

The Formation of Four-Generation Ancestor Worship in Early Chosun*

*Geungsik Jung***

*Translated by Benjamin Hughes****

Abstract

The new ruling elite who played a leading role in the establishment of the Choson Dynasty developed a discriminatory ancestor worship system based on four-generation ancestor worship. They were greatly influenced by Chu Hsi's Family Rituals, the Ming Dynasty system, and such old practices as were found in the Liji. However, they did not adopt Chu Hsi's Family Rituals wholesale, but adjusted it with a view to establishing a stratified society.

In the mid-sixteenth century, as commoners were gaining financial resources and using them to perform rituals basically equivalent to those of the elite class, national laws on discriminatory ancestor worship which were inconsistent with Chu Hsi's Family Rituals became the subject of many heated and politically charged conflicts.

As a result of increasing comprehension of Chu Hsi's Family Rituals and the widespread diffusion of Neo-Confucian values, the discriminatory ancestor worship system began to break down at the close of the 16th century, especially in regions where Neo-Confucianism had been disseminated early. Initially, performing three-generation ancestor worship regardless of social position became common, but by the end of the 17th century, four-generation ancestor worship based on Chu Hsi's Family Rituals had become the norm, and has been recognized as the common ideal form of the sacrificial rites until today.

The intention of the new ruling elite, who wanted to maintain the hierarchical society and the ritual system they established, was frustrated in the end. Regional ritual practices and norms diverged from national and officially sanctioned patterns of ancestor worship, and the discriminatory rituals system was eventually transformed into a more egalitarian system. This transition from uniformity to diversity, from a discriminatory to an egalitarian system for the performance of the most important normative rituals in Choson society, signaled an important step forward in Korea's historical development.

* This Article is a translated version of an article originally published in The Journal of Korean Legislation Research, Vol. 11(Oct. 1996).

** Assistant Professor of Law, Seoul National University.

*** J.D. Candidate, NYU Law School.

I. Introduction

After the chaotic end of the Koryo Dynasty and the establishment of the Chosun Dynasty, the new ruling elite sought to reform Korean society along Confucian lines. Guided by Chu Hsi's *Family Rituals*, the Chosun bureaucratic elite attempted to mold daily life and social interaction in accordance with the norms and rituals it contained. They undertook a broad and comprehensive reform of the social order, utilizing various institutions and appealing to Confucian religious, moral and ritual sensibilities in order to rebuild society on the basis of proper principles and behavior. Especially important for the elite was this social conduct to take root in the family, thus establishing a firm foundation for social stability as a natural extension of proper family order.

Through extensive research, the historical importance of the *Family Rituals* and the use of other ritualistic ceremonies of the late Koryo and early Chosun period have been documented. Although the influence of the *Family Rituals* on Chosun social propriety laws has been studied extensively, research thus far has focused more on royal worship ceremonies than on ancestor worship. This is unfortunate, for the influence of Chu Hsi's work on ancestor worship reveals many rituals that were crucial to shaping and reflecting the character of the family.

Contemporary texts on ritual and propriety and other sources show the formation and development of four-generation ancestor worship in the 16th century. The 16th century was a transitional period in Korean history, when the social systems under the *Kyung-kuk dae-chun* started to take firm root. Ancestor worship laws were implemented to put the principals of Confucianism and the Family Rituals into practice. During this crucial transitional period, non-Confucian Koryo society was transformed into a society that widely practiced four-generation ancestor worship under the teachings of the *Family Rituals*. Accordingly, the study of four-generation ancestor worship has broader implications that can serve as an important indicator of social change in comparing the early and late Chosun period. In this paper, I examine the compilation of *Kyung-kuk dae-chun* during the dynastic transition, especially the Code of Propriety and the Articles of Ancestor Worship, which have their foundations in the *Family Rituals*.

II. The Establishment of Discriminatory Ancestor Worship

A. *Discriminatory and Four-Generation Ancestor Worship*

Although ancestor worship had been in existence since primordial times, it was ancient China that codified official ancestor worship rituals and laws which varied according to one's social status. The Chiu Dynasty's ancestor worship laws were based on the importance of blood relationships and lineage, and a system of primogeniture developed in order to ensure the orderly inheritance of ancestor worship responsibilities. The eldest son was responsible for worshiping several generations of ancestors, with secondary descendants responsible for worshiping four-generations of ancestors. With the responsibility of leading ancestor worship ceremonies, the primary descendant was able to have control over the clan.

