



# Laughter in the Face of Death: *The Concept of Good Death and Its Cultural Expressions in Korean Funeral Rituals*

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## Abstract

*While funerals are traditionally solemn occasions in Confucian ideology, Korean funeral rituals also displayed elements of playfulness or festivity. Previous studies have often interpreted this playfulness as a remnant of local traditions, contrasting with the prevailing Confucian approach to funeral rituals characterized by grief and sorrow. Drawing on ethnographic research in Jeongseon, Gangwon-do during the mid to late 20th century, this study examines the playfulness in Korean funeral rituals as an innate aspect of the ritual itself. Funerals in this period involved abundant food and vigorous social exchanges between family members and condolers from around the village. The concept of good death (hosang), which generally denotes one's passing after a long life and under stable economic and family conditions, mitigated the solemnity of funerals and allowed playfulness to manifest within the ritual. This gave rise to various expressive forms, including playing with the bier the night before the burial, adhering to playful behavior norms shared by participants, and fostering a festive atmosphere where jokes and laughter were permissible. With detailed descriptions, this study illustrates how the concept of good death influenced the practice of funeral rituals, enabling diverse cultural expressions to emerge.*

**Keywords:** good death, funeral rituals, festivity, food, labor, play, atmosphere

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## Introduction

When I met Mr. Jeon, a man in his 60s from Yeoryang village in Jeongseong-gun, Gangwon-do, during my doctoral dissertation fieldwork in 2019, he recounted a memory from the day his grandfather passed away in 1968. Being a teenager at the time and the eldest grandson, Mr. Jeon held a special bond with his grandfather. The event occurred a day after the Lunar New Year. His grandfather had gathered Mr. Jeon's father and all his uncles and aunts and had for the first time disclosed the real estate owned by the family in distant regions. As the story was coming to an end, a surprising twist emerged. With a twinkle in his eye, Mr. Jeon's grandfather declared, "I have shared all that needs to be said, and now it is time for some merriment." To the astonishment of the gathered family and visitors, who had come to pay their respects, he began to sing a jovial song. Despite the somber context and crowded house, an air of celebration pervaded the room. Mr. Jeon remembered the resonance of his grandfather's voice, which had remained strong even in his final moments.<sup>1</sup>

The ideal traditional Confucian funeral ritual was required to be filled with grief and sorrow. More precisely, it was commonly regarded that the ritual serves as a mechanism for dealing with the emotional experience of losing one's closest and most important loved ones (W. Lee 2017). The eldest son of the deceased occupied a central role in the entire ritual process, with all emotional expressions revolving around him and his brothers (if any), who shared the duty of filial piety. In the context of bereavement, the offspring of the deceased were considered not only those who suffer but also those responsible for the death of their parents, which necessitated a sense of guilt underlying their profound sadness. Their costumes, made of coarse hemp cloth and without knots symbolized their position as sinners

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1. Considering that it was more common to endure a period of suffering before death, Mr. Jeon's grandfather's case cannot be regarded as typical. It is also plausible that the narrator may have somewhat dramatized the narrative. Nevertheless, it was previously noted that common people could foresee their own deaths (G. Choi 1991). Furthermore, Mr. Jeon's account still serves as an illustration of the ideal type of good death shared by the residents in anticipation of their own or their families' deaths.

(Shihwang Kim 1994). Additionally, the regular and formal practice of wailing demonstrated that grief and sorrow, infused with guilt, were the appropriate emotions for the ritual process. In fact, the Confucian ideas on funeral rituals prohibit different attitudes or methods of mourning the deceased (Shideok Kim 2012).

However, previous studies have highlighted that the actual process of funeral rituals comprised not only expressions of grief and sorrow, but also distinct elements of festivity. Korean folklore studies, in particular, have emphasized these festive elements, which are more prominent in regions distant from Seoul, the Confucian center. For instance, funeral rituals practiced in Jindo, Jeollanam-do are renowned for their unique customs, such as *ssitgimgut*, *dasiraegi*, and *manga* (Huh 2004). Regarding this festivity in funeral rituals, two major analytic approaches can be identified. On the one hand, the festive elements contrast with Confucian norms, shedding light on their origin and transmission (Han 2009; K. Lee 2013, 2021). On the other hand, from a functional perspective, these elements contribute to the healing of the bereaved and the restoration of community cohesion (M. Choi 2016; Oh 2017). In both approaches, the playfulness or festivity of funeral rituals was often deemed improper or exceptional, requiring an explanation for its existence. Furthermore, while it was recognized that funeral rituals are performed within the social fabric of a community, social relations tended to be regarded merely as a background or resource utilized for the rituals.

This study aims to clarify that the playfulness or festivity in funeral rituals originates from the structure of the ritual itself, extending beyond its symbolic order to encompass the infrasympbolic level, which includes social relations and physical exchanges. This study seeks to understand the playfulness or festivity in funerals not as an anti-ritual element (Lim 1995), but as an integral aspect of the substructure of the funeral ritual itself. The traditional concept of a *good death*, known as *hosang* 好喪, serves as a key concept, shedding light on the emergence of playful elements at funerals and how they emerge from the heart of what may initially appear as a tragic event, the death. This study endeavors to unravel the contradiction between tragedy and joy within a funeral ritual. Rather than merely juxtaposing grief

and joy as two separate emotional categories, I analyze the substantial interactions that exist between them. In addition, this study focuses on the actual performances of funeral rituals, diverging from previous research that primarily concentrated on interpreting literary texts and clarifying conceptions of death or emotional attitudes towards it (I. Lee 1997; Choe 2013).

