



The Validity of the Confucian Three-Year Mourning Ritual System and Its Contemporary Adaptation

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Abstract

This paper examines the validity and contemporary adaptation of the Confucian three-year mourning ritual (*samnyeonsang*). Unlike modern funerals, which primarily focus on the physical treatment of the deceased, the Confucian ritual encompasses a wider process of transformation. It elevates the deceased into an ancestral deity and enables the chief mourner, along with the wider community, to endure and overcome the existential crisis caused by the death of the family head. The validity of this ritual rests on four dimensions. First, it preserves continuity with the Confucian funeral structure, which includes rites for the deceased, the spirit, the ancestral deity, and the mourner. Second, it functions as a cultural and psychological buffer, helping mourners and their communities cope with grief and trauma. Third, the symbolic use of the *ganaeyeo* (domestic mourning hut) provides an external marker of the mourning period and sustains genealogical succession. Fourth, the three-year ritual reorganizes the hierarchical order of ancestral tablets within the family shrine, ensuring continuity of ancestral veneration. At the same time, modern adaptations of the ritual reflect contemporary lifestyles. These include adjustment to occupational demands, alignment with modern life-cycle rhythms, and incorporation of funeral industry practices such as simultaneous body preparation and the use of portrait photographs. Thus, the Confucian three-year mourning ritual retains its symbolic meaning and structure while adapting to modern contexts.

Keywords: Confucian three-year mourning ritual system, three-day funeral rites, rites, cultural tradition, Confucian mourning rites, Confucianism, contemporary adaptation, grief healing

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I. Introduction

The Confucian mourning ritual was introduced during the late Goryeo period and became widespread in the late Joseon period. This occurred as a result of Joseon's policy as a Confucian ritual-based state, which systematically reorganized both state and household rituals according to Confucian philosophy. Consequently, the four Confucian-style ceremonial occasions of coming of age, wedding, funeral, and ancestral rites (*gwan, hon, sang, je* 冠婚喪祭) established the foundational framework for Korean ceremonial practices, continuing even into contemporary society. Thus, the cultural tradition of funeral rites in Korea became firmly rooted in Confucian practices (S. Kim 2012b, 12–13).

However, contemporary Korean funeral practices exhibit considerable diversity, including Western-style, modernized, and religious forms, significantly differing from traditional Confucian rituals. Three major factors underlie this transformation. First, industrialization and urbanization—consequences of modernization—and changes in family structure have reshaped funeral culture. Second, multicultural influences have introduced funeral rituals from various religions, reflecting the inseparable relationship between death and religion (Cheon 2000, 136) and people's tendency to approach death according to their own religious beliefs. Third, the process of Westernization, initiated during the Japanese colonial period, also had significant effects. Under Japan's Westernizing policies, the colonial Korean society was influenced notably by the symbolism of black as representative of death (S. Kim 2024a).

The three-year mourning ritual (*samnyeonsang* 三年喪) is a fundamental ritual and ideological cornerstone of Confucian funeral rites (S. Kim 2025b). This procedure involves transforming the soul of the deceased into an ancestral spirit after the disposal of the body. For the bereaved family, it functions as a buffer mechanism to overcome the emotional shock and existential crisis resulting from the death of a family member. The origin of the three-year mourning ritual is documented in *Book of Rites (Liji 禮記)*: “Confucius said, ‘Only after three years does a child leave the embrace of their parents. Therefore, a

three-year mourning period for one's parents is universally recognized throughout the world.”¹ This practice is rooted in filial piety (*xiao* 孝), or the foundational Confucian principle for establishing familial and social order.

As indicated by the term “*samiljang*” 三日葬 (“three-day funeral”), most contemporary funerals in Korea are held over three days. The origin of this practice lies in the series of ritual regulations imposed during the Japanese colonial period under the guise of modernization, beginning with the “Ritual Ordinance” (Uirye Junchik 儀禮準則, 1934) and later formalized through the “Family Ritual Standards” (Gajeong Uirye Junchik 家庭儀禮準則) of 1969. As a result, modern Korean funerals have largely lost the symbolic significance traditionally associated with rituals of mourning, retaining only a formal procedure for disposal of the body. Consequently, contemporary funeral practices have faced criticism, with some pointing out that the modern method of corpse disposal differs little from waste management practices (Faure 1997, 10).

According to the dictionary definition, “funeral” (*jangnye* 葬禮) refers specifically to “the ceremonial procedure of handling a corpse in funeral rites; it is a term used in modern society to replace traditional mourning rituals” (S. Kim 2022). As indicated by the term *jangnye*, contemporary Korean death rites are predominantly confined to the handling of the deceased's body. This implies the disappearance of the traditional Confucian ritual process of transforming the deceased's spirit into an ancestral deity, a practice that previously constituted the core of Confucian mourning procedures. Additionally, this signifies the loss of the ritualized process that helps the bereaved family members overcome the trauma caused by the death of their loved one. In an era when cremation rates reach 93%, the concept of funeral rites is essentially recognized as the process of cremating and subsequently enshrining the deceased's remains.

Nevertheless, the Confucian three-year mourning ritual still persists in contemporary Korean society. Admittedly, it tends to be maintained primarily among historically significant head families

¹ 孔子曰，子生三年，然後免於父母之懷，夫三年之喪，天下之達喪也。(Liji, “Sannianwen” 三年問)

(*jongga* 宗家) that possess ancestral shrines. Even today, the tradition of Confucian three-year mourning rituals continues. For instance, a three-year mourning ritual for the lineal descendant of Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501–1570) has been observed since March 8, 2024, and a similar ritual for the senior daughter-in-law (*jongbu* 宗婦) of the head family of Kim Seong-il 金誠一 (1538–1593) began on March 20, 2024, and is still ongoing. While statistically the Confucian three-year mourning ritual may appear insignificant in contemporary society, it still holds considerable cultural significance.

In order to examine traditional Confucian mourning rituals, I have continuously investigated cases of Confucian-style mourning rituals that persist in contemporary Korean society. Among these cases, I have conducted participant observation research on the three-year mourning rituals for Yi U-seop 李雨燮 (1931–2007)² in 2007 and for Kim Si-in 金時寅 (1917–2008) in 2008, subsequently publishing these findings in ethnographic reports.³

Additionally, I have further participated directly in researching several other three-year mourning rituals, including those for Yi Dong-eun 李東恩 (1909–2009, the head descendant of the Joseon-era scholar Yi Hwang), Yi Jong-min 李鍾敏 (1900–1993), Jo Pil-nam 趙必男 (1917–1993, wife of the head descendant of the Joseon-era scholar Kim Seong-il), and Bak Hyo-su 朴孝秀 (1900–1997).

The mourning rituals selected as research cases, such as Kim Si-in's mourning and Yi Dong-eun's mourning, are associated with the head families (*jongson* 宗孫) of prominent Confucian scholars like Kim Seong-il and Yi Hwang, whose Confucian traditions are particularly pronounced. The other cases similarly represent households either from head family lineages or those maintaining ancestral tablets (*sinju* 神主) in shrines and practicing a Confucian way of life. Exceptionally, Yi U-seop's mourning is distinct in that Yi U-seop himself, who did not pursue modern education, consistently adhered to Confucian

² Hereafter, cases of three-year mourning rituals will be referred to using the deceased's name followed by the term "mourning."

