

Funeral foods and its role as vehicle of communication

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Funeral rituals can be differentiated by beliefs, religion and cultures. Funeral used to be domestic events governed by family and relatives at home. Funeral halls were appeared in early 1980 because it became difficult to manage funeral rituals and reception for mourners at home due to life-style of urbanization. As the space and the labor problems were resolved, the scope of mourner was expanded to not only people connected to the deceased, but also to acquaintances of the bereaved. Funeral foods had been transformed in accordance with social changes. Funeral Halls provide catering service with ready-prepared and fast serving for the mourners. They mostly serve home-style meal as set menu including assorted rice cake *Tteok*, cooked rice, red hot-spicy beef soup *Yukgaejang*, with various side dishes. *Yukgaejang* and *Tteok* act as symbolically. Red color of *Yukgaejang* was regarded as defeating the evil spirit and *Tteok* as medium which connect human to the god. Because of commercialized funeral halls, the menu has become conforming to a single standard nationwide diminishing attributes of traditional funeral foods in households. As foods and the beverages by which the communication occur are provided in more comfortable environment, mourners stay longer. Sharing foods connect people spiritually constructing network as well as social relationship. In this sense, funeral foods act as vehicle of communication in contemporary Korea.

Keywords

funeral ritual, funeral food, funeral hall, mourner, vehicle, communication

1. Introduction

Funeral include rituals for the burial of the body of the dead, mourning the deceased, sharing memories, and expressing sympathy for the bereaved. Funeral rituals can be differentiated by beliefs, religion, cultures as well as social and economic status. Funeral

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foods are comprised of two types, one is for the deceased as a tribute to respect, which has the protocol for every specific ritual. Another is for serving mourners who pay a visit to express their condolences. Funeral rituals used to be domestic events governed by family and relatives and was performed at home until early 1980. There were needs for more spacious and convenient funeral hall. Funeral process was delegated to the funeral hall and the system was well accepted to the public. Funeral foods had been transformed in accordance with the social changes.

Food is closely related to rituals and culture so that we can see it as form of communication(Cramer, Green, Waters, 2011). Food plays important role in the process of communication as means of expression and social relationship(German.2011) Food act as message which is encoded with meanings and then is decoded to convey meanings. At the same time, food acts as medium through which communication occurs.

Literatures and films were reviewed because those depicted funeral process and emotions among related people. Novel 'Festival', 'Honbul' and Film 'Festival', television dramas, newspapers were chosen to elucidate funeral foods as communicator and medium of communication. The survey was done to study funeral foods and its acceptance among guests in funeral halls.

2. Traditional funeral rituals