This article is divided into three parts. First, it elucidates the traditional concept of good death and its elements. Second, it explains the relationship between daily life and ritual circumstances and clarifies the structure of a funeral ritual. Third, it classifies several types of cultural expressions of good death. The data for this study were collected through an anthropological fieldwork conducted from 2018 to 2019, and an additional one in 2020, on elderly residents of Jeongseon, Gangwon-do. The interviewees are former or current farmers and are in their 60s to 90s—born between the 1920s and 1950s. Moreover, I had the opportunity to engage with ritual specialists involved in organizing and conducting funeral rituals. The in-depth interviews placed greater emphasis on the past, particularly the mid to late 20th century, when it was customary for individuals to pass away in their own homes, with funeral rituals organized and conducted by family and neighbors. This was a time before the funerary transformations (H. Lee 1996; Park 2010), and since the field site was in the countryside the pace of change was low. Therefore, although the present tense is used in descriptions, this article is an ethnography not of the current situation, but rather of mid- to late-20th-century rural South Korea.

## The Concept of Good Death

The concept of good death, *hosang*, is key to elucidating the playfulness or festivity in funeral rituals. Although the concept falls under the category of normal death, it requires specific conditions.<sup>2</sup> Previous studies have noted

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2. It should be noted that both the classification of normal death or abnormal death and the concept of good death are not universal but historical. This means that the criteria can

the distinction between normal death and abnormal death (Yi 2009; Song 2006), and elderly residents in Jeongseon hold similar conceptions. For them, normal death was considered the default for death and was, therefore, relatively unremarkable. Specifically, to be classified as normal death, two elements must have been satisfied. The first is related to the social membership of the deceased, that is, whether the person was married and had offspring. The second is related to the specific circumstances of passing, that is, whether the person died at their own home surrounded by their family.

Death that does not satisfy these conditions was referred to as bad death, known as *aesang* 哀喪, *aksang* 惡喪, or *hyungsang* 凶喪. Typical examples include a person dying at a young age (a) or unmarried (b), not at their own home, namely *gaeksa* 客死 (c), by accident (d), or suicide (e). Table 1 shows the conditions of normal death and the types of abnormal death.

**Table 1.** The Conditions of Normal Death and the Types of Abnormal Death

Categories	Conditions of normal death		Types of abnormal death		
Social membership	Married and had offspring		Not adult	Children	(a)
				Unmarried men/ women	(b)
Circumstances of passing	Place	Home	At places other than home		(c)
	Cause	Internal cause	External cause	Accident	(d)
				Suicide	(e)

All types of abnormal death or bad death were considered events that people had to avoid or even prevent; therefore, they were accompanied by symbolic

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vary with overall social change. In addition, even if the same term is used, the concept of good death can differ based on the individual and the context. Despite the complex nature of the concept, I focused on the specific definition of good death shared by the elderly residents at the field site, which indicates specific orientations and attitudes toward death during the middle and late 20th century in rural South Korea.

rituals or taboos. For instance, when a child died, there was no funeral ritual; instead, the corpse was buried upside down in a sack, symbolizing the desire to prevent such deaths from recurring. Unmarried men and women were believed to become resentful ghosts capable of harming the living; hence, people would place a knife beside their tombs to appease or ward off any potential harm. Deaths caused by tigers were regarded as avoidable by placing a knife in a steamer at the location of the accident. As another example, it was advised not to salute boatmen and mine workers who were exposed to the risk of accidents, the salutation could potentially be their last word.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from normal and abnormal death, Korean culture also has the specific concept of good death, known as *hosang* 好喪, which differs from normal death as it involves additional conditions. When determining whether a death was *good* or not, the individual's situation at the time of death and the overall circumstances of the family were considered. The conditions of good death are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The Conditions of Good Death (*hosang*)

Categories	Conditions of Good Death		Note
Individual's situation at the time of death	Age	Over a certain age (e.g., 60)	Standard has changed (e.g., 80 or 90)
	Generational order	Without outliving offspring	Condition for the ritual of sixty years of marriage
Overall circumstances of the family	Economic condition	Enough to host funeral rituals and serve ancestral rites	Unless the burial would be done by villagers without a ritual
	Family's situation	Existence of sons	

Regarding the first aspect, the individual's situation at the time of death, age and generational order within the family were considered. Firstly, the

3. Although farming is the primary occupation of the residents in this area, there were also boatmen and coal miners in the region.

individual must have passed away after reaching a certain age, traditionally set at 60 years (known as *hwangap*); however, in recent times, this threshold has significantly increased to 80 or even 90. Mr. Hong and Ms. Jo of Bancheon village, both in their 80s, reflected on the changes over time.

Mr. Hong: In the past, there were too many who passed away before reaching 60 years old.

Ms. Jo: Back in the old days, people did not have access to proper nutrition and medical care. So, when someone died after reaching *hwangap* and *jingap* [one year after *hwangap*], people considered it good death.

Researcher: So, were there very few individuals who lived past 70?

Mr. Hong: That is correct.