³ The three-year mourning rituals observed in these two families were published in 2011 by the National Folk Museum of Korea as part of the "Three-Year Mourning Series" (S. Kim 2011). Therefore, this study will omit citations when referring to these reports.

principles throughout his lifetime. Thus, all of these cases share a common characteristic: they represent families whose way of life is firmly rooted in Confucian traditions.

This paper has two primary objectives: first, to examine the continuing validity of the Confucian three-year mourning ritual in contemporary society, and second, to analyze how the Confucian three-year mourning ritual adapts and transforms in response to the contemporary sociocultural context. The analytical materials employed are derived from Confucian three-year mourning rituals in which I have participated fully or partially through observational research.

II. Modern Funeral Culture Generalized as the Three-Day Funeral

Cultural change inevitably accompanies cultural accumulation. This aligns with the idea that tradition continues precisely because culture changes. As Ravaissou-Mollien ([1838] 2001) argues, habits, once acquired, exist through continuous change and perpetual movement; hence, the inability to accept change implies the inability to sustain habits. In other words, a culture that fails to accommodate continual change cannot persist.

In contemporary Korea, funerals have become primarily focused on corpse management. The funeral procedures outlined on websites of funeral halls and funeral service companies—all central players in the funeral industry—typically involve handling the deceased's body over a period of three days. While Confucian terminology still appears in these modern procedures, the meanings attached to them have deviated considerably from traditional Confucian funeral rituals. Some procedures are distorted in their symbolic meanings, and occasionally new rituals are artificially introduced, leading to the erosion of the symbolic significance inherent in traditional rites.

For example, the ritual of *yeomseup* 斂襲 performed on the second day currently integrates various distinct procedures into one single step: bathing and cleansing the corpse, dressing it in funeral clothes (*seup* 襲), wrapping and tying the body (*soryeom* 小斂), and placing the

body in the coffin (*daeryeom* 大斂). However, distortion occurs when *ipgwan* 入棺, the primary action of placing the body into the coffin, is separated and emphasized as a distinct major step unrelated to *daeryeom*.

The *Seongbokje* 成服祭 can be understood as a rite held after family members change into mourning attire (*seongbok* 成服). Yet in current practices, after changing into mourning clothes, mourners perform reciprocal condolences, followed by rituals such as offering morning sacrifices (*sangsik* 上食 and *jojeon* 朝奠). But the specific procedure known traditionally as *Seongbokje* itself is omitted. Likewise, the ritual termed *Barinje* 發鞠祭, now understood as a pre-funeral rite preceding the departure of the coffin, corresponds more closely to the traditional *gyeonjeon* 遣奠, as the concept of *Barinje* does not originally exist in Confucian funeral rites.

Additional practices such as the wearing of black ribbons or non-traditional black modernized *hanbok* worn by women—without clear cultural origins or standardized definitions—also represent aspects of funeral culture lacking historical precedent or official prescription. These developments disregard what Victor Turner (1966) defined as the “ritual process,” including the underlying structures and functions inherent in traditional rituals. Behind these transformations lies a phenomenon of funeral capitalism that deliberately overlooks the psychology of mourners and the symbolic meanings of funeral rites, driven primarily by commercial profit motives (Han 2024, 40–46).

Changes in contemporary Korean funeral culture began during the Japanese colonial period. The first factor was the simplification of rituals as part of Japan’s cultural assimilation policy under the guise of modernization. A concrete manifestation of this policy was the “Ritual Ordinance” (*Uirye Junchik* 儀禮準則) promulgated by the Japanese colonial government in 1934. Later, simplification was intensified through the “Improved Funeral Standards” enforced in 1941 as Japan prepared for World War II (GCJY 1941, 66–69), resulting in traditional funeral rites becoming targets of rejection. This policy of simplification continued after liberation through various state directives, starting with the “Family Ritual Standards” of 1969, amended in 1999, and currently known as the “Healthy Family Ritual Standards.” As indicated

by the term “healthy,” the state intervened legally, compelling simplification and thus restricting individuals’ family rituals.

The state-driven simplification of funeral rites has consequently produced a situation where symbolic meanings traditionally associated with funeral rites were ignored, reducing funerals primarily to formal procedures for handling corpses. The funeral industry, driven by commercial profit, tacitly supported this approach, resulting in today’s three-day funeral (*samiljang*) becoming standard in contemporary Korea.

The terminology referring to death rites has likewise shifted from *sangnye* 喪禮 (“mourning rituals”) to *jangnye* 葬禮 (“funeral rituals”). Although the term *jangnye* was historically used, it originally referred specifically to respectfully managing a corpse (*jangsa* 葬事) (S. Kim 2010, 438–440). Notably, the official “Ritual Ordinance” and the “(Healthy) Family Ritual Standards” continue to use the term *sangnye*, defining it as “the ceremony conducted from death until the completion of burial or cremation” (S. Kim 2010, 439–40). However, in reality, the state has erased traditional functions and meanings of mourning rites, including spiritual transformation of the deceased into an ancestor and the therapeutic processes for the bereaved family’s trauma.

The second factor of change involves methods of body disposal.⁴ As reflected in Korea’s cremation rate of 93%, cremation has become the prevalent form of body disposal. This rise results from government policies emphasizing efficient land use, advocacy campaigns by civic groups, and convenience-oriented values. The government and civic organizations initiated extensive cremation campaigns, utilizing slogans such as “Prevent Korea’s beautiful landscape from becoming filled with cemeteries.”⁵

Additionally, burial sites traditionally require considerable human resources and expenses for maintenance. Cremation, by contrast, became preferred due to its relative ease and lower management costs, thus raising cremation rates through convenience-driven factors.

⁴ The following summary draws from Kim ShiDug’s analyses (S. Kim 2007; 2010).

⁵ The National Council for Reform of Funeral and Burial Culture, established in 1998, played a pivotal role in these movements.

The third aspect involves a spatial shift from private family grave sites and clan cemeteries to collective or park cemeteries. Traditionally, ancestral graves were not considered undesirable but rather sacred and familiar spaces. Folklore stories describe travelers sleeping near graves at night, indicating a perception of grave sites as comfortable, familiar places. However, during Japanese colonial rule, authorities compelled the creation of communal cemeteries located away from villages, turning cemeteries into spaces associated with fear and avoidance. This historical change laid the foundation for contemporary NIMBY (“Not In My Back Yard”) attitudes towards funeral facilities (Heo 2009; Kim and Hong 2010; W. Kim 2012; Kim and Jeong 2012; Ham and Hyun 2013). With the rise of cremation, burial grounds are now increasingly shifting toward columbarium facilities for enshrining cremated remains.

The fourth element is the delegation of family rituals to professional specialists (S. Kim 2010, 74–79). Put differently, funeral capitalism has appropriated family rituals. Funeral capitalism refers to a crude form of capitalism driven solely by profit maximization, systematically excluding humanistic values such as ethical conduct and responsibility (Han 2024, 302). Due to industrialization and urbanization, family rituals are no longer conducted at homes but rather at neutral, third-party facilities. The funeral industry, comprising specialized professionals, now leads these rituals (S. Kim 2012a, 192–95), resulting in funeral ceremonies driven primarily by commercial interests rather than the original intentions of the bereaved family.