The ancestor worship laws, coupled with feudalism, were able to extend beyond the royal-centered lineage system to create a system of ancestor worship based on social status. Through this discriminatory process, the ancestor worship laws enabled the government to wield far-reaching control over society. Strict and specific procedural requirements were promulgated and enforced, creating a more rigid social hierarchy and greater opportunity for state interference in family and village affairs. Although the Chiu Dynasty ancestor worship laws disappeared along with the collapse of Chiu feudalism, the concept of class-discriminatory ancestor worship was exerted an important influence on future ancestor worship practices.

Until the Tang Dynasty, laws of propriety were centered on the king and the kingdom according to the five laws of propriety. However, with the rise of the Confucian scholar-officials of the Sung Dynasty, the laws were transformed to suit a different purpose. The laws were used to promote stability of the family order and rural society through strengthening family relationships and raising family and group consciousness. To realize these goals, the elite focused their attention on the descendants who were to conduct ancestor worship ceremonies, reviving the traditional ancestor worship laws and adjusting them to fit Sung society. The practice of four-generation worship (up to the great-great-grandfather) was made into law, compiled in its most coherent and comprehensive form by Chu Hsi into the *Family Rituals*. The institution of legally mandated ancestor worship was considered by the Sung scholar officials to be the most rational way to solve the problems of social

instability, having its roots in the classical system that existed in the Chiu Dynasty. The laws were known as the Ancestor Worship Laws.

However, it is important to note that four-generation ancestor worship as found in the Ancestor Worship Laws did not immediately take over class-discriminatory ancestor worship. Sa-Makwang's *Suh-ui*, considered a formative influence on the *Family Rituals*, mentions only three-generation ancestor worship. The first to advocate four-generation ancestor worship was Chung I-chun. This was his reply to a question explaining the validity of the four-generation arrangement:

Sa-Makwang's *Suh-ui* calls for ancestor worship up through to the third-generation ancestor (great grandfather). But when someone asked what we should do about people nowadays who do not worship up through to four-generations, Scholar Chung I-chun replied, there is a mourning robe especially prepared for the ceremony of the fourth-generation ancestor (great-great-grandfather), and this would mean that it is wrong for us not to worship up through to the fourth-generation. Scholar Chung added, from the Kings' descendants down to the descendants of concubines, they follow the five laws of propriety up through to their fourth-generation ancestor, and likewise, it would be proper for us to follow the same ways with regard to our ancestor worship ceremonies as well.

Regardless of social status, Chung I-chun permitted four-generation ancestor worship based on the premise that there is a mourning robe prepared especially for the worship of the fourth-generation ancestor. Adopting this line of reasoning, *The Family Rituals* notes that in the room designated for the worship ceremony, four ancestral tablets should be prepared. Particularly noteworthy was the omission of class-discriminatory qualifications for conducting ancestor worship as well as the standardization of the ceremonies centered on the four-generation system. Furthermore, all the ceremonies and procedures under the encompassing four proprieties were also to fall under the fourth-generation system. Research shows the system of four-generation worship already instituted in the *Sung-li Dae-chun* written during the Ming Dynasty. Moreover, four-generation ancestor worship became the standard practice after the Sung Dynasty.

In the Sung Dynasty, the new leadership of the dynasty constructed their identity

through the policy of consolidating family lineage, providing a sense of stability and social identity to the rural community. They also attempted to consolidate their own social power base through the pursuance of such policies. The decision to pursue the four-generation worship system resulted from the recognition that the Ancestor Worship Laws could be the key to raising the family and group identity. Secondly, the standardization of four-generation ancestor worship was used as a policy of inclusion and conciliation for the commoners. In order to improve the landlord-tenant relationship as well as to provide a sense of social identity, the Ancestor Worship Laws could not be denied to the commoners. Whatever the purpose, the new system was viewed as a top-down instituted step toward social equalization. Although limited in scope, the movement away from the social stratification of class-discriminatory ancestor worship to the more equal standard of four-generation ancestor worship may be seen as social progress.

B. The Formation of the Kyung-kuk dae-chun Propriety System

1. The Ancestor Worship System of the Year of 1390

During the period of dynastic transition in Korea from late Koryo to early Chosun, the class-discriminatory ancestor worship system was firmly established as a legal system. With the advent of Confucianism in the late Koryo period, the Koryo scholar-officials showed interest in the *Family Rituals*. Many of them saw the text as a possible tool for controlling social order. Accordingly, even before official adoption of the *Family Rituals*, some used its teachings to establish family shrines and conduct ancestor worship ceremonies in the home. After some political struggle, the rising elite began to aggressively accept ancestor worship laws based on the *Family Rituals*. Royal decrees were issued in 1390, formally establishing a detailed system of class-discriminatory ancestor worship laws.

