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## CHARACTERISTICS OF KOREANS' VIEW OF DEATH IN THE HISTORICO-RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

This study reveals the characteristics of the Koreans' view of death formed in historical and religious contexts by analyzing the ancient literature from the Three Kingdoms to Chosun Dynasty. Koreans' thoughts on death and life coexist with the present world-oriented, the afterlife-centered, and the shamanistic viewpoints. This is deeply related to the influence of beliefs imported from outside based on the original Korean beliefs.

Koreans recognized death as a natural phenomenon and showed an attitude of conformity to the harmonious cosmic order. On the other hand, under the influence of Buddhism's belief in ups and downs combined with local beliefs, good deeds lead to paradise, but evil deeds lead to suffering in the afterlife. The shamanic view of death that relied on spiritual mediators to soothe the souls of other worlds was also prevalent. From a Confucian perspective, it was recognized that a good gift of death was given to those who fully demonstrated their ability to live by focusing on the present life. Due to the influence of the Taoist view of death, Koreans recognized that there was nothing artificial about death, but also revealed a contradictory view of paying attention to the cure for immortality.

**Key words:** Koreans, Perspective on death, Folk religion, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism.

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### Корейлердің тарихи-діни контексттегі өлімге көзқарасының сипаттамасы

Бұл зерттеу Үш патшалықтан Чосун әулетіне дейінгі көне әдебиеттерді талдау арқылы тарихи және діни контексте қалыптасқан корейлердің өлімге деген көзқарасының ерекшеліктерін ашады. Корейлердің өлім мен өмір туралы ойлары қазіргі дүниетанымдық, ақыреттік, бақсылық көзқарастармен қатар өмір сүріп келеді. Бұл бастапқы корей нанымдарына негізделген сырттан әкелінген нанымдардың әсерімен терең байланысты.

Корейлер өлімді табиғи құбылыс деп танып, үйлесімді ғарыштық тәртіпке оң көзқарас танытады. Екінші жағынан, буддизмдік наным-сенімдердің құлдырау мен өрлеу деген наным-сенімінің ықпалы мен жергілікті наным-сенімдермен қосылып, жақсы істер жәннатқа, ал жаман істер ақыреттегі азапқа әкеліп соғады деп сенеді. Сонымен қатар, басқа дүниелердің жанын тыныштандыру үшін рухани делдалдарды қолданатын өлімге шамандық көзқарас та кең таралған болатын. Конфуцийлік тұрғыдан алғанда, қазіргі өмірге назар аудару арқылы өмір сүру қабілетін толық көрсеткен адамдарға өлімнің жақсы сыйы берілген деп танылды. Даосизмнің өлім туралы көзқарасқа ықпалының салдарынан корейлер өлімде жасанды ештеңе жоқ екенін мойындады, сонымен бірге өлместіктің еміне назар аударудың қайшылықты көзқарасын ашқан болатын.

**Түйін сөздер:** Корейлер, Өлімге көзқарас, Халықтық дін, Конфуцийшілік, Буддизм, Даосизм.

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### Характеристики взглядов корейцев на смерть в историко-религиозном контексте

Это исследование раскрывает особенности взглядов корейцев на смерть, сформированных в историческом и религиозном контекстах, путем анализа древней литературы от Троецарствия до династии Чосон. Мысли корейцев о смерти и жизни сосуществуют с современными мировоззренческими, загробными и шаманскими взглядами. Это глубоко связано с влиянием верований, привнесенных извне, основанных на исконных корейских верованиях.

Корейцы признавали смерть естественным явлением и проявляли отношение к гармоничному космическому порядку. С другой стороны, под влиянием буддийской веры в взлеты и падения в сочетании с местными верованиями добрые дела ведут в рай, а злые деяния ведут к страданиям в загробной жизни. Также был распространен шаманский взгляд на смерть, который использовал духовных посредников для успокоения душ других миров. С конфуцианской точки зрения было признано, что хороший дар смерти был дан тем, кто полностью продемонстрировал свою способность жить, сосредоточившись на настоящей жизни. Из-за влияния даосского взгляда на смерть корейцы признали, что в смерти нет ничего искусственного, но также выявили противоречивый взгляд на обращение внимания на лекарство от бессмертия.

**Ключевые слова:** Корейцы, Взгляд на смерть, Народная религия, Конфуцианство, Буддизм, Даосизм.

## Introduction

The question of life and death, as the ultimate question of where we came from and where we are going, ultimately leads to a philosophical and religious question. According to the religious scholar Jeong Jin-Hong, death was perceived as a 'natural phenomenon like flowing water', as it is often expressed to a dead person as "returned", meaning that he or she has moved to the original world. (Jeong, 2001b). However, since different religions were introduced based on this view of death, Koreans perceived death differently.

