

# Who Are Venerated in Contemporary Domestic Ancestral Rites? *An Aspect of Ritual Change among Urbanites in Korea*

Song-Chul KIM

## Abstract

*Ancestral rites have a long tradition in Korea. The norms applied to traditional “Confucian-style” ancestral rites were likely adopted in the eighteenth century when Neo-Confucianism was firmly established as the state ideology of the Joseon dynasty. According to these norms, ancestors up to four generations removed are venerated at the home of the primogeniture descendants on their death days and on holidays. However, since the start of industrialization in the 1960s and the ensuing urbanization, ancestral rites have undergone a variety of changes. In the 1970s and 1980s, changes occurred in the ritual procedures, food offerings, and the time of day that the domestic rites begin. In the 1990s, another major change occurred when the range of ancestors covered by the domestic rites shrank. Most urbanites now venerate ancestors no more than two generations removed at domestic rites, especially on death-day rites, instead of the four generations removed prescribed by the traditional norms. This study presents several patterns in current domestic rites, and provides reasons for such a change, including urban lifestyles, the rise of female employment, changing inheritance patterns, and the waning importance of yangban status.*

**Keywords:** ancestral rites, domestic rites, Korean tradition, Confucian norms, range of ancestors, ritual change, effects of urbanization

---

Song-Chul KIM is Professor in the Department of Korean Studies at Inje University, and a researcher at the Institute for Korean Culture and Cultural Strategy at Inje University.  
E-mail: langsk@inje.ac.kr.

In the middle of his great-grandfather's death-day rite (*gijesa* 忌祭祀) at the apartment of his father's older brother, K<sup>1</sup> is wondering whether he will continue this tradition for his great-grandfather when his uncle passes away and it is his turn to carry out the ancestral rites. Because he never met his great-grandfather, or even his grandfather, who passed away when K's father was eight years old, he feels little attachment to these ancestors.

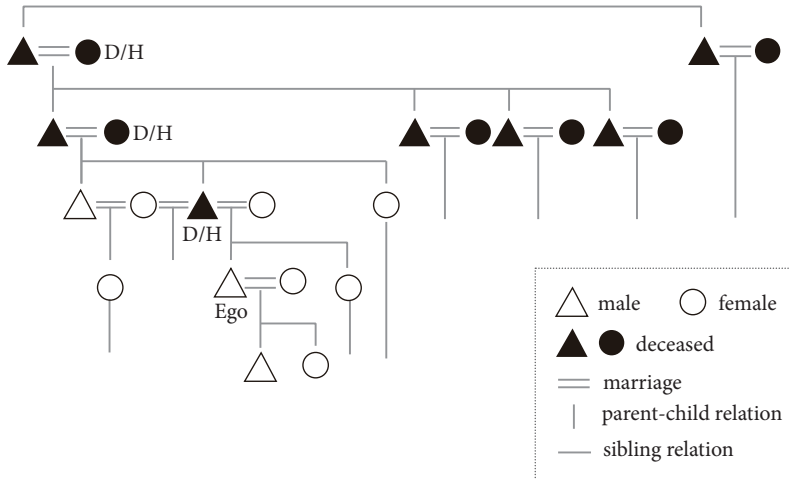
When K looks around the room, he sees only his son and his uncle, because his father passed away a few months ago. He remembers how many more family members participated in the rites even ten years ago, let alone when he was very young. His uncle's living room, where the rites were held, used to be packed with around 20 descendants. His grandfather's younger brothers and cousins, as well as their children, all used to come to pay respect to the ancestors until his grandfather's younger brothers and cousins passed away around 15 years ago. Since then, things have changed. His father's cousins—the children of his grandfather's younger brothers—have excused themselves for religious reasons, and the descendants of his grandfather's cousins say that K's grandparents and great-grandparents are not their direct ancestors, so their participation in those services is not mandatory.

In addition, K remembers that ancestor rites were held a lot more frequently in the past, because more ancestors had to be venerated. On holidays like Lunar New Year's Day and Chuseok (Harvest Moon Day), he used to write four paper tablets for ancestors from his grandparents to his great-great-great grandparents, and all eight of these ancestors were venerated again on their death days, a total of ten ancestral rites a year. These days, however, the extent of ancestors venerated is just two generations up from his uncle's vantage point. This may be because members of his extended family have decided not to come to the rites at his uncle's home, or because K is not able to attend all eight ancestors' death-day rites since he lives far away from his uncle.

