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Ancestor worship in contemporary Korea

Uctívání předků v moderní Koreji

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Vedoucí práce: Mag. Andreas Schirmer, Dr.

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ABSTRACT

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Author: Věra Podestátová

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This bachelor thesis deals with ancestor worship in contemporary Korea. In the beginning it provides a brief overview over the historical development of ancestor worship in Korea by religion. Then it establishes how, in relevant recent sources, the current state of ancestor worship practices and rituals is described. The aim of this thesis is to illustrate the current role of ancestor worship in contemporary Korea by investigating a corpus of newspaper articles collected from the Korean English online press.

ABSTRAKT

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Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá uctíváním předků v moderní Koreji. Na začátku práce je uveden stručný přehled historického vývoje uctívání předků v Koreji dle jednotlivých náboženství. Poté tato práce zjišťuje, jak je v příslušných novějších pramenech popsán současný stav praktik a rituálů uctívání předků. Cílem této práce je znázornit, jakou roli má uctívání předků v současné Koreji na základě zkoumání vybraného korpusu novinových článků publikovaných online anglicky psaným korejským tiskem.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Mag. Andreas Schirmer, Dr., for his valuable advice, time and patience during the process of writing my thesis.

Table of Contents

List of figures	7
Transcription	8
Introduction.....	9
1. Definition of ancestor worship	10
2. Historical origin	10
2.1 Shamanism	11
2.1.1 Shamanic spirit worship	12
2.2 Buddhism	13
2.3 Confucianism	13
2.3.1 Koryŏ: The beginning of Confucian ritual tradition in Korea.....	14
2.3.2 Chosŏn: A (Neo)-Confucian society	15
2.3.3 Confucian ancestor worship rituals	16
2.3.4 State sacrificial rites and the establishment of chongmyo cheryeak	17
2.3.5 Rite to Royal Ancestors.....	18
3. Modern practice of ancestor worship.....	18
3.1 Shamanism and rites for deceased ancestors	19
3.1.1 Chinogwi-kut.....	19
3.2 (Neo-)Confucian chesa.....	21
3.2.1 Kijesa.....	21
3.2.2 Ch'arye	22
3.2.3 Sijesa.....	22
3.2.4 Rite to Royal Ancestors.....	23
4. Ancestor worship in the Korean English language press	24
4.1 Travelling home for seasonal holidays and COVID-19 restrictions	24

4.2 Seasonal holidays and ancestral ceremony preparations - a source of stress.....	25
4.3 How gender inequality reflects in ancestor worship	27
4.4 Contents of the sacrificial food offerings.....	28
4.5 The economical side of ancestral rites	29
4.6 Relevance of ancestor worship in the present society.....	30
4.7 Ancestral ceremonies as a cultural heritage	31
Conclusion	32
References.....	34
Primary Sources: Newspaper Articles	35
Image Credits	40

List of figures

Figure 1: A shamanness performing a ritual dance	12
Figure 2: Chongmyo shrine	18
Figure 3: A group of <i>mudang</i> performing <i>ogu-kut</i> (also known as <i>chinogwi-kut</i>)	20
Figure 4: An example of the food setting on the altar	22
Figure 5: Performance of the Rite to Royal Ancestors at the National Gugak Center	23
Figure 6: Performance of the Rite to Royal Ancestors at the Chongmyo shrine.....	23

Transcription

In this thesis, Korean terms are transcribed into the Latin alphabet in accordance with the McCune–Reischauer system of romanization. The romanized terms are in *Italic*.

Introduction

Death has always been an inseparable part of people's lives. People in every culture have developed their own way of dealing with the loss of a family member or a close person. Realizing the finiteness of a human life also inevitably brings up questions concerning afterlife, as nobody knows for sure what happens to the soul after death. Providing such answers has mostly been the role of religion.

In case of Korea, various religious influences have been blending together throughout history and subsequently influenced people's beliefs, customs and traditions concerning death, burials, funerals and commemoration of the deceased. Some of these rituals, such as different types of *kut*, stemming from shamanism, may seem to have almost an exorcist function, as their aim is to ensure there will be no harm done by a spirit of a person, who passes away without the chance to resolve their grudges. Confucian rites, on the other hand, serve rather as an extension of the relationship one has had with their ancestor during their life and allows them to return filial gratitude.

In spite of various efforts to eradicate these traditions, a large number of ancestral rituals are still being performed in Korea till this day. As they give people a sense of reconnection with their deceased ancestors, removing customs so emotional has proven to be ineffective. The ongoing evolution of traditions, customs and beliefs surrounding death and the commemoration of the deceased is not a finished process. People's beliefs and religious preferences keep on changing, which results in the role of various traditions and ceremonies changing as well.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter explains the definition of ancestor worship. The second chapter illustrates which influences came together to form the tradition of ancestor worship, by providing an insight into its development in history. The the third chapter covers rituals for the deceased ancestors performed in contemporary Korea, with the main focus on shamanic and Confucian traditions. The four part investigates articles published from 2014 to 2022 in Korean English online newspapers including *Korea Times*, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, *The Korea Herald*, and *Hankyoreh*. By examining this corpus of articles, this thesis aims at exploring perceptions: what is the perceived role of ancestral rituals in contemporary Korean society, what are the related

issues are most vibrantly discussed these days, and to which extent are the media discussing the changes these rituals seem to have undergone during this recent period of time.

1. Definition of ancestor worship

Although “ancestor worship” seems to have become a somewhat established name for the practice of ancestral rites, the term “worship” itself is in fact rather inaccurate. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, it usually refers to “worshipping God or a god,” such as the Christian worship of God.¹ The aim of contemporary ancestor worship on the other hand, (which is based predominantly on the Confucian tradition), is to return filial gratitude to ancestors and it serves to honour and reciprocate the love and affection one has received from them during their life, rather than to worship them as gods or idols (Chung 2015, 120).² Perhaps the term “worship” could be replaced rather by “veneration.”³ In this thesis, however, I will proceed to use the term “ancestor worship.”

