

# Chapter 5

## Death and Grief in Korea: The Continuum of Life and Death

Eunsuk Cho and Miai Sung

### Introduction

Based on culture and religion, Koreans have developed detailed rituals and processes around death and grief throughout history. These rituals and processes have traditionally enabled Koreans to express lamentation and grief over the dead; furthermore, these traditions seeped into their ordinary lives. However, recent industrialization has brought radical simplifications to the rituals and as a result, bereaved Korean families now face challenges in healthy grieving. In this chapter, we discuss the funeral and ancestral tribute practices of *South Koreans* in the post-Korean war (1950–1953) timeframe.

### Korea, a Country of Dynamic Religion and Ideology

Korea is a peninsular country located in the eastern end of the Asian continent with China and Japan as its neighboring nations. Korea is located between northern and southern Asian cultures, in which two cultures converge. The history of civilization in the Korean peninsula dates back over 4,000 years, with its first ancient kingdom, *Gojoseon*, founded circa BC 2,333. Across that time, Koreans have demonstrated resilience, maintaining their identity and intrinsic culture as one people despite numerous changes in ruling dynasties. In Korea, 70 % of the topography is mountainous, there are few natural resources, and the population density is high. The zeal for education in Korea is extremely high and a robust survivability based on this

---

E. Cho (✉)

Department of Child and Family Welfare, The University of Suwon, Hwaseong, South Korea  
e-mail: [grace@suwon.ac.kr](mailto:grace@suwon.ac.kr)

M. Sung

Department of Home Economics, Korea National Open University, Seoul, South Korea

organizing principle is characteristic in Korean people around the world, referred to as the *Korean diaspora*.

Historically, the culture of everyday life in Korea can be split into the following: before and after the mid-seventeenth century when Neo-Confucianism began to exert influence on the family system and culture in general; the period of Japanese colonial imperialism and post-independence U.S. influence; and before and after industrialization (Sung & Ok, 1997). Before the mid-seventeenth century, shamanism and Buddhism had greater influence than Neo-Confucianism. Shamanism is a popular folk belief centered on shamans, who have the power to talk with spirits and cure illnesses. Shamanism was passed down through the years, and formed the basis of the religion of Korea long before foreign religions such as Buddhism and Confucianism were introduced. For this reason the shamanist folk belief system is deeply embedded within Korean family culture, even today (Park & Hong, 2012, p. 373). Buddhism was associated more with post-death ceremonies rather than everyday life proceedings. For example, during the *Koryo* Dynasty (918–1392), when Buddhism was the national religion, it was customary to cremate corpses and leave them in Buddhist temples (Park & Hong, 2012, p. 173).

From the mid-seventeenth century to the period of Japanese colonialism, the influence of Neo-Confucianism expanded from a mere family culture to society in general, and most systems of regulations were based on this philosophy. During this period, the funeral rite of leaving a cremated corpse in a Buddhist temple was prohibited, and the nation emphasized burying the deceased, enshrining the spirit at home, and performing ancestral tributes each year.

However, as with all cultures, elements of older customs and practices did not die out, even though they were superseded by a newer system of thought and custom. Therefore, even in this period, behind the formality of Neo-Confucianism, inherent Korean qualities of shamanism and Buddhism were a part of the peoples' *consciousness*.

### **Neo-confucianism**

It is not possible to talk about the system of thought in Asian culture without considering Confucianism. Confucianism is a ruling theory of moral politics with the goal of *soo-ki-chi-in*, which means ruling the people after disciplining the self. Although Confucius, the Chinese progenitor, established the basis of the philosophy, it later evolved into a metaphysical school of thought, being influenced by ideas like *man-heaven unity* and *yin-yang* at the end of the *Jin* Dynasty and the beginning of the *Han* Dynasty. Neo-Confucianism is a subdivision of Confucianism established by *Zhuxi* during the twelfth century.

Presenting a rule of ethics based on a blood-related community centered on the family, and a society based on the nation, Neo-Confucianism developed into the central school of thought in society. In this way, Neo-Confucianism had two channels of clear application: social relationships and individual development.

In the case of Korea, with a Neo-Confucian book *Zhu Xi Family Ritual* as the foundation, from the mid-seventeenth century on, Neo-Confucianism began to exert great influence both in everyday life and in public institutions.

*Source.* Academy of Korean Studies, *Encyclopedia of Korean culture*.

During the Japanese colonial rule in the first half of the twentieth century, the imperialists emphasized Neo-Confucian customs, in order to make it easier to rule the colonies. Because the Confucian ideology of hierarchy made ruling colonies easier, the Japanese imperialists first implemented “education through modeling based on Neo-Confucianism” in the compulsory curriculum imposed on Korean students. Confucian and patriarchal feudal values of patriotism and filial piety self-discipline, and an ideology of emperor-worship were among the components of this curriculum intended to inhibit anti-Japanese sentiment (The Korean History Research Association, 1989, pp. 285–286). In the period of American military influence following the liberation from Japan, the USA discovered that the immense instrument of colonial government established by Japan was very suitable for efficient rule, and tried to maintain this instrument as best it could (The Korean History Research Association, 1989, p. 357). On the other hand, as Western culture was introduced during this period, there occurred a phenomenon of polarization deriving from the contradictions between traditional and Western values. After the Korean war (1950–1953), Korean society attempted to break free from the gloomy shadow of the war by paving a highway of growth. During that time, traditional Korean culture was greatly harmed under the guise of modernization. But as it is not easy for one’s own or a nation’s intrinsic culture or emotional standards to change, as ever in Korean culture, traditional aspects remain as the baseline even today. For this reason, in Korea there are thoughts and ceremonies about death which are unique from those of other nations.