Ancestral rites in Korea have changed not only in terms of procedure or food offerings, as Lee (1989) points out, but also in terms of which

---

1. Informants in this study are indicated by their family name initials.



**Figure 1.** K's Domestic Ancestral Rites

*Note:* D denotes “recipients of death-day rites, and H denotes “recipients of holiday rites K is denoted as “ego.” In cases in which the D or H is to the side of a couple, both members of the couple are venerated.

ancestors are honored through such rites. Nowadays, few follow Confucian tradition and hold or participate in rites for ancestors up to four generations removed from the highest-generation living male descendant in the primogeniture line.<sup>2</sup> Instead, like K, most Koreans seem to hold or participate in the domestic rites only for ancestors up to two generations removed, particularly in the case of death-day rites.

This study attempts to illuminate current patterns in domestic ancestral rites in Korea and explain why they have replaced centuries-old Confucian norms within the past 20 years.<sup>3</sup>

2. Out of the 45 families the author studied, only two were still holding or participating in domestic rites for ancestors up to four generations removed on death days and holidays.

3. Data in this study was collected through interviews with 45 informants in the Busan metropolitan area in 2012. The informants were mostly males between 40 and 70 years old. They were asked about their participation of domestic ancestral rites (both death-day rites and holiday rites).

## Traditional Norms for Ancestral Rites

Ancestral rites have a long tradition in Korea. Norms applied to the traditional Confucian-style ancestral rites were likely adopted fully in the eighteenth century, when Neo-Confucianism was firmly established as the state ideology of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910). Those norms, which describe who is considered to be an ancestor and how ancestors are worshiped, were elaborated on in the ritual manual *Sarye pyeollam* (Handbook of Four Rituals), which was compiled in the eighteenth century based on Chinese Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi's prescriptions for family rituals (Lee 1987). The *yangban* (privileged gentry class) were the first to adopt these norms regarding ancestral rites, along with the erection of ancestor shrines and the publication of genealogies to reconfirm their status in society. Commoners then followed the *yangban*'s lead, through the process of *yangbanization* (Asakura 1998),<sup>4</sup> in an attempt to acquire socio-economic benefits associated with *yangban* status.

According to these norms, ancestors up to four generations removed are to be venerated at the home of the primogeniture descendants on their death days, and on holidays,<sup>5</sup> and ancestors five or more generations removed are to be venerated at family grave sites on certain days. Thus, ancestral rites in Korea can be divided into two categories: domestic rituals and lineage rituals (Janelli and Janelli 1982, 86, 122). Lineage rituals (*sije* 時祭, *myoje* 墓祭, or *myosa* 墓祀) are the ancestral rites performed at their gravesites or the lineage shrine by the members of a local lineage to honor all ancestors five or more generations removed, on designated days

---

4. *Yangbanization* refers to the adoption of the *yangban* lifestyle by commoners who hoped to be recognized as *yangban* later. In particular, the adoption of the *yangban*'s ritual life was a very effective way to become accepted as *yangban*.

5. The only exceptions are those who were granted *bulcheonjiwi* 不遷之位 (status not to be removed [from domestic rites]) by the state during the Joseon dynasty. They are venerated at the primogeniture descendants' homes even when five or more generations have elapsed since their death. *Bulcheonjiwi* was an utmost honor to the descendants (Lee 1987), since it meant that their superior *yangban* status was guaranteed by the state. The importance of *yangban* during the Joseon dynasty will be discussed in detail later in this article.

in the 10th lunar month. Since lineage rituals are a lineage group activity for all descendants who share an apical ancestor, it does not really matter whether particular ancestors are lineal or collateral to the particular descendants.

Domestic rituals are further divided into death-day rites (*gijesa*) and holiday rites (*charye* 茶禮). At a death-day rite, the deceased ancestor and his or her spouse are venerated, and on holidays, all ancestors up to four generations removed through the primogeniture line are venerated together. Although the content of food offerings and the number of wine offerings may differ between the death-day and holiday rites, the ritual procedure is otherwise nearly the same for the two kinds of rites. Also, they both differ from lineage rituals in that only lineal descendants of the deceased ancestors are required to participate.

Holiday rites were performed more frequently during the Joseon dynasty, and even up until the 1960s, some families held additional rites on such holidays as Hansik (the 105th day after the winter solstice) and Dano (the 5th day of the 5th lunar month). Yet these days, aside from a few ardent Confucianists, most Koreans hold rites only on the two major holidays, Lunar New Year's Day and Chuseok. Therefore, an ancestor covered by the domestic rituals is venerated four times a year: on his or her death day, on his or her spouse's death day, and on the two major holidays.

