Philosophy and Social Science Vol. 2 No. 9, 2025

Chinese Elements in Korean Chuseok Culture

Boyang Zhang
Chonnam National University, Gwangju, Republic of Korea

Abstract: The evolution of human civilization is essentially a process of multicultural interaction and integration. Under the profound influence of Chinese civilization, countries within the Chinese-character cultural sphere share a number of traditional festivals with similar cultural connotations. Festivals serve as a concentrated embodiment of a nation's cultural identity. Among them, Chuseok-a major folk festival on the Korean Peninsula-was recognized as one of the "Nine Grand Folk Festivals" during the Goryeo dynasty, alongside the Dano and Winter Solstice festivals, and was inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2009. However, from its very name to its ritual system, Chuseok is deeply infused with Chinese cultural elements. Even its ancestral worship practices can be traced to records in ancient Chinese texts. As the importance of "cultural confidence" was repeatedly emphasized, this paper examines the Chinese elements embedded in the customs, rituals, and nomenclature of Korea's Chuseok festival. Through this analysis, it aims to illuminate the formative influence of Chinese civilization on Korean Chuseok culture, thereby revealing the extensive reach and enduring depth of Chinese traditional cultural influence.

Keywords: Chuseok; Korean Folk Culture; Chinese Civilization

1. Introduction

1.1 The Origins of Korean Chuseok Culture

For centuries, China served as the suzerain state of the Korean Peninsula, exerting profound and far-reaching influence over its culture. Prior to the fifteenth century, the Korean Peninsula lacked an indigenous writing system and relied exclusively on Chinese characters (Hanja). As early as the Silla dynasty, Confucianism had already become the dominant ideology guiding governance and social ethics.

One prevailing theory regarding the origin of Korea's Chuseok festival suggests that it derived from ancient rituals of sun and moon worship practiced on the peninsula. However, archaeological and historical evidence indicates that Chuseok most likely originated within an agrarian context, as a communal event tied to collective agricultural labor. In societies with limited productivity, cooperative work was necessary to complete seasonal tasks, and Chuseok emerged as a day to commemorate the completion of such agricultural activities.

The earliest written reference to Chuseok in Korea appears in Samguk Sagi (Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms), compiled by Kim Busik in 1145. In the "Annals of Silla" section of this text, Chuseok is described in detail [1], and later cited in works such as Joseon Sesigi (Records of Seasonal Customs of Joseon). Based on Yeryang Sesigi, Dongguk Sesigi, and Samguk Sagi, scholars trace the earliest form of Chuseok customs back to as early as 32 CE. These early observances of the lunar fifteenth day of the eighth month centered on collective activities such as hemp harvesting and weaving competitions, followed by communal feasts and songs marking the end of the labor season.

Chinese historical sources also mention special observances on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month in relation to the Korean Peninsula, with the earliest record appearing in the Book of Sui (Suishu)[2]. While the Mid-Autumn Festival itself can be traced to the Tang dynasty, the term Chuseok does not appear in extant records until much later, during the Goryeo dynasty (founded in 918 CE). By this time, Chuseok had become recognized as one of the "Nine Major Folk Festivals" of the Goryeo court.

From these historical sources, three key conclusions can be drawn. First, by the first century CE, collective agricultural labor and subsequent communal celebrations were already being held on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month. Second, during the Zhenguan era of the Tang dynasty, the Silla people had begun

celebrating this day as a festival with banquets and entertainment, though the name Chuseok had not yet been established. Third, the specific term Chuseok as a festival name only emerged after the tenth century.

1.2 The Development and Consolidation of Chuseok Culture in Korea

During the Three Kingdoms period on the Korean Peninsula-when Silla, Goguryeo, and Baekje coexisted in a tripartite balance-Silla, though strongly influenced by Confucianism, left no record referring specifically to Chuseok by name. The earliest textual evidence of the festival's formal development is concentrated in the Goryeo dynasty.

The cultural influence of China on the Korean Peninsula was continuous, comprehensive, and multi-dimensional, encompassing the calendar system (the lunar calendar), craftsmanship, and philosophical thought. By the Song dynasty, the Chinese imperial polity was governed under the ideal of the shi-daifu (scholar-officials) co-governing with the emperor, fostering a relatively open political environment. During this period, surrounding non-Han peoples experienced a rise in independent consciousness: the Khitans established the Liao dynasty, the Jurchens founded the Jin dynasty, and the Mongols unified the northern steppe. Within this same historical context, the Goryeo kingdom arose, and the peninsula's festive system became more formally established. It was also during Goryeo that Chuseok took on its courtly dimension, featuring elaborate ancestral rites performed within royal and aristocratic households.