Ms. Jo: Although some people did live longer, like my great-grandfather. He lived well beyond 70.

However, the perception that a death occurred at the appropriate time was not solely related to the individual's age. It was also crucial for the person to not have experienced the loss of their children during their lifetime, and their death should not have disrupted the generational order within the family. Mr. Jeong from Yeotan village, who is in his 70s, defined good death as passing away at old age without significant suffering and emphasized the importance of not outliving one's children.

Researcher: When can we consider a death to be good death?

Mr. Jeong: When people use the term *hosang*, they typically refer to individuals who died at a very old age without much suffering. The word *ho* signifies good. Nowadays, people typically associate *hosang* with individuals who pass away at least beyond 70 and without outliving their children.

Additionally, death that does not involve outliving one's children is referred to as *charye georeum*, which translates to "steps in good order." Ms. Yoon and Mr. Shim of Bancheon village, both in their 80s, explained the term as follows:

Ms. Yoon: When I think about it, I know I must die, but how can I bear the thought of leaving my children behind? However, it is *charye georeum*, and we, the elderly, must face death.

Researcher: *Charye georeum*?

Mr. Shim: It means dying in a proper sequence.

Ms. Yoon: Sequentially, starting from the oldest and continuing to the youngest. It would not be considered proper if one were to lose their children or grandchildren...The grandfather passes away first, followed by the father.

As evident from the dialogue, while individuals could not remain indifferent when confronted with their own mortality, the concept of *charye georeum* helped people accept it. Death without outliving one's children was also a requirement to observe the ritual celebrating sixty years of marriage, known as *hoehollye* 回婚禮. Although some people used to celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary, if a couple had outlived their offspring, they would not partake in such festivities. In essence, the concept of destiny was intertwined not only with the deceased individual but also with the generational order within the family.

Concerning the second aspect, which encompasses the overall circumstances of the family, two primary factors were considered: the economic condition and the family's situation. This means that the family must have sufficient funds to conduct funeral rituals, and there should be a son who can carry out ancestral ceremonies. While these factors may not be as readily apparent as the age or generational order of the individual, they are nonetheless crucial in determining whether a death was considered good or not. Even if a death met the criteria for normalcy outlined above, it could not be deemed good death without the presence of stable financial and familial circumstances. Mr. Seo of Gujeol village, who is in his 90s, recollected witnessing several instances where people were buried without proper funeral rituals.

Researcher: Does *hosang* mean that the deceased died at an old age?

Mr. Seo: No, whether old or young, *hosang* refers to someone who had a



good destiny and died without causing trouble to others. It cannot be called *hosang* if it caused problems to others. If it is not *hosang*, it means there can be no bier. Without a bier, people simply carry the corpse and bury it. It is a miserable situation.

Researcher: Why can't someone have a bier?

Mr. Seo: They are not well-off, and if someone dies without a spouse or children, the responsibility of burial has no choice but to fall upon the village people.

Researcher: The village...

Mr. Seo: Let us say there is cooked rice. If it is glutinous, it tends to stick together, and people prefer it to dried rice. Similarly, destitute people without family tend to be left unattended. However, the village people cannot allow them to decay, so they gather and bury the deceased. I have also participated in such burials several times.

Mr. Cheon of Bongyang village, who is in his 70s, also indicated that people living in extreme poverty found it impossible to hold a funeral ritual. The villagers would put the corpse in a sack and carry it using an A-frame on their back to the burial spot. This illustrates that the concept of good death was not solely concerned with the quality of death itself but also with the feasibility of conducting funeral rites. If a person died at home at a certain age and not due to suicide or an accident, it could be regarded as normal death. However, if the family did not have enough money to host people during the several days of the funeral ritual, it was not the ideal form of *hosang*. In summary, while categorizing a death as normal involves an evaluative judgment based on the individual's social membership and circumstances of passing, the concept of good death also encompasses the ability to conduct a proper funeral ritual, which relies on the stability and economic resources of the deceased's family. In the context of rural life in the mid to late 20th century, this particular concept of good death influenced not only the attitude of individuals but also shaped the specific forms of funeral rituals.

## The Structure of the Funeral Ritual

The elderly residents of Jeongseon reminisced, recalling, “We had *janchi* [feast] when it was *hosang*,” indicating that funeral rituals could evolve into a feast when the deceased’s passing met the criteria of good death. In order to elucidate how the concept of good death influences the forms of funeral rituals, it is essential to comprehend the structure of the funeral ritual, which comprises two distinct levels: the symbolic and the infrasympolic. This chapter begins by reflecting on the fundamental characteristics that distinguish ritual circumstances from mundane daily life. Following this, I analyze both the symbolic and infrasympolic levels of funeral rituals, with particular emphasis on the importance of the latter.

### *Daily Life to Ritual*

When one’s biological life ends, the world surrounding the person does not cease to exist. For a while, the deceased’s kin and neighbors participate in the farewell, creating a specific time and space distinct from their daily lives. Throughout the ritual period, strict protocols are observed, dictating people’s speech and behavior, and fostering particular forms of emotional expression. Elderly residents in Jeongseon recalled the time when people died at home, noting that the ritual process was much more complex compared to nowadays. Opinions regarding the past varied. Mr. Seo, who played a leading role in funerals in his village, took pride in preserving old customs throughout his life, whereas Ms. Yoon, who had taken care of her parents-in-law until their deaths, complained about the numerous and detailed elements of funeral rituals. These divergent viewpoints also suggest that death marks a transition from ordinary daily life to a distinct ritual period.