Ancestral rites are motivated by descendants' concern for the well-being of their deceased ancestors, but also by real-world social goals such as solidifying agnatic cohesion among descendants of the same lineage and asserting the *yangban* status of the lineage (Janelli and Janelli 1982, 92-93, 123-135). The former is more conspicuously expressed in the domestic rites for close ancestors and the latter in the lineage rites for remote ancestors. As mentioned earlier, since all descendants pay respect to all ancestors five or more generations removed, lineal or collateral participation in the lineage ritual is "not as descendants of individual ancestors but as members of a corporate descent group" (Janelli and Janelli 1982, 127). By performing a magnificent lineage ritual paid for with a corporate ritual fund mostly obtained through land ownership, a lineage could assert its superior status, in addition to promoting agnatic solidarity among its members.

On the other hand, domestic rituals are viewed more as an extension of filial piety (*hyo* 孝) (Sorensen and Kim 2004), although they also have implications for status assertion.<sup>6</sup> In domestic rites, ancestors are considered old, dependent, and immobile parents who constantly need their children's care. This caring is the core of filial piety, and offering appropriate food is a big part of proper caring. That is why ritual food offerings are prepared in large quantities for any ancestral rite in Korea. Traditionally, this kind of caring for one's parents might have started on the parents' 60th birthday, the usual age of retirement from strenuous manual work, with a big party and two deep bows from the children, which is similar to the ancestral rite. Even today, the caring for ancestors with food offerings continues past death through the funeral and ancestral rites, although the rites are held less frequently as generations pass by.

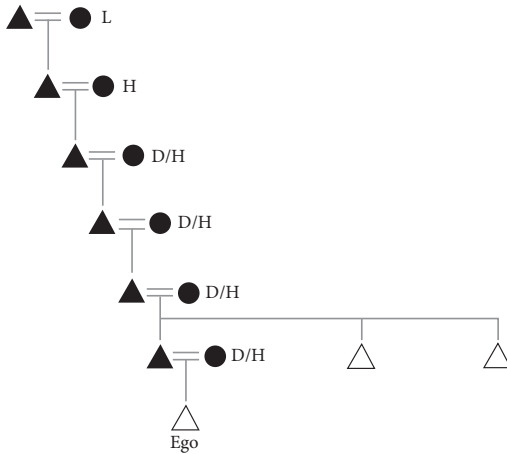
As to the range of ancestors covered by the lineage ritual, there seems to have been little disagreement among Koreans. In short, those ancestral who are not venerated at the domestic rites are venerated at the lineage rites. Since ancestors up to four generations removed from the primogeniture descendant are traditionally venerated at the domestic rites, ancestors above four generations removed are venerated at the lineage rites.<sup>7</sup> Another condition for the transfer of rites from domestic to lineage is the creation of a ritual fund by the descendants to pay for the rites. If the money necessary to hold lineage rites for ancestors five generations removed is not prepared, an alternative may be to temporarily hold domestic rites on holidays for those ancestors (Janelli and Janelli 1982, 115-116), since the food is prepared anyway and adding more ancestors requires little effort.

On the other hand, as to the range of ancestors that should be cov-

---

6. As manifested in the old Korean saying, "Perform ancestor rites and entertain guests" (*bongjesa jeopbingaek* 奉祭祀接客), performing ancestor rites has long been regarded as a duty of respectable *yangban*.

7. Although *Sarye pyeollam* states that ancestors who are five generations removed in the primogeniture line yet have other living descendants within four generations should be venerated at the homes of those living descendants in rotation, this prescription has not been observed (Lee 1977b). The author suspects this practice is related to Korea's tradition of unequal inheritance (in favor of first sons).



**Figure 2.** Management of Ancestral Rites of a Family in the 1970s

Source: Adapted from Janelli and Janelli (1982, 116).

Note: L denotes “recipients of lineage rites.”

ered by domestic rituals, there were disagreements as early as the fifteenth century, relatively early in the Joseon period. The Joseon government published *Gyeongguk daejeon* (National Code) in 1485, and specified the range of ancestors that should be covered by domestic rituals, which differed according to the family’s status. That is, level six and higher government officials should venerate ancestors up to three generations removed, level seven and lower officials up to two, and commoners just their parents. However, Confucian scholars of that time strongly opposed the government’s instructions, arguing that the idea of limiting family rituals went against the spirit of Zhu Xi’s recommendations. It would seem that the *yangban* class first supported this opposition, and performed the rites for the ancestors up to four generations removed to assert their status, and commoners later followed *yangban*’s move.

More recently, in 1969, in the early stages of Korean industrialization, the Korean government decided that ancestral rites and other family rites were a waste of resources, and announced the *Gajeong uirye junchik* (Fam-

ily Ritual Standards), which limited domestic ancestral rites to parents and grandparents, as well as simplified the food offerings. However, not many people abided by the new regulations, especially after the collapse of the Yusin regime in 1979, and so the *Gajeong uirye junchik* did not significantly affect people's perception of appropriate ancestral rites.