At the end of the 14th century, the Joseon Dynasty was established, and Confucianism was adopted as the state religion. Under the influence of politics that honored Confucianism and suppressed Buddhism, the state system was governed by Confucian laws, and Confucian teachings were deeply infiltrated by the general public. Before the introduction of Confucian philosophy, Buddhism and Taoism had existed in Korea since the Three Kingdoms period and were based on indigenous beliefs such as shamanism for a long time. The fact that Koreans' views of the world and death were heavily influenced by Confucian ideology is evident in Korean death rituals. The founder of Confucian philosophy, Confucius gave his students teaching that emphasized this realistic present life, with no afterlife. Thus, Confucian scholars did not have a clear concept of the afterlife (Yoo, 2004: 23). This is because they dismissed the problem of death as a metaphysical thing that could not be known in the present life (Yoo, 2004: 7; Yoo, 1990:160). This philosophy of death is deeply rooted in Koreans to this day, with the perception of a good death, that is, 'Hosang', by ending the present life well. A good death implies that the present life should be filled with an active attitude by acknowledging man's high religiosity and spirituality and accepting it as an important process of human growth (Boo, 2001: 264).

According to a recent study (Kim, 2010: 74), for Koreans today, death is not only viewed as a cessation of biological life, but is recognized as a complex phenomenon in which psychological, philosophical, and religious aspects are integrally intertwined. Some people perceive that death is the 'end' of nothing, while those who believe that death leads to other lives such as the afterlife or heaven coexist in a number similar to the former. Ivo Kwon (2013: 156) considered Koreans' perception of death as a result of coincidence and interaction with the views of various beliefs and Confucius's ideology. In this regard, the authors examine how the value and meaning of the death of Koreans had been formed in the religious and historical contexts through the historical literature of Korea.

## Justification of the choice of the study and objectives

The value of death of Koreans is deeply related to the belief system that was historically imported from the outside, and it cannot be determined as a unilinear view of death in any particular era or in a particular belief. In other words, Korean perspective of death has multiple and complex characteristics that simultaneously show synchronic and diachronic connectivity and disconnection. Although various religions have settled in today's Korean society, and many Koreans today have been greatly influenced by Catholicism and Christianity introduced from the late Joseon Dynasty, traditionally formed and internalized values of death are deeply rooted in daily life and religious practices.

The question of how life and death have been recognized and practiced can be found through the analysis of ancient literature that reflects Korean beliefs and worldviews. The authors postulate that the coexistence and combination of heterogeneous yet similar elements of death have shaped Koreans' diverse perceptions and attitudes toward death..

### Scientific methodology

To reveal the value and perspective of Koreans' death, this study examines the pre-modern literature showing the historical context of the formation of Koreans' diverse belief systems and views on death. In other words, by analyzing the content and meaning of Confucian ideology and other belief systems contained in these written materials, the authors show how Koreans related and interpreted death to life. The subject of data analysis is literature from the Three Kingdoms Period and the Goryeo Dynasty to the Joseon Dynasty that show perspectives on death in the official documents, folktales, customs, religion, and death rituals.

### Results and discussion

From the analysis results of the data, the perception and characteristics of Koreans' death were implied and classified into the following five categories: Death is a natural phenomenon; A good life leads to a good death; Longing for immortality; Liberation from suffering and nirvana; Connection to the world of souls by spiritual mediators

#### *Death is a natural phenomenon*

Since everything exists in natural order, and people are inseparable from this order, human life and death are also part of the flow of nature. All things are created and perish, and this happens in the harmonious order of the universe. All things exist in harmonies with each other like yin and yang, and yin and yang are mutually complementary and dependent relationships. Cosmic order is a dynamic state that does not rest for a moment, so everything is created and disappears repeatedly.

The Christian view of the universe, according to which God created the world, people, and the soul after death, belongs to God, that is, the dualistic way of thinking that separates the soul and body is not familiar to the traditional Korean view of death. For Asians, heaven and earth mean the entire universe. Everything exists because there is order in the universe. Without this order and in a state of chaos, beings would be indistinguishable from each other. According to Do Jeon Jeong, a contributor to the founding of the Joseon Dynasty and a Confucian scholar in the 105th episode of "Dongmunseon" (東文選第百五卷), "Changing the heavens and the earth (the universe) is a process in which something (beings) is born and constantly born. This is the process in which beings are formed, they must be

dispersed, and when they are born, they must die. Once you know the origin of your existence, you will know that after that you will surely run away and die" (Kwon, 2013: 157; KCD). When a tree burns, the ashes seep into the earth and the smoke rises into the sky. Likewise, when a person dies, his body becomes dust and his soul scatters as if ascending to heaven. Just as ash and smoke cannot become a tree again once a person dies, the scattered cannot become a living person again (Lee, 2010).