In this respect, the moment of death was not only the point of change for the deceased person’s ontological status but also the point of change for others, transitioning from a relatively flexible daily life to a ritual circumstance that required stricter norms. Upon an individual’s death, their house became the venue for the ritual, accompanied by a shift in temporal perception. Before death, family members fulfilled their basic duties, which

were not governed by intricate rules of conduct. Once the ritual began, regulations were delineated and imposed on each behavioral aspect. Additionally, as kin and neighbors gathered to offer their condolences, social exchanges among them were maximized. Furthermore, cultural symbols manifested themselves in tangible ways, employing various elements such as costumes, tools, and gestures.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that the essence of daily life persists during the ritual period, offering vital support for the ceremonial proceedings. This is apparent when considering the viewpoint of participants, like Ms. Yoon mentioned above, who actively engaged in funeral rituals. For them, the demarcation between daily life and rituals centers mainly on the intensity of the labor required. In this regard, the differentiation between the two is not solely about delineating mundane from sacred times (Leach 1966; Miller 2000), but rather discerning between regular laborious days and days that are markedly more strenuous and demanding, particularly due to additional tasks and heightened activity. This insight helps explain why marriage and funeral memories overlap for elderly residents and emphasizes the importance of understanding ritual as consisting of two distinctive levels, the symbolic and the infrasympolic.

### *The Symbolic Level of the Funeral Ritual*

The symbolic level of funeral rituals primarily encompasses sequential procedures divided into detailed steps with specific terms for them. Traditionally, funeral rituals followed a sequence outlined in ritual texts like the *Sarye pyeollam* 四禮便覽, the most widely distributed book on ritual in the late Joseon period. Among the four types of rites of passage, the funeral ritual (*sangnye* 喪禮) stood out for its numerous and detailed processes compared to the coming-of-age ritual (*gwallye* 冠禮), marriage ritual (*hollye* 婚禮), and ancestor ritual (*jerye* 祭禮). According to the *Sarye pyeollam*, the entire funeral ritual consisted of 19 steps, with each step further subdivided into smaller ones. These steps not only involved the handling of the deceased's body, but also entailed caring for their souls and expressing and recovering the emotions of the bereaved. In this process, every element from

material objects and attire to behaviors carried not only practical significance but also vivid symbolic meanings.

Despite some variations, the funeral rituals practiced in Jeongseon largely adhered to the ideal form. Based on the distinctions made by the residents, it can be understood as consisting of three phases. The first phase involved handling the soul and body of the deceased, starting at the point of death and continuing until the corpse was placed in the coffin. To invoke the soul of the deceased, kin or a neighbor of the deceased took on the role of shaking the cloth of the deceased while shouting the deceased's name within a fixed phrase. After the separation of the soul and body of the deceased, relatives or villagers handled the remaining body. They washed it with perfumed water and then clothed it with a shroud. The clothed corpse was then tied to a board and placed into a coffin, which could be positioned inside the room or outside the house in a shallow hole.

The second phase involved the bereaved preparing themselves by donning mourning clothes and receiving guests. For wearing mourning clothes, a mat was laid down and two bowls of water were prepared. Men and women faced each other and bowed before changing their clothes. Wearing mourning clothes also marked the commencement of the full-scale ritual. Only afterward did the relatives and neighbors formally offer their condolences, which the bereaved received while serving food and drink. During the second phase, wailing, serving daily meals, and conducting rites for the deceased were also frequent occurrences. In this phase, the combination of symbolic rituals and social exchanges, which will be further explored in the next part, persisted and peaked on the night before the burial.

The third phase primarily involved carrying the coffin on the bier to the burial site on the mountain and constructing a tomb for the deceased. Men, typically in a group, prepared to conduct the funeral rituals and bear the bier. The procession was accompanied by an exchange of songs between the leading singer and the others. After reaching the designated spot, a hole was excavated wherein to place the coffin. While people trod on the ground made of soil and lime to prevent tree roots or animals from intruding into the tomb, songs were sung to guide them. A rite was performed after the

tomb was completed, and then the soul of the deceased, represented by a form of a piece of cloth or paper, was brought back to the house.

As recalled by Ms. Nam, a nonagenarian, “In the old days, funerals were full of small rites.” The complexity of the process was considered the main difference from the current method used by commercial specialists in funeral halls. The traditional funeral ritual abounded with symbolic forms mirroring the Confucian approach to death. In essence, it had a thick layer of symbolic processes operating differently from everyday life. These symbolic elements played a vital role in how the community coped with death. Yet, it is crucial not to disregard that this symbolic level relies on the support of the level below it, which can be called the “infrasympolic” level (Féral 1982). This level relates to a physical experience that provides content for symbolic forms and enables them to function in the real world, comprising the power of social cohesion and exchange.

#### *The Infrasympolic Level of the Funeral Ritual*

While the symbolic level of the funeral ritual centers on the emotions of grief and sorrow, it cannot overshadow or negate the diverse affective forces originating from the level below. It is important to recognize that the material resources, physical interactions, and social exchanges form the substratum of the funeral ritual, with their dynamic forces operating beneath the symbolic framework. This perspective allows us to understand the similarity between marriage and funeral experiences reported by residents, as both involve intensive labor and necessitate collaboration, alongside the provision of abundant food and drink compared to ordinary days.