Between the eighteenth century when the traditional norms regarding ancestral rites were fully adopted and the industrialization of the country, domestic ancestral rites had not changed much in Korea. With the start of industrialization in the 1960s, practices that deviated from traditional norms began being reported; notably, distribution of ritual duties among brothers (Lee 1977a), veneration of (or participation in the rites of) collateral ancestors (Lee 1977b; Janelli and Janelli 1982, 114-121), and veneration of ancestors at a non-primogeniture descendant's home (Kim 1997). However, until approximately the late 1980s, there was an unspoken consensus about the range of ancestors covered by domestic rites.

### **New Patterns in Domestic Ancestral Rites**

After industrialization started in the 1960s, a great majority of the rural population migrated to urban centers, and an urban-centered society and economy emerged in Korea. This massive urban migration, especially of the younger generation, also means that close kinsmen who used to perform domestic ancestral rites together did not live in the same village as their parents and relatives, which in turn brought about changes in the domestic rites.

One of the immediate changes in the domestic ancestral rite was that those who had migrated could no longer attend all death-day rites (Lee 1989), particularly when they fell on a weekday, as travelling to their hometown was very troublesome, if not impossible. If those out-migrants happened to be the adult primogeniture descendant, not attending the domestic rites was considered to be a serious breach of traditional propriety. However, probably because of the "development-first" social atmosphere of the time, they were ultimately excused from death-day rites.



Later, when their parents passed away and it was their turn to hold domestic rites, those out-migrants were more than willing to hold the rites at their homes in the cities, as they wanted to use the occasion as an opportunity for brothers and close kinsmen living nearby to gather together, and for educating their children regarding the family roots (Lee 1989). Nevertheless, further changes in the domestic rites were inevitable, and those changes included the kinds of food offered at the rites and the procedure of domestic rites, reflecting the increasing influence of urban Western lifestyles. Lee (1989) points out that many of these changes may have been due to younger generations' unfamiliarity with the traditional domestic rites that they had stopped attending after they migrated.

The starting time of the death-day rites was also affected, due to the enactment of the national curfew from 1955 to 1982 (Lee 1989). Traditionally, death-day rites were performed at the first hour of the day the ancestor passed away, or after midnight of the preceding day. However, because the national curfew made it impossible to travel after midnight,<sup>8</sup> many urbanites began to hold the domestic rites around eight in the evening prior to the death day so that the participants could return home without much trouble. Even after the national curfew was lifted, this practice continued among the vast majority of urbanites since it was convenient and more suitable to the urban lifestyle.

Starting in the 1990s, another major change in domestic ancestral rites has emerged: the range of ancestors covered by the domestic rites has decreased.<sup>9</sup> As previously shown in the case of K, the typical pattern in modern domestic rites is to only venerate ancestors up to two generations removed from the living primogeniture male descendant.<sup>10</sup> This study did

---

8. The national curfew, between midnight and four o'clock in the morning, was strictly enforced in the cities and coastal areas while somewhat ignored in the inland rural areas.

9. The author is not sure exactly when this change first emerged. Most of the 45 informants the author interviewed replied that they have been holding the domestic rites only for ancestors two generations removed for approximately the past 20 years.

10. Out of the 45 cases the author studied, two families still hold or participate in domestic rites, both death-day and holiday rites, for ancestors up to four generations removed, five families for those up to three generations removed, and the remaining 38 families for those up to two generations removed.

find a few exceptions in which ancestors beyond two generations removed are venerated at home on holidays or on other designated dates, yet these can be viewed as transitional practices in the sense that rites are not held exclusively for ancestors beyond two generations removed on their death days.

As for ancestors three or four generations removed who, according to traditional norms, should be covered by domestic rites, there are several strategies employed. One such strategy is that which is employed by Y's family. Since Y's father passed away just a few years ago (though his mother is still alive), he has decided to continue venerating his great-grandparents on holiday rites—along with his father and grandparents—instead of completely omitting all domestic rites for them. As mentioned earlier, at holiday rites, the ritual food is prepared for closer ancestors regardless, so adding a few more ancestors requires only another paper tablet and extra bowls of rice and soup. However, because he has not been in contact with the distant cousin who is responsible for his great-great-grandparents' rites for more than twenty years, he does not know how they are held, let alone participate in them. The practice of holding rites for three generations