2. Historical origin

We may not be able to point out when exactly in Korean history did the practice of ancestor worship start, but we can at least identify which religions took part in its development into its contemporary form. According to historians and theologians, the ancient spirit worship originated from indigenous shamanism and animism and throughout the time it blended together with Buddhist and Confucian elements. (Moon 1974, 72–73)

It is, however, difficult to specify which practices and beliefs originated from which religion. The practice of ancestor worship has never been strictly based on only one state religion in any era. Rather, the traditions, practices and beliefs of all the religions that have been coexisting on the Korean peninsula have been overlapping and blending throughout time (Horlyck and Pettid 2018, 5–12). Therefore, it is necessary to examine all of the influences that came together to create the culture of ancestor worship in its contemporary form. Michael J. Pettid and Charlotte Horlyck repeatedly associate the above named

¹ According to the Cambridge Dictionary, one of the definitions of worship is “the act of worshipping God or a god, often through praying or singing” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.) [Accessed February 13, 2022].

² To explain the purpose and meaning of ancestor worship requires a more in-depth elaboration, which I will provide later in this work.

³ As suggested by Mark Peterson in his article “Ancestor ceremonies today” (Peterson 2019).

religions with two terms: “multivalence” and “syncretism.”⁴ That means to say, that the systems of their theory and practice have been intermingling so much, that at a certain point some of them became almost inseparable (Horlyck and Pettid 2018, 12–16).⁵ In case of shamanism, the effort of pointing out its original elements becomes all the more difficult because of the fact that Koreans most likely didn’t recognize its very category until the twentieth century (Horlyck and Pettid 2018, 137).

Some of the main attributions in context of ancestor worship were “the dread of ghosts” and “ghost propitiation” in contrast with “love and respect” for the deceased. In the case of Confucianism, the latter one has been emphasised strongly in connection with filial piety and loyalty. (Moon 1974, 72–73)

2.1 Shamanism⁶

It is believed that shamanism (in Korean *musok* or *mugyo*) was brought to the Korean peninsula from Siberia and Manchuria in the Neolithic Era and was a prevailing belief system among Korean people throughout the prehistoric times. Its dominance continued throughout the period of Three Kingdoms, and even after the adoption of Buddhism and Confucianism, shamanism didn’t cease to impact the spiritual life of people in Korea. It existed not only as a religious system of its own, but numerous elements of shamanic practice and beliefs blended into Buddhism and Confucianism as well.

This religious tradition is deeply connected with nature and a transcendental world of spirits. In the shamanic worldview, spirits inhabit heavenly bodies as well as geographic entities including mountains or rivers and they usually have a human form. Besides spirits, the shamanic cosmology also includes a large number of gods, demons and deities, who affect the lives of the living in various ways. Shamans (in Korean *mudang*) are those who possess the ability to communicate with them through rituals called *kut*. The form of *kut* varies greatly depending on the purpose and region. It often includes singing, dancing and making offerings to the spirit. Most importantly, *mudang* usually enters trance to communicate with the spirit on behalf of the person who asks for their help, either to bring

⁴ The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines religious syncretism as “the fusion of diverse religious beliefs and practices“ (Britannica 2019).

⁵ This was the very case of shamanism and Buddhism in the 12th century, as mentioned in the same publication (Horlyck 2018, 138).

⁶ This section is based on Koehler (2012, 10–20).

good fortune into their life, or to put an end to bad fortune. Most *mudang* are women. There are two ways one can become a *mudang*: this role may be either inherited in the family of a *mudang*, or it may be initiated by a “spirit sickness” (as translated by Robert Koehler from the original Korean term *sinbyŏng*), which is subsequently cured by holding a ritual called *naerim-kut*, that simultaneously serves as an initiation ceremony for the new *mudang*.



Fig. 1: A shamaness performing a ritual dance⁷

2.1.1 Shamanic spirit worship⁸

The ultimate aim of the shamanic spirit worship is to secure the balance between the secular and sacred realms, as their mingling brings misfortune and illness to the living. For this purpose, various funerary rites are held in effort to help the spirit of the deceased to pass to the other world. In the shamanic worldview there are two types of spirit, and their nature depends on the conditions of their death. The first kind, the good or benevolent spirits are those, who lived long lives and died in a natural way at home. These ancestor spirits affect the lives of their descendants in a good and protective way. The second kind, the bad spirits or ghosts, are those that died at a place outside of their home, and mostly in an unnatural way, such as by accident or suicide. They are believed to do harm to people and to bring misfortune upon their descendants.

Aside from helping the soul of the deceased, shamanic rites are held in order to purify the place of death from bad energy.⁹ From shamanic perspective, ancestor worship

⁷ For image sources see the credits list at the end of this thesis.

⁸ This section is based on Horlyck and Pettid (2018, 150–152) and Lee (1984, 199–214).

⁹ The shamanic worldview considers death to be the worst source of pollution of two types: the first type spreads spatially depending on the contiguity to the corpse, the second type is based on the closeness of social relations of a person with the deceased, regardless of physical proximity (Horlyck and Pettid 2018, 145).

also serves as a means of securing good fortune, health, prosperity and success of the family by offering rites to the ancestor spirits who have the role of guardians of the household. Although the process of sending the spirit off to the other world through rituals such as *chinogwi-kut* may give the impression of disassociation of the deceased person from their family, truth is rather contrary in that their bond becomes in fact reaffirmed.

2.2 Buddhism¹⁰

In comparison to shamanism and Confucianism, the impact of Buddhism on the development of ancestor worship does not seem to be as notable, although due to the intermingling of all these religions, it would be impossible to say there was no influence at all. Perhaps the most noteworthy elements of Buddhist philosophy that did blend into ancestor worship would be the concepts of Nirvana and cyclical life. The most impact Buddhism could have had on the practice of ancestor worship was likely to happen before the 12th century, which marked the beginning of Confucian ancestral rites in Korea.

A few of the resources available on this topic mention the Buddhist practice of memorial rites for the deceased, namely in times of Koryŏ dynasty. After a person's death, the bereaved offered food to the cremated remains for 140 days, as the soul of the deceased person was believed to be transforming during that time, before it was ready to depart to the other world (Lancaster et al., 1996). Contrary to the Confucian practice of ancestor worship, which prevailed later, these rituals would not only take place at Buddhist monasteries instead of the home of the deceased person, but they could also be conducted by women as well as by men in equal roles.