## **Korean History and Unresolved Grief**

### ***Ideological Conflict and Tragic Deaths***

*Many wars have been fought on Korean soil due to frequent invasions from its neighboring countries China and Japan. In addition, during the years 1910 to the end of the Second World War in 1945, the nation was ruled by Japanese imperialists. After the end of the war, there was a split and conflict of ideologies, as the nation broke into two nations: the socialist north became the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the liberal democratic south became the Republic of Korea (Kim, 2009).*

### ***Jiseul II: The Age that Didn't End***

This movie received the grand prize in the 29th Sundance Film Festival. It is a film based on a true story of a civilian massacre that occurred on *Jeju* island in 1948, when the conflict between the right and left was severe in Korea. *Jiseul*, which means potato in *Jeju* dialect, is a work which portrays the severe winter that the *Jeju* islanders were forced to go through when the U.S. military issued the declaration, "Everyone further out than 5 km from the coastline will be considered as a mob" (Daum Movie, 2013). This movie shows the innocent deaths of the *Jeju* people, victims of a clash in ideologies. It also portrays the process of consoling and comforting these families. It could be said that the fact that such movies are produced and released shows that only now, after several decades, Korean society has the peace of mind to heal the pains of collective loss through telling—and publicizing—the story. The disaster of April 3rd on Jeju was the communist people's resistance against the U.S. military's coercive control over the South Korean government after the liberation of Korea from Japanese colonialism in 1945. Public motivation to figure out what occurred and to recover the honor of the victims has increased gradually since the late 1980s, initiated by non-governmental organizations. Even though 25,000–30,000 innocent people were killed, their families did not receive any apology from the Korean government and have experienced their deepest regrets in their hearts for 55 years, until President Noh offered governmental apologies in 2003.

*Source.* Parkmungak Knowledge Engine Center, *Dictionary of Current Events*.

The Korean War broke out in 1950 with North Korea's invasion, and after the armistice in 1953, despite being one people, the North and South are currently, technically, in a ceasefire, still divided by a military demarcation line. The war devastated all of Korea and the division that followed resulted in countless deaths and separated families between North and South Korea.

In the case of defection to North Korea or becoming missing during the war, bereaved families suffered a sense of loss, not even knowing if family members were among the living or the dead. And under the national system of anti-communist ideology, families were forced to suppress their sense of loss and live on, unable to learn the status of loved ones from whom they'd been separated. This uncertain state resembles the idea of ambiguous loss stated by Pauline Boss (2007):

The premise of the ambiguous loss theory is that uncertainty or a lack of information about the whereabouts or status of a loved one as absent or present, as dead or alive, is traumatizing for most individuals, couples, and families. The ambiguity freezes the grief process and prevents cognition, thus blocking coping and decision-making processes. Closure is impossible.

Family members have no other option but to construct their own truth about the status of the person absent in mind or body. Without information to clarify their loss, family members have no choice but to live with the paradox of absence and presence (p. 105).

Following the success of the Korean economy in the 1980s, the reunion movement of North–South families began, starting with the search for separated families, registration of those who were missing during the war, and searching for the remains of those killed in battle. The campaign began in 1983 with almost ten million people suffering from the loss of family members in the South alone. The campaign’s intent was to reduce the suffering caused by these losses. Live coverage of the campaign was broadcasted on television, and for the campaign’s 136 days showed an unprecedented story of drama to the world. The government also provided measures of support through NGOs, and formed task force committees in order to devise detailed plans of support (National Archives of Korea, 2013).

Even so, the wounds of many bereaved families have not yet healed, and these families are not able to rid themselves of lingering thoughts that the missing may still be alive. The movie *Taegukgi*, which was also released in North America, shows the story of brothers who must kill each other as soldiers of the North and South, as well as the grief process of the younger brother’s family as they find the remains of the elder brother in the twenty-first century as a result of a campaign.

## **Suicide, the Shadow of Industrialization**

The suicide rate in Korea is high, relative to that of other nations. According to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) statistics, the suicide rate in Korea in 2009 was 31.0 per 100,000 persons, more than twice the average rate of 13.0 amongst 35 OECD countries. The suicide rate for elders was the highest amongst all OECD countries in 2010 and for elders under 74, the suicide rate was 81.8 per 100,000 persons, 5–6 times Japan’s 17.9, or America’s 14.5. The study showed that 60 % of elders who committed suicide lived alone and had nobody to rely on. In comparison, the teen suicide rate in 2009 was 15.3 per 100,000 persons. Suicide is the number one cause of teen death in South Korea. The study also revealed that 40 % of teens have thought about suicide at least once and 9 % have attempted suicide. Sexual and academic achievement problems accounted for 53.4 % of suicidal thoughts (Saesayon Research Center, 2013).