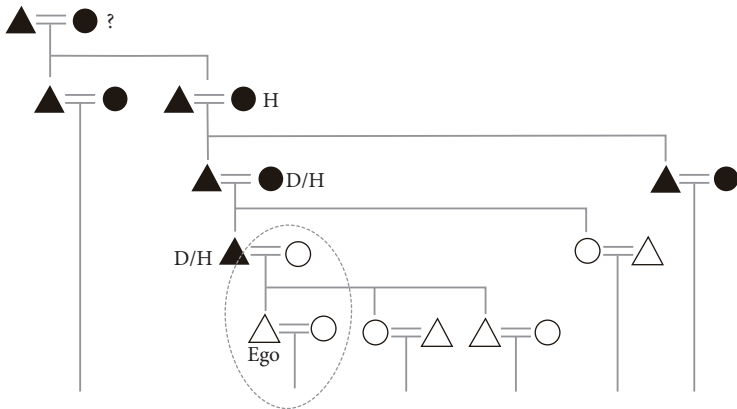


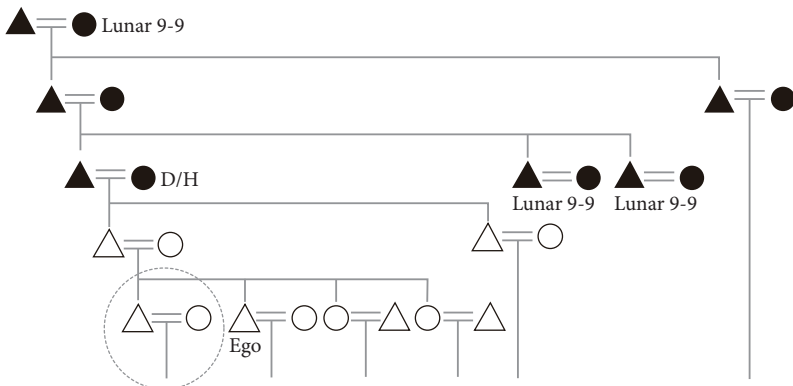
Figure 3. Y's Domestic Ancestral Rites

Note: The dotted circle (○) means "family in charge of the domestic rites."

above oneself, is more prevalent when, like Y, the primogeniture descendants who are responsible for the domestic rites have living mothers or uncles (who are within the two generations of the ancestors covered only on holiday domestic rites); this can be viewed as a transitional practice.

Other families venerate their great-grandparents or great-great-grandparents at their grave sites, when they go to tidy up the graves during the Lunar New Year and Chuseok holiday seasons. This could be considered similar to holding lineage rites, and the informants for this study actually say that during those holiday seasons they hold *myosa* for ancestors three or four generations removed. However, the rites held by our informants are confined to lineal ancestors and the scale is not as large as traditional lineage rites. Also, since they have to visit the family gravesites anyway around the Lunar New Year and Chuseok holidays, these families take advantage of the opportunity and pay respect to the ancestors three or four generations removed during this visit. Thus, it is appropriate to view this practice as an extension of domestic rituals instead of as a lineage ritual.

Still, other families, like B's family, designate one day per year to venerate ancestors three or four generations removed at home. B venerates his grandparents and great-grandparents at his older brother's home on their



**Figure 4.** B's Domestic Ancestral Rites

Note: "Lunar 9-9" denotes "recipients of the rite held on the 9th day of the 9th lunar month."

death days and on holidays. This covers two generations up from his (still living) father's vantage point. However, his great-great-grandparents are venerated on the 9th day of the 9th lunar month (which used to be a date for a holiday rite during the Joseon dynasty), and during this rite his grandfather's two younger brothers and their wives, who do not have any male descendants, are also venerated, although they are collateral ancestors.

In one unusual case, informant L's family venerates all the ancestors for whom it is ritually responsible on holidays and the third Saturday of May. This particular date was arbitrarily set by the informant L's deceased father when he was alive. L's father did not like his cousins and their sons skipping ancestral rites—especially his grandparents' death-day rites—and not helping with the expenses for food offerings, even though they were much better off than him. To simplify the situation and thus ensure their participation and support, he randomly selected a weekend in May (the month his grandfather passed away) to hold death-day rites for all ancestors up to two generations removed.