Due to these multifaceted changes, contemporary Korean funerals have become standardized as three-day events. This phenomenon is a direct product of cultural shifts, the “(Healthy) Family Ritual Standards,” and funeral capitalism. Consequently, the traditional Confucian functions of funeral rituals—transforming the deceased’s soul into an ancestral spirit and assisting mourners to overcome the existential crisis triggered by loss—have largely disappeared. Modern Korean funerals, standardized as three-day events, have thus been reduced primarily to the function of corpse disposal.

III. Confucian Three-Year Mourning Ritual as a Cultural Tradition

The practice of the Confucian three-year mourning ritual can be traced back as early as ancient Korean societies.⁶ Although the funeral rites of King Gwanggaeto 廣開土 (r. 391–412) and King Muryeong 武寧 (r. 501–523), which also lasted three years, were not explicitly Confucian rituals, they shared the commonality of a three-year duration. Officially, the Confucian three-year mourning ritual was introduced during the Goryeo dynasty, but initially lacked a practical basis for widespread implementation (An 2014, 105). Furthermore, considering the fact that Goryeo granted only 100 days of leave for the mourning of close family members, it is doubtful that the full three-year mourning ritual was performed in practice during this period (Lee 2013, 90).

In the late Goryeo period, Neo-Confucianism introduced a philosophical shift from original Confucian ritual systems toward those based on Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals* (*Zhuzi Jiali* 朱子家禮). With the adoption of Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1140–1200) ritual system during this era, funeral rituals transitioned from Buddhist traditions to Confucian ones (Chang 1990, 9–10).

Under the Joseon dynasty's policy of governance through rites, Confucian rituals became deeply embedded as cultural traditions.⁷ In early Joseon, difficulties emerged in fully establishing Confucian rites due to cultural lag and conflicts with entrenched Buddhist rituals. However, the Joseon court strengthened policies such as the Certificate of Monkhood system (Docheopje 度牒制), restricting individuals from

⁶ Historical records clearly indicate the existence of three-year mourning rituals: 居父母及夫喪，服皆三年，兄弟三月 (“Upon the death of parents or husband, mourning clothes were worn for three years, and for brothers, three months”), 『北史』 (*History of the Northern Dynasties*), Vol. 94, 列傳 (Biographies) No. 82, 高句麗 (Goguryeo);

居父母及夫之喪，服皆三年，兄弟三月 (“Upon the death of parents or husband, mourning clothes were worn for three years, and for brothers, three months”), 『隋書』 (*Book of Sui*), Vol. 81, 列傳 (Biographies) No. 46, 高句麗 (Goguryeo);

死者，殯於屋內，經三年，擇吉日而葬 (“When someone died, the body was kept inside the house for three years and then buried on an auspicious day”), 『隋書』 (*Book of Sui*), Vol. 81, 列傳 (Biographies) No. 46, 高句麗 (Goguryeo).

⁷ S. Kim (2012b, 61–111) provides detailed insights into this institutionalization process.

becoming monks, while progressively replacing royal Buddhist rituals with Confucian ones. In addition, Joseon systematically institutionalized Confucian rituals by compiling legal texts such as the National Code of the Five Rites (*Gukjo Oryeui* 國朝五禮儀), the Great Code of State Administration (*Gyeongguk Daejeon* 經國大典), and the Supplementary Edition of Funeral Rites (*Sangnye Bopyeon* 喪禮補編). Moreover, Joseon explicitly prohibited three-day funerals and cremation,⁸ legally mandating that all officials observe the three-year mourning ritual for parents.⁹

Since ancestral tablets (*sinju* 神主) served as the central objects of mourning and ancestral rites in Confucian tradition, the state actively encouraged the construction of ancestral shrines (*sadang* 祠堂). During the reign of King Sejong 世宗 (r. 1418–1450), regulations became strict enough to punish those who did not build shrines within set deadlines. Establishing ancestral shrines was crucial to institutionalizing the lineage system (*jongbeop* 宗法) and ancestral worship, as ancestral tablets symbolized the ancestors themselves. Thus, through legal codifications, mandated three-year mourning rituals, and encouragement of ancestral shrine construction, Joseon succeeded in institutionalizing Confucian rituals systematically (S. Kim 2012b, 72–79).

However, due to Joseon’s hierarchical society, the universality of the three-year mourning ritual remained controversial. Universalist positions viewed the three-year mourning ritual as a universally applicable rite, extending from emperors to commoners without discrimination.¹⁰

Conversely, exclusivist positions argued that rites did not extend to commoners (*seoin* 庶人), asserting they were limited to the scholar-

⁸ 「朝鮮王朝實錄」(*Joseon Wangjo Sillok*, The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty), “Taejo” 太祖, year 4, month 6, day 28, entry 3.

⁹ 許終三年之喪, 申明家廟之制, 禁三日葬及火葬. (“The three-year mourning ritual shall be strictly observed, ancestral shrines established clearly, and three-day funerals and cremation prohibited,” *Joseon Wangjo Sillok*, “Taejo,” year 4, month 6, day 28, entry 3)

¹⁰ 三年之喪, 達乎天子, 父母之喪, 無貴賤一也, “The three-year mourning reaches even the Son of Heaven; mourning for parents does not distinguish between high and low ranks” (*Liji Zhengyi* 禮記正義, Vol. 52, “Zhongyong” 中庸).

gentry class (*sajok* 士族) and above.¹¹ In Joseon, debates continued until King Jungjong's 中宗 (r. 1506–1544) reign regarding whether the three-year mourning should extend to non-scholar classes or remain restricted, as some commoners abused mourning periods to evade compulsory labor.¹² Ultimately, the Gyeongguk Daejeon stipulated a mourning period of 100 days for commoners.¹⁵

Thus, the hierarchical differentiation of rites persisted (J. Kim 2023, 64). However, the *Gukjo Oryeui* did prescribe funeral rites applicable to scholar-officials, commoners, and everyone in between (*daebu, sa, seoin, sangui* 大夫 士 庶人 喪儀). By the seventeenth century, with advances in ritual scholarship, three-year mourning rituals and four-generation ancestral rites became increasingly common across classes. King Yeongjo 英祖 (r. 1724–1776) himself declared: “Even commoners in rural areas perform ancestral rites for four generations. How much more so should the eldest sons responsible for continuing the main family lineage?,”¹⁴ thus reinforcing traditional mourning practices.¹⁵

The Confucian three-year mourning ritual, which flourished until the late Joseon dynasty, began to decline under Japanese colonial rule, largely due to the influence of colonial policies and Christianity. Western or Christian funeral practices—lacking the process of transforming the deceased into ancestral spirits—alongside Christian

¹¹ 禮不下庶人。【注】庶人卑賤，且貧富不同。故經不言庶人之禮，古之制禮者，皆自士而始也（“Ritual does not apply to commoners; commoners are of lower status and economic standing varies greatly, thus classical texts do not specify rites for them. Ancient rituals began from the scholar class”), 『禮記大全』 (Complete Collection of the Book of Rites), Vol. 1, 曲禮 (Quli, Summary of Ritual Rules).

¹² 『朝鮮王朝實錄』 (*Joseon Wangjo Sillok*, The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty), “Jungjong” 中宗, year 3 [1508], month 2, day 11, entry 1.