The discriminatory ancestor worship laws promulgated by the bureaucratic elite were inherently different from those described in Chu Hsi's *Family Rituals*. Even so, certain aspects of the worship system of the late Koryo and early Chosun period were based on the *Family Rituals*. The ruling elite focused their efforts on adopting many practices of the text, but the parts of the *Family Rituals* transplanted into the new discriminatory ancestor worship laws remained limited to ceremonial procedures.

Consequently, the ancestor worship system which resulted was rooted less in the *Family Rituals* than in older Confucian teachings or in Sa Ma-kwang's *Suh- ui*.

The adoption of discriminatory ancestor worship and domestic shrines shows that the elite did not blindly copy the *Family Rituals* during the late Koryo period. However, it does suggest that the Koryo scholars understood the significance of the *Family Rituals* before the end of the Koryo by themselves.

2. The Formation of the Articles of Ancestor Worship in the *Kyung-kuk dae-chun*

The ancestor worship laws underwent no significant changes after the initial formation of the Chosun Dynasty. King Taejong formed a research institute for the study of ancestor worship systems, and knowledge during King Sejong's reign about the *Family Rituals* and classic ancestor worship laws increased significantly. Accordingly, many questions were raised regarding the merits of the *Family Rituals* as well as the discriminatory worship laws of the late Koryo period.

The year of 1427 is an important year for the development of the legal system for ancestor worship. A scholar named Park Yun recommended to King Sejong the adoption of four-generation ancestor worship and this recommendation began an earnest debate among the scholar-officials regarding four-generation ancestor worship. Although many esoteric arguments were advanced on both sides, which tend to cloud the debate for modern readers, in fact practical concerns were paramount. Those in favor of discriminatory ancestor worship argued that to establish social order requires discrimination based on social identity and class. Those in favor of four-generation ancestor worship argued for the need to combine the *Family Rituals* and the Ming system into one social institution. They pointed out that ancestral tablets were difficult to deal with under discriminatory ancestor worship. Nonetheless, the majority of the officials were in favor of the discriminatory worship system.

In response to recommendations that ancestor worship should be extended to the fourth generation of ancestor, King Sejong replied that "the system of four-generation ancestor worship was not adopted by our Confucian forefathers, and our current laws have been passed down from the classic laws, and therefore we cannot hastily adopt a new system." In addition, King Sejong believed that a move to standardized four-generation worship might threaten social stability, and he refused to adopt the recommendations. Although more realistic issues such as the difficulty of handling the

ancestral tablets used in discriminatory ancestor worship invited more discussions on the merits of change, King Sejong remained in favor of the existing system. Thus, while a number of scholars in early Chosun did point out the problems of discriminatory worship and advocated the institution of the four-generation ancestor worship, the discriminatory system remained in place with the majority support of the officials.

Discriminatory worship, as codified in the *Kyung-kuk dae-chun*, was an institution which aimed to promote social norms and practices appropriate to the reality of the times during the late Koryo Dynasty. The new elite leadership which promulgate the system understood that Koryo society was different from China, and they were guided both by traditional practices and by the *Family Rituals*. In order to cure a disorderly society on the verge of collapse, the new elite leaders extolled the ideal of national and social unity by implementing Confucian-based codes and practices. They solidified discriminatory ancestor worship by utilizing Confucian ideology, but based the practices on both the *Family Rituals* and traditional exercises. This practical and independent approach, with its emphasis on practice over theory, was intended to build a stable society based on ritual duties and obligations. That discriminatory ancestor worship was firmly established in the *Kyung-kuk dae-chun* at this time is clear evidence of the autonomous nature of the new elite leaders of the time.

C. Actual Conditions of Worship

As there are no historical materials which specifically inform us about the actual conditions of ancestor worship during this time, we must understand them indirectly through secondary sources. Although family shrines were already somewhat widely supplied during the early Chosun era, their spread was not completed until the mid-15th century. Family shrines came into appearance during the King Sungjong era mostly in the homes of the elite of Seoul, and became very popular by the mid-16th century during the King Myungjong era (1545-1567). But despite this supply of family shrines, shamanist and Buddhist rituals still prevailed. In addition, although in principle a deceased ancestor must be enshrined with an ancestral tablet in the family shrine, such laws existed merely on paper and were not widely enforced. References to ancestors' tablets in memorials to the throne began in the King Sejong era and persisted through the King Myungjong era, indicating that the family shrine worship was not properly prepared and executed even into the mid-16th century.