2.3 Confucianism¹¹

Confucianism is an ethical and philosophical system, founded on the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551 BC–479 BC). It held the position of a ruling ideology in the Chosŏn era. During these five centuries it transformed a predominantly Buddhist Korean society into an exemplary Confucian society. Its ethics and practices persist even in modern Korea, influencing people's behaviour, relationships, culture and everyday lives.

¹⁰ This section is based on Bae (2007, 75), Lancaster, Suh and Yu (1996, 1–33).

¹¹ This section is based on Koehler (2012, 56–57) and Janoš (2007, 153–156).

Confucius believed that every being has their own place in the Universe, and by sorting the society in the correct order will allow everyone to live in peace and harmony. Therefore, he promoted the hierarchisation of society according to the five relationships between father and son, king and subject, husband and wife, senior and junior, and friend and friend. All of these relationships, except for the relationship between two friends, are vertical, with the former being superior to the latter (i.e. wife was to be obedient to husband, son to father, etc.). Genuine reciprocity of these relationships was strongly emphasised, as one-sided relationships can never function harmoniously.

Confucius' idea of a harmonious world also includes the expression of reverence towards one's ancestors. This idea, however, originates in ancient Chinese beliefs long before Confucius' birth, according to which the ghosts of the deceased people live with the Supreme Ruler in Heaven and closely observe the behaviour of their descendants. Should the descendants neglect their filial obligations, the ghosts of the deceased ancestors may become vengeful demons, who bring misfortune upon their descendants' lives. The rituals carried out regularly at the gravesites of the ancestor later became codified. The most emphasised rule, however, was for the rituals to be carried out only by male direct descendants. For this purpose, every family considered it necessary for a man to have at least one male descendant, so the family line could continue.

2.3.1 Koryŏ: The beginning of Confucian ritual tradition in Korea¹²

In Koryŏ, otherwise a multireligious society, which allowed the coexistence of diverse religious and philosophical systems, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, shamanism, astrology and geomancy, the strongest position was held by Buddhism, together with Confucianism. While Confucianism took the role of a political ideology useful especially in state-building, Buddhism, at the time a dominant religious force, was focused on spiritual cultivation. Many of the Koryŏ kings took interest in Buddhism, but they interpreted it in context of the Chinese philosophical systems and they used the Buddhist teaching and rituals as a tool to promote the Confucian ideas of loyalty and filial piety. Both of these ideologies together also served to secure the eternity of the royal house, which was considered to be one of the primary duties of Koryŏ kings. The idea of ancestor

¹² This outline is based on Kim (2017, 128–151), Min (2016, 19–31), and Song (2008, 99–106).

worship, together with geomancy or Chinese philosophical views of human life or the universe created the basis of major Buddhist rituals, which were meant to achieve precisely that.

Some of the rulers of Koryŏ also laid the first foundation of the ritual tradition of ancestor worship. King T'aejo, the founder of the dynasty, did not accept and promote the Chinese system and Confucian values of loyalty and filial piety, but he also founded the Royal Ancestral Shrine. The royal ancestor worship ritual held at this site was considered to be one of the most important state events throughout the whole era of Koryŏ.

Later, in 1116, after expressing his desire to follow the example of China and establish a tradition of ritual and music, the Koryŏ King Yejong received a gift from the Emperor Hui Tsung of Song, which included musical instruments, props, costumes, musical scores and books of musical playing techniques, all of which were necessary for the performance of *aak*, the Chinese ritual music. *Aak* was subsequently performed at various royal sacrificial rites. This branch of music still exists in Korea to this day, although it underwent many changes throughout time. Its existence became endangered due to difficult conditions during military revolts and the Mongol invasion, but as a symbol of political stability and wellbeing of the country, it was cherished and re-established immediately after overcoming a crisis or founding of a new dynasty. When Chosŏn was founded, *aak* was transmitted into the new dynasty with Korean indigenous musical instruments gradually incorporated into the performance of *aak*.

2.3.2 Chosŏn: A (Neo)-Confucian society

In Chosŏn, Confucianism became the state ideology, which began to suppress other religions and labelled them as heretic, especially Buddhism and shamanism (from 18th century also Christianity). A great emphasis was put on the practice of rituals, and their orthodox observance was associated with morality. In an effort to create a highly moral and harmonious society strict rules for each ritual were codified and their practice according to these directions was being enforced by supervising institutions. Their non-observance would be punished. Due to various legislative reforms promoting primogeniture and direct line of succession, the only family member who was allowed, but at the same time obliged, to perform family rituals was the legitimate firstborn son. (Andělová 2005, 89–99)

The observance of these rituals was especially important for *yangbans*, the power and intellectual elite, consisting of civil and military officials (Janoš 2007, 107). Their social status was based on their belonging to a clan, and its relation to other clans. For this purpose, family trees were being compiled and genealogy became a highly regarded field of science. Its development went hand in hand with the elaboration of various funeral and memorial ceremonies. Some of the works of a great impact in codification of these ceremonies include *The Introduction to Family Ceremonies* by Kim Chang-saeng, who has made a name for himself as a founder of *yehak*, the science of Confucian ritual studies (Eckert 2001, 114). *The Book of House Ceremonies* by Chu Hsi is also not to be omitted, as it was integrated into law at the beginning of Chosŏn dynasty and has been subsequently observed by Koreans for generations (Moon 1974, 73).