This phenomenon of high suicide rates amongst socially vulnerable age groups can be seen as *a shadow of industrialization*. That is, as a part of the process of industrialization, where growth and development are emphasized, the traditional custom of supporting the elderly was destroyed and never restored. In this chaotic environment, elders, who have lost their livelihood, are choosing suicide as a means of avoiding poverty. Similarly, when teens are not protected by their families from the results-centric educational ranking system, or the harsh university entrance process, it is evident that they feel a heavy burden.

One deeply tragic phenomenon observed in Korean society is that of an entire family committing suicide together. And amongst these, the most common form is where the parents are the assailants and the children are the victims. This is different from the Western phenomenon of committing suicide after killing their partner (World Socialist Web Site, 2005). The phenomenon of family suicide in Korea grew after the 1997 Asian economic crisis caused loss of jobs and societal unease (Kim, 1998). Regarding family suicides in the twenty-first century, with the polarization of wealth in Korea, the poor fell into despair, causing some families to see death as the only solution (Jung, 2004).

The psychological mechanism of Korean suicide may be informed by Marx's subjective powerlessness and Bowen's failure of differentiation of self. Lystad (1972), applying Marx's subjective powerlessness theory, argued that in modern society, the unemployed and otherwise poor people fall into a sense of powerlessness, become socially alienated, and eventually even create a class of alienation from the self. Meanwhile, Bowen saw the failure to differentiate one's ego from that of another person as failure of differentiation of self. In a family-centric country like Korea, the individuality of family members is threatened and parents tend to see their children as their dependents rather than as independent beings. Thus, there is an infinite sense of responsibility, threatening lack of self-differentiation (Son, Kim, & An, 1997). This lack of self-differentiation between parents and children could lead to family suicides when a family fell into extreme powerlessness (Lee, 2007).

With the increase in suicide rates, there has been an increase in the awareness of bereaved families whose loved ones have completed suicide, resulting in enhancement of social service programs to develop training systems for counseling bereaved families.

## **Culture, Religions, Industrialization, and the Grieving Process in Korea**

Anyone who is born dies. Thus the last hurdle of life is death and it is recognized with funeral rites. In particular, death cannot be an exclusive personal event, as it is seen to affect society as a whole. In other words, the death of one person brings about changes to the social groups to which that one person belonged, and as such, has a social meaning. Through funeral rites the changing order is restored and by symbolically filling up the hole left by the deceased, a new order is erected and customs are rectified (Park & Hong, 2012, p. 170).

Based on notions derived from traditional shamanistic beliefs, most Koreans perceive humans as the dual combination of body and spirit (Park & Hong, 2012, p. 387). Thus, they believe that although the flesh may die, the source of life lives in the spirit, and that after death one is reincarnated as a new being, a spirit in this world, or goes onto the afterlife for eternity. Spirits are also seen as omniscient, omnipotent beings that are not restricted by space or time (Park & Hong, 2012, p. 387).

Therefore, within universally honored funeral rites, in addition to the Confucianism that had such a dominant impact on Korea from the mid-seventeenth century, there also exist residual facets of Buddhism and shamanism. From these derive rituals before and after the death, a ritual for the corpse, ritual for the bereaved, a funeral ritual, and a ritual after the funeral (Song, 2010). The process of these ceremonies precisely models the *separation–transition–reincorporation* process of Arnold van Gennep (1960). In other words, the separation between the deceased and the living, the period of transition where the feeling of solidarity lingers between the living and dead, and finally the process whereby the dead wholly reconsolidate with the afterlife, and the living with the reality of life.

This process of separation–transition–reincorporation lasts up to 3 years: the funeral, *cho-sang*, which takes place on the year of the departure; the commemorative first anniversary of one's death, *so-sang*; and the *dae-sang*, which occurs on the second anniversary. Together, this is called *3-year mourning*. The period of mourning ends after this 3-year period and the *reincorporation* stage then unfolds.

Koreans traditionally have a strong belief in the existence of spirits and also that the relationship between ancestors and descendants continues eternally following death. Consequently, it is very important to pay tribute to the deceased on the anniversary of death or on important holidays (Song, 2010). In this way, the funeral and subsequent tributes yield a smooth road to a difficult transition, which not only is thought to help the deceased to let go of lingering thoughts of this world and enter the afterlife, but also helps the bereaved to recover from the loss and to readjust to everyday life. In Korea, funerals are very expensive, and most guests at a funeral give the bereaved *condolence money*. It's a custom similar to that of giving money at a wedding, and was started for the purpose of reducing the financial burden of a funeral, and it continues today.