The festival system on the Korean Peninsula reached full maturity during the Joseon dynasty. The Joseon state, founded on Neo-Confucian ideology as articulated by Zhu Xi, institutionalized the Confucian code of propriety (Zhuzi Jiali) as the fundamental principle of governance. Under this intellectual and political framework, Joseon society modeled its festival and ritual systems after Chinese prototypes, adapting them to local practices.

Detailed descriptions of Chuseok customs are found in works such as Dongguk Sesigi (Seasonal Customs of the Eastern Kingdom) and Yeryang Sesigi (Seasonal Customs of Yeryang), which document both courtly and popular observances. Even impoverished households were expected to prepare special foods and conduct ritual offerings on this day, reflecting the festival's deep social and moral importance.

Following the Opium War, as the Qing government gradually lost its suzerainty over Korea, the peninsula fell increasingly under Japanese influence. In 1910, the signing of the Japan–Korea Annexation Treaty marked the beginning of Japan's colonial rule, during which traditional Korean customs were systematically suppressed. The Japanese authorities abolished the lunar calendar, imposed the Gregorian system, and enforced the adoption of Japanese holidays, thereby attempting to erode Korean national consciousness until the end of World War II.

In the early decades after liberation, Korea's political instability and single-minded focus on modernization led to a period of official neglect-and at times, opposition-toward traditional culture. It was not until the late 1980s that renewed efforts emerged to restore and revitalize traditional festivals, including Chuseok, as essential components of national heritage and cultural identity.

2. Chinese Elements in Korean Chuseok Culture

2.1 Customs of Chuseok

Korean ritual customs are the result of the fusion between China's Wengong Jiali (Family Rituals of Master Wen) and traditional Korean folk practices, formed after the wide transmission of Chinese ritual culture to the Korean Peninsula. [3]

The customs of Chuseok in Korea can be broadly divided into three main types: ancestral rituals at gravesites, banquets and moon-viewing gatherings, and recreational activities. Over time, these developed into the three major customs that continue today-tomb visits and ancestral worship, making and eating songpyeon (half-moon rice cakes), and moon appreciation. Regardless of their form or ritual detail, these customs reveal a deep connection with traditional Chinese culture. The customs of family reunion and ancestral veneration particularly demonstrate three major aspects of Chinese influence:

First, the cultural significance of ancestral rituals originates from Confucian thought. Although the ancestral rites (charye) and tomb visits (seongmyo) during Chuseok are not held on the same day and differ slightly in procedure, both

involve the preparation and offering of food. The ancestral rite is typically more elaborate. Their forms resemble China's practices of tomb-sweeping (saomu) and ancestral sacrifice (jisi), and their emotional core expresses reverence for ancestors, remembrance of forebears, and the virtue of filial piety.

According to the Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji), after King Wu of Zhou conquered the Shang dynasty, he consulted the Shang official Jizi on matters of governance. Dissatisfied with Jizi's response, King Wu sent him to Joseon but did not treat him as a subject[4]. Although this account is not widely accepted in Korea, early Goryeo understandings of ancestor worship and tomb rituals indeed differed from later Confucian norms. It was not until the Joseon dynasty, when Confucianism became the state ideology, that the concepts of ancestor worship and tomb visits were unified under Confucian ritual thought. Xu Jing, the Song envoy to Goryeo during the Xuanhe reign, recorded in Illustrated Account of an Official Mission to Goryeo (Xuanhe Fengshi Gaoli Tujing) that early Goryeo lacked a clear concept of systematic ancestral worship and tomb rituals.

Second, Chuseok rituals correspond closely to ancient Chinese rites and embody the Confucian ideal of family reunion. The Korean ritual system was profoundly influenced by Confucian values, with filial piety (xiao) as its central principle. During the Joseon period, Zhu Xi's Family Rituals (Zhuzi Jiali) served as the foundation for ritual codification, and many of its principles remain in practice today. The most significant modern Chuseok custom is family homecoming. The Chuseok holiday generally lasts three days, and when combined with weekends, may extend to five days, allowing families living apart to return home. Thus, Chuseok has become an important occasion for family reunion. Although this custom reflects modern mobility and social change, its core value-the emphasis on family unity-can be traced back to Confucian tradition.

Third, the ritual system of ancestral worship and tomb visits originates from the Chinese family ritual culture. Tomb offerings can be traced to China's pre-Qin period. The Joseon dynasty strictly followed Zhu Xi's Family Rituals. Initially practiced among the aristocracy, the custom gradually spread to commoners through the influence of the scholar-official class. Both ancestral worship and tomb rituals display evident Confucian characteristics.

