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Original Article

Ancestral ritual food of Korean *jongka*: Historical changes of the table setting

Chang Hyeon Lee, Young Kim^{*}, Yang Suk Kim, Young Yun

National Institute of Agricultural Sciences, Rural Development Administration, Wanju, South Korea

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ABSTRACT

Background: In the agrarian society of historical Korea, *jesa* (祭祀, traditional rite from ancestors), rituals practiced for praying to the gods for a rich harvest, was one of the most important rites. Since its founding, Chosun adopted Korean Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism as its governing principles, and *karye* (家禮, family rites of Zhu Xi), the customary formalities of the family, was perceived as an obligatory guideline to practice with the Confucian rites. This study aims to examine periodic changes in how the ritual table was set up in Korea's traditional head families, or *jongka* (宗家, the traditional Korean family), from the Chosun Dynasty (1392–1910) to the present time.

Methods: We compared the varieties of food and their positioning in a diagram illustrating the placement of ritual food or *jinseoldo* (diagram illustrating the placement of ritual foods for ancestral rites), from *karye*, and three guides about family rites published during the Chosun era. We also analyzed the food arrangement style for ancestral rites from the ritual standards of the Japanese colonial era and the Simplified Family Ritual Standards issued by the Korean government. In addition, we visited eight head families to observe the varieties and positioning of fruits on the ritual table.

Results: During the Japanese rule (1910–1945), the Japanese Government General of Korea declared the ritual standards for the purpose of simplifying the ritual practices of Chosun, but with an ulterior motive to disintegrate Korea's traditional rites and put the nation under its control. After independence from Japanese rule, the Korean government insisted on a new set of family ritual standards. However, the standards imposed from the outside rarely affected the rites practiced by families.

Conclusion: The examination of historical records revealed that *kakarye* (家家禮, different rituals by each family) was being practiced among families, which causes only formalities to remain and sincerity to disappear. This is unfortunate as sincerity matters more than formalities. (The "Supplementary File" provides further explanations of each term mentioned in this article.)

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1. Introduction

Jongka (宗家) is the traditional Korean family system preserved and passed down to the eldest son of each generation for over 400 years since the mid-Chosun period. It gives that son full control and management of the family [1]. Although *jongka* has been under the influence of Chinese culture for a long period, it nevertheless has become a unique part of Korean history and culture. The food culture of *jongka* underwent an especially unique development [2]. *Jongka* food comprises an important part of the

history of Korean food. Each social stratum of the Chosun period was defined by a distinct pattern of life and culture that involved their food as well. During a strong monarchy, the food served to the king in the royal court was prepared in large quantities. Each time a courtly banquet ended, the abundant leftover royal foods, as well as the recipes of these dishes, were passed down to the royal vassals and formed the basis for the dishes unique to the *yangban* (gentry) class.

These recipes were passed down to the *yangban* households that were given the hereditary right to conduct the ancestral rites by the king. These form the *jongka* of today, and the passed down recipes that comprise the *jongka* food. *Jongka* food shares the history of its development with the royal food even though each of them belonged to different social stratum [1]. We introduced the definition of *jongka* and the characteristics of its daily food and ritual

^{*} Corresponding author. National Institute of Agricultural Sciences, Rural Development Administration, 166 Nongsaengmyeong-ro, Iseo-myeon, Wanju-gun, Jeollabuk-do 55365, South Korea.

E-mail address: kimyoun@korea.kr (Y. Kim).

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food for ancestral rites in an article published in the March 2018 issue of *Journal of Ethnic Foods* [1]. This article examines the *jongka* ritual food for ancestral rites in detail.

The food culture of *jongka* developed over the course of conducting dozens of ancestral rites annually and serving guests. The ancestral rites form an important ritual of *jongka*, and the food that is placed on the ritual table represents the defining characteristics of the family. The Korean ancestral rites have a long history, going back to the myth of *Dankun* (檀君) that describes the anniversary of Korea's founding. The myth of *Dankun* was recorded in *Samkuk Yusa* (三國遺事, Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms), a collection of legends, folktales, and historical accounts pertaining to the three kingdoms of Korea (Kokuryeo [高句麗], Baekje [百濟], and Silla [新羅]) compiled in the 13th century AD by the Buddhist monk Il-Yeon (一然, 1206–1289) [3]. *Hwanung* (桓雄), the son of *Hwanin* (桓因), the “Lord of Heaven,” descended to earth to govern a human society. When a bear and a tiger came to *Hwanung* asking to be made human, he gave them each a bundle of sacred food (a bundle of mugwort and 20 cloves of garlic) to eat and told them to stay in a cave for 100 days, after which time they would become human. While the tiger gave up, the bear persisted for 21 days and was turned into a human woman named *Ungnyeo* (熊女, bear-woman). *Ungnyeo* mated with *Hwanung* and gave birth to *Dankun*. He was *Dankunwangkeom* (檀君王儉, the mythological origins of Korea), the founder of Kochosun (Ancient Chosun, 2333 B.C.–676 AD), the first kingdom of Korea. The “*Dankun* (檀君)” in *Dankunwangkeom* refers to his religious authority, while the “*Wangkeom* (王儉)” title indicates that he was also a political leader. Therefore, the myth implies that Kochosun was a society where religious rituals and politics were united. As seen from this example, the rituals in Korea have a long history as their beginning coincides with the birth of the nation.