Because of the complex formalism of funeral rites, families often receive help during this process. In agrarian regions, relatives live together in a community, comforting and helping each other. This is especially true of the kinship group called *Dang-nae-chin*, which shares the fourth ancestral grandfather of the patriarchal lineage, and participates in the funeral wearing funeral attire. Even local residents help to send off the deceased, assisting in cooking or guest accommodations. Thus, in rural Korea, the traditions surrounding a death are highly communal in nature.

In urban situations, where families have left their native communities, the bereaved are often these days comprised of just the immediate family and/or close relatives, and religious groups are taking the place of more distant relatives or neighbors. There have also been changes in funeral rites. Most of the traditional funeral rites mentioned earlier have been simplified. Among the factors which dictated these changes are urbanization, the very rapid and nearly universal spread of condominiums and apartments as primary residences, hospital deaths instead of home deaths, the increasing popularity of public funeral homes over home funerals, changes in perspectives on death and the spirit, and the influence of Christianity.

Christianity, introduced to Korea in the late nineteenth century, has wrought many changes in funeral services. Rites honoring the spirit of the deceased were deemed *idolatrous* in the Protestant Christian view. Christians prohibited traditional funeral rituals and also the annual tributes for the ancestors. This Protestant approach often generated familial conflict when it was introduced. However, the Catholic Church, which accepted prayers for the spirit of the deceased and ancestor worship as part of the culture, was more easily integrated into the traditional Korean grieving system. Further, the lengthy ritualized lamentations of the past are vanishing, due to the modern individual's typically busy lifestyle. Traditional mourning has in many cases been shortened to as little as 3 days in some families. Most companies give a 3-day funeral leave for employees when a parent dies. Some people choose to keep the mourning period for 49 or 100 days, but it is now very rare to adhere to the entire 3-year mourning period. The rituals to honor the body of the dead continue to be performed, but those for the spirit are largely neglected, and the disregarding of all rituals after the burial has become commonplace. The tribute to the ancestors, which was normally dedicated up to the fourth ancestral generation in traditional society, has been simplified and many now dedicate only up to their grandparents.

Traditional funerals and rites of tribute have also been commercialized. The practice of paying a monthly fee to funeral service companies to receive help during funerals is expanding. Complaints, refunds, and termination of contracts regarding these companies are at times raised as an issue in society (Hankook Daily News, Sept. 14th, 2012). The commercialization of funeral ceremonies can result in unintended consequences. For example, while the bereaved should be the host of the funeral rites for the separation–transition–reincorporation process, through which both the deceased and the bereaved go their separate ways, the bereaved during standardized commercial ceremonies may instead become merely onlookers. Thus, despite a well-organized and structured ceremony, the bereaved may become lost in all the jumble of activity, may fail to be comforted, and as a result may be unable to integrate the loss into daily life. This situation can interfere with the fundamental rationale for offering funeral rituals.

## **Unique Korean Ideas About Death and Loss**

### ***Guilt Faced by Offspring After the Death of Their Parents***

From a Confucian perspective, the death of a parent is a considerable sin of the offspring, because it is believed that they have failed to provide adequate care for their parents. The attire and the behaviors of the bereaved worn during the funeral and rituals express that guilt. In addition, dying before his or her parents die is the most undutiful thing that a descendant can do the parents.



### ***Fearing Death and Ghosts***

Rooted in shamanism, Koreans avoid contact with death as much as possible, because death is related to spirits or ghosts. The corpse is veiled and tied fast; soil is trampled over the soil mounded on the coffin, and a shaman ritual called *shitkim-goot* is performed during the funeral. *Goot* is a rite composed of sacrifice, dance, music, and ritual performed by a shaman. *Shitkim-goot* is a rite to cleanse the regrets of the spirit of the dead. The shaman cleanses all regrets the dead did not resolve before death, and releases the spirit to the other world (the afterlife). This tradition is based upon fear of the spirit of the dead person.

### ***The Concept of Abnormal Death***

Deaths of infants or youth by disease or accident, deaths of non-married individuals or those who have wandered, suicides, and other types of death are regarded as *abnormal* deaths. It is thought that the spirit of a victim of *abnormal death* hovers over the living and will harm them. The bereaved family who has experienced an *abnormal death* usually avoids the funeral service. Instead, the corpse is promptly cremated or buried, because the family is ashamed, and because they want to relieve the uneasiness of neighbors. Families of *abnormal* death could not lament or even speak about the death.

### ***The Continuity of the Reciprocal Relationship Between the Dead and the Living***

Koreans think that death cannot disconnect the dead from the living. Rather, the ghosts of the dead are always connected with the living, and in a reciprocal way. They believe that the spirit of the dead stays with its family during the 2-year-long transitional period before the spirit completely settles into the other world. Even after 2 years, as evidence of the family's side of this reciprocal relationship, the family of the deceased holds a memorial service to honor deceased family members up to the fourth ancestral generation on their death anniversaries and major holidays. In return, these ancestors are thought to extend protection to their descendants.