In terms of labor intensity, a funeral was more demanding than a marriage, primarily because it lasted for more than three days. Additionally, the unpredictability of the day of death added to the difficulty, unlike in the case of marriage, where the two families could plan and prepare in advance. Ms. Nam recounted her experiences with over ten major family events, including funerals and marriages, emphasizing that handling funerals was much more challenging due to the inability to prepare for all the rituals in

advance. She recalled the days surrounding her grandmother-in-law's funeral, specifically remembering the extensive hard work required.

Ms. Nam: It was on the 14th of January of the lunar calendar. Pounding and grinding the grains, making tofu, and brewing rice wine... There was a stream only a long way off from the village. It was small, though. We went there to draw water but sometimes returned with empty hands. Even when there was water, it was often muddy. The funeral took seven days. Myself and the wife of my husband's brother, the two of us handled all the work, so we could not sleep during those days.

Researcher: Why couldn't you sleep?

Ms. Nam: There was too much work to do. When people came together, we had to serve them. So, we had to grind wheat to make noodles. We also pounded rice in a mortar. Day and night. On the day of the burial, I found that the skin of my legs was worn out.

Researcher: Why?

Ms. Nam: Because I walked too much. Both she, the wife of my husband's brother, and I could not squat due to the pain. That is how we lived in the old days.

Ms. Bae in Bancheon village, who is in her 80s, also recalled that she could not sleep for seven days during her father-in-law's funeral because she was involved in the preparation of food and drink. On the day of the burial, after the last rite for the deceased was completed, she fell asleep in the kitchen and woke up to a pitch-black night after all the guests had returned to their homes.

Thus, the memories of the funeral days were associated with the arduous work family members had to undertake. For Ms. Nam and Ms. Bae, although they were the primary subjects of the funeral ritual, the main emotional elements attached to their memories were fatigue and exhaustion rather than grief and sorrow. For them, the obligation of regular or irregular wailing was also an additional work besides the other ceaseless responsibilities. Although the main process of the funeral ritual was divided and given meaning by the symbolic order that dealt with the metaphysical

dimension of life and death, it was the actual and concrete labor that enabled such a process to unfold. In other words, the symbolic level mobilized the bodies of people to accomplish the work they were given, and it could not be actualized without the utilization of such labor. This significance is vividly etched into their bodily memories.

The amount of work was also the reason for gatherings among the villagers. It was common for neighbors, in addition to immediate family members, to gather at the house of the deceased and share in the funeral tasks. It was even said that only the sons of the deceased performed the ritual, whereas others performed the actual work. Traditional gender roles dictated that women were responsible for crafting garments for the deceased and the bereaved, as well as managing food preparation. Elderly women in Bongjeong village recalled the times when they had to make clothes for both the deceased and the bereaved.

Villager 1: When my father-in-law died, it took a lot of hemp cloth.

Villager 2: Yes, a lot.

Researcher: Were the clothes all homemade?

Villager 3: Of course.

Villager 2: After a person died, while the corpse was in the room, women from the neighborhood gathered and made shrouds together.

Researcher: Not only family members but neighbors as well?

Villager 1: Neighbors do all the work.

Villager 4: When a grandmother dies here, everyone gathers, and when another grandmother dies elsewhere, everyone gathers there to do all the work.

While the initial days of the funeral ritual focused on crafting shrouds and garments, the preparation of food and beverages was ongoing through the entirety of the proceedings. As people gathered at the house of the deceased to offer condolences or help with the work, they all stayed for every meal, and the women had to work tirelessly to ensure that there was enough food and drink. A variety of dishes, including freshly made tofu, handcrafted noodles, and traditional rice cakes, were prepared to accommodate the

entire village. Preparing drinks, in particular, was a time-consuming process, as it involved various steps. In contrast to the brief duration of marriage celebrations, funeral rituals extended over a minimum of three days, encompassing the day of passing, the pre-burial day, and the burial day. The longer the ritual lasted, the more food and drinks were required.

Men were in charge of the work directly related to the funeral ritual process, such as carrying the coffin and working at the burial site, including digging the ground and preparing the tomb. The nature of this labor necessitated organized efforts, leading many villages to establish *gye*, private groups dedicated to cooperative endeavors. It was customary for individuals to join a *gye* upon their parents reaching the age of 60. In villages with strict rules governing these organizations, it was considered unacceptable to withdraw from the *gye* before one's parents had passed away. Neglecting duties within these organizations could lead to embarrassment when one's own parents passed away, as funeral rituals depended on strong social bonds forged through these networks. Mr. Cheon, who had actively participated in a *gye* in his village, mentioned that once the sons of the deceased had to kneel and ask for help from the *gye* members.

Mr. Cheon: In the old days, there were *gye* in the village for both marriages and funerals. Yes, there was a *gye* specifically for funeral rituals. Some people joined but didn't participate, and when their parents passed away, they couldn't perform the funeral rituals by themselves. They had to come and beg for help, but the members wouldn't go, even when they were offered money in exchange.

Researcher: They had not participated...