This recognition of Confucian death has been established as a cultural style of family and kin death in the Joseon Dynasty (Yoo, 2004: 6). This style comes from the norms of ancient Chinese death rites and rituals. The Confucian perception is accepting the fact that the body and mind are dispersed after death and conforming to a harmonious order. In other words, since the answer to the question of death cannot be found within the scope of rational thinking (Jung, 2008), it focuses on life with a humble and precious acceptance of real life, in which body and mind are not scattered. This view is very different from the Buddhist view, according to which the theory of reincarnation assumes the existence of an afterlife and repeats life after death.

#### *A good life leads to a good death*

The Confucian view of death is centered on good observance of the norms of temporary life and on meeting a good death. Therefore, people believe that a good life becomes a good death. For all beings that have life, death is inevitable. And the perception that living is good and dying is bad was natural. Goryeo scholars Gyu-bo Lee and Jung-bok Ahn said that attachment to life and dislike of death are common characteristics of humans and all things (Kwon, 2013: 157). Humans and all beings in life come from the power to maintain their existence, and death is the disappearance of their existence. In other words, all beings have inertia to sustain their existence. Humans have an extreme fear of their extinction and the afterlife, and the regret of death remains. The death of beings belongs to the harmonious order of nature, but it is really difficult to accept one's death naturally. Death is something you want to avoid whenever possible because of your attachment to the people you love and the things you love.

In Confucianism, a good death is the result of a good life, that is, a blissful life. The Five Blessings in *Seogyeong* (Confucian scriptures, one of the five books on librarianship): *Su* (longevity), *Bu* (wealth), *Gangnyeong* (health of the body), *Yuhodok* (to show virtue and be recognized), and *Gojongmyeong*

(perform all one's tasks and die without problems.) In other words, people live in abundance, give birth to many offspring, live long and healthy, and in later years die peacefully at home. It was considered bad death to die from an accident or natural disaster, to die early from an illness, or to die in an unfamiliar land. A good death is when you die comfortably at home with your family watching.

The key concept of death in Confucianism is to end life by fully activating life abilities and giving meaning to life and present life. When a person is born, enjoys the five blessings, ends a happy life, and faces a perfect death, Koreans who attend the death ritual are considered *hosang* (good death). However, the strict norms practiced through death rites and ancestral rites clearly reveal the practices of the deceased and the morals of the bereaved family.

#### *Longing for immortality*

The view of life and death by the thinkers Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu is the perception and position that, since death is a spontaneous natural phenomenon, people have no choice but to be indifferent to death and that nothing can be done artificially. Chuang Tzu said, "Old Ching-Ying (a person who knows the regularity of natural phenomena, knows and practices the method of rebirth) did not know how to enjoy life and hate death. And he was neither happy to be born nor resisted death... such a person is Ching-Ying." (莊子大宗師: Kwon, 2013: 159)

Another Taoist thinker, Yeol-Tzu said, "The dead skeleton and the living self are not two separate entities, and life is death and death is life." Regarding this, Chuang Tzu said, "Death is neither good nor bad, it only follows the path that nature and all things flow" (莊子至樂: Kwon, 2013: 160). However, regarding Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu's views on death, people of future generations have a flexible idea that life can live long without aging if it retains its original energy (Choi, 2012). When he reaches the state of Taoism, he overcomes the confrontation between life and death, and the body is not damaged by water or fire because it cannot feel alive or dead (Kwon, 2013: 161). It is said that when people practice and reach the point of life and death, their life force is preserved, resulting in immortality and freshness.

Because of this belief, people's desire for a healthy and long life was nurtured, and various methods such as breathing techniques, Taoist gymnastics, massage, taking certain drugs, and abstinence from sex were developed. A scholar named Yingro Li of the Goryeo Dynasty (東

文選券四: Kwon, 2013: 161) introduced the *Yangsaengsul* (Mental and physical training and dosage for longevity and immortality) treatment method proposed by the Chinese poet Su Shi (Poet, writer, scholar, and politician during the Song era in China) from the Tang Dynasty. It was popular in the private sector until the late Joseon Dynasty. So, the perception of death, which was influenced by Taoism and the thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi, began in terms of overcoming life and death, and ultimately, despite this, pursued immortality.