### ***Consoling the Spirit of the One Who Died with Regrets***

It is common for the bereaved to meet the deceased in their dreams. The former are sensitive to the status of the ghost of the dead and, upon awakening, perform a good deed for the latter. For example, when they think the spirit of the dead is not happy, they

invite a shaman to perform the *goot* ritual. One study (Yoon & Kim, 2010) tells of a mother who saw her son, who committed suicide, in a dream. In the dream, he said, “I am hungry,” and so, henceforth, she prepared food for him on his birthday every year.

### ***Blessings for the Dead***

The bereaved have a great interest in helping the ghost of the dead arrive at a better place in heaven. The rituals of shamanistic *goot*, providing money and rice to the dead body (the *ban-ham ritual*, explained in an earlier section), and the Buddhist *Cheondo* rite are examples of their blessings for the dead. The *Cheondo* rite is performed by a Buddhist priest to bless the dead, to open its eyes towards wisdom and be born again in a good place. Catholic churches often organize groups to perform a relay prayer to console the spirit of the dead until the funeral service finishes, as the Catholic Church teaches that believers can help the spirit of the dead ascend to heaven from purgatory through the merit of prayer.

### ***Communication with the Dead Through Objects or Symbols***

Koreans believe that they can communicate with the dead using objects or symbols. When they close the lid of the coffin over the corpse, they make *hon-baeck*, a symbol of the spirit of the dead, made of paper, and visualize the spirit. During shaman *goot* for the dead’s soul, the shaman dancer sweeps the body of a doll that symbolizes the dead with a brush as a symbolic act to release the spirit from the regrets it had before death. Koreans infer that the world of the spirit is reflected in the life of the living, and try to communicate with the dead through such symbols.

## **Korean Traditional Funeral and Grieving Processes**

Korean traditional funeral and grieving processes evolved under Confucianism during the *Chosun* dynasty (16C–19C), and are mingled with ancient shamanistic practices. The rituals described here are categorized based on the works of Kim, Park, and Hong (2011, pp. 221–239) and Lim (2013, pp. 25–42).

### ***Rituals Before and Immediately After Death***

During the last moments of a person’s life, family members surround him in the main bedroom and say goodbye. This is called *im-jong*. When they confirm that the person has passed away, they loosen their hair and beat their chests, crying loudly.

Then, one person brings a piece of the deceased's clothing into the yard and waves it toward the roof, shouting "*Bok* (meaning "return"), *bok, bok.*" This process, *go-bok*, calls back the spirit that has just departed the body. After this, a table is set in front of the main gate of the home, prepared with bowls of rice, pairs of shoes, and coins. The family members believe that three messengers of the other world come to escort the spirit of the dead. Straightening the corpse before it hardens is called *soo-shi*. After straightening it, the host lays the corpse on a hard board, covers the whole body with linen, and sets up a folding screen in front of the corpse. After this, they inform neighbors, relatives, and friends of their bereavement (*bal-sang*).

### ***Rituals for the Corpse***

First, *seup*: the corpse is washed and clothed. *Ban-ham*: rice is put into the mouth of the corpse and beads or coins placed on the breast, actions thought to ease the journey of the spirit to the other world. Then, *so-ryum*: the corpse is bound with ropes seven times from bottom to top. Next, *dae-ryum*: the corpse is wrapped in a large piece of hemp cloth. Finally, *ip-kwan*: the corpse is laid in the coffin. After this, the coffin cover is nailed into place, and the coffin is draped with red silk on which the final career and name of the deceased are written.

### ***Rituals for the Bereaved***

*Hon-baeck* is an object made of thread or paper that symbolizes the ghost of the dead, which the bereaved receive after laying the corpse in the coffin. They put the *hon-baeck* in a box, put the box upon a high chair, and prepare a ritual table in front of the chair, a process thought to separate the spirit from the dead body. After receiving the ghost, the bereaved wear funeral costumes slightly different according to the kinship relationship with the dead. Sons and unmarried daughters wear the highest ranked attire, composed of coarse cloth, straw shoes, and a stick, signifying that they are sinners who sent their parents to death. Once they are dressed, they dedicate a *seong-bok* rite. After wearing costumes, the bereaved (the hosts) begin to receive condolences from other mourners, the number of which signifies the social position and status of the dead and/or hosts.

### ***The Funeral***

Helpers at the funeral (village folk in the past, but funeral specialists in the present) prepare a *sang-yeo*, a coffin carrier covered by colorful papers or flowers, and the grave. On the night before the funeral, people play boisterously, carrying the empty *sang-yeo* on their shoulders in the funeral home (usually the home of the dead).

Folklorists interpret this feast-like custom as a meeting point of the bereaved and the life energy of the living people, and as a performance to cover the gloomy atmosphere of death with play (Lim, 1995). The present funeral culture that allows mourners to stay overnight at the funeral home and enjoy alcohol and games can be traced to the play of *sang-yeo*.