Mr. Cheon: Right. They had not participated or worked, and people considered them culpable. They initially came and offered a certain amount of payment, but people would not go. Only after getting on their knees and promising never to do the same thing again, could they persuade the *gye* members to help with the funeral work.

The intensity of labor and collaboration during funeral rituals created strong bonds among the villagers, much like the bonds formed during marriage



feasts. Upon the occurrence of a death or a wedding, villagers would gather at the house of the host to collectively undertake various tasks. In both circumstances, they collaborated more intimately and frequently than on typical days, resulting in similar communal experiences. Moreover, unlike bereaved family members, condolers could experience different emotions apart from grief and gravity. For condolers, involvement in the funeral often served to strengthen bonds with the grieving family, beyond solely mourning the deceased (Janelli and Janelli 2000).

Food and drink served as integral elements that transformed funeral rituals into communal feasts. Given the scarcity of food and supplies in villages decades ago, a person's passing also presented an occasion for special communal meals. Naturally, such sentiments could not be openly articulated, given the solemnity of the occasion and the expected expressions of grief and sorrow. Nevertheless, in certain instances, these sentiments found expression through humor. There is an idiom: "One only thinks about *patjuk* [red bean porridge], while forgetting that someone passed away." *Patjuk* has a symbolic meaning with its red color, which was believed to repel bad spirits. It was also a typical food that neighbors brought for the bereaved during the initial days of the funeral before wearing mourning clothes. The idiom reflects the hidden thoughts in people's minds that death is somehow linked to their appetite.

In addition to *patjuk*, an oily pastry called *gwajeul* in this region was also linked to funeral rituals. While this food was prepared for various occasions like weddings or seasonal festivities such as Seol (Korean New Year's Day) and Chuseok (Korean Thanksgiving Day), it was often mentioned in conversations related to funerals. Ms. Jo, who is in her 80s, recalled that a man in the village used to tease elderly women with jokes about *gwajeul*.

Ms. Jo: In those days, even fruits were rare. Only *tteok* [rice cakes] and *gwajeul* could be prepared. A man used to say, "I will have the opportunity to eat *gwajeul*" to old ladies, implying that he would get to eat *gwajeul* when they die.

Researcher: Oh, was it because *gwajeul* was available in funeral rituals?

Ms. Jo: Yes. When a person died, people ate *gwajeul*, as in an old saying. The man used to tease old women in the village, saying that he is expecting to eat *gwajeul* at their funerals. Some of the more close-minded women did not like these jokes. When the young man died, an old woman said, “A young man’s *gwajeul* is tasty as well,” expressing her displeasure for his jokes.

As noted by Ms. Jo, the notion that someone’s passing offered others a chance to enjoy special food was expressed in the form of jokes, albeit sometimes risking conflict. Some people were displeased, but generally these kinds of jokes were not strictly prohibited.

In the 1980s and 1990s, not only men but also women and children could follow the procession, led by a bier, to the burial site of the deceased. After completing the work of digging and arranging the tomb, the rite of completing the tomb was performed, and the food for this rite was prepared by the deceased’s eldest daughter. The *tteok* of the rite was distributed to all present, and there were people who went to the burial site only to get the *tteok*. Some people even put a pillow on their back to mimic carrying a baby, hoping to receive an additional piece of *tteok*. Although funeral rituals were solemn affairs stemming from tragic events, they were also viewed as opportunities to partake in abundant and unique culinary offerings, which were far rarer than in the present day. In the residents’ memories, *patjuk*, *gwajeul*, and *tteok* all represented the expectations attached to someone’s death.

In summary, funeral rituals encompass not only symbolic procedures, but also the infrasymbolic level that underpins them. Throughout the funeral, intensive labor and collaboration were required, fostering a high density of social interactions that, along with the abundance of food and drink, contributed to a sense of communal enjoyment. While grief and sorrow were the expected emotions, there existed seemingly contradictory elements. Particularly in cases of perceived good death, dynamics at the infrasymbolic level intermittently surfaced, transforming the funeral into a festive occasion. In essence, funerals held the potential to transition into feasts, with the assessment of good death momentarily alleviating taboos

and allowing for the emergence of playful elements.

### **The Cultural Expressions of Good Death**

While the symbolic level emphasizes the solemnity of the funeral ritual, it constitutes just one aspect of the entire structure, with the dynamic force of the infrasymbolic level having the potential to manifest. When death was deemed a good death, playful elements could emerge during the funeral ritual days. These elements can be categorized into three distinct types based on their level of formalization. The first is a bier play, performed the night before the burial, which was a ritualized play identified by different names throughout the country. The second comprises playful behavior norms shared by the participants, enabling simpler and more informal activities compared to the bier play. The third is a pleasant atmosphere that did not take a concrete form, yet it could be easily felt and sensed by the participants. In practice, these three types were interrelated and reinforced each other's intensity.

The two photographs displayed were taken in Bongjeong village in 1990 when people still held funeral rituals at home. Figure 3 shows the chief mourners waiting to receive callers arriving to pay their condolences. They are wearing mourning clothes made of hemp cloth and standing with sticks, which symbolize the position of the sons as sinners and grievers. Figure 4, on the other hand, captures an atmosphere contrasting with that of Figure 3. It depicts men gathered the night before the burial and playing together. Whereas the lineal family performed grief and formal procedures, the relatives and the villagers engaged in energetic interactions and collaborations.