2.3.3 Confucian ancestor worship rituals

Chosŏn was an era of numerous ancestor worship ceremonies.¹³ They served not only to fulfill moral and ethical obligations of the descendants, but they also functioned to strengthen the relationships between family or kinship members by reinforcing them to discuss various family interests. Moon Seung-gyu classifies them into three categories: funeral, mourning and non-mourning. The first category consists of five ritual ceremonies held from the deathbed to the burial of a parent at the graveyard. The second category of ceremonies begins with the return of the family from the burial service and ends with a special ceremony held two months after the second death anniversary, which marks an end to the mourning period. Out of these minimum six ceremonies in this category, the ones held at the day of the first and second anniversaries of death are the most important. Friends and members of family visit the bereaved to express their sympathy, and in return, they are treated to foods and drinks. The third category consists of those ceremonies unrelated to the funeral and mourning ceremonies. Some of these include seasonal ceremonies held at the clan shrine or graveyard in spring and autumn, ceremonies held for the founder of the clan, or New Year and Thanksgiving ceremonies. *Kije* is considered to be the most important in this category. This ceremony is held annually at midnight on the anniversary of death, after the two-year period of mourning has ended. This service is held for only one's direct

¹³ This section is based on Moon (1974, 75–76).

ancestors up to the fourth generation.¹⁴ Other ancestors are venerated jointly on different occasions, such as the seasonal ceremonies.

2.3.4 State sacrificial rites and the establishment of *chongmyo cheryeak*¹⁵

The state rituals were significant not only for their expression of ethics and filial piety, but also as a symbol of the country's both political and cultural thriving. Should they be found imperfect, the king would immediately assign experts to correct them. The process of invoking the spirits of ancestors, paying them respects and offering them food and wine and then bidding them farewell was the common point of both the state and private ancestor worship rituals, which have otherwise differed in many ways. The ceremonies performed by the king were dedicated to "heaven, the earth and the great teachers of humankind" as well, since he was believed to be receiving orders directly from them.

After its establishment, the Chosŏn Dynasty was in need of institutionalisation of rituals and reforming every aspect of ritual music from the methods of musical performance to the musical instruments used in ceremonies. This task was resolved by King Sejong during his reign (1418–1450). Song Hye-jin points out three key aspects, in which *aak* was subsequently revised: the establishment of standard pitch,¹⁶ the revision of music theory and the selection of *aak* repertoire.¹⁷ To reform the music in a way more familiar to the people, elements of Korean indigenous music and non-ritual Chinese music were incorporated into some of the musical pieces. The revised song texts additionally included prayers for the ancestors to bless their filial and dutiful descendents and bring them prosperity, success, longevity and good fortune.

King Sejong also developed a music notation system called *chŏngganbo*, which allowed the newly established music to be passed down through generations of Chosŏn Dynasty. All of these reforms allowed *chongmyo cheryeak* (the music played at Rite to Royal Ancestors) to develop into the form in which it has been transmitted till this day.

¹⁴ In Koryŏ dynasty it served to venerate three preceding generations of deceased ancestors. The number of ancestors one was obliged to prepare rituals for, as well as the number of rituals one was expected to perform, however, differed by the person's social status and other factors. In Chosŏn, it was a custom for everyone without exception to venerate four generations of ancestors, no matter the person's status. (Choi 2006, 68)

¹⁵ This section is based on Song (2008, 13–26 and 106–127).

¹⁶ The final choice was *hwangjong* pitch of a *p'yŏnjong* set (a type of bells) from China (Song 2008, 108–110).

¹⁷ The repertoire included 144 pieces of sacrificial *aak*, which were recorded in the Annals of King Sejong.



Fig. 2: Chongmyo shrine

2.3.5 Rite to Royal Ancestors

The Rite to Royal Ancestors, held at the Chongmyo shrine (Song 2008, 13), was considered to be the highest possible form of ancestor worship practice in Chosŏn. Its purpose was not only the veneration of royal ancestors, but also praying for the country and its people to live in peace and harmony. The performance of the sacrificial rites combines music, song and dance. (Song 2008, 6) The songs in the Rite to Royal Ancestors include prayers for the descendants' well-being, as well as praise of both the civil and the military achievements of the preceding kings of Chosŏn, who protected the stability of the country and maintained its peace (Song 2008, 72). The rite also combines various symbolic elements, such as the principle of yin-yang, the representation of eight materials of East Asian cosmology¹⁸ (Song 2008, 14–18), or the symbolisation of the unity of heaven with earth and of gods with humans in many features, such as in the position of the ensembles, the performance of music and dance or the ceremonial utensils and foods (Song 2008, 33).

3. Modern practice of ancestor worship

As the times change so do people's customs. Some of them, however, persist even for centuries. Since death is an inseparable part of human lives, the need to deal with the loss of a family member or a close person remains just as unchanged. Ancestor worship rituals have been fulfilling this need for generations of Koreans, although their spiritual meaning may be changing as well as the form of their performance. Korean culture is very rich in

¹⁸These include metal, stone, silk, bamboo, gourd, earth, leather, wood, which were materials, out of which the ritual musical instruments were made of (Song 2008, 14).

rituals for the deceased, however, for the purpose of this thesis I will present only a limited selection of them.

3.1 Shamanism and rites for deceased ancestors

In spite of various efforts to eliminate shamanism throughout the period of Chosŏn or Japanese colonisation, shamanism not only managed to persist, but it is starting to gain back its popularity again. Although not many people in Korea identify themselves as shamanists today, it is very common to visit *mudang* and seek their help in many areas, including rituals for the deceased.

3.1.1 Chinogwi-kut¹⁹

As explained by Michael J. Pettid, *chinogwi-kut*,²⁰ is performed “only in the instance of a ‘bad’ death; that is, a violent death, death at sea or away from home, the death of the young or unmarried adults, or the death of an individual who had many unresolved grudges in his or her life” (Horlyck and Pettid 2018, 144). If such spirits do not get an opportunity to express their grievances and to move to the other world, they may cause harm in the world of the living. *Chinogwi-kut* does not only help the spirit of the deceased to depart to the other world, but it also gives an opportunity to the bereaved to relieve their pain of losing a loved person by allowing them to communicate with the deceased soul through *mudang*, and to resolve their conflicts and say their apologies and farewells, so that they can part ways in peace.

Chinogwi-kut is held at the house of the deceased person, unless they died at sea, for which the *kut* is performed on the beach. There is no set order for any shamanic rite, as it differs not only by region and purpose, but also by the practising *mudang*, therefore I may present only a general outline summarised from a number of selected sources. *Chinogwi-kut* may consist of sixteen to twenty-one acts performed over two to three day course by a team of four to six *mudang* (with the senior shaman performing the majority of the acts while being assisted by the other shamans).

