

EXCERPTS FROM THE SEJONG SILLOK: REFORM OF FUNERARY PRACTICES, 1437

Introduction

From the beginning of the Chosŏn period onwards, Neo-Confucian reformers sought to encourage Koreans to undertake forms of ritual observance described in Confucian texts. These were often at odds with existing Korean practices. When it came to funeral customs, they encouraged Confucian memorialization while decrying forms of religious and social commemoration that had been common during the Koryŏ period. The Neo-Confucian reform agenda in its spread and enforcement over the course of the Chosŏn dynasty provides an example of a certain sort of social transformation: a top-down, textually — and ideologically — driven re-engineering of society. Excerpted here is a 1437 decree on funeral practices drawn from the royal annals.

Document Excerpt with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from the Sejong sillok:
Reform of Funerary Practices, 1437

The people of our country follow in their mortuary and ancestral rites the bad customs of Koryŏ. ...

...

From now on the playing of music, the gathering of guests, and the performance of wanton ceremonies for the spirits, as well as visits of mourners to shaman houses to feast the spirit of the dead, or the invitation of guests to pray for the soul's repose, and the serving of wine on funeral days must be clearly and sternly prohibited by the censorial offices in the capital and by the local authorities in the province. If there are offenders, host and guests will be held equally responsible.

[Translated by Martina Deuchler]

Questions:

1. How might mourners have felt about efforts to change funeral customs? How might they have regarded practices that reformers deemed "extravagant," "excessive," or "wanton"?

Longer Selection

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Excerpts from the Sejong sillok:
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The royal edict to the Department of Punishments [in 1437] reads as follows:

The people of our country follow in their mortuary and ancestral rites the bad customs of Koryŏ. Although prohibitions were put into the *Six Codes of Governance*, the authorities are unable to investigate the violations, and the old practices are thus still observed. We are a long way from correcting them. Nowadays people of high and low social status commonly compete with each other in upholding wanton ceremonies; they respect and trust shamans and dissipate fortunes. Some mourners visit shaman houses where music is played and the spirit of the dead is feasted. Others go to Buddhist temples and have a service held for the repose of the soul. Still others serve wine and food on the burial day, and host and guests console each other. All strive to outdo one another in lavishness and extravagance. The rich are boastful; the poor make strenuous efforts. They call in guests and friends, and men and women mix freely. Only when the costs of entertainment are excessive do they rejoice in their hearts and get praise from their neighbors. Because this has become a custom, they do not restrain themselves. Once they have a bad harvest, they come close to starvation. This is indeed something to worry about, because the people's livelihood consequently deteriorates, and the quality of the customs is bound up with this.

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[Translated by Martina Deuchler]

Questions:

1. How might mourners have felt about efforts to change funeral customs? How might they have regarded practices that reformers deemed "extravagant," "excessive," or "wanton"?
2. What reasons does the edict give for mandating the reform of funeral customs? What reason(s) do you think were most important for reformers?
3. Can you think of comparable examples of state-mandated customary and social reform? Have they been successful?