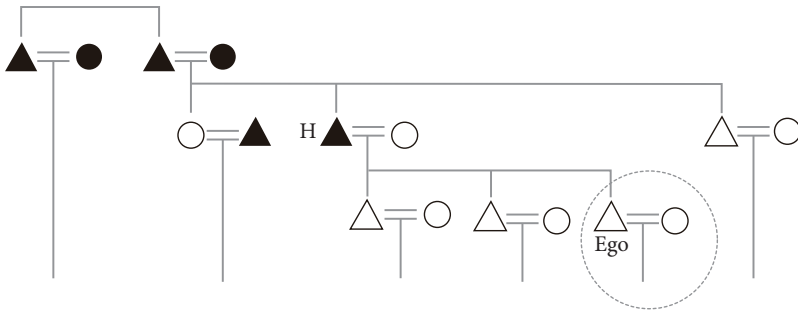
In a more extreme case, the families of informant C and his two cousins in the primogeniture line omit all death-day rites and just only perform holiday rites for the ancestors for whom they are responsible. This is because it is almost impossible for them to get together on death days that fall on weekdays since all three live far from one another and they are unable to take days off from work.

A few cases were found in which domestic rites are performed at the homes of non-primogeniture descendants.<sup>11</sup> The reasons behind this practice include: financial difficulties of primogeniture descendants, religious objections, or international immigration. In these cases, the descendants in the primogeniture line do not participate in the ancestral rites, and there is a tendency for the range of ancestors covered by the domestic rites to be smaller. Also, regardless of the reason, there is a good possibility that this situation caused conflicts among brothers.

---

11. To be exact, among those interviewed, six such cases were found. The author suspects that the proportion of families doing this has increased over the years, but could not find any sources for comparison.

J is the third son of his family, and his two older brothers are Christians. As a result, at his mother's insistence, J has assumed the responsibility for the ancestral rites. However, because as the third son he would not normally be responsible for holding any rites, J holds holiday rites only for his deceased father and no one else, as a silent protest toward his two brothers, who have left all of the responsibilities to him. He admits that over the years there have been arguments among the three brothers and their mother over ritual obligations, yet nothing has changed. This conflict between brothers over ritual obligations may be closely related to changes in the inheritance process; this will be discussed in detail in the next section.



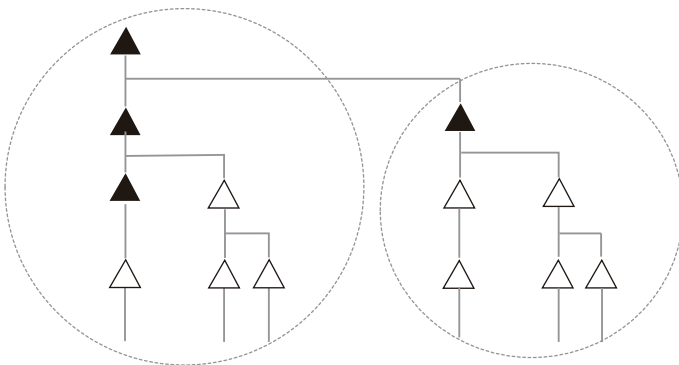
**Figure 5.** J's Domestic Ancestral Rites

### Reasons behind the Ritual Change

One immediate explanation offered by informants for the change in the range of ancestors covered at domestic rites is that ancestral rites do not really fit into the current urban lifestyle. First of all, brothers, cousins, and other family members who have to participate in the rites do not always live near each other. Rather, they live wherever their work is, which means that participation in the rites, death-day rites in particular, is tricky when they fall on weekdays. In addition, apartments, the dominant housing type in contemporary Korea, cannot comfortably accommodate a large num-

ber of people for a couple of days, as is necessary when performing ancestral rites on holidays. Besides, the expense and effort necessary for the preparations for ancestral rites can be burdensome. These factors make people hesitant to hold ancestral rites, especially when they expect only a few family members to participate.

If brothers or cousins do not live near each other, it may be physically impossible for junior-line family members to participate in the holiday rites of the primogeniture line, even for ancestors who are lineal to them. G's family is in this situation. G lives in Busan, and his (primogeniture-line) uncle moved to Seoul decades ago, so his cousins and their children live there. G has managed to participate in his grandparents' death-day rites (more so when his cousin was alive), yet holidays are a different story. If they all lived near each other like in traditional times, G would first go to his cousin's son's home to pay respect to G's grandparents and then return to his home to venerate his parents. However, this is now impossible, so on holiday mornings G's family prepares the rites for his parents and waits for the phone call from Seoul. When those in Seoul finish the rites for G's grandparents, they call G to let him know to start the rites for his parents. If this kind of practice persists, it will also affect the range of ancestors Koreans venerate at home in the future.



**Figure 6.** G's Holiday Rites Groupings

*Note:* Female members are omitted.

The rise of the urban lifestyle has also been accompanied by an increase in the rate of female employment. According to national statistics, the female employment rate in Korea had already reached nearly 50 percent by the mid-1990s, which was twice as high as in the 1980s (Statistics Korea 2009). The significance of this figure is that it affects the proper preparation of food offerings essential for the rites. Although the primary obligation for rituals falls on primogeniture male descendants, they rely on their wives for the preparation of food offerings. The following episode, recounted by one of the informants, demonstrates how difficult it is for dual-income families to hold ancestral rites several times a year.