First, the tea ritual (charye cha-rye) did not originate in Korea; it was recorded in the Song dynasty. During the period when tea culture flourished, Sima Guang included tea utensils in sacrificial offerings and established a tea-offering ritual, recorded in Sima's Book of Family Ceremonies (Simashi Shuyi): "The attendant holds the vessel and removes the tea froth; another follows with hot water to pour, beginning from the west. When finished, all withdraw, and the officiant closes the door"[5]. The tea rite was later incorporated into Zhu Xi's Family Rituals[6]. The earliest record of the term "tea rite" in Korea dates to 1401 (the first year of King Taejong's reign in the Joseon dynasty).

Second, the traditional offerings for Chuseok include fish, meat, soup, jerky, vegetables, chestnuts, persimmons, pears, and other fruits. A comparison with the autumn offerings prescribed in Zhu Xi's Family Rituals shows that both include similar categories: meat, fish, seasonal vegetables, fruits, soups, and preserved foods. The Korean principle of arrangement"jerky on the left, wine on the right; father to the west, son to the east; roasted foods in the center"-corresponds to the traditional Chinese layout of ritual offerings.

Third, the ritual procedure in Korea also derives from Zhu Xi's Family Rituals. While local variations exist, the main process remains consistent. Traditional Korean ancestral rites consist of sixteen steps, including invocation, worship before the spirit tablet, the first offering (chocheon), reading the prayer, secondary and final offerings, pouring of wine, arranging utensils, closing and reopening the door, removing offerings, and concluding with a blessing ceremony[7]. In comparison, Zhu Xi's Family Rituals divide the ritual into five main sections-inviting the spirit, presenting offerings, reading the prayer, partaking of the food, and completing the ceremony-comprising thirteen stages in total. The resemblance indicates that Korean rituals follow the same tradition.

In addition, the arrangement of participants during the rituals follows Chinese principles of hierarchy-male over female, left over right, east over west. Since the Han dynasty, the left side was regarded as superior; this order was briefly reversed under the Yuan, then restored by the Ming dynasty. In Chuseok rituals, male family members occupy the left side, a continuation of

this Confucian hierarchy.

In summary, both the form and meaning of Korea's Chuseok customs clearly derive from Chinese culture. The Zhu Xi Family Rituals provided the structural model, while Confucian thought shaped the spiritual essence. Before 1015, Goryeo envoys to the Song dynasty reported that rituals were held on the first and fifth days of the lunar year but made no mention of Chuseok. Although The History of Goryeo (Goryeosa) records that early Goryeo kings visited royal tombs and conducted rituals on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, Chuseok was not yet widely celebrated. Only the royal family and commoners performed simple tomb visits under the full moon to honor their ancestors[8].

2.2 The Origin of the Term "Chuseok"

The word Chuseok (Qiuxi) first appeared as an independent term in early Chinese literature, most notably in Du Mu's Tang dynasty poem Autumn Evening (Qiuxi), written before 852 CE. In contrast, the earliest Korean use of the term Chuseok can only be traced back to the Goryeo period (after 918 CE).

The admiration for Chinese culture on the Korean Peninsula did not diminish with the dynastic changes in China and reached its peak during the Joseon dynasty, which corresponded to China's Ming dynasty. Some Korean scholars suggest that the term Chuseok may have originated from the combination of two Chinese terms-Zhongqiu (Mid-Autumn) and Yuexi (Moon Evening)-and was later coined by Koreans. However, no archaeological or historical evidence has yet been found to support this hypothesis.

3.Reasons for Korea's Deliberate Downplaying of Chinese Elements

In 1986, the South Korean government proposed a strategy of "synchronizing cultural development with national development." In 1990, it formulated the Ten-Year Cultural Development Plan, followed in 1993 by the Five-Year Plan for Cultural Prosperity. Aiming to develop the cultural industry, South Korea sought to build its traditional cultural sector, establish an image of possessing a unique culture in Asia, and thereby transform the national image into "an Asian country with cultural depth," laying the foundation for achieving broader political and economic goals in the future.

Perhaps due to historical factors, South Korea exhibits a strong sense of insecurity, which has prevented it from acknowledging the roots of its own culture. Historically, Korea was long a vassal state of China. After the Opium War, on the one hand, Japan exercised strong influence over the Korean Peninsula, and on the other, Qing officials-such as Yuan Shikai-focused primarily on their positions within the Chinese imperial center rather than managing Korea as the highest authority. As the Qing government gradually relaxed its actual control over the peninsula, Korea fell under Japanese colonial rule until the end of World War II, followed by division into North and South, and later came under the influence of the United States.