#### *Liberation from suffering and nirvana*

Since Korean Buddhism was the state religion from the Three Kingdoms period to the Goryeo Dynasty, it has penetrated deeply into people's lives. Buddhism was originally localized by combining it with indigenous beliefs and shamanism, and thus people have a transformed Buddhist worldview.

Since there have been various sects in Buddhism over the long history, there are some differences in teachings, but in general, the view of death in Buddhism sees that it is difficult for people to escape from the dead (born, old, sick, and dying), and life itself is a sea of pain. Therefore, the Buddha taught people to accept death rather than suffer pain and anguish, since everything created is mortal (BCCC, 1997). The goal of Buddhism is to achieve liberation from the pain of life. In other words, all beings are originally Buddhas, but they are covered by their karma and are not aware of this fact. The meaning of knowing this is to achieve liberation from suffering. There is no mention of reincarnation in the teachings of the Buddha, but in Buddhism, which was influenced by Hinduism in India, the theory of reincarnation was almost generalized and accepted. It is believed that this life does not end once in the present world but continues to be reborn and liberated as soon as karma is completely extinguished in repeating past lives. When one becomes a Buddha, life and death cease to matter, and the pain of life and death disappears, and to reach this level, various methods of practice are suggested.

The original goal of Buddhism was to practice according to the teachings of the Buddha and reach the level of liberation, but there are aspects in which ordinary people worship the Buddha and the Bodhisattva and have turned into like a health and wealth gospel to desire blessings from the Buddha. That is, people believed that if they did well, they would go to heaven, if they did evil, they would go to hell or be reborn as animals or asuras and suffer.

This popularized Buddhism greatly influenced Koreans' views of the afterlife, regardless of the original teachings of the Buddha.

*Connection to the world of souls by spiritual mediators*

Shamanism has had a strong influence on Koreans' ideas about mortality since ancient times. In Korean shamanism, people were seen as a dual combination of body and soul (Yang, 2004: 19). After death, they believed that they would enter that world, and considered the afterlife. Therefore, living beings were divided into a world in which visible and physical beings live, and the next world in which invisible spiritual beings live (Kim, 1985: 254-256; SCHC, 1990: 146). These two worlds interact with each other. Since the luck of people in this world depends on spirit beings from that world, people should appease spirit beings through intermediaries to prevent anger and pray for blessings.

This task is the responsibility of a Korean shaman who travels between this world and the next. *Yongcheongdamcheokki* (泉談寂記) (Kwon, 2013: 162), written by scholar Kim Ahn-or in the middle of the Joseon Dynasty, shows a typical aspect of the world from the point of view of ordinary people. When a person dies, the other world sends a grim reaper to take the soul. It was the general perception of the other world that the dead receive appropriate compensation or punishment according to their good deeds and evil deeds while they are alive in the presence of the great King Yeomna in heaven under the guidance of a judge.

Shamanism, as the prototype of primitive religion, is common not only in Korea but also in other ethnic groups around the world. This is due to the general desire of people that their existence should not be forever terminated by the life of this world but continued in that world. Belief in punishment and reward for good and bad karma

in the next world (Jeong, 1993: 221) justifies the injustice of this world.

**Conclusion**

From the point of view of rational thinking that supports Confucianism, the question of death was considered meaningless though it is an unchanging truth that people face death. In other words, the question of what death itself is and what happens after death is beyond the scope of rational thought. Therefore, the Confucian view of death, "what is death" and "what happens after death" may not be the key questions, but rather focus on "how to face death" and "how to live so that we can die well". Good life in a temporary world eventually leads to a good death. The good death of an old man is more a ritual of death in a bright atmosphere than mourning and sadness. However, in strict death rites and rites, the practice of morality and filial piety for the living descendants was more important than for the afterlife of the dead.

According to the thought of Lao Tzu and Chang Tzu, any human reaction to life or death is artificial, so we should be indifferent to it. However, in later generations, various teaching methods and treatments for immortality were passed down. The Buddhist worldview encourages one to pursue and devote to nirvana since life is suffering.

However, Korean folk Buddhism has settled itself as a doctrine of prosperity rather than self-liberation. From the point of view of shamanism, there is a shaman who connects the real world with the other world, and there is also faith in another world that is subject to punishment. Thus, the idea of death, the tradition of the Koreans, was formed based on Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and shamanism, and it showed that the perceptions of death from various viewpoints were syncretized.

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