The *kut* is initiated by a purification rite in order to cleanse the area from harmful spirits and to create a ritual space for the invoked benevolent spirits to enter safely, without

¹⁹ This section is based on Choi (2006, 28–31), Horlyck and Pettid (2018, 144–150) and Lee (1984, 210–213).

²⁰ Sometimes known as *ogu-kut* or *ssitkim-kut* (Choi 2006, 28).

harming anybody in the secular world. The first eleven acts of *chinogwi-kut* serve to bless the participants with prosperity and longevity and to protect them from bad fortune. For the remaining acts, which aim to send the deceased spirit off to the otherworld, various spirits are invoked, including ancestor spirits, spirit of smallpox, or even Buddhist deities.

On their way to the other world, the spirit must pass through ten gates of hardship, each of which is guarded by a king. After the ritual invocation of the Ten Kings, *mudang* proceeds to perform the rite of cutting the cloth bridge, for which one bridge made of cotton, and one made of hemp, are stretched out by the family members and assisting shamans. While the hempen bridge symbolises the unclean way to the underworld and to the Ten Kings, the cotton bridge signifies the path to paradise. By ripping first the cotton and then the hempen bridge in half, the spirit of the deceased is sent off to the other world. Then, the ancestor spirits, together with the spirit of the deceased, for whom the ritual is being performed, get to express their grievances by possessing the shaman and talking with the bereaved family members. One of the following acts is a rite to Princess Pari, whose help is essential for the spirit on their journey to paradise.

According to shamanic stories, Princess Pari is a spirit of a former princess, who was abandoned by her parents after her birth, as they wished for a son instead. When they were on their deathbed, she set out on a perilous journey to the underworld and back to retrieve medicine that would cure them. Due to her supernatural power to cross the bridge between the secular and sacred world, Princess Pari is essential to the *chinogwi-kut*. Many *mudang* even identify Princess Pari, as their common ancestor, which makes her significant not only in context of shamanic spirit worship, but to the whole culture of Korean shamanism.



Fig. 3: A group of *mudang* performing *ogu-kut* (also known as *chinogwi-kut*)

3.2 (Neo-)Confucian chesa²¹

Some authors refer to Confucian ancestor rituals altogether as *chesa*, other authors use this name interchangeably with *kije* in reference to a specific ritual further described below. Since I am no expert in this field, this may not necessarily be the ultimately correct approach, however, in this thesis I will use the term *chesa* as a collective name for the Confucian ancestor worship rituals. Originally, there were eight types of *chesa* to be held, but only three of them are still performed in Korea today: *kijesa*, *ch'arye* and *sijesa* (Choi 2006, 68).

3.2.1 Kijesa

Kijesa (or *kije*) is a memorial service held at midnight on the anniversary of the ancestor's death. The ceremony includes the preparation of food offerings and their placement on a ritual table in a correct position. That means placing red fruits, fish on the east side of the altar and white fruits and meat on the west side. The ritual foods, however, may also include confectionery, vegetables, stews, marinated and minced meat, noodles, rice, soup and *sikhye*,²² and by the rules of their positioning they are to be sorted correctly into lines according to the type of food. The foods and drinks offered to the spirit may differ from family to family, or even depending on what the deceased person used to enjoy during their life, but the order of ritual procedures does not change. In the first stage, the ancestor spirit is invoked with a prayer. In the second stage the spirit is offered liquor three times and then meal as well. The meal is offered by sticking a spoon and chopsticks into the bowl of rice and soup. While the spirit enjoys their meal, the participants wait either standing by or outside of the room. After the third stage of bidding farewell to the spirit and sending it off, the food and drink offerings from the ceremony are consumed by the participants as they sit together.

²¹ This section, together with the subsections about *kijesa*, *ch'arye* and *sijesa*, is based on Choi (2006, 68–79).

²² A sweet non-alcoholic drink made of rice.



Fig. 4: An example of the food setting on the altar

3.2.2 Ch'arye

Ch'arye is performed on seasonal holidays like *Söllal* (Lunar New Year), *Hansik* (in early spring) and *Ch'usök* (Thanksgiving). All of the ancestor spirits, which are to be honoured, are invited and served jointly in the morning of the holiday.²³ The rest of the day is spent by activities specific for each of the holidays. In the case of *Ch'usök*, that includes playing various games, whereas on *Söllal* people exchange greetings with the elders and relatives. Nowadays people tend to mix the procedures of *chesa* with *ch'arye*, but contrary to the former, *ch'arye* is more focused on the family kinship and the well-being of its members rather than on the ancestors. These procedures, however, differ not only by region, but also from family to family.

3.2.3 Sijesa

Sijesa (or *sije*) serves to venerate ancestors far preceding the four generations worshipped in other ceremonies. It is held annually, usually in October, taking place outside during daytime in front of the tomb of the father or paternal grandfather. This tradition is common rather for great aristocratic clans with a large number of famous ancestors. Members of these families sometimes travel great lengths to gather and take part in them. As the process of the ceremony is usually quite elaborate, a meeting is held for it to be discussed the day before the ceremony, and each member is assigned with their own role. The first offering of liquor is a role reserved for the eldest son. The members to perform other offerings and readings of ritual addresses are selected during the meeting. Contrary to *kijesa*, family clans

²³ Unlike *kijesa*, which is held for each ancestor separately.

like to invite more participants and boast their strength and power by preparing a bigger and more luxurious altar. Otherwise these two ceremonies are not very different.

3.2.4 Rite to Royal Ancestors

The Rite to Royal Ancestors, formerly a state ritual of the highest importance, became National Important Intangible Cultural Asset No. 1 in 1964 and UNESCO World Human Oral Cultural Heritage in 2001 (Song 2008, 7–8). As a country with no state religion, Korea is no longer in need of this rite in its original function. Nowadays, it is more of a traditional cultural performance in its essence, rather than a spiritual or political act.



