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# Confucian-Christian Interplay: Death Rites of Modern-Day South Korean Christians

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## **Introduction**

Death rituals, the ceremonies of burying and honoring the dead, are indispensable customs across cultures, religions, and civilizations worldwide. The Korean peninsula, with its own distinctive customs and cultural characteristics, has historically been subject to the religious influences of neighboring countries, particularly China. Deeply rooted in Shamanism during the Neolithic era, Korea was later profoundly shaped by Chinese Confucianism in the fourth century A.D., and further influenced by Western Christianity in the late nineteenth century. Today, South Korea is often described as a 'mono-ethnic, yet multi-religious' nation.<sup>1</sup> As inhabitants of such a religiously and philosophically diverse country, South Korean Christians experience an inherent clash between Confucian and Christian religious traditions, most notably those pertaining to death rites. Furthermore, in their practice of Western religion in a country deeply shaped by Eastern religious philosophy, South Korean Christians struggle to balance 'religious piety to God' and their 'filial duty to ancestors,' as both cultural phenomena are integral to their religious and South Korean identity. This research paper will examine the complex cultural interplay between the death rites of contemporary South Korean Christians and Confucian adherents.

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<sup>1</sup> Chang-won Park, *Cultural Blending in Korean Death Rites*, (New York, Continuum, 2010), 32.

## Confucianism as a Religion?

According to the theory of the “three great world religious river systems” proposed by Hans Kung and Julia Ching in their book, *Christianity and Chinese Religions* (1989), major world religions can be classified into three categories: “Semitic origin and prophetic character,” “Indian origin and mystical character,” and “Chinese origin and religions of wisdom.”<sup>2</sup> Christianity, a monotheistic religion premised on the teachings and life of Jesus Christ, is classified in the first category. Confucianism, based on the teachings of Confucius (*Kongfuzi*), a Chinese philosopher who lived around 500 B.C., is classified in the third category. Although some deny Confucianism’s status as a religion due to its lack of deities and teachings pertaining to the afterlife, Confucianism is considered a religion in South Korea because it guides the behavior of its adherents and shapes Korean moral and social thought.

## Confucian Burial Customs

Since its introduction to Korea in the fourth century A.D., Confucianism has developed a highly sophisticated ritual system that can be reasonably described as a religion of rituals. Along with the ‘Four Confucian Family Rituals,’<sup>3</sup> two primary rituals that constitute the Confucian ritual system are burial and ancestral rites that serve as expressions of ‘filial duty,’ a core value of Confucianism firmly rooted in traditional Korean society. Contemporary influence of these rituals can be found in a strong preference in South Korea for burials over alternative methods of bodily disposal, such as cremation. South Korean families often bury their dead near their ancestral villages, because the bodies of these dead are considered a valuable gift from their ancestors. Stemming from traditional ancestor worship, these rituals first originated from Shamanism in ancient Korea.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Park, *Cultural Blending*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Park, *Cultural Blending*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Deok Weon Ahn, *Chudo Yebae in the Korean Protestantism: A Model of Liturgical Inculturation*, (Drew University, 2013), 8.

However, as Neo-Confucianism developed into the core philosophy of Korea during the Yi dynasty,<sup>5</sup> the *Gar-rye*, a book of family rituals, began to guide subsequent Korean cultural and ancestral rites. The *Ga-rye* specified standard customs pertaining to daily life, including the four rites of passage: *Kwan* (the ceremony for coming-of-age), *Hon* (the ceremony of marriage), *Sang* (the funeral ritual), and *Je* (ancestral worship).<sup>6</sup> A principal ritual of Confucian belief, *Je* further consists of four major ancestral rituals: the seasonal ritual, anniversary-of-death ritual, holiday ritual, and gravesite ritual. In traditional Korea, prior to the introduction of Christian influence, Koreans practiced numerous ancestral rituals throughout the span of a year: four seasonal rituals, two holiday rituals, eight anniversary-of-death rituals (performed for four ascending generations), and a gravesite ritual.<sup>7</sup> These death rituals not only served as opportunities for Koreans to carry out ‘filial duty’ to their ancestors, but also provided for frequent family gatherings, uniting and strengthening familial ties and bonds.