S is the first son of the family and has been holding domestic rites for his father and grandparents at his home with the participation of his two younger brothers and their children. The three brothers work full time, as do their wives. Several years ago, his father's death-day rite fell on a weekday, so S's wife took a day off and prepared the food offerings with her sisters-in-law. When they had dinner after the rite, the three brothers got drunk and complained about the offered food, which infuriated their wives. The three wives declared that they would not prepare the food offerings anymore, so the following year, the three brothers had to hold the domestic rites with only fruits and dried fish (simplified food offerings prepared when visiting the grave sites on holidays), which made S's mother angry. Finally, after the three brothers apologized to their wives and promised to do the dishes after the rites, the family's domestic rites returned to normal.

Informants further explained the changes in the range of ancestors venerated from a reciprocity perspective. According to informant Y, ancestral rites, a part of filial piety, are a way for children to repay parents and grandparents for their efforts in rearing and nurturing them. In traditional times, many got married in their teens, so families with three or four living generations were common; there were even some five-generation families. For them, domestic rites for ancestors up to four generations removed were appropriate, since they had directly interacted with many of those people. In contrast, Koreans today do not marry at such a young age and most people did not know their great-grandparents in person. For this reason, in contemporary Korean society, it is generally considered to be more ratio-

nal to venerate ancestors only up to one's grandparents.

G, a man in his late 60s, even provides esoteric theories about the human spirit to explain the ritual change. According to G, it takes 60 years “for white bones to turn to dust and dirt” (*baekgol-i jinto-doeda*), meaning not only the human body but also the spirit disappears from this world 60 years after death as well. In traditional times, three or four generations would pass in the 60 years after the death of a person, yet now it is just two generations because of the increase in age at the time of marriage as previously mentioned. For this reason, G maintains, venerating ancestors beyond two generations removed is not necessary because there are no spirits to accept the food offerings.

In addition to the reasons given by the informants, the author suspects that changes in inheritance patterns and process might affect the range of ancestors covered at domestic rites. The traditional inheritance pattern in Korea was an unequal distribution of the father's property among sons in favor of the eldest. The inheritance process started when younger sons got married and ended when the father passed away. That is, when a first son got married, he lived with his parents. In contrast, when a younger son got married, his father usually helped him set up his household. When a father passed away, all of his remaining wealth was given to the first son, and this was a greater amount than what the younger brothers had received. Yet this extra portion came with the obligation to continue the family line and, more importantly, fulfill ritual obligations toward ancestors (Lee 1975, 209-220; Kim 2001). Thus, primogeniture descendants were solely responsible for the preparation of ancestral rites at their homes.

Since the beginning of industrialization, however, sons have not lived in the same village as their fathers, and this has affected the inheritance process: now, it starts when first sons set up their own families with help from their fathers in the urban area, where their job is located, and continues on with younger sons. Later, when fathers pass away, what is left is distributed among brothers, and now even sisters, and there seems to be no conspicuous favoring of the first sons. Thus, first sons might think that ritual obligations should not fall solely on them, since they do not receive extra inheritance—whereas younger sons might insist that it is traditional



for first sons to take care of the ancestors. As shown in the previous section, it seems that conflicts among brothers over the ritual obligations may affect the range of ancestors venerated at home.

The insignificance of *yangban* status in contemporary Korea has also contributed to this ritual change. During the Joseon dynasty, when other means of climbing up the social ladder or accumulating wealth were almost nonexistent, attaining *yangban* status and passing the state examination to become a government official was the surest way to wealth and power (Kim 1997). After passing the state examination, government officials were granted land from the state (especially during the early and mid-Joseon dynasty) and this land was typically inherited by their descendants. In order to assert their status, the *yangban* class established local lineages, published genealogies, and performed ancestor rites frequently. In addition, commoners tried by all means to become *yangban* in order to enjoy the same privileges, and their success is evident in the increase of the *yangban* class from five percent of the population in early Joseon to 20-30 percent at the end of the Joseon dynasty.

This notion of *yangban* status persisted at least through the preindustrialized, agriculture-based period of Korea.<sup>12</sup> With the onset of industrialization, however, personal achievements (in fields other than agriculture) became more important in determining people's wealth and power. Later, when older generations who had spent their prime years in preindustrialized Korea passed away, *yangban* status became insignificant to most Koreans, as did ancestral rites.