Fig. 5: Performance of the Rite to Royal Ancestors at the National Gugak Center (left)

Fig. 6: Performance of the Rite to Royal Ancestors at the Chongmyo shrine (right)

3.3 Christianity²⁴

Christianity arrived in Korea in late Chosŏn (around the 18th century), but at that time it was strongly persecuted by Confucianism, the state ideology at the time, as these two beliefs were conflicting in numerous areas. This situation escalated into a huge number of Christians being martyred for burning their ancestral tablets and for not observing ancestral rites after the Catholic Church banned ancestor worship. Nevertheless, Pope Pius XII eventually decided to tolerate the practice of ancestral rites as a means of expressing filial affection towards one's deceased parents. In the context of Catholic faith it might be also perceived as a means of purge and salvation of sinful souls that could not go to heaven.

The Protestant Church, on the other hand, rejected the tradition of ancestor worship as idolatry. The only entity that the Protestant Church allows its believers to worship is

²⁴ The following text is based on Bae (2007, 69–94).

God. The members of this church still may express their love and loyalty to their deceased ancestors by holding memorial services such as *ch'udohoe*, which includes praying, singing hymns and reading of the Bible. When the service comes to an end, the bereaved family members gather and share a meal. Contrary to the Confucian ancestral rites, the Protestant services are commemorative in their essence, thus none of the prayers are addressed directly to the ancestors themselves, as that would undertone the service in a rather venerative way.

4. Ancestor worship in the Korean English language press

The preceding part of this thesis was mainly focused on observing ancestor worship as a tradition subject to change and development under the influence of various factors over time. Followingly, I provided a brief description of the rituals most commonly practised in Korea in the present. This part observes what kind of issues, events and new phenomena arises in relation to ancestor worship in the modern Korean society according to the articles published by the Korean English press from 2014 to this day.

4.1 Travelling home for seasonal holidays and COVID-19 restrictions

Söllal and *Ch'usŏk* holidays are some of the few opportunities for families to gather, share a meal and discuss family matters not only among the living members of the family, but also to pay respects to those family members, who have already passed away, and symbolically reunite with them altogether. For this occasion many people travel to their hometowns, which mostly concerns people who moved from the countryside, where their families live, to big cities for work. Therefore this pre-holiday journey becomes a frequent topic in the media every year. The Korean English press is no exception.

In the past two to three years, this topic came with a twist contrary to the preceding years, when information like the overcrowded transportation, prices of bus and train tickets, or amounts of people travelling home annually during this time of the year have been the usual matters of such articles. Due to the spread of COVID-19 disease, the government had to impose numerous restrictions concerning social distancing, family gatherings (*Korea Times* 10 February 2021), and even access to the cemeteries, which meant they were either closed completely (*The Korea Herald* 8 September 2021), or only a limited number of

visitors, who made a reservation in advance were allowed to enter (*Korea Times* 3 September 2021).

These circumstances made a lot of people feel bad about not being able to attend their ancestors' graves and pay them respects properly. It also took away one of the scarce opportunities they had to reunite with the rest of their family, share food and engage in the usual holiday activities. The restrictions were, however, necessary as the biggest group of people taking off on a journey for holidays consisted of those who moved from rural cities to big cities like Seoul, which have been reporting quite high numbers of COVID-19 patients at the time (*Korea Times* 29 September 2020). A frequently quoted argument of a Korean citizen, who aimed to encourage people to prioritise keeping themselves and their families safe by staying home said "Won't our ancestors be sad if their offspring contract coronavirus during their visit?" (*Korea Times* 29 September 2020).

Numerous online newspapers were therefore providing their readers with information not only about online alternatives of partaking in the ancestor worship ceremonies, but also about ways they can enjoy their holidays even alone. To provide an example, some families solved this problem by having only one member represent the rest of the family by visiting the ancestor's grave alone and stream it online for the other members to watch through live video chat programs or platforms such as YouTube, AfreecaTV. The Ministry of Health and Welfare also created an "e-sky burial information system," which allowed people to visit the memorial parks in Korea online and even to decorate the ancestors' online graves with photographs (*The Korea Herald* 30 September 2020).

4.2 Seasonal holidays and ancestral ceremony preparations - a source of stress

If we talk about *Söllal* and *Ch'usŏk*, it is natural to expect them to be enjoyable holidays of family reunions, delicious feasts and fun activities. Although it may not come to our mind at first, these holidays unfortunately also bring a lot of stress for different groups of people, which often results in their reluctance to take part in their celebrations. Every year around the Lunar New Year and *Ch'usŏk*, the newspapers look into this issue and carry out interviews and polls to find out, which factors are the most burdening, and which groups of people experience most stress in relation to the seasonal holidays.

First of all, the holidays impose a financial burden when it comes to travelling across the country, buying presents for other family members, and preparing food for *chesa* (*The Korea Herald* 23 January 2020).

Then, the Korean English language press often highlights the troubles of women, as they are usually the ones who are most heavily burdened with the preparations. Cooking different types of ritual food and meals for the extended family, cleaning and other activities surrounding the seasonal holidays are usually considered to be a woman's duty. Various newspapers also often point out the burden of working women, who on top of their job related responsibilities and raising children are supposed to handle most of the work connected with seasonal holidays. If the woman is married to the family's eldest son, the expectations she has to meet are even higher as her husband has the most responsibility when it comes to ancestral services. (*Korea Times* 23 February 2015)

Another group frequently discouraged from taking part in the family gatherings on seasonal holidays are young people. For fresh college graduates who struggle to find a job once they finish school, being nagged about their career by other family members is almost inevitable. Other delicate topics, such as dating or marriage are also a nightmare for young and unmarried people. (*The Korea Herald* 23 January 2020)

It might come as a surprise, but workers at Korean airports also belong among those who have to deal with an increased level of stress during the holidays as *Ch'usŏk* and *Sŏllal* represent an extremely busy season during which many people decide to travel abroad. For an article on this topic, in 2017, *Korea Times* interviewed some of the employees of Incheon Airport to reveal how busy they are during this time of the year. For example, baggage handler Jung Hae-jin, 51, admitted that during the 10 years of her work at the airport she had no chance to spend the holidays with her family, as the employees are usually so busy during this season they have to work more hours. (*Korea Times* 2 October 2017)