Carrying the coffin out of the home is called *bal-in*. They lay the coffin upon the *sang-yeo* and dedicate a rite of *bal-in*: the farewell rite. Then, the parade of *sang-yeo* starts, the order of which is as follows: The banner on which is written the name of the dead; the spirit (*hon-baeck*) of the dead riding on the small sedan chair (*young-yeo*); several banners and the *sang-yeo*; the head of the bereaved family (usually the first son); other family members and mourners. The order of the *sang-yeo* parade is reflected in the present in the order of the seats on the bus or the service cars that carry the hosts and condolers to the burial place. After the coffin arrives, it is lowered into the earth at exactly the time and place specified by the theory of divination (*Feng shui*). After lowering the coffin, soil is spread on the top. Other helpers spread the remaining soil over the grave, level the ground, and dedicate a rite using food. Then, helpers rhythmically trample over the soil, make a burial mound.

### ***Rituals After the Funeral***

After the burial, the funeral party brings the spirit (*hon-baeck*) back to the home. This ritual is called *ban-hon*. At home, the returned *hon-baeck* is carefully placed in the living room or the room the dead used, and a dining table is set up in front of it. Dedicating food to the deceased, which is called *sang-sik*, continues until the expiration of the mourning period. A rite is conducted every day for 3 days from the day of the funeral, the third one being called the *sam-woo* rite. They dedicate the first rite just after *ban-hon*, and pray that the spirit of the dead should not wander, but arrive safely at the funeral home. After the *sam-woo* rite, they visit the tomb and check the burial mound, the site, and other facilities related to the tomb. From this day on they dedicate *sang-sik* not every day, but two times a month.

Within 3 months after the death, the *jol-gok* rite usually takes place to celebrate the end of lamentation (*gok*). After this rite, the family laments only when they dedicate food to the spirit. The second year death anniversary is commemorated as *so-sang*, and the third year *dae-sang*, which is the end of the mourning period. From this time on, the bereaved believe that the dead belongs to the other world entirely, and they return to their ordinary life. The eldest son of the dead prepares food for the rite every anniversary night after the expiration of the mourning period. They believe that the spirit visits home to receive offerings at the dining table. This is called the *gi* rite or the tribute to the ancestors, which the descendants are required to dedicate up to the fourth ancestral generation.

## **Korean Funeral and Grieving Processes as a Coping and an Intervention to Loss**

As should be clear by now, various devices have been created to console the bereaved as a part of the traditional Korean funeral rituals. First, they seek to allow sufficient time for the bereaved to emotionally separate from the loved one. During the *3-year mourning* period, the bereaved family lives together with the spirit of the *living dead*. This process provides the bereaved a substantial period whereby to handle the psychological and filial problems deriving from separation and loss. It is noteworthy that this period roughly coincides with research that suggests 2 years is needed to properly deal with the sorrow caused by death (Horon, 1994; Wolfelt, 1988).

Second, there are ritualized ways to outwardly express the complicated emotion of sorrow, guilt, regret, and so forth. The bereaved are allowed and encouraged to mourn by crying loudly. This is intended to offer an effective way to grieve for men who are not allowed, per social norms, to cry in ordinary life, and for women whose voice must not be heard out of the house wall in traditional Confucian society. To wear coarse clothes and to suffer from insufficient eating and sleeping are also official ways to express sorrow and guilt.

Third, the rituals actualize some works the bereaved can do for the dead, and help the bereaved to maintain and develop the relationship with the deceased even after death: The bereaved prepare a dining table for the messengers of the spirit; perform a shaman *goot* to console the spirit before releasing it to the other world; offer a wedding ceremony for the ghosts of the unmarried dead children (*ghost marriage*); dedicate a Buddhist *Cheondo* rite; host and care for the spirit of the dead for 2 years; and perform a *gi* rite every anniversary night. These rituals provide a robust system for developing a satisfactory relationship with the dead. It is a way to bless the bereaved by renewing the relationship with the dead.

Fourth, the funeral process confirms the love of the community for the deceased, and after the funeral ends, the bereaved can successfully reintegrate into their lives. In traditional society, the funeral service was the work of the entire village. They gathered together at the home of the dead and created a boisterous air for at least two nights in order to be with the bereaved, and thus received energy to renew their lives together, by sending the dead to the other world.

### **Case Study: Suicide Survivors**

This is the story of suicide survivors who lost their mother and wife to suicide, which is excerpted from a study by Park (2010), and reorganized by the authors from the view of the *healthy grieving and reincorporation into life*. For suicide survivors, in addition to the shock, rage, and guilt that come from suicide itself, survivors must also deal with the unfavorable perceptions of those around them. We will observe the importance of proper funeral and lamentation processes, which

were lacking in this case, to relieve the grief of the bereaved. All the names in this story are pseudonyms.

In the autumn of 2009, *Hyosung's* wife committed suicide. At that time, they had a 15-year-old daughter, *Jinhye* and a 12-year-old son, *Jinsung*. In his early 40s, *Hyosung* had unsuccessfully searched for a stable job after losing his job 4 years before, and his wife became clinically depressed. One day in September, with her young son at home, she committed suicide by throwing herself from the veranda of a 15-story apartment. Because he thought that spreading the news of his wife's suicide would be harmful to the children, he did not tell his parents, relatives, and the children's schoolteachers; instead, he told only his siblings and his wife's younger sister, asking them to keep it a secret, and then quickly held a funeral. Immediately after the funeral, he shut his family off from the rest of the world. As *Hyosung* explained:

After the funeral, just our family of three was left ... my daughter said this ... "Dad! When I go to school tomorrow, do I have to tell the teacher about mom? I don't want to ... I want to say she's just sick ... no ... it's OK if I just say that she passed away from a car accident, right? And this thought came to mind ... "Now we're trapped in a cave ... There is really only you and me in this world...."