### Christian Burial Customs

Following the introduction of Catholicism to Korea in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Protestantism arrived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century amidst the decline of the Neo-Confucian Joseon Dynasty. Similar to Confucian funerary rites in their methods of bodily disposal, Christian burial rites did not generate significant tensions between the two religions. Until the 1990s, the rate of cremation in South Korea remained below 20 per cent as the majority of South Koreans,<sup>8</sup> including South Korean Christians and Confucians, practiced burials, while cremation was practiced only among the very poor and in select cases. However, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, dramatic changes to funeral customs began to take place with the emergence of

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<sup>5</sup> Ahn, *Chudo Yebae in the Korean Protestantism*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Hae Sung Lee, *The Neo-Confucianism of the Joseon Dynasty: Its Theoretical Foundation and Main Issues*, (Wroclaw, University of Wroclaw, 2016), 184.

<sup>7</sup> Park, *Cultural Blending*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

hospital funeral halls and a rapid increase of cremation.<sup>9</sup> As shown in the figure below, within a decade, the nationwide rate of cremation increased from approximately 20% to 70%, funerals at homes declined from 72% to 7%, and funerals at hospital funeral halls increased from 23% to 60%. With societal acknowledgement in Korea of cremation as an acceptable form of burial, believers of both Confucianism and Christianity seem to have conformed to these shifts in burial practice.

	1994	2001	2005
Home	72.2%	34.6%	6.9%
Hospital Funeral Halls	22.6%	53.9%	68.8%
Private Funeral Halls	No existence	5.6%	20.7%
Religious Institution	No data	5.8%	3.6%

<Figure 1: Korea Gallup surveys on the venue of funerals 1994-2005>  
from ChangWon Park's *Cultural Blending of Korean Death Rites: New Interpretive Approaches*

### The Clash Begins

Unlike Confucian burial customs, Confucian ancestral rites are viewed as sacrilegious among some within the Christian Church. Historically, controversy over Confucian ancestral rites resulted in heated debate among Roman Catholic missionaries in Korea, consequently hampering missionary efforts to convert the Korean population. After a long dispute within the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Pius XII issued a decree in 1939 declaring Confucian ancestral rites no longer superstitious, and, instead,

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<sup>9</sup> Park, *Cultural Blending*, 11.

honorable in that these rituals' expressed respect for one's ancestors.<sup>10</sup> This decree consequently authorized Korean Catholics to observe and participate in Confucian ancestral rites. However, no such decree existed for the Protestant church operating in Korea.

The Protestant Church continued to ban Confucian ancestral rituals, regarding such rituals as idolatrous.<sup>11</sup> The Protestant Church pressed that abandoning traditional ancestral rituals was a core precondition for Christian baptism. As such, Korean converts to Protestantism abandoned the practice of ancestral rites, burned their ancestral tablets, and withdrew from eating or touching ritual food in accordance to the Bible.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the Protestant ban on ancestral rituals incited significant conflicts within the converts' local communities and families. Most often, converts to Christianity would be subject to shame and exclusion by their direct and extended family. Early Christian converts were often ostracized and cut-off from their family clan and local community. Converts who refused to participate were often even severely beaten by their family members, as such refusal was considered the most unfilial behavior one could exhibit towards their parents and ancestors.<sup>13</sup> Today, the majority of the South Korean population, apart from most Protestant Christians, still practice Confucian ancestral rituals, regardless of their religious orientations as Buddhists, Catholics, or non-believers.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, some early Korean Protestants have given up their Christian faith and have returned to their Confucian practices, whereas the majority have begun an

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<sup>10</sup> Maurice Teo, *The Catholic Church in People's Republic of China (PRC)*, (Pasay, Incontro Continentale Asia-Oceania, 2009), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Park, 12.

<sup>12</sup> "you are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols" *Acts. New International Version (NIV) Bible*.

<sup>13</sup> Park, *Cultural Blending*, 176.

<sup>14</sup> Park, *Cultural Blending*, 13.

alternative Christian memorial ritual that has now become prevalent among modern-day South Korean Christians: *chudoyebae*.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Chudoyebae*, the Christian Alternative**

The first record of *chudoyebae* belongs to that of Moo-Young Lee, a convert of Chungdong First Methodist Church, at the funeral service for his deceased mother.<sup>16</sup> Replacing ancestral worship, *chudoyebae* is a practice consisting of seven sections in the following order: hymns, opening prayer by head of family, Bible passage readings, recollections of the deceased, hymns, silent prayers, and a dismissal prayer.<sup>17</sup> The funeral rites consist of four services at different intervals: when one passes away (*imjong yebae*), when the deceased's body is placed in a coffin (*ipgwan yebae*), when the coffin is moved to the burial ground (*balin yebae*), and when the coffin is placed in a grave (*hagwan yebae*). If the body is cremated, the first three services are the same whereas the last is replaced by a service held at the crematorium. According to the record of Moo-Young Lee, many of the church members attending his mother's funeral were deeply inspired by Lee's Christian memorial service and began to practice it. In 1934, the Korean Methodist Church approved *chudoyebae* as an appropriate memorial service. Shortly after, the Korean Methodist Church also introduced a worship order for *chudoyebae*, "a memorial service for the deceased parents," in the *Kyoreewa jangjung* (The Book of Disciplines) in 1935.<sup>18</sup>

### **Confucian-Christian Interplay Seen in *Chudoyebae***

As an alternative to the Confucian *jesa*, *chudoyebae* is a Christian funeral service with traces of Confucian tradition. Although *chudoyebae* includes Christian elements, such as hymns, sermons, prayers, and

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<sup>15</sup> Park, *Cultural Blending*, 49.