One article in *The Korea Herald* even investigated how do foreign wives of Korean men feel about the holiday preparations, ancestral rite celebrations, and how much of a burden it imposes on them. The results of this enquiry differ to some extent, depending greatly on each family, as some families tend to be more relaxed about observing such traditions orthodoxly, or whether their attitude is rather stiff in that they have high

expectations and tolerate no deviations from the long-observed rules. (*The Korea Herald* 20 September 2018)

4.3 How gender inequality reflects in ancestor worship

A rather complex issue of Korean society also reflects in ancestor worship, and that is gender inequality. In contemporary Korean society, women are being disadvantaged in a number of ways that are usually perceived simply as a traditional setting enrooted in the Confucian philosophy and system of hierarchisation. As elaborated by Mark Peterson for *Korea Times*, the rules of this Confucian patriarchy actually saw their beginning in 17th century Korea. Specifically regarding the ancestor worship, we are talking about sons, especially first-borns, being in charge of hosting the rituals. Prior to the late 17th century though, the daughters and sons would take turns in this role equally, no matter their gender nor the order in which they were born. (*Korea Times* 13 August 2018)

The task women were left in charge of is “only” the preparation of ritual food. Based on the notion that after marriage, the woman becomes a part of her husband’s family, she is also expected to prioritise taking care of her parents-in-law before anyone else. (*The Korea Herald* 14 February 2018) As irrelevant as they may seem to be in the 21st century, some of these social structures have been transmitted into the contemporary society, which in many families reflects very clearly especially in the observation of ancestral rites on holidays like *Söllal* and *Ch’usök*.

Since the firstborn sons are expected to be carrying the most responsibility when it comes to the ancestor worship, high expectations likewise shift on their wives when it comes to the preparation of ritual food. The duty of cooking for the whole family is a burden so heavy that many women don’t even get to visit their own parents on seasonal holidays, as they are too busy taking care of their husbands’ relatives. When interviewed for *Korea Times*, some women shared confessions like “Being a daughter-in-law is a more overwhelming job than my professional career” (*Korea Times* 23 February 2015).

Many women are already very busy on an everyday basis either with their work, their children, or both. Having to deal with the preparations around seasonal holidays and ancestral rites presents so much stress it projects into different areas. For example, according to a study from 2018, the rates of female patients in their 30s and 40s suffering from bladder infection increased around holiday as a result (*The Korea Herald* 14 February

2018). Another example would be an article from 2020, in which *The Korea Herald* implied that the increase in divorce rates occurring around *Söllal* and *Ch'usök* is a result of the stress related to the holidays (*The Korea Herald* 23 January 2020).

Depending on how tolerant the husband's family is, this situation may be overwhelming for foreign wives of Korean men as well. If these women come from countries that do not have a culture of ancestor worship, learning the specific ways of preparation of each ritual food, but also learning all of the customs related to ancestor worship might be very difficult and time consuming. (*The Korea Herald* 20 September 2018)

4.4 Contents of the sacrificial food offerings

Food is one of the essential parts of ancestor worship ceremonies. As the times change, so does people's diet, but also their preference in taste. Nowadays, Koreans include various kinds of Western food into their everyday menu, such as pizza, pasta, or fried chicken. If anyone decides to combine this new food culture with the tradition of ancestor worship, is it in accord with the rules and with the nature of these rituals, or is it not acceptable at all? To resolve this dilemma, *Korea Times* shared an opinion of an official from a national Confucian academy, who said that including whatever food the ancestors enjoyed when they were alive is perfectly okay, no matter how unusual it might seem for an ancestral rite. (*Korea Times* 13 September 2016)

In the past few years, a new trend surrounding ritual food emerged: ready-made dishes. As some of the ritual foods take days to prepare, and the overall preparations are too exhausting, the option of buying ready-made dishes lifts the burden off many people's shoulders. Producers like Emart or Lotte Department Store started releasing whole sets of ready-made food specifically for the seasonal ancestral rites. They not only make sure these sets are sufficient in their amount for serving the whole family, but also that buying them is cheaper than preparing the same amount of food from scratch. (*Korea JoongAng Daily* 19 September 2018)

As most people had to celebrate seasonal holidays separately due to pandemic restrictions, convenience stores like Emart or 7-Eleven started selling single portions of pre-packaged traditional holiday meals for those who decided not to cook at all. Emart24 also introduced an instant version of soup with rice cake and dumplings, traditionally eaten

at Lunar New Year. According to *Korea JoongAng Daily*, the sales of pre-packaged meals have been increasing during the *Söllal* holidays nearly by 50 percent both in 2018 and in 2019. (*Korea JoongAng Daily* 23 January 2020)

Buffet restaurants have also started providing another option for those who decided not to cook during holidays for various reasons. As their profit dropped amid the pandemic, they decided to focus rather on takeout and delivery orders. A seafood buffet restaurant called Makino Chaya was one of the restaurants that provided special gift sets for *Ch'usök*, one of them even called “*Chesa* ceremony pack,” which included dishes usually served as the ritual offerings. (*Korea JoongAng Daily* 1 October 2020)

4.5 The economical side of ancestral rites

Ancestral rituals are not only a matter of spiritual reconnection with ancestors and their commemoration as a part of a family reunion, but very significantly a matter of great financial expenses, thus an economic issue for numerous Korean citizens and their businesses.

In relation to *Ch'usök* and *Söllal* the Korean English press informs the readers in advance about changes in prices of foods for *chesa* offerings and other goods people buy most frequently, which usually increase, as the holidays provide the most profit for various businesses. Specifically last year the press provided details on the increasing prices of food, but also explained the reasons for this increase, such as difficult weather conditions for growing fruit and vegetables, or the issue of bird flu, which affected the prices of eggs and chicken and duck meat (*The Korea Herald* 28 January 2021).

Last year, the *Korea JoongAng Daily* also wrote about financial issues of various businesses, for whom the annual ancestral worship ceremonies people celebrate on holidays mean a high increase in profit. Due to the government restrictions against spreading COVID-19 disease, which resulted in significantly fewer people partaking in big family gatherings and celebrations, thus freed of the expenses on gifts and food, which would be otherwise necessary, many stores even had to close. (*Korea JoongAng Daily* 8 February 2021)

4.6 Relevance of ancestor worship in the present society

The body of articles this section refers to, interprets many of the factors I elaborated on above as signs that the ancestral worship traditions connected with seasonal holidays have become rather a burden for the majority of Koreans nowadays, and that many of them, especially those from the younger generations, do not feel this tradition's relevance anymore like their predecessors used to.

