyond a simple theory of rites of passage, liminality has expanded into a theoretical framework for understanding the principle of new emergence amid the complex change and chaos of modern society.

Conclusion and Implications

Research conclusion: Liminality has value as an integrative conceptual framework linking modernity and post-modernity. Expansion of the interpretation of modernity: liminality, going beyond the limits of dialectics, effectively explains the indeterminacy and ambivalence of modernity.

Rediscovery of indigenous modernity: Donghak and Daesoon Thought are important cases demonstrating an indigenous modernity on a path different from Western modernity. The universality of liminality: liminality, through the shifting of the boundary of Sacred (聖) and Secular (俗), acts as a mechanism of social change common to East and West.



Research implications: “Liminality becomes a conceptual tool that opens new emergence and possibility in an age of uncertainty.” Theoretical implications: providing a new theoretical framework for comparing Eastern and Western modernity; its value as an alternative mode of thought beyond dialectics; the possibility of an academic reappraisal of Korean new-religious thought. Practical implications: insight for overcoming the uncertainty and crises of modern society; the possibility of solving social problems through communitas-like solidarity; a way to harmoniously integrate cultural identity and universal values. Indigenous modernity seen through liminality can develop into an alternative paradigm for future society.