In traditional Korea's agrarian society, the celestial god worship ritual was one of the most important practices. The unity of religious rituals and politics was passed down to ancient nations where harvest rituals centered around praying to heavenly gods were developed including *Yeongko* (迎鼓) of Bu-yeo (夫餘), *Dongmaeng* (東盟) of Kokuryeo (高句麗), *Mucheon* (舞天) of Dong-ye (東濊), and *Surit-nal* (수릿날) and seasonal rites of Samhan (三韓, Mahan, Byeonhan, and Jinhan).

In the late Koryeo Dynasty (高麗, 918–1392), a new social class called *sadaebu* (士大夫, scholar-officials) adopted *karye* (家禮, also called *jujakarye* or *munkongkarye*), the family rites of Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200), a Confucian philosopher of the Southern Song Dynasty (南宋) in China. As the Chosun Dynasty (1392–1910) was founded, Confucianism became the governing principle of the nation, and *karye* was considered an obligatory set of standards to follow to set the beginning of the Confucian-style rituals in Korea. *Jesa* (祭祀, traditional rite from ancestors) is a form of ritual to worship god, which involves making an offering of food prepared with sincerity and prayer [4]. For nations and families, the directions are different in performing ancestral rites even though the purposes are basically the same. Nations prayed for their comfort and the stability of the royal authority serving natural deities such as the heavenly and earthly deities. On the other hand, familial rituals aimed to remember and pay tribute to their ancestors [4]. There are two national memorial rites remaining: *Jongmyo Jerye* (宗廟祭禮), royal ancestral ritual in the *Jongmyo* (宗廟) shrine; and *Seokjeondaeye* (釋奠大祭), a memorial ceremony for Confucius at local *Hyangkyo* (鄉校, local academy), educational institutions during the late Koryeo and Chosun Dynasties [5]. *Jongmyo Jerye* was a memorial to the kings of the Chosun Dynasty and their ancestors. Although it lost its symbolic status as a national ceremony because it was prohibited during the Japanese rule, the Royal Ancestral Rite of *Jongmyo Jerye* continues to be

performed annually and was designated as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage in 2001. Family ancestral rituals are divided into *kije* (忌祭, household rites, also called *kijesa*), ceremonies held once a year on the anniversary of the death of the person being honored; *sije* (時祭, seasonal rites), ceremonies held once a year in the clan; and *charye* (茶禮, tea rites held four times a year on major holidays), held on major holidays such as *chuseok* (秋夕, the great middle of autumn festival, August 15th in the lunar calendar) and *seollal* (元旦, Korean New Year, January 1st in the lunar calendar). *Jongka* (宗家, the traditional Korean Family) additionally performed *bulcheonwi* (不遷位), the ceremony for their founding ancestors [1].

The *bulcheonwi* ceremony maintained its original form of Confucian ancestral rituals. For example, during the Chosun Dynasty, *kije* was performed differently according to the class and status of the family. *Kyeongkukdaejeon* (經國大典, a complete code of law) and *kukjo-oryeui* (國朝五禮儀, national five rites) prescribed the number of generations of ancestors who will be served in the rituals. Nevertheless, *sarim* (士林, forest of scholars) insisted on honoring all ancestors of four generations back in an attempt to practice *karye*, which they believed laid the basis for all formalities and rites, in Chosun. The ritual standards (儀禮準則, *Uiryejunchik*) under Japanese rule and the family rite standards of the Korean government both suggested two generations for ancestral rituals, but *jongka* and some ordinary families stuck to the four-generation ancestor worship, even until now.

For hundreds of years, Korea has been through a process during which the ritual standards are introduced, discarded, and newly introduced and established repeatedly with the rise and fall of the ruling classes for effective control of the nation. The ruling class has sometimes encouraged good practices but forced bad practices as well during this process. Korean ritual practices lasted in spite of going through a lot of changes [6].

Confucian ritual practices underwent drastic changes as the rule of the Chosun Dynasty came to an end and the government published standards for family rituals after the country's liberation from Japanese colonial rule. External changes, which occurred with the introduction of Western culture and rapid industrialization beginning in the 19th century, also influenced the ritual practices. The *bulcheonwi* ceremony table setting at *jongka* and its changes over time have been at the center of attention for many researchers. This study examines the changes in the table setting of *jongka* ritual foods in Korea over the course of history. First, we will examine the table setting during the Chosun period through ritual books written by Chosun scholars. Then, we will also investigate the significant changes that were brought about by political powers under the pretext of eliminating the empty formalities and vanity of ritual during Japanese colonial rule and after independence.

Around major holidays such as *chuseok* and *seollal* every year, people are exposed to the information about the ritual through media, including how to set up the table and on what historical background, how much it costs to prepare ritual foods, or in what order the ceremony should be conducted. However, although much of the information about the table setting for the ancestral rites is presented as the established method, none has a reasonable historical basis. Such information seems to have influenced and changed the way the rituals are performed today.

Therefore, from the information on the table setting provided by the media, the *joyulisi* (棗栗梨柿) and *joyulsii* (丕栗柿梨) that imbue the placement of fruits with symbolic significance will be examined. This may contribute to educating people about the historical change in the table setting of the foods for the ancestral ritual and may prevent the incorrect interpretation of the placement of fruits in the table setting.

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