<sup>16</sup> Ahn, *Chudo Yebae in the Korean Protestantism*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-5.

benedictions, a complex Confucian-Christian interplay can be seen in its practice. A unique element in *chudoyebae* is the opening prayer by the head of the family.<sup>19</sup> This element demonstrates the subtle presence of the Confucian social structure within the Christian *chudoyebae* memorial service. The scripture reading that follows this prayer is regularly centered around Biblical passages relating to the theme of ancestors and the family.<sup>20</sup> Selected passages reflect the importance of ancestral-familial ties in South Korean Christians. Furthermore, while there is no description of how to pay ‘silent tribute,’ many Christians express their respect and love for their deceased parents or family members by bowing their heads, similar to bowing before the ancestral table in Confucian practice.<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, concepts of Confucian morality and community formation are still present in Korean Christian funeral rites. Rather than neglecting the importance of ancestral rituals, South Korean Christians regard the memorial service as one of the most important family rituals. The guidelines for *chudoyebae* provide lengthy instructions that emphasize solemnity and respect for the deceased during funeral service, therefore maintaining the integrity of Confucianism by paying silent tribute to one’s deceased ancestors. After the worship service, there is often sharing of food among the family members and funeral participants. These meals serve to extend vertical unity between older generations and younger generations as well as horizontal unity among all family members.<sup>22</sup> Through prayers and meals, *chudoyebae* strengthens unity and identity among familial members during times of hardship. This practice further parallels the emphasis on community formation present in Confucian ritual practice.

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<sup>19</sup> Ahn, *Chudo Yebae in the Korean Protestantism*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

## Confrontational to Conciliatory

As Christian belief extends across generations, the relationship between God and one's ancestors in South Korea seems to have evolved from a confrontational to conciliatory relationship. According to Chang-Won Park, this societal shift can be described as a gradual shift from "God-versus-my ancestors" to "God-of-my ancestors."<sup>23</sup> Unlike the Confucian emphasis on reverence for one's ancestors as a means to good health and future prosperity, Christianity emphasizes remembrance of one's ancestors as a means to find emotional and spiritual recovery in God, and to have belief in the resurrection of the dead.<sup>24</sup> Although early converts were obliged to choose God at the expense of their ancestors, such conflicts seem to have diminished in long-standing Protestant families.<sup>25</sup> Evidenced by the *chudoyebae*, the Confucian-Christian interplay evident in modern-day Christian death rites not only serves to pay respect to one's ancestors, but also serves to maintain the bonds between these ancestors' descendants. By observing these rituals, descendants are able to express filial respect towards their ancestors and strengthen their sense of rootedness and identity. Furthermore, these rites serve as symbolic meetings between the family's past (ancestors), the family's present (parents), and the family's future (children), evoking respect for the past, stimulating devotion towards the present, and envisaging hope for the future. As a result, the *chudoyebae* embodies both Christian and Confucian elements and strikes a distinctive cultural balance between the core values of both religious traditions: filial duty to one's ancestors and religious piety to God.

## Conclusion

Death rites performed by South Koreans are a complex sociocultural phenomenon that have evolved across centuries with the introduction of

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<sup>23</sup> Park, *Cultural Blending*, 63.

<sup>24</sup> Ahn, *Chudo Yebae in the Korean Protestantism*, 26

<sup>25</sup> Park, *Cultural Blending*, 180

new religious influences such as Chinese Confucianism and Western Christianity. Residing in a contemporary society deeply rooted in Confucian tradition, South Korean Christians have struggled to balance filial duty to ancestors and religious piety to God. As ancestral veneration and God are core and conflicting aspects of South Korean religious and cultural identity, South Korean Christians have strived to resolve such conflicting elements by innovating new death rites such as the *chudoyebae*. With the establishment of *chudoyebae* as a Christian syncretic form of Confucian ancestral worship, modern-day South Korean Christians are now better able to practice Christianity and venerate their ancestors without significant tension with Confucian norms of South Korean society.

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