¹³ 父斬衰三年，軍士及庶人服百日，母同（“For a father’s death, three years of mourning for officials; for soldiers and commoners, mourning lasts 100 days. The same applies for mothers”), 『經國大典』 (*Gyeongguk Daejeon*, National Code of the Joseon Dynasty), 五服 (Obok, Five Degrees of Mourning Attire)”.

¹⁴ 『朝鮮王朝實錄』 (*Joseon Wangjo Sillok*, The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty), “Yeongjo” 英祖, year 28 [1752], month 7, day 24, entry 1.

¹⁵ Extensive research exists on three-year mourning during Joseon, such as works by K. Kim (2001, 115149; 2016, 189–221; 2017, 229–52), Lee (2013, 101–13), An (2014, 103–57), Lee (2016, 79–125), Cho (2016, 153–84), Y. Kim (2017, 21–45), J. Kim (2023, 41–72), and Seo (2023, 355–90).

doctrines, functioned as significant mechanisms in weakening Korea's Confucian mourning tradition.

In 1907, the *Christian Funeral Manual* published by Samuel Austin Moffett (1864–1939) outlined eight prohibitions against traditional Korean funeral practices. These included prohibitions against summoning the spirit (*chohon* 招魂), preparing the traditional spirit banner (*myeongjeong* 銘旌), expressing grief through ritual weeping (*gok* 哭), dressing the deceased in traditional burial clothing, binding the corpse during the cleansing ritual, and conducting ancestral rites at graves (Moffett 1907).¹⁶

Although Moffett claimed he aimed to abolish practices entrenched in Confucian or shamanistic customs (Ahn 2018), his actions represented a fundamental denial of Korea's cultural tradition of mourning rites.

Furthermore, during the colonial period, Japanese authorities actively enforced the three-day funeral ritual through the "Ritual Ordinance" and the "Improved Funeral Standards," stigmatizing the three-year mourning as outdated and undesirable. (*Maeil Sinbo* 1941, 1; *Maeil Sinbo* 1942, 3; National Mobilization Federation of Joseon 1941, 66–69). Funeral companies influenced by Japanese funeral practices continued to affect Korean funeral culture after liberation, ultimately establishing the three-day funeral as the standard form of funeral ritual in modern Korea. Additionally, during the Korean War (1950–1953), many households lost ancestral tablets, which further eroded traditional mourning practices. Subsequent industrialization, urbanization, apartment living, and weekly workplace culture made it increasingly difficult to maintain ancestral shrines, making the three-year mourning ritual virtually impossible for most families.

With the advent of professional funeral halls, family rituals were entrusted to funeral industry specialists, making the three-year mourning appear as a fossilized tradition. Nevertheless, prominent head

¹⁶ Samuel Austin Moffett was an American Presbyterian missionary who arrived in Korea in 1890, known in Korean as Ma Posamyeol 馬布三悅, and actively supported Korean independence movements. He served as president and professor of Pyongyang Theological Seminary and later as president of Soongsil University, until being expelled by Japanese authorities in 1936 for obstructing colonial policies.

families (*jongga* 宗家) and families maintaining a Confucian way of life continue the tradition of three-year mourning by maintaining ancestral tablets. For these families, the ancestral shrine remains essential, rendering the three-year mourning ritual a necessary component.

Though relatively infrequent, contemporary three-year mourning rituals have persisted without complete interruption, as confirmed by the author's direct participant observation and research. In addition to the cases mentioned in the introduction, other examples include the three-year mourning rituals for Kwon Yong-hyeon 權龍鉉 (1900–1988) in 1989, Yi Yong-gu 李龍九 (1908–1998) in 1998, and Yi Byeong-ju 李秉周 (1922–2000) in 2003. Additional three-year mourning rituals have also been observed among prominent head families in Andong.

Currently ongoing three-year mourning rituals include those for Yi Geun-pil 李根必 (1931–2024), the head descendant of Yi Hwang, which began on March 8, 2024, and for Yi Jeom-suk 李点淑 (1940–2024), the wife of the head descendant of Kim Seong-il, initiated on March 20, 2024. Considering that around 350,000 deaths occur annually in Korea, making the three-day funeral the prevalent norm, these occasional three-year mourning rituals may appear exceptional. Nevertheless, the continued observance of the three-year mourning ritual even in today's society, dominated by the three-day funeral practice, underscores the enduring cultural significance and validity of Confucian funeral traditions within contemporary Korean culture.

IV. The Validity of the Traditional Confucian Three-Year Mourning Ritual

A. Structure of the Traditional Confucian Three-Year Mourning Ritual

The traditional Confucian three-year mourning ritual can be described as a grand narrative, comprising 19 procedures conducted over three full years. This extensive ritual involves four main participants: the deceased, the soul of the deceased, the ancestral spirit into which the soul is transformed, and those who preside over the mourning rituals.

The sequence of Confucian mourning rites is structured around rituals intended specifically for these four participants (S. Kim 2012b, 181–96).

First, the “rituals for the deceased” pertain directly to handling and processing the body of the deceased. These rituals begin immediately after death (*chojong* 初終) and continue until the burial. This phase involves cleansing, arranging, wrapping, placing the body into the coffin, and finally interring the deceased.

Second, the “rituals for the soul” address the spirit that is believed to depart from the body upon death, typically considered to be traveling to the afterlife. However, in Confucian funeral practice, since the soul must eventually be revered as an ancestral spirit, the ritual of summoning the soul (*chohon* 招魂) is performed to call it back to the world of the living. Ritual steps include establishing a dedicated seat for the soul (*yeongjwa* 靈座) and enshrining the spirit symbolizing the deceased’s soul.

Third, the “rituals for the ancestral spirit” involve the transformation of the deceased’s soul into an ancestral spirit. This process begins at the burial site with the writing of the deceased’s official titles, name, and the name of the ritual successor on the spirit tablet (*sinju* 神主). This ritual of inscribing the spirit tablet (*jeju* 題主) is analogous to the Buddhist ceremony of dotting the eyes of a Buddha statue (*jeoman bulsa* 點眼佛事), symbolically instilling life into the ancestral tablet. Hence, the selection of the person who writes the inscription is undertaken carefully.¹⁷

Following this, mourners return home with the spirit tablet to perform the ritual of stabilizing the spirit (*uje* 虞祭), marking the formal initiation of the spirit’s transformation into an ancestral deity. Subsequently, through a series of further rituals—*jolgok* 卒哭 (“ceasing frequent ritual weeping”), *buje* 祔祭 (“enshrinement ritual”), *daesang* 大祥 (“major anniversary ritual”), and finally *gilje* 吉祭 (“completion

¹⁷ Examples include calligrapher Yi Dong-ik, who wrote inscriptions during the mourning rituals for the fourteenth senior daughter-in-law of Kim Seong-il’s family in 1993 and the fourteenth direct descendant of Kim Seong-il, Kim Si-in, in 2008; Yi U-seop from Gimhae, who wrote inscriptions during Bak Hyo-su’s mourning rituals in Cheongdo in 1997; and Professor Seong Baek-hyo of the Institute for Classical Translation, who performed this role during Yi U-seop’s own mourning rituals.

ritual”)—the deceased’s soul completes its transformation into an ancestral spirit.