*Hyosung* began to spend a lot of time taking care of his children, who were in puberty. The daughter tried to make up for the mother's absence and suppressed her own emotions in order to prevent relatives from mocking her mother. The son prioritized understanding his family over his own wants (examples?).

After the wife's *49 day-Cheondo rite* passed, *Hyosung's* life was filled with uncertainty and unsettledness coming from his son's worrying actions (which were?), loneliness from the absence of his wife, and the burden of having to raise the children himself.

*I was reminded of my wife ... Especially when I go to bed alone ... It's so lonely ... So, from a few months ago, the three of us all sleep together... Jinhye is a big child, so it was a little odd, but when I asked, "Do you want to sleep with dad?" the children liked it.*

The daughter *Jinhye*, 15, is studious, active and has an independent personality. She began to lock up her world to protect her mother from the mockery of relatives (explain?) and to fill the void of her mother for her father and brother.

*Last time at (mother's) funeral... aunt said something about mom... to dad... "You aren't even supposed to hold a funeral for those who commit suicide, why are you doing this?" ... That we are young and that it is bad to keep showing us this (suicide)... But ... I became angry ... What about my mom ... So now, when grandma or aunt calls, I reply "I'm alright! Don't worry about me!" and hang up. (Shortened) I don't like it because it seems like they mock my mom while pretending to care about me.*

*We never talked about mom at home after she passed away. Even when we eat dinner... We just talk and laugh about what happened during the day... Dad even worries about us watching television in the living room late at night ... That we might look at the veranda and think of mom....*

The son *Jinsung*, 12, is shy and had an especially close relationship with his mother. He feels so much guilt from not preventing his mother's death that he portrays himself as a culprit who does not even have the right to feel sad.

(Very quietly) *But really, mom did that because of me, right?! Dad said it isn't (my responsibility), but I needed to block her... So I'm sorry to mom but also to dad and sister and grandma....*

After the mother's 49 day-rite, *Jinsung* was admitted to a hospital for the treatment of depression. After finding out that he has the same illness that his mother had, he fears that he may act like his mother.

*I tried standing where my mom stood (the veranda). I tried it to see whether or not it was scary ... I'm scared ... How did mom fall from here? But if I fall and follow mom, I think for some reason it will be neither painful nor scary and I think that mom will come and receive me (from Jinsung's diary).* Each person's pain is being completely suppressed, and in the absence of help or support, they are feeling the ill-effects.

## **Suggestions for Healthy Grieving and Reincorporation into Life**

Even though traditional Koreans evolved detailed processes for healthy grieving, the funeral process today is much smaller in scale and convenience-centric. It is often the case that a sparse funeral and bare minimum ancestral rites are conducted. Also, as the responsibility of conducting funerals transfers from families to religious clergymen and businesses, the bereaved are becoming more like any other guest, making lamentation through the funeral almost impossible. Problematically, because all periods of mourning were planned as funeral rites in traditional Korea, people today do not know how to share the pain or talk about a death under the simplified ritual system. This becomes a severe problem for unusual or abnormal deaths, such as suicide. People are left to resolve their sadness and complex feelings surrounding grief on their own without the support of ancient rituals or traditional communities.

There are changes that could be made in the following areas to help modern Koreans deal more effectively with loss. First, we could educate people about how to share their feelings and support each other throughout the mourning process. Often, Koreans do not know what to say even when they are at the house of mourning. People do not know how to communicate with the bereaved, and the bereaved in turn do not know how to share their thoughts or feelings with other family members or close friends. Education in this regard would surely be helpful in dealing with these issues.

Second, a culture-specific effort by psychological and religious bodies could be undertaken to help the bereaved to receive sufficient consolation and to ensure healthy reintegration into their everyday lives. Perhaps the recent social movement,

which includes many older women, to conduct the *Cheondo* rite for aborted babies (Woo, 2013) is related to an insufficiency of consolation and mourning in response to prior losses. It also seems sensible to modernize and adapt the concept of *goot*, a traditional rite to help the deceased and the bereaved settle their accounts. This could be one role played by a psychological counselor in grief counseling.

Third, a greater effort for restoration and reconciliation of family relationships not only after death, but also before, would be helpful. Given their stormy history, Koreans often contain within themselves social, personal, and familial regrets and tensions. These tensions are often not resolved before death, and consequentially, are internalized as guilt or shame. Providing a service to help families reconcile before the death and have a good parting between the living and the dead is essential. This is an especially pressing issue because 25 % of the population is Protestant and the Protestant faith proclaims that there is nothing that can be done for the deceased. Accordingly, there is a need for a structured program in which pastors provide pastoral counseling before death, so that the family can be well prepared for the departure.

