Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in Korea: From Ancient to Contemporary Times ed. by Charlotte Horlyck and Michael J. Pettid (review)

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Book Reviews

Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in Korea: From Ancient to Contemporary Times edited by Charlotte Horlyck and Michael J. Pettid. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014. 265 pp. 18 photographs. 2 illustrations. Bibliography. Index. $48.00 (hardcover)

Death is universal. We have all experienced the death of someone close to us. And we all are well aware that we will eventually die as well. Like finding a way to put food in our belly and finding a friend or partner to share the ups and downs of life with, dealing with death is an integral part of human life. All organized societies have had to come up with ways to deal with death. However, not only do we see different ways of dealing with death among different cultural communities, we can also see different ways of dealing with death within the same cultural community, especially when that community changes over time.

The most common way to deal with death is to deny its finality. We do that, first of all, by lavishing attention on the lifeless body as though the person we are going to bury is still around to appreciate that attention. Another way we deny the reality of death is to continue to interact with the dead after they have left their bodies behind, to envision them as still alive in some sense in an invisible realm, or by assuming that they can continue somehow to influence what is happening in the world of the living. To help us interact with those who have permanently left us, we create visible reminders of those who are no longer visible themselves. Those reminders may be monuments or they may be a spirit tablet, a simple grave, or an urn containing their ashes. In some cases a written record of the life they lived or a collection of items they produced suffice. In any case, those whose lives were touched by the person who has left this world try to minimize the impact of their loss by thinking of them as still present in their lives. This begins in the immediate aftermath of death, with rituals of preparing the lifeless body for disposal one way or another, but can continue for years or even, in the

case of individuals who have had a particularly significant impact on the people and society they left behind, for decades or centuries.

Charlotte Horlyck and Michael Pettid have bundled together in this volume ten chapters by eight different authors, including themselves, analyzing different ways Koreans have dealt with death and the dead over the centuries. Their book covers death from how the body is treated in the immediate aftermath of its loss of vitality to how that body is disposed of to how the dead person who inhabited that body is remembered afterward. A key unifying principle of the various chapters is the influence of religion on Korean notions of the dead. The different authors each focus their attention on one of the religions present on the peninsula, be it shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, or Christianity, but they are all sophisticated enough to recognize that these religious labels often represent differences more important to scholars and other outside observers than to those actually dealing with the emotional impact of the death of a loved one.

Even though *Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in Korea* covers all the major religions in Korea, the editors make it clear that they did not intend to provide a comprehensive account of death and its place in Korean culture from pre-history to the present day. Instead, they present snapshots of different Korean approaches to mourning and remembering the dead over the centuries, drawing on archaeological, literary, and modern observations. Readers should not expect this book to provide a definitive account in English on death, mourning, and the afterlife in Korea (though it is the first book on that topic in English to cover such a wide range of responses to death). Rather, it should be taken as a stimulus to further research into areas the eight authors here were not able to cover in the limited space available to them.

There are two chapters in this volume that focus our attention on late Silla and the Koryŏ Dynasty. Sem Vermeersch and Charlotte Horlyck, in their respective contributions, show us that, despite the assumptions that either cremation or double burial (unearthing the remains of the dead to rebury them a few years after they have been in the ground) was the norm before the Chosŏn Dynasty, burial practices were much more diverse than that. Vermeersch tells us that cremation did not become common even among monks until the mid-eleventh century, and even then it was not the primary method of disposing of bodies among the general population. Before that, double burial appears to have been preferred by the elite.

Horlyck complements the contribution by Vermeersch by pointing out that wooden coffins or pit graves were quite common. In addition she notes that stone chamber tombs were sometimes used for the elite. The key points that both Vermeersch and Horlyck make is that, first of all, there was no government or even religious pressure during Koryŏ times to bury the dead in one and only one sanctioned way. Second, what happened to a body after death was to a large degree determined by the social status of the person who had inhabited that body when it was alive. Both Vermeersch and Horlyck make it easier for the reader to visualize the various approaches to disposing of the dead body by providing photographs

that show both the outside and the inside of tombs from this period, as well as photographs of cinerary urns.

In between the interesting contributions by Vermeersch and Horlyck, we find an equally interesting contribution by John DiMoia on funerary practices today. DiMoia persuasively argues that biomedicine has transformed the Korean attitude toward the body. Not only do Koreans today accept the notion of physicians inserting knives into human bodies (neither surgery nor autopsies were part of Korea's premodern medical tradition), this shift toward viewing the body as essentially a physical object has made it possible for Koreans to adopt two new approaches to dealing with death and dead bodies. Whereas in the past most Koreans died in their home, surrounded by loved ones, today they tend to die in hospitals. They are still surrounded by loved ones, but in more impersonal environments. Moreover, in a Korean innovation that often surprises Westerners who visit a Korean general hospital, once a person is certified as dead, the corpse is usually then moved to a mortuary hall attached to the hospital in which that death occurred. DiMoia argues that this practice has arisen to allow the grieving to spend time with the dead as they would have in the past when death occurred in the home.

DiMoia mentions briefly another dramatic change in Korean attitudes toward dead bodies: a sharp rise over the last couple of decades in the use of cremation rather than burial in the ground to dispose of remains. I would have liked to have read more about how this change came about. Is it because of a shortage of land suitable for burials? Who cremates? Is the rate the same across religious communities or are Buddhists more likely to cremate than Christians are?