## Conclusion: Traditional Norms and New Norms

Considering the decrease in the range of ancestors venerated at domestic rites in contemporary society, it may seem that Koreans are less serious

---

12. According to Asakura (1998), *yangbanization* was pursued even in the 1970s and this can be seen as evidence that *yangban* status was still an important frame of reference among members of the older generation who grew up in preindustrialized Korea.

about ancestral rites than before, but most informants agree that ancestral rites are still not something to be given up completely. Their attitude toward ancestral rites might best be described as ambivalent. On the one hand, an ancestral rite is a good opportunity for brothers and close relatives to get together, and is also a good occasion to educate the next generation about the family roots. Moreover, people feel good about performing ancestral rites, with some saying that they feel they will be blessed by the ancestors after the rites. On the other hand, getting the family together is difficult for most urbanites and the expense and effort needed for the rites are not something most people can disregard.

For most social norms, there are common practices that deviate from, yet coexist with them. Kinship behavior norms, including ancestral rites, cannot but be the same. Bourdieu (1990, 166-179) proposed a distinction between “official kinship” and “practical kinship.” By “official kinship,” he meant the abstraction of norms, rules, and regulations of kin groups, and by “practical kinship,” he meant the transformation of such an abstraction into strategies of practice by active agents in everyday life. According to Bourdieu, the function of official kinship is to order the social world and to legitimate that ordering, whereas practical kinship is used by individuals to achieve specific social goals in everyday life. In a word, practical kinship refers to “what people do with kinship,” and official kinship deals with “what people say about kinship.”

The discrepancy between norms and practices occurs because human behavior is dependent on not only what one has been taught to do (their culture) but also the socioeconomic context in which such behavior occurs (Harrell 1982, 8-15). Harrell (1982, 9) describes “socioeconomic context” as “the sum total of exogenous, given factors to which people with certain cultural rules have to adapt their social behavior.”

When practices that deviate from established norms persist, new norms are created. Ancestral rites in Korea have changed and modern practices now differ from traditional norms, mainly due to the changing socioeconomic context, a result of industrialization and urbanization. If current ancestral rite practices like those described by this study persist, they can be expected to someday replace traditional norms.

---

**REFERENCES**

- Academy of Korean Studies, ed. 2001. *Dongasia munhwa jeontong-gwa hanguk sahoe* (East Asian Cultural Tradition and Korean Society). Seoul: Baeksan Seodang.
- Asakura, Toshio. 1998. "Aspects of Yangbanization." In *The Anthropology of Korea: East Asian Perspectives*, edited by Mutsuhiko Shima and Roger L. Janelli, 191-211. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford University.
- Harrell, Stevan. 1982. *Ploughshare Village: Culture and Context in Taiwan*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Ikels, Charlotte, ed. 2004. *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Janelli, Roger L., and Dawnhee Yim Janelli. 1982. *Ancestor Worship and Korean Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kim, Song-Chul. 1997. "Jongjok-gwa sahoe: hanguk-gwa jungguk-ui bigyo" (Lineage and Society: A Comparison between Korea and China). *Bigyo munhwa yeongu* (Cross-Cultural Studies) 3: 109-129.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. "Hanguk gieop-eseoui gajokjuui-ui pyochul" (The Presence of Familism in Korean Corporations). In *Dongasia munhwa jeontong-gwa hanguk sahoe* (East Asian Cultural Tradition and Korean Society), edited by the Academy of Korean Studies, 236-258. Seoul: Baeksan Seodang.
- Lee, Kwang-Kyu. 1975. *Hanguk gajok-ui gujo bunseok* (Structural Analysis of Korean Family). Seoul: Iljisa.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1977a. "Chinjok chegye-wa chinjok jojik" (Lineage System and Lineage Organization). *Hanguk munhwa illyuhak* (Korean Cultural Anthropology) 9: 119-122.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1977b. "Chinjok jipdan-gwa josang sungbae" (Descent Groups and Ancestor Worship). *Hanguk munhwa illyuhak* (Korean Cultural Anthropology) 9: 1-24.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1987. "Ancestor Worship and Kinship Structure in Korea." In *Religion and Ritual in Korean Society*, edited by Laurel Kendall and Griffin Dix, 56-70. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1989. "The Practice of Traditional Family Rituals in Contemporary Urban Korea." *Journal of Ritual Studies* 3.2: 167-183.

- Sorensen, Clark, and Song-Chul Kim. 2004. "Filial Piety in Contemporary Urban Southeast Korea: Practices and Discourses." In *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia*, edited by Charlotte Ikels, 153-181. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Statistics Korea. 2009. *2008 Gyeongje hwaldong ingu yeonbo* (Annual Report on the Economically Active Population Survey, 2008). Seoul: Statistics Korea.