According to *Korea Times*, the younger generations of Koreans feel more and more sceptical about the importance of ancestor worship rituals carried out on seasonal holidays. One of the reasons for their reluctance in maintaining these traditions are the high expenses required for purchasing all of the food necessary for ritual offerings. (*Korea Times* 13 September 2016)

In September 2017, *Korea JoongAng Daily* made a survey among 599 people asking how they plan to arrange the ritual table for the upcoming *Ch'usŏk*. Compared to the preceding year, 3,2 % less people responded to be willing to prepare the traditional ritual food. 12,5 % less also said they would follow the traditional rules in the food preparations. More people also decided to simplify the contents of the ritual offerings by reducing the amount of dishes and opting rather for food preferred by the living family members. (*Korea JoongAng Daily* 18 September 2017)

In September 2018 before that year's *Ch'usŏk*, *Korea JoongAng Daily* already noticed the increasing trend of travelling abroad for the seasonal holidays, which were usually the time of family reunion and commemorating the ancestors by holding memorial services for them. The most popular destinations were reportedly Japan, Vietnam and Thailand. Another trend was, as reported in the same article, the so-called "staycations" for which people opted if they only wanted to enjoy some time by themselves and relax in a hotel in Korea instead of reuniting with the rest of the family. (*Korea JoongAng Daily* 7 September 2018)

In 2019, the first week of February, *Korea JoongAng Daily* reported a record number of people opting to spend the *Ch'usŏk* and Lunar New Year holidays abroad instead of gathering with the rest of their family to venerate their deceased ancestors. 202,000 travellers reportedly used Incheon Airport, the largest Korean airport, during that

week compared to the 190,400 people from the holiday period in the preceding year (*Korea JoongAng Daily* 8 February 2019).

4.7 Ancestral ceremonies as a cultural heritage

The *chesa* ancestral worship rites are an example of Korea's cultural heritage that organisations like Arumjigi Culture Keepers Foundation make effort to protect and preserve, sometimes even by recreating it in a modern way. In 2021, *Korea JoongAng Daily* informed its readers about an exhibition held by this non-profit organisation, which formerly also contributed to the renovation of the five royal palaces in Seoul alongside Chongmyo shrine, which is the venue for royal ancestral rites. Among traditional Korean lamps, tables, tents and canopies, displayed at the exhibition held in a traditional Korean house called *hanok*, the visitors could also see a modern recreation of the *chesa* ritual altar setting with fewer dishes than usual. The aim was to bring the original essence of *chesa* back to life, as it may be forgotten amidst the hectic and exhausting preparations for seasonal holidays. (*Korea JoongAng Daily* 21 November 2021)

Aside from the *chesa* ceremonies held at seasonal holidays, another main topic related to ancestor worship that the Korean English press informs their readers about is the Rite to Royal Ancestors. As Korea's cultural heritage it is often performed at events such as the Royal Culture Festival, which includes various performances, art exhibitions and cultural programs. It is held annually at the royal palaces in Seoul as well as at the Chongmyo shrine, which is intrinsically linked to the Rite to Royal Ancestors. Not only is the festival itself usually presented as an exciting experience for tourists, but some of the years, such as the viewers get to witness unusual versions of the royal ceremony. An example would be 2014, when the viewers had a chance to witness an unusual take on the royal ancestral ceremony – it was performed by robots (*The Korea Herald* 17 September 2014). Another time they were able to watch the performance of Rite to Royal Ancestors at night.

The Rite to Royal Ancestors also received lots of attention from the press and other media in 2015 when Korea and France marked the 130th anniversary of their diplomatic relations. With the aim of further strengthening their bond, the two countries decided to celebrate this milestone by holding the Korean Year in France from September 2015 to August 2016. Four months after its end the Korean Year was followed by the French Year

in Korea, which was held throughout 2016. Both events included a large number of various artistic performances. At this occasion, the Rite to Royal Ancestors was conducted by the National Gugak Center at Chaillot National Theatre in Paris. (*Korea Times* 16 February 2015 and 3 April 2015)

Conclusion

Korean culture is very rich in rituals stemming from various religions. In the beginning of this thesis, the established knowledge from available sources concerning the historical origin of ancestral rites was summarised in order to help the reader understand their background in the religions that have been blending on the Korean peninsula throughout the time.

Although the presented thesis was focused on ancestor worship rituals, this area proved to be so wide that the limitations of this work only allowed a brief description of rituals most commonly performed by people in contemporary Korean society. These include different types of Confucian *chesa*, or the shamanic *chinogwi-kut*.

The main objective of this thesis was to provide an overview of the established general knowledge about ancestor worship as presented by experts in a number of specialised publications, and to further complement this by findings from an examination of a selected corpus of newspaper articles (collected via a search in the online archives of the following newspapers: *Korea Times*, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, *The Korea Herald*, and *Hankyoreh*).

Concluding from these articles, the main occasions, on which the Korean English press writes about ancestor worship most frequently, are the seasonal holidays of *Söllal* and *Ch'usök*, and cultural events, such as performances of the Rite to Royal Ancestors.

Several newspaper articles suggest that the focus of ancestral rites held on seasonal holidays has gradually shifted from ancestral veneration towards reuniting with the living family members. Unfortunately, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this occasion, for some families very scarce, was taken away from many people in the past few years due to social distancing restrictions. This change in the way people spent *Söllal* and *Ch'usök* holidays reflected in the economics and supply of various businesses as well. Even before the pandemic, the seasonal holidays presented a source of stress for a number of reasons,

including the burden of food preparations and financial expenses, but also the pressure of personal questions from other family members.

To conclude, the ancestral rites held on the seasonal holidays seem to be losing their relevance due to the various burdens surrounding them. Whether they will remain to be practised in the form they are known today or whether they will further transform significantly, it would be fair to presume the need for dealing with the loss of a family member and for commemorating them even years after their death will remain in people's nature.

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