The chapters by Vermeersch, Horlyck, and DiMoia focus on the disposing of the dead. They are followed by a couple of chapters on how the dead are remembered. Guy Podoler looks at how memories of the dead are constructed to support contemporary political power. He focuses our attention on the National Cemetery and shows how it is used to assert the legitimacy of the Provisional Government, based in China from 1920 to 1945, and also to argue that the Republic of Korea is the sole legitimate heir to that Provisional Government. The dead, of course, had no vote when a decision was made to use them to support a particular political agenda. That is often the nature of memories of the dead—they typically are shaped more to fit the needs of the living than to accurately reflect the life those being remembered had lived.

Milan Hejtmanek also examines how the dead are remembered but he looks at the early Chosŏn Dynasty rather than Korea today. His contribution shows that, just like in Koryŏ times, who you were in life, your place in society, determined how you were mourned. However, he also points out a significant transformation in Korean mourning practice, thanks to the rise of Confucianism to hegemony. Cremation is no longer acceptable (not to return again until the early twenty-first century). Moreover, unlike Koryŏ, the Chosŏn government standardized mourning practices and insisted that everyone abide by them. Hejtmanek does not tell us, but the government demand that the dead be remembered with a spirit tablet

led to a violent persecution of Korea's first Christians in the late eighteenth and into the nineteenth century when those Christians refused to create spirit tablets, believing that such tablets represented idolatry. Thousands were killed in this dispute that broke out over how to honor the dead.

Two chapters in this volume, both by Michael Pettid, address how the living interact with the dead. He draws on his knowledge of shamanic beliefs and practices to show that, to Koreans, "Death does not necessarily remove the spirit of the deceased" (p. 141). In his first chapter, he argues that a primary purpose of a shamanic ritual was to convince the dead that they were dead and therefore they should stop trying to interfere in the affairs of the living. In his second chapter he explores tales of spirits of the dead, particularly attractive young women who suffered an early and unjust death, contacting the living by appearing to them either as an apparition or in a dream in order to convince the living to help them punish those who mistreated them. Pettid shows conclusively in both of these chapters that it was widely believed that the dead continued to have an emotional life after their physical life was over.

The final two chapters focus our attention on how the afterlife is conceived. Gregory Evon uses the novel *A Nine Cloud Dream* by Kim Man-jung to explore how an official in the staunchly Confucian Chosŏn government nonetheless could turn to Buddhism for help supplementing the rather barren Confucian notion of death. It is not the promise of rebirth that appeals to Kim but, according to Evon, Buddhism's embrace of natural death as a way to escape suffering attracted Kim at a time when he was facing his own death. It helped him accept the inevitable.

Franklin Rausch concludes this volume by looking at Korean Catholics and their distinctive view of the afterlife. He focuses on the martyrs during the time of persecution in the nineteenth century and discovers that not only did they look forward to being able to spend eternity in the presence of God, they also believed that they would be reunited with their immediate family in heaven, and that was what some, having been influenced by the family-orientation of Korean culture, very much looked forward to. In effect, they envisioned a Confucianized heaven, since they longed more for family rather than individual salvation.

I have already noted that the editors stated that they did not try to present a comprehensive account of Korea's mourning practices and views of death and the afterlife. So it seems a little unfair of me to point out some interesting points that were not discussed in the volume. Nevertheless, I will do so anyway, not as a criticism but as a suggestion for future work on this subject. I would have liked to have seen something on the burial customs of the pre-Silla peninsula, such as dolmens, stone cist tombs, human sacrifice, and the placement of bronze and stone goods in tombs, and what that tells us about diversity on the Korean peninsula 2,000 years ago. I would also have liked to have seen more on the selection of grave sites, since disputes over where graves could be placed lay behind many legal battles during the Chosŏn Dynasty. I would have enjoyed an analysis of the *myojimyŏng*, the epitaphs for family and friends that are often included in the

collected works of Chosŏn-era scholars. The only Christians discussed in this book are Catholics. It would have been better balanced if it had also included a discussion of Protestant mourning rituals, such as the Christian version of the traditional Confucian *chesa* (minus the spirit tablet). And, but this may be asking too much given the current state of scholarship on what is going on in the northern part of the peninsula, I would have appreciated a survey of how North Koreans deal with their dead, both how they honor the ancestors of the current leader and how ordinary North Koreans are mourned.

These caveats do not mean that I do not think this book makes a significant contribution to a better understanding of Korean history and culture. On the contrary. I think this book belongs in the library of every serious Korean studies scholar. It sheds new light on a corner of Korea's past and present that has unfortunately been dimly illuminated up to now. I offer my thanks to Horlyck and Pettid for opening up this new approach to the study of Korea and hope that this book will inspire others to follow the path they have blazed.

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Non-Traditional Security Issues in North Korea edited by Kyung-ae Park. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013. 265 pp. 9 tables. 14 figures. Index. $54.00 (hardcover)

Is it possible that North Korea's nuclear weapons, ballistic missile tests, bellicose rhetoric and aggressive provocations are a sign of its weakness and insecurity rather than its strength? What if traditional security discourse and policy, centered on the military dimension of interstate relations, not only prevented scholars from seeing the source of this weakness, but also contributed to greater insecurity in other, non-traditional areas? If this were the case, how might traditional and non-traditional security issues be interconnected, and how might scholars, analysts, and policymakers begin to conceptualize and pursue solutions to the many complex problems presented by North Korea?

While the vast majority of North Korea–related literature remains narrowly focused on the nuclear and missile issues within a traditional state-centric, realist framework, the various authors in Kyung-ae Park's edited volume, *Non-Traditional Security Issues in North Korea*, take a decidedly different approach. Inspired by the constructivists of the Copenhagen school, the work of human security scholars, and, in some cases, by their own experience within North Korea, the authors problematize traditional security discourse in order to address the above questions.