Once South Korea achieved a certain level of democratization and modernization, and its economy reached a developed stage, it began to seek a higher international status. Consequently, the government increasingly emphasized spiritual and cultural development. However, the historical reality could not fully support the construction of the ideal cultural status. As a result, Chinese influences were deliberately downplayed, the distinctions between modern Korean folk culture and Chinese culture were emphasized, and in some cases, the significance of traditional Chinese culture was even denied.

4. Conclusion

The author argues that human development is inherently a process of multi-ethnic exchange and cultural integration. While it is important to respect the uniqueness of each national culture, a rigorous approach tracing the origins is also essential. Historical evidence shows that Korea has long admired Chinese thought, cultural practices, and customs. The influence of Chinese culture on the entire Sinosphere is extensive, and it is beyond doubt that the Chuseok festival was shaped by Chinese cultural influence.

China, Korea, and Japan are geographically close and have maintained frequent interactions. Both Japan and Korea studied Chinese culture extensively. However, since the 1990s, the South Korean government, driven by its so-called "Cultural Prosperity Plans," has gradually deviated from historical accuracy, interpreting Korean traditional culture selectively and even denying the existence of Chinese cultural influence. Although many Korean scholars objectively respect historical facts and acknowledge China's influence, the official

stance reflects not only a disregard for human cultural history but also Korea's own cultural insecurity.

This situation is comparable to the development of Buddhism in China: over more than two thousand years, Buddhism evolved into a localized form distinct from Indian culture. Nevertheless, China never denies that Buddhism originated in India, nor does it use the localized Chinese Buddhist tradition to negate Indian civilization.

As an important traditional festival in the Sinosphere, the Mid-Autumn Festival originated in China and spread throughout the Chinese cultural sphere. Countries such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam have all been influenced to varying degrees by Chinese culture, adopting and adapting Chinese folk rituals, cultural ideas, and festival symbolism. As the origin of Han culture, China should value its own cultural heritage and understand it thoroughly.

For example, some researchers claim that the ancestral rituals of Korea's Mid-Autumn Festival are a native Korean tradition. The author argues that this is not the case: ancient China also practiced festival rituals. Chinese civilization has a long history, and rituals have evolved over time. The Korean Peninsula adopted the customs that existed in China at that historical moment. Therefore, the later evolution of Chinese culture through integration with other ethnic groups does not negate the historical existence of these customs. Similarly, many practices in Japan and Korea-such as eating raw fish or sitting on the floor-originated from certain historical stages of Chinese culture. Thus, the author concludes that China's influence on neighboring countries is likely far greater than commonly assumed, and it is necessary to systematically examine historical sources to substantiate this influence.

References

[1] “A Study on Chuseok Folk Customs on the Korean Peninsula." Japanese Journal of Folklore Studies, no. 309 (February 2022): 203.

[2] The Complete Translation of the Twenty-Four Histories: Book of Sui (Suishu), vol. 81, Biographies, no. 46, "Eastern Barbarians: Silla," p. 1646. Edited by Xu Jialu. Shanghai: Hanyu Da Cidian Press, January 2004.

[3] Comprehensive Database of Korean History, vol. 10: "Structure of Aristocratic-Bureaucratic Society, Family Structure, and Ritual Systems in the Joseon Period." Korea History Database. Published July15,1981. https://db.history.go.kr/diachronic/level.do?levelId=oh_010_0030_0050_0010#none

[4] The Complete Translation of the Twenty-Four Histories: Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji), vol. 38, "The Hereditary House of Song Weizi," pp. 590–594. Edited by Xu Jialu. Shanghai: Hanyu Da Cidian Press, January 2004.

[5] Sima Guang. Sima Family’s Book of Rites (Sima Shi Shuyi), vol. 10, “Funeral Rites VI: Sacrifices,” p. 117.

[6] Zhu Xi. Family Rituals (Jiali). In Collected Works of Zhuzi, vol. 7, edited by Huang Ruijie. Reconstructed Rare Books of China series. Beijing: National Library of China Publishing House, 2005.

[7] Hayashi, Jae-gyu. "Characteristics of Ritual Foods and Communal Eating in Korean Ancestral Rites: A Case Study of a Yangban Village in Chungcheongnam-do." Bulletin of Shizuoka University of Art and Culture (Japan), March 31, 2012, pp. 13–21.

[8] Na, Hee-ra. "Chuseok in the Goryeo Dynasty as Seen through Literary Sources." Journal of Studies on Korean History 8 (2021): 84–95. http://dx.doi.org/10.21490/jskh.2021.8.84.95