The most notable form of playfulness was the bier play, taking place the night before the burial and involving lively festivities throughout the funeral ritual. To prepare for the journey to the burial site on the following day, men in the village brought a bier, which was shared and assembled by villagers. Upon completing the process, the men rehearsed the carrying of the bier. A lead singer, usually a man with a resonant voice, sang mournful tunes, while



**Figure 3.** Chief mourners waiting to receive condolers in 1990, Bongjeong village, Jeongseon-gun, Gangwon-do.

*Source:* Acquired by author, used with permission.



**Figure 4.** Men playing the night before the burial in 1990, Bongjeong village, Jeongseon-gun, Gangwon-do.

*Source:* Acquired by author, used with permission.

the rest sang along the chorus. The rhythm of the songs led to the steps of the men and the movements of the bier. With the songs, rhythmic movements, and lively responses of the participants, the formal type of play could emerge. This type of bier play was called by different names in other regions, while in Jeongseon, it was called a *daedodum* play. Mr. Jeong, who is in his 70s, described the case of good death when the *daedodum* play could be performed.

Mr. Jeong: If it was a good death, on the day before the burial, people played carrying the frame of the bier, and it was called *daedodum*. They played with the bier hoping that the deceased would go to heaven.

Researcher: *Daedodum*?

Mr. Jeong: Yes, *daedodum*.

Researcher: Was it done the day before the burial?

Mr. Jeong: Yes. If it was not a good death, people just gathered on the day of the burial. Of course, they prepared on the day before, deciding the roles of each person. However, that was all. Without any play, they just gathered on the day and carried the bier.

Each village had its own communal bier and designated storage location. On the day before the burial, people brought the frames of the bier and assembled them. If it was not considered a good death, the process was carried out solely for practical reasons and did not relate to any kind of play. Conversely, if it was deemed a good death, the leading singer stood on the bier and sang songs, and the bier carriers responded with a chorus. Mr. Kwon, who is in his 80s, was renowned for his singing ability in Yeoryang village and participated in many funerals in his village as lead singer.

Mr. Kwon: In the days when the funeral was done at home, people gathered near the place where the coffin was placed outside the house and played *daedodum*. They received cigarettes for the play. They assembled the frame of the bier, and the leading singer stood on it. It is the place where the coffin would be carried. He wore *durumagi* [a traditional Korean overcoat] and sang songs. Then

the bier-carriers responded, rehearsing the carrying of the bier.

Researcher: It was done like a play.

Mr. Kwon: That is right. If they wanted to get more cigarettes, they would sing for a longer time. If the voice is good, it is good to listen to. That is why they do it. As the lyrics are about death and the journey after death, offspring shed tears. It was *daedodum*, and it was *seonsori* [funeral song singing]. The lyrics were like this. “Although it was said that there is a long way to go to the afterlife, now it’s just outside the gate of the house.”

While *daedodum* was explicitly a form of play, it did not only evoke joy or excitement. In particular, the lyrics and melodies of the songs sung during the *daedodum* were plaintive. Villagers remarked that “All the elderly women wept at the scene.” It is also said that the songs evoked *sinmyeong*, a concept encompassing both spirituality and exhilaration, representing a feeling not only contrasting with sadness but also magnified by it. In other words, the emotional experience in the scene of *daedodum* was not only limited to the superficial sensation of joy, but also traversed the complex emotions of joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure in human life. This demonstrates that the playfulness in the funeral ritual is a direct reflection of the concept of good death, which involves condensed emotions of sadness, relief, and acceptance of human destiny.

The second type involved behavior norms related to playful activities known as *jangnan*, which encompassed joking or teasing and constituted a less formalized form of play. Although the word *jangnan* usually refers to children’s play, for residents in the region, it also involves adults. In the case of good death, the funeral ritual was even said to “begin with *jangnan* and end with *jangnan*.” If it was not a good death, there was no room for it. While *jangnan* was dispersed throughout the funeral ritual compared to *daedodum*, the night before the burial was also the time when other playful activities were frequently performed. Generally, the subject of *jangnan* was the bier-carriers, and the targets were the mourners, except those in the direct line of descent from the deceased. The bier-carriers teased them to obtain cigarettes, alcohol, or money. *Jangnan* was most prevalent on the

night before the burial and persisted until the following day, starting from the house of the deceased to the burial spot. Mr. Han, who is in his 70s, recalled the *jangnan* they used to engage in.

Mr. Han: There was *jungsikje*, a ceremony performed at night. For that, the parents of sons-in-law or daughters-in-law of the deceased sent a big package of rice cakes and Korean pancakes...The sons wept in the room, and other relatives stayed outside, becoming the target of *jangnan* from bier-carriers. They engaged in very mischievous play, creating smoke when they set fire to the pine branches and bringing it closer to them.

Researcher: To whom did they do that?

Mr. Han: The bier carriers did it to sons-in-law or cousins of the deceased who were not required to wear the whole mourning clothes but only specific hats. The bier carriers played jokes and made fun of them, demanding cigarettes, or alcoholic drinks.

Researcher: So, they were not the chief mourners.

Mr. Han: Right...People might think that mourning was only a sad thing, but it was not like that. To be honest, the chief mourners could be sad, but others were not. If one started *jangnan*, the sadness disappeared.