Fourth, the “rituals for the chief mourner and their community,” also described as rituals for the mourners or bereaved family, are spread throughout the entire mourning period. These rituals function as mechanisms designed to help the chief mourner and the family community overcome the existential crisis caused by the death of their family head, minimizing psychological and social disruption. Upon the death of the deceased, the chief mourner enters the mourning period, gradually returning to everyday life after the final completion ritual (*gilje*). These mourning rituals involve detailed symbolic actions, beginning with changing attire and removing decorative elements upon handling the corpse, followed by donning formal mourning attire to officially become the chief mourner.

When conducting the *jolgok* ritual, mourners stop frequent weeping (*musigok* 無時哭). Then, at the minor (*sosang* 小祥) and major (*daesang* 大祥) anniversary rituals, mourners change mourning attire, symbolically reducing their intensity of grief. By the ritual of *damje* 禫祭, mourners shift to colored clothing in preparation for fully resuming their normal lives. Upon performing the final *gilje*, the three-year mourning ritual officially concludes, reaffirming the chief mourner’s role as head of the family and enabling the family and community to fully return to everyday life.

B. The Three-Year Mourning Ritual as a Buffer to Overcome Existential Crisis

In contemporary society, the effectiveness of the three-year mourning ritual lies primarily in its capacity to help mourners overcome trauma, functioning as a ritual specifically designed for the chief mourner and their community. Within the patriarchal, lineage-focused family system emphasized by Neo-Confucianism, the leadership role of the family head is critical. Therefore, the death of the household head constitutes a severe existential crisis for the family. The Confucian three-year mourning ritual was specifically devised to help families navigate and overcome this profound crisis.

The process of overcoming trauma through the three-year mourning begins with the first ancestral rite (*chouje* 初虞祭). Following this, mourning rituals such as the *uje* 虞祭 and *jolgot* 卒哭 ceremonies are held, each marking stages that gradually lessen grief, symbolically represented by changes in mourning attire (Y. Kim 2019, 209–300).

The *uje* ritual embodies the sentiment: “Though bones and flesh return to earth, the soul wanders freely; thus, the filial son conducts three rituals to calm the wandering spirit.”¹⁸ During this ceremony, the chief mourner and other family members take their first bath since the death occurred,¹⁹ symbolically signaling their emerging roles and status as heads of their household.

Subsequently, during the *jolgot* ritual, mourners significantly reduce both the frequency and intensity of their weeping. The term *jolgot* itself implies “ending frequent mourning cries,” as explained: “Upon death, the filial son mourns continuously day and night without a fixed schedule. However, after burial and completion of the *uje* rite, mourning is reduced to only once each morning and evening.”²⁰ Thus, decreasing the frequency of weeping during *jolgot* serves explicitly as a means of alleviating grief, effectively marking the transition from sorrow (*sangje* 喪祭) to reverence and normality (*gilje* 吉祭).

Upon reaching the one-year anniversary (*sosang* 小祥), the mourner’s grief is expected to diminish further, as “the cycle of heaven has completed one rotation, and sorrow gradually fades.”²¹ The *sosang* rite is particularly significant: as Yi Hwang described, it symbolizes a major turning point in reducing mourning intensity. The mourner removes

¹⁸ 骨肉歸于土，魂氣則無所不之，孝子爲其彷徨，三祭以安之（“When the body returns to the earth, the soul wanders everywhere; the filial son, in distress, performs the three rites to bring peace”), 『常變通攷』 (*Sangbyeon Tonggo*, Comprehensive Study of Changes in Funeral Rites), 喪禮 (Sangnye, Funeral Rites), 虞祭 (Uje, Post-burial Rite)

¹⁹ 主人以下皆沐浴（“The chief mourner and all below him perform ritual bathing”), *Sangbyeon Tonggo*, “Sangnye,” “Uje.”

²⁰ 孝子親始死，哭晝夜無時。葬後虞竟，乃行神事。卒其無時之哭，惟朝夕各一哭（“When a parent first dies, the filial son cries day and night without ceasing. After the burial and the completion of the U-rite, spirit rites are performed. Thereafter, weeping without set times ceases, and only morning and evening weeping remain”), *Sangbyeon Tonggo*, “Sangnye,” 卒哭 (Jolgot, Final Weeping).

²¹ 葦天道一變，哀情益衰（“After one full year, Heaven’s way changes, and grief is further diminished”), *Sangbyeon Tonggo*, “Sangnye,” 小祥 (Sosang, First Anniversary Rite).

the headband of mourning (*suji* 首經), adopting instead a less severe mourning attire by discarding items such as the mourning plate (*bupan* 負版), collar decoration (*byeoknyeong* 辟領), and coarse mourning clothes (*choe* 衰).²² At the second-year anniversary ritual (*daesang* 大祥), the mourner further reduces grief by completely removing mourning clothes and adopting simplified white clothing (*sobok* 素服), symbolically marking the end of mourning and the overcoming of trauma.

During the subsequent ritual, known as *damje* 禫祭, mourners change once again, this time into regular dark-colored everyday attire, clearly indicating the resolution of grief and successful navigation of the existential crisis brought about by the death. These repeated changes in mourning attire, collectively called *subok* 受服, represent the gradual easing of mourning, continuing incrementally until mourning formally concludes.²³ Thus, each clothing change (*subok*) explicitly symbolizes the mourners' gradual reduction of sorrow and overcoming of trauma.

Finally, during the concluding ritual, *gilje*, the three-year mourning ritual officially ends, the spirit tablet is enshrined in the family's ancestral shrine, and the chief mourner fully resumes daily life. This completes the process of overcoming the profound existential crisis triggered by the death of the family head, allowing the new chief mourner to fully assume family leadership.

Contemporary three-year mourning rituals also rigorously follow this process. While this adherence reflects a formal commitment to prescribed ritual traditions, it significantly demonstrates how mourners effectively manage the severe crisis resulting from the death of the family head, completing all necessary steps for family suc-

²² 退溪曰, 小祥一期之周, 爲一大變殺之節, 故於首去經, 而別以加一升練布爲冠, 於身去負版辟領衰 (“Toegye said: The completion of the first anniversary (*sosang*) marks a major change and a lessening of grief. Thus, the mourner removes the mourning headband and replaces it with a plain hemp cap, and also removes the mourning clothes with wooden collar and hempen garment”), 『沙溪全書』 (*Sagye Jeonseo*, Collected Works of Toegye Yi Hwang), Vol. 42, “Bu Sangjerye Dammun Byeonui” 附喪祭禮答問辨疑 (Supplementary Questions and Explanations on Funeral and Ancestral Rites).

²³ 皆有受服, 遞加升數, 漸殺以至于闋 (“At each stage of mourning, the mourner receives new attire, with the number of hemp threads gradually increasing; grief is lessened step by step until the mourning period is completed”), 『常變通攷』 (*Sangbyeon Tonggo*, Comprehensive Study of Changes in Funeral Rites), 喪禮 (*Sangnye*, Funeral Rites), 小祥 (*Sosang*, First Anniversary Rite).

cession. For instance, during Yi U-seop's mourning, the second chief mourner refrained from haircuts and shaving throughout the mourning period, finally doing so after the *Gilje* ritual. Similarly, during Kim Si-in's mourning, the primary mourner left his life in Seoul to return and uphold the family tradition at the ancestral home throughout the three-year mourning. Such examples illustrate clearly how the critical existential crises faced by families were successfully resolved through adherence to the traditional three-year mourning rituals. Through step-by-step ceremonial processes, families gradually alleviated grief and overcame trauma. Thus, the three-year duration of mourning functions as an essential buffer mechanism, enabling mourners and their communities to recover psychologically and socially from the existential crisis triggered by the death of their family head.