During the early Chosun era, the practices of the Koryo period were being conformed to Confucian practices in accordance with the *Family Rituals*. Confucian rituals of ancestor worship were being imposed upon society on a national level. The discussions of four-generation ancestor worship during King Sejong's rule were about enforcing the conduct and practices already encoded in the law, not about transcribing customary practices into law. Therefore, one cannot use these discussions as proof that the four-generation ancestor worship was already being performed by this era. At the same time, one cannot ignore the influence and power of the law, and it is highly likely that many high-ranking and educated people were already practicing Confucian rituals. In addition, during the early Chosun era when national laws were more prominent institutions than customary practices, ancestor worship ceremonies in general were probably more like the three-generation discriminatory ancestor worship ceremonies found in the *Kyung-kuk dae-chun* than the four-generation ancestor worship found in the *Family Rituals*.

III. The Origin and Development of Four-Generation Ancestor Worship

A. Ceremony Dispute during the Chungjong Era

The discriminatory worship and propriety institutions regulated by the *Kyung-kuk dae-chun* were in a way threatened by both the commoners and the followers of the *Family Rituals*. Starting from the King Chungjong era (reign :1506-1544), even commoners were gaining financial resources and using them to perform the *Family Rituals* in order to demonstrate their financial status. Commoners were performing rituals basically equivalent to the elite class, such as placing stone figures on their tombs. Many even went beyond what is outlined in the *Family Rituals* in order to show off their wealth. The situation became severe enough to provoke a strong response from critical scholars and officials. Conflicts arose between the commoners, who wanted to use their financial resources to perform the rituals and vehemently objected when they were forbidden to do so, and the elite, who criticized the extravagance of weddings and funerals and demanded that the distinction between their funeral rites and those of the commoners. The elite were outraged that commoners, without being conferred the right to establish family shrines or to perform

the rituals outlined in the *Family Rituals*, were doing so nonetheless. The egalitarian funeral rituals of the commoners and their practice of the *Family Rituals* indicate that the attempts of the early Chosun authorities to establish a stratified society by means of discriminatory worship were breaking down.

During the course of the often turbulent and sometimes bloody factional struggles for dominance among various groups of scholar officials, rigorous adherence to the rituals and practices outlined in the *Family Rituals* became an important source of political legitimacy. Domination of the political scene depended upon demonstrating moral superiority, and moral superiority was measured against the code of conduct contained in Chu Hsi's formulation of proper ritual and ethical comportment. Failure to adhere to these rituals could undermine one's social and political position, and could even prove fatal. While a detailed description of these factional political struggles is beyond the scope of this paper, their effect was to create an environment in which the underlying principles of the *Family Rituals* were placed beyond question or debate.

In this environment, discriminatory ancestor worship stood little chance of institutional survival, since it is inconsistent with the *Family Rituals* and therefore could not be sustained ideologically. Moreover, due to the general rise of the commoners, discriminatory ancestor worship could no longer be maintained as a practical matter. The beginning of the transformation from discriminatory ancestor worship to four-generation ancestor worship had actually begun already, as commoners increasingly ignored both national laws that did not permit three-generation worship and traditional customary social status distinctions.

B. Inheritance and the Conditions of the Ancestor Worship System

Inheritance documents of the Chosun era can be broken down into several categories (1) those that recorded the distribution of inheritance while the parents are still alive, (2) those that recorded the distribution of inheritance among the children after the deaths of the parents, usually after the observance of three years of mourning, and (3) those that indicated the specific distribution of inheritance to the children. During the inheritance and succession process, arrangements were made for the transfer of burial land for the deceased and memorial preparatory items. Because these arrangements directly reflect the actual conditions of the memorial rites, much can be learned about the system of memorial rites by examining the distribution of ancestral

worship commodities during the inheritance distribution process.

What we learn from these inheritance documents is that the passage of three generations freed funds and commodities marked for conducting ancestor worship services for a particular ancestor. The descendants could then dispose of these funds freely, a clear indication that ancestor worship obligations extended only to three generations. Regardless of status, three-generation ancestor worship was the universal practice of the period, and it was legally codified as such in the *Kyung-kuk dae-chun*.

However, over time, many families attempted to extend this ancestor worship in order to follow Confucian norms more rigorously and in accordance with the *Family Rituals*. Although descendants could legally distribute among themselves the property designated for conducting ancestor worship after three generations, many families attempted to continue the tomb rites. They reasoned that the rites had been performed for a long time, and often constructed family precepts asserting the importance of their continuity.