*Jangnan* illustrates similarities between funeral and wedding customs. Specifically, the act of teasing the sons-in-law of the deceased takes the form of *dongsangnye* 東床禮, also known as “treating the groom.” Traditionally, when the groom stayed at the bride’s house, relatives and neighbors of the bride’s family used to playfully trouble the groom. For instance, as the groom entered the village, men would throw packets of ash at him. When the couple returned from the groom’s house, people would hang the groom upside down and engage in a mock trial, asking him various questions. Such playful questioning, where the responses were linked to playful punishments, was also a part of funeral rituals (M. Choi 2016). Although the frequency and intensity of *jangnan* were higher during weddings, in cases of a good death, rituals involving playfulness were accepted and even encouraged, as they contributed to creating laughter and a unique atmosphere.

This pleasant atmosphere represents the third manifestation of playful elements during funeral rituals in cases of good death. The atmosphere, or the overall feel, can be understood as a more ephemeral dimension of ritual performance (Karp 1988). Although it does not have a distinct form, as in *daedodum* or *jangnan*, it plays a crucial role in defining the quality of the ritual. Like *daedodum* and *jangnan*, the festive atmosphere conveyed that the deceased's death was sad but acceptable. Mr. Jeon, who is in his 70s, explained that there existed an atmosphere during cases of good death where singing and dancing were permitted.

Mr. Jeon: If death was deemed as a good death, the funeral ritual turned into a feast.

Researcher: What does it mean when you say it was a feast?

Mr. Jeon: I mean, holding a feast involved people dancing and playing at the funeral. They would dance and play because it was considered a good death...In such cases, people used to dance and play, and this didn't reflect the typical somber funeral atmosphere...Only in the area where the chief mourners received the condolers, people had to weep; otherwise, everyone else just had fun.

Researcher: So almost all the villagers...

Mr. Jeon: Yes, they had fun. That's why it was crowded.

In instances of a good death, the funeral atmosphere transformed into a joyous gathering filled with singing, dancing, and playful elements, commemorating the life of the deceased. This would become clearer when compared with the atmosphere in cases of a not-so-good death. If a person passed away at a young age or due to a sudden accident that did not meet the criteria of good death, the atmosphere of the funeral ritual would be distinct. Everyone cried, not only the family of the deceased but also all the villagers, who felt grief and sorrow. In short, the atmosphere of the funeral ritual was an index of whether the death was considered good or not. While the atmosphere was not an event itself, it served as a momentary dimension of the event, connected to the attitudes and reactions of the participants. The words spoken about the deceased, facial expressions or gestures of condolers,



and the extent to which jokes and laughter were accepted were constituents of the atmosphere, the third expressive forms of the concept of a good death.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have endeavored to address the question of how death, an ostensibly tragic event, could give rise to a scenario wherein the funeral participants not only experience sorrow but also engage with one another in a spirit of delight. Through analysis of the structure of the funeral ritual, its potential transformation into a festivity became evident. This unveiled how physical aspects and social interactions constituted a robust foundation supporting the symbolic progression of the ritual. At the heart of the transition from somberness to festivity lay the traditional concept of good death, known as *hosang*, shaping the conduct of rituals.

This analysis allows us to compare the practices predating the 2000s in rural South Korean villages with the contemporary landscape. Today, medical and ritual experts occupy distinct domains, while family members, relatives, and neighbors often participate behind the scenes, partially enacting symbolic directives. It is plausible to hypothesize that, historically, deaths transpiring at home and funeral rituals facilitated by kin and neighbors had struck a harmonious equilibrium between the two strata of the ritual framework. The interface bridging physical experiences and significant interactions was not impermeable, granting individuals the capacity to navigate between these realms. This approach enables us to understand the near extinction of festivities in funerals, while the concept of good death has continued with unceasing amendments.

Thus, the playfulness or festivity observed in funeral rituals during the mid- to late-20th-century Korea, should be understood as being enabled, on the one hand by the concept of good death and, on the other hand, by the strong and stable existence of community life. Regarding the concept of good death, it is imperative to avoid perceiving it as a static or normative construct. Given that every individual is confronted by their ultimate moment, the inevitability of death is intertwined with the very essence of life itself. With

few exceptions, all demises fundamentally underscore the corporeal fragility and vulnerability intrinsic to humanity. Thus, while the jubilant or lighthearted facets woven into funeral rituals may appear peculiar from a contemporary standpoint, they are not isolated anomalies or exotic facets to Korean culture. Instead, they serve as cultural expressions embracing and even affirming the mortality inherent in human existence.

Within this contextual framework, one can understand why the scenes enacted during funeral rituals, within the context of good death, were occasionally perceived as moments of beauty. For individuals who cared for their parents for years, death signifies both a sorrowful occurrence and the culmination of protracted suffering. One octogenarian woman who had diligently tended toward her stroke-afflicted mother-in-law recalled that the days encompassing the funeral ritual were also a juncture at which her efforts were validated. She recounted that on the day of the burial, there was heavy snowfall, which symbolized forthcoming prosperity. The confluence of individuals offering condolences and the dynamic ambiance they generated played a pivotal role in the successful execution of the funeral rituals. Amid the collective endeavor to bid farewell to the deceased, death itself emerges as a phenomenon somewhat tempered by the cultural apparatus of ideas and procedural forms.

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