C. Symbolization of the Three-Year Mourning Ritual through the Domestic Mourning Hut (*Ganae Yeoso* 家內廬所)

The original form of the three-year mourning ritual involved maintaining a mourning hut (*simyo* 侍墓) beside the parents' gravesite for the full three-year period following burial.²⁴ The earliest historical account of graveside mourning appears in Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (fl. 145–86 BCE) *Shiji* 史記, documenting that Weizi 唯子 (?–?) mourned for six years at Confucius's grave.²⁵ In Korea, the tradition of graveside mourning is believed to have begun with Jeong Mong-ju 鄭夢周 (1337–1392) during the late Goryeo period and continued into the Joseon dynasty.²⁶

The background to graveside mourning (*yeomyo*) lies in the Confucian tradition requiring children to mourn their parents for three full years after death. However, according to the ritual of returning

²⁴ Concerning this practice of graveside mourning (*yeomyo* 廬墓), detailed discussions can be found in M. Kim (2000, 47–63), K. Kim (2001, 115–49; 2016, 189–221; 2017, 229–52), Park (2014, 107–32), Y. Kim (2017, 21–45), and Lee (2018, 199–241).

²⁵ 唯子竊廬於冢上，凡六年，然後去 (“Weizi Gan maintained a hut by the grave for six years before departing”), 『史記』 (*Shiji*, Records of the Grand Historian), Vol. 47, 孔子世家 (Hereditary House of Confucius).

²⁶ 吾東自圃隱鄭文忠公居廬之後，始知慕效，漸久成俗 (“Since Jeong Mong-ju performed graveside mourning in Korea, this practice gradually became customary”), 『家禮輯覽』 (*Garye Jibnam*, Collected Explanations on Family Rituals), 喪禮 (Sangnye, Funeral Rites), 反哭 (Bangok, Return Weeping).

sinju home from the grave (*bangok*) as described in Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals* (*Zhuzi Jiali* 朱子家禮) and the dualism separating spirit and body, graves were viewed merely as sites containing the body, while the spirit resided within the ancestral tablet (*sinju*) kept at home. Graves became objects of reverence primarily because Zhu Xi once accommodated popular custom by holding graveside rituals.²⁷ Later, Zhu Xi officially incorporated grave rituals (*myoje* 墓祭) into his *Family Rituals*. Moreover, Korea's seasonal grave rituals had become so deeply rooted in popular tradition that reform was considered challenging.²⁸

Consequently, through the late Joseon period, interaction with the deceased was thought possible primarily at graves, centered around the buried body itself. This belief stood in conflict with the official Confucian practice of *bangok* 反哭, which emphasized spiritual worship centered around ancestral tablets (Y. Kim 2017, 39). In 1579, debate emerged regarding mourning practices, with No Su-sin 盧守愼 (1515–1590) arguing that the practice of returning home (*bangok*) disrupted the integrity of graveside mourning. In contrast, Kim U-ong 金宇顛 (1540–1603) argued that graveside mourning was not prescribed by ancient rites and thus should not preclude *bangok*.²⁹ This controversy was significant enough to be recorded in the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* (*Joseon Wangjo Sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄).

In the mourning rituals of Yi U-seop and Kim Si-in, mourners similarly practiced graveside mourning symbolically. Rather than erecting a hut at the gravesite, mourners constructed a symbolic mourning hut by attaching straw mats to the pillars in front of the ritual altar within their home, called a domestic mourning hut (*ganae yeoso* 家內廬所). The practice of domestic mourning huts had precedents during the Joseon era, as seen in the cases of Yi Mun-geon 李文樾 (1494–1567) and Yun I-hu 尹爾厚 (1636–1699) (Y. Kim 2017, 23). The

²⁷ 按, 墓祭非古也, 朱子隨俗一祭 (“Originally, grave rituals were not ancient practice; Zhu Xi performed them once following local custom”),『四禮便覽』(*Sarye Pyeollam*, Convenient Reference to the Four Rites), 祭禮 (Jerye, Sacrificial Rites), 墓祭 (Myoje, Grave Sacrifice).

²⁸ 四節墓祭, 國俗行之已久, 有難頓變 (“Seasonal grave rites have long been customary in our country and thus cannot be easily abolished”),『四禮便覽』(*Sarye Pyeollam*, Convenient Reference to the Four Rites), 祭禮 (Jerye, Sacrificial Rites), 墓祭 (Myoje, Grave Sacrifice).

²⁹ 『朝鮮王朝實錄』(*Joseon Wangjo Sillok*, The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty), “宣祖” (Seonjo), year 12 [1579], month 3, day 25, entry 4

ganae yeoso thus represented a compromise, harmonizing the formal Confucian ritual of *bangok* with graveside mourning traditions. Even in contemporary practice, this domestic mourning hut continues to function symbolically, visibly demonstrating the family's adherence to the tradition of graveside mourning.

A Korean proverb says, "Debt collection is not enforced during the three-year mourning period." This indicates that social obligations, such as debt repayment, can be postponed until after the mourning period when families have recovered from the crisis of bereavement. In this sense, the *ganae yeoso* also serves as an outward sign to society that the family is actively observing the three-year mourning ritual, thus allowing them to seek understanding and temporary exemption from social expectations during this sensitive and critical period.

D. Three-Year Mourning Ritual as a Necessary Condition for Families Enshrining Ancestral Tablets (*Sinju* 神主)

The three-year mourning ritual is fundamentally a process designed to transform the deceased into an ancestral spirit. Within the Confucian mourning framework, this corresponds explicitly to the rituals intended for the ancestral spirit. This transformation begins at the burial site, specifically through the ritual act of inscription on the ancestral tablet (*jeju* 題主). Upon completion of the inscription, the ritual offering known as *jejujeon* 題主奠 is presented, and the mourners return home with the newly inscribed tablet, in a rite known as *bangok* 反哭. Once arriving home, the ancestral tablet is enshrined, and the first *uje* (*chouje* 初虞祭) ritual is performed. From this point onward, the ritual term used changes from *jeon* 奠 to *je* 祭. While *jeon* denotes an offering conducted before burial—indicating a period during which death is not yet fully recognized—the term *je* signifies formal recognition of death and the identification of the deceased's soul as an ancestral spirit.

During the subsequent ritual of *jolmok* 卒哭, clear liquor (*hyeonju* 玄酒), which traditionally symbolizes purification and renewal, is prepared. This indicates the ritual has now transitioned into an auspicious event (*gillye* 吉禮). At the earlier *uje* ritual, the officiant (*chukgwan* 祝官) recites ritual addresses (*dokchuk* 讀祝) while standing to the left of the

chief mourner, facing east. However, from *jolmok* onward, the officiant stands on the opposite side, indicating the deceased is now formally worshipped as an ancestral spirit. Next, a ritual called *buje* 耐祭, which formally announces to the existing ancestors that the newly deceased is joining them in the ancestral shrine, is conducted. This ritual clearly signifies the deceased's entrance into the ranks of ancestral spirits.