Fourth, and finally, it would be immensely helpful to find ways to change the perception of people who die due to suicide or from accidents, as well as offering social support for the bereaved who are suffering in these particular instances. This is important because, as we saw in the case study, those who suffer suicide or other unnatural forms of death may cut themselves off from the outside world in fear of being mocked or shamed. This exacerbates their emotional pain. Bereaved families are exposed to high levels of stress because of financial difficulties, necessary readjustments in family roles and the many other factors discussed here. Until now, there has been an implicit assumption that grief was something that should be taken care of within the family. But due in part to the radical curtailment in rituals and traditions that have customarily played key roles in the grief process, there is now a need for society to provide special attention and services for this matter.

## References

- Academy of Korean Studies, *Encyclopedia of Korean culture*. Retrieved from <http://terms.naver.com/entry.nhn?cid=1621&docId=575537&categoryId=1621>. Accessed 8 May 2013.
- Boss, P. (2007). Ambiguous loss theory: Challenges for scholars and practitioners. *Family Relations*, 56(April), 105–111.
- Gu, M. (2013). *Lifetime ceremonies based on Korean Buddhism*. Seoul: Minjoksa. Daum Movie. Retrieved from <http://movie.daum.net/movieDetailStory.do?movieId=68396>. Accessed 10 June 2013.
- Hankook Daily News, Sep. 14th, 2012. Retrieved from <http://news.hankooki.com/lpage/economy/201209/h2012091402343921500.htm>
- Horon, R. J. (1994). *Family adjustment following the death of a parent* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Biola University, La Mirada, California.
- Jung, S. (2004). A study of murder-suicide: An analysis of the status of murder-suicide in Korea by reviewing newspaper articles. *Public Safety and Criminal Justice*, 18, 191–210.



- Kim, J. (1998). A study of the introduction schemes of prevention and mental health policy on murder followed by suicide as a dimension of social welfare. *Mental Health & Social Work, 6*, 99–120.
- Kim, J. (2009). *Modern and contemporary Korean history*. Seoul: Moonhakgongwon.
- Kim, H., Park, H., & Hong, H. (2011). *Korean family life history* (1st Rev. ed.). Seoul: KNOUPRESS
- Lee, M. (2007). Social psychological exploration of the collective suicide of families in Korea. *Health & Social Science, 20*(1), 153–175.
- Lim, H. (2013). The funeral culture of traditional Korea. In Y. B. Lee (Ed.), *Death-related ritual, death, and Korean society* (pp. 25–42). Seoul: Moshineunsaramdeul.
- Lim, J. (1995). Anti-ritual characteristics and sexual symbols of life in funeral-related amusement in Korea. *Asian Comparative Folklore, 12*, 265–317.
- Lystad, M. H. (1972). Social alienation: A review of current literature. *The Sociological Quarterly, 13*(Winter), 90–113.
- National Archives of Korea. Retrieved from <http://contents.archives.go.kr/next/content/listSubjectDescription.do?id=000836>. Accessed 25 June 2013.
- Park, J. (2010). A hermeneutic phenomenological case study of a family's survival experience after a suicide loss. *Mental Health & Social Work, 36*, 203–231.
- Park, H., & Hong, H. (2012). *Korean family life history* (2nd Rev. ed.). Seoul: KNOUPRESS
- Parkmungak Knowledge Engine Center. *Dictionary of current events*. Seoul: Parkmungak. Retrieved from <http://terms.naver.com/entry.nhn?cid=830&docId=72008&categoryId=830>. Accessed 10 June 2013.
- Saesayon Research Center. *Suicide rate of Korea 30.1, the highest amongst OECD countries*. Retrieved from <http://www.saesayon.org/agenda/bogoserView.do?paper=20120130164059831&pcd=EA01>. Accessed 12 Jan 2013.
- Son, H., Kim, Y., & An, D. (1997). Murder-suicide in Korea: An analysis of newspapers. *Mental Health Research, 16*, 181–193.
- Song, J. (2010). *A study of Korean rituals*. Seoul: Bakmoonsa.
- Sung, M., & Ok, S. (1997). Historical review of filial piety norm-focus on reciprocity and fairness. *Journal of Korea Home Economics Association, 35*(3), 245–257.
- The Korean History Research Association. (1989). *Modern Korean history*. Seoul: Pulbit.
- Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage* (Vol. 3). London: Routledge.
- Wolfelt, A. D. (1988). *Death and grief: A guide for clergy*. New York: Accelerated Development.
- Woo, H. (2013). The new forms of the *Cheondo* rite. In Y. B. Lee (Ed.), *Death-related rituals, death, and Korean society* (pp. 191–214). Seoul: Moshineunsaramdeul.
- World Socialist Web Site. (2005). *An epidemic of murder-suicide in the US*. Retrieved from [http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/mar2005/side-m16\\_pm.shtml](http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/mar2005/side-m16_pm.shtml). Accessed 12 May 2013.
- Yoon, M. S., & Kim, K. D. (2010). A review of the experiences of mothers of suicide victims. *Korean Journal of Family Social Work, 29*, 115–148.