A substantial level of standardization of the *Kyung-kuk dae-chun*'s three-generation worship can be seen for at least the second half of the 16th century. However, as the tomb rites were considered important, those ancestors who were no longer able to receive family shrine service as they passed the third generation were to be worshiped instead in the tomb rites forever. As this practice became universalized, descendants also set aside land for the tomb sites and funds and materials necessary for continuous service for the ancestors. The tomb rites were considered important, with the descendants perpetuating the services generation after generation. This signified the nullification of the discriminatory worship guidelines found in the *Kyung-kuk dae-chun*.

The practice of three-generation worship occurred after the 1560s when the worship propriety debates occurred. This coincides with the study and practice of the *Family Rituals* by certain scholar officials. The understanding and practice of the *Family Rituals*, only partially practiced, ended discriminatory ancestor worship and established the system of three-generation worship based on social equality. This later gave rise to the universal practice of four-generation worship. In addition, the growing importance the concept of serving ones ancestors played was an important factor in making the universal practice of three or four generation worship possible for the people at the time.

The procession from discriminatory worship to four-generation worship evolved in relation to the national laws that regulated discriminatory worship. During the early Chosun period, the national law codes respected and discriminatory worship was

strongly emphasized. Over time, both national law and customary practice were equally recognized, and the rites performers were free to select between the two. Finally, the national laws were superseded by the *Family Ritual's* four-generation worship. This process demonstrates a separation between society and government, with the Confucian bureaucratic elite gaining independence as a separate entity from the Crown, and the development of a bureaucratic national order.

The universalized practice of four-generation ancestor worship in the late Chosun period was formed not by compulsory enforcement through the revision of national laws, but through the practice of the *Family Rituals* by individual elite families, unofficially following the rituals by their free will. These scholar-officials wanted to strengthen their ruling power and take social control from the Crown by practicing the *Family Rituals* to display their moral superiority over the commoners. In the process, four-generation worship began to take hold in general Chosun society. On the one hand, the commoners practiced the *Family Rituals* in adherence to the policies put forth by these officials. On the other hand, as the commoners gained economic clout, they began to practice ancestor worship more aggressively, and to practice the *Family Rituals* in order to place themselves on equal footing with the elite. This historical phenomenon marks the escape from central uniformity to the development of regional diversity, and signifies overall historical progress with the commoners being able to perform ancestor worship on equal footing with the ruling elite.

IV. Conclusion

The introduction of four-generation ancestor worship gave independence to the commoners from the national order as determined by law. Its development signifies social progress, as an institution of equality replaced a system of discriminatory ancestor worship. This development can be used to gauge the role of national law in Chosun society, as the theory of four-generation ancestor worship evolved in tension with national law. It is commonly assumed that although law formally existed in Chosun society, it had no practical application in what was an essentially a lawless society. The evolution of the system of four-generation ancestor worship should provide valuable evidence to the contrary.

There are some areas of inherent weakness in this study, and further research should be conducted to substantiate these findings. In this paper, for example, all of the

documents and inheritance distribution records consulted came from the Kyongsang province and the scholar-official social class. Moreover, societal developments do not usually evolve in distinct stages but are the product of many interrelated phenomena. The theory of four-generation ancestor worship is closely tied to the promotion of close family-group relationships of the Ancestor Worship Law and other laws. However, this brief paper cannot treat all the issues related to the Ancestor Worship Law, and deals only with the section on four-generation ancestor worship, resulting in an incomplete evaluation of the historical entirety of the topic.

In conclusion, changing societal conditions and the influence of universalized ritual propriety studies after the mid-Chosun period were the biggest factors in the popularization of four-generation ancestor worship. Founded on the system of the Ancestor Worship Laws of China and in accordance with *The Family Rituals*, the system of ancestor worship succession and the process of its popularization in society should be examined closely, and placed in its respective historical context. Such studies should be the subject of future research.

Glossary

- Chiu Dynasty 周王朝
Chu Hsi's *Family Rituals* 朱子家禮
Chung I-chun 程伊川
King Chungjong 中宗
King Myungjong 明宗
King Sejong 世宗
King Sungjong 成宗
King Taejong 太宗
Kyung-kuk dae-chun 經國大典
Ming Dynasty 明王朝
Park Yun 朴堧
Sa-Ma kwang 司馬光
Suh-ui 書儀
Sung Dynasty 宋王朝
Sung-li Dae-chun 性理大全
Tang Dynasty 唐王朝
Ancestor Worship System of the year of 1390 1390年 大夫士庶人祭禮