In the concluding *gilje* 吉祭 ritual, a crucial rite known as *gaeje* 改題, involving rewriting the inscriptions on ancestral tablets, is performed. Specifically, the day before *gilje*, as demonstrated clearly during the mourning rituals for Kim Si-in and Yi Dong-eun, the inscriptions are updated to rearrange the ranking of ancestral tablets within the shrine. *gaeje* thus involves modifying the ancestral tablet's front inscription (*bunmyeon* 粉面), replacing the name of the former ritual successor (*bongsaja* 奉祀者) with the name of the current chief mourner. The generation count (*bongsadae* 奉祀代) inscribed on the tablet is similarly adjusted to reflect the current lineage status. Hence, the three-year mourning ritual is indispensable for families who enshrine ancestral tablets and must update their ancestral rankings accordingly.

As the *gilje* is completed, ancestral tablets representing the fifth generation ancestors are either relocated (*checheon* 遞遷) or ritually buried. Only then is the tablet of the recently deceased ancestor formally placed at the eastern end of the ancestral shrine, indicating the completion of the ancestor's transformation into an ancestral spirit. Subsequently, this ancestral spirit continues residing in the ancestral shrine, symbolically participating as an invisible member of the family for four generations.

V. Contemporary Adaptation of the Traditional Confucian Three-Year Mourning Ritual System

A. The Adaptation of the Three-Year Mourning Ritual to Modern Social Life

As discussed previously, the validity of the Confucian three-year mourning ritual is recognized even in contemporary society. However,

modern industrial and urbanized society makes it impossible to observe this ritual in the traditional manner, originally designed for an agricultural, family-centered context. Consequently, contemporary adaptation of the Confucian three-year mourning ritual is inevitable, as it must accommodate modern lifestyles and social conditions.

During the Joseon dynasty, individuals often resigned from official positions upon the death of their parents to fully observe the three-year mourning ritual. Traditionally, the chief mourner would spend three years residing in a mourning hut (*yeomyo* 廬墓) near the gravesite, reflecting on parental virtues and managing household affairs. Even in the Joseon era, however, mourners occasionally left their mourning huts to attend important events. For instance, Yi Mun-geon 李文楗 (1494–1567) is documented as having temporarily left his mourning hut in Nowon, Yangju, to visit his family home in Jeodong and participate in ancestral rituals at his elder brother's residence near Seosomun (K. Kim 2001, 11–15).

By the late eighteenth century, mourners such as those participating in the mourning for An Jeong-bok 安鼎福 (1712–1791) strictly avoided travel before the *Jolgok* ritual but afterward made necessary trips while still nominally observing mourning from their home-based mourning huts (K. Kim 2017, 246–47). Thus, even in Joseon society, complete isolation during the three-year mourning period was not strictly enforced, reflecting an understanding that social participation was sometimes necessary.

During the contemporary mourning rituals observed in this study, similar adaptations were evident. In Yi U-seop's mourning, the eldest son, who managed a small business with his wife, dedicated himself fully to the mourning rituals within the home-based mourning hut (*ganae yeoso*), while his wife managed their business. The other three brothers participated in mourning rituals intermittently, balancing their professional responsibilities by attending significant ritual occasions, such as the *jolgok*, *buje*, *sosang*, and *daesang*. The second son, who also ran his own business, demonstrated his mourning by not shaving or cutting his hair for the entire mourning period.

During Kim Si-in's mourning, the eldest son had already retired but maintained active social commitments in Seoul. To fulfill the mourning

responsibilities, he concluded his life in Seoul and relocated to the ancestral residence with his wife, observing the three-year mourning rituals while also managing external activities intermittently. Other siblings similarly participated by attending only major rituals due to work commitments. This reflects an essential compromise necessary to accommodate the demands of modern professional life.

In the mourning ritual for Yi Dong-eun, the eldest mourner maintained the home-based mourning hut for three years. However, during Yi Geun-pil's ongoing mourning rituals, the chief mourner continues his professional work, participating fully only in significant rituals such as *jolgot* and *buje*, during which he wears formal mourning attire. Likewise, the chief mourner for the senior daughter-in-law of Kim Seong-il's head family has similarly adapted the mourning rituals to fit professional schedules. In contemporary society, workplaces do not provide extended leave for observing three-year mourning rituals, nor do they guarantee reemployment after a prolonged absence. Therefore, mourners must inevitably continue professional work, adjusting mourning rituals through strategic use of vacation periods or brief absences. Thus, the modern Confucian three-year mourning ritual has evolved into a modified form, shaped significantly by the conditions and demands of contemporary social and professional life.

B. The Three-Year Mourning Ritual Adapted to the Modern Social Calendar

In traditional Korean society, selecting auspicious days (*taegil* 擇日) was considered critically important when scheduling funeral rituals. The traditional method involved proposing a specific date and using divination sticks (*baegyo* 环琮), where one stick landing face-up and the other face-down indicated a favorable date.³⁰ Typically, the initial auspicious day proposed would be a *jeongil* (丁日 a specific type of lucky day), preferably within the first third of the month. If the divination indicated this day as inauspicious, a day from the second or third part of the month was then selected.

³⁰ "The sticks are thrown onto a plate, and one facing up and the other facing down signifies good fortune." ("即以琮擲于盤，以一俯一仰爲吉，" *Jiali* 家禮，"Sangli" 喪禮，"Tan" 禫)

In contemporary society, however, scheduling rituals for the three-year mourning ritual depends primarily upon weekends and public holidays. During Yi U-seop's mourning, the key rituals such as *jolmok* and *buje* were intentionally scheduled on Sundays, with *jolmok* held in the morning and *buje* in the afternoon, enabling participants to return home promptly without disruption to their Monday work schedule. Similarly, in Kim Si-in's mourning, the concluding ritual (*gilje*) was scheduled for May 1 (Labor Day), explicitly considering participants' convenience. Other rituals were likewise scheduled on Saturdays or Sundays. Additionally, while traditionally the *samuje* 三虞祭 ritual required five days, modern rituals condensed these into three consecutive days to minimize interference with work responsibilities.

Traditional methods of auspicious date selection could only have been maintained in an agricultural society where time management was flexible. Modern societies, adhering to standardized global working hours (five days per week, eight hours per day), necessitate scheduling mourning rituals on weekends or holidays. Thus, the modern adaptation of the three-year mourning ritual demonstrates deliberate accommodation of contemporary social calendars and employment obligations.

C. Incorporating the Funeral Industry into the Three-Year Mourning Ritual

In contemporary Korean society, the funeral industry has emerged as a blue ocean market, exemplified by hospital-based funeral halls and funeral service companies. Although commonplace in Korea, hospital funeral halls represent a site where seemingly incompatible symbolic meanings coexist—often described metaphorically as strange yet comfortable cohabitation (Cheon 2014). Virtually all Koreans today conduct funeral rites connected to these two sectors.

Modern funerals in Korea have become standardized as three-day events (*samiljang* 三日葬), influenced both by the Family Ritual Standards and the commercial aspects of funeral halls. According to current burial laws, a body cannot be buried or cremated until 24 hours have elapsed

since death.³¹ Thus, body preparation (*yeomseup* 斂襲) typically occurs on the second day, followed by cremation or burial on the third day.

One modern adaptation observed in contemporary three-year mourning rituals is the simultaneous execution of body preparation rituals. Traditional Confucian mourning prescribed conducting body preparations over three separate days: washing and dressing (*seup* 襲) on the first day, small wrapping (*soryeom* 小斂) on the second day, and final wrapping and coffin placement (*daeryeom* 大斂) on the third day. This three-day separation symbolized waiting for a possible revival of the deceased.³²

However, in modern funeral halls, the entire sequence—from washing to coffin placement—is completed within approximately two hours on the second day. After placing the body in the coffin and allowing final respects from the family, the coffin is closed, concluding the body preparation ritual. Funeral halls commonly mislabel this combined procedure as “body preparation and coffin placement” (*yeomseup* and *ipgwan*). During the mourning rituals for Yi Dong-eun and the senior daughter-in-law of Kim Seong-il’s head family, funeral halls were utilized, and thus body preparation rituals followed the simplified funeral hall procedures. Even in the rituals for Yi U-seop and Kim Si-in, although body preparation was conducted at home, the traditional multi-day practice was similarly compressed into a single session on the second day.

Another prominent modern incorporation is the use of funeral portraits. Funeral portraits first appeared in Korean funerals around the 1930s (S. Kim 2024a, 139–42) and were officially standardized by the Ritual Ordinance in 1934. Over time, societal shifts led to widespread use of funeral portraits decorated with black ribbons, replacing the traditional spirit tablet.

In traditional Confucian mourning rituals, the deceased’s soul was called back through the ritual of *chohon* 招魂, then symbolically

³¹ Under Article 6 (Timing of Burial and Cremation) of the Act on Funeral Services and Related Matters [Act No. 20449, September 20, 2024, Amendment to Other Laws], burial or cremation is not permitted until at least 24 hours have passed since death or stillbirth.

³² “Thus, the body is wrapped three days later in anticipation of possible revival.” (“故曰三日而後斂者，以俟其生也,” *Sangbyeon Tonggo* 常變通攷, “Sangnye” 喪禮, “Daeryeom” 大斂)

housed in a spirit tablet, serving as the essential step in transforming the deceased into an ancestral spirit. Consequently, dying outside the home was traditionally avoided. Reflecting this belief, during Kim Si-in's and Yi U-seop's mourning, critically ill individuals hospitalized were quickly returned home before death—a practice known as *cheongeο jeongchim* 遷居正寢, meaning “returning the deceased to their rightful place of residence.” Subsequently, their souls were summoned via *chohon*, and spirit tablets were established.

Nonetheless, in both Kim Si-in's and Yi U-seop's mourning rituals, portraits of the deceased were placed behind the spirit tablet, serving more as commemorative images rather than typical funeral portraits. By contrast, in the mourning rituals for Yi Geun-pil and Yi Jeom-suk in 2024, portraits explicitly included black ribbons, fully embracing contemporary funeral industry practices.

VI. Conclusion

The Confucian three-year mourning ritual represents a significant cultural tradition within Korean funeral practices. Nonetheless, contemporary Korean funeral culture predominantly revolves around the three-day funeral (*samiljang*), which is fundamentally distinct from the traditional Confucian form. Unlike the three-year mourning, the three-day funeral has become reduced primarily to a formal procedure centered solely on the disposal of the deceased's body. Despite this situation, the Confucian three-year mourning ritual continues to be practiced, particularly among historically prominent families (*jongga*). Unlike the three-day funeral, the Confucian three-year mourning fulfills multiple functions, including handling the deceased's remains, transforming the deceased into an ancestral spirit, and providing a mechanism for mourners to overcome trauma.

These traditional functions of the three-year mourning ritual remain valid even within modern society, though adaptations reflecting contemporary social contexts are also observable. The validity of the Confucian three-year mourning today is demonstrated firstly through its adherence to the traditional Confucian structure of rituals, which

comprises procedures specifically designed for the deceased, the deceased's soul, the ancestral spirit, and the mourners themselves.

Secondly, the ritual acts as a buffer mechanism to assist the chief mourner and their community in overcoming the existential crisis brought on by the death of a family head. From the moment the death occurs, the mourners enter a state of mourning. Through rituals such as the initial *chouje* 初虞祭—marked symbolically by the chief mourner's ceremonial bath—mourners gradually prepare to return to normal life. Subsequent rites (*jolgok* 卒哭, *sosang* 小祥, *daesang* 大祥, and *damje* 禫祭) progressively reduce the intensity of mourning, symbolized explicitly by gradual changes in mourning attire (*subok* 受服). Ultimately, with the concluding *gilje* 吉祭 ritual, the three-year process serves to systematically alleviate the mourners' trauma, facilitating their full return to everyday life.

Thirdly, families practicing the three-year mourning ritual use the symbolic domestic mourning hut (*ganae yeoso* 家内廬所), a form combining graveside mourning with the ritual of returning home (*bangok* 反哭) while carrying the ancestral tablet. This visible symbol externally communicates the household's observance of mourning, providing justification for temporary withdrawal from social obligations and enabling the continuity of familial succession rituals.

Fourthly, for families maintaining ancestral tablets, the three-year mourning ritual is necessary for reorganizing ancestral hierarchy within the family shrine. The mourning period marks the process by which the deceased's soul is fully transformed into an ancestral spirit, indicated by the change in terminology from *jeon* 奠 to *je* 祭. The *buje* 祔祭 ritual officially announces to ancestors the enshrinement of a new spirit tablet. At the *gilje*, the spirit tablet of the fifth-generation ancestor is ritually relocated or buried, ceasing regular ancestral rites and introducing the newly enshrined tablet into the ancestral shrine hierarchy. This hierarchical adjustment necessitates the complete three-year ritual sequence.

Meanwhile, contemporary adaptations of the Confucian three-year mourning are clearly evident. First, the ritual has adapted to the professional requirements of modern social life. Unlike traditional society, contemporary mourners cannot realistically quit jobs or take

extended leaves, requiring mourners to balance mourning duties with professional obligations and social activities. Thus, contemporary three-year mourning rituals inevitably incorporate the practical constraints of modern social and professional contexts.

Second, the rituals have adjusted to the modern workweek and calendar. Traditional Confucian mourning practices involved careful selection of auspicious dates. However, due to fixed modern work schedules, contemporary mourners instead schedule rituals on weekends or public holidays. This demonstrates a practical adaptation replacing traditional date-selection customs with contemporary considerations of social convenience and necessity.

Third, contemporary three-year mourning rituals have integrated aspects of the modern funeral industry. The standardized three-day funeral procedure heavily relies on professional funeral services. Contemporary three-year mourning has similarly adopted certain practices, such as compressing the traditionally separate procedures of washing and wrapping the body (*seup* 襲 and *yeom* 斂) into a single session on the second day. Additionally, even while conducting traditional rituals such as returning the deceased home (*cheongeo jeongchim* 遷居正寢) and summoning the spirit into an ancestral tablet, mourners have accepted the modern convention of displaying a portrait photograph, reflecting contemporary funeral practices.

Thus, the contemporary Confucian three-year mourning ritual continues to exhibit validity by faithfully inheriting traditional Confucian functions, meanings, and symbols. Simultaneously, it inevitably incorporates modern adaptations responding to current social contexts—embracing contemporary work life, practical calendar scheduling, and certain conventions from the modern funeral industry. Therefore, the modern Confucian three-year mourning ritual represents a dynamic blend of continued traditional validity and necessary modern adaptation, harmonizing historical practice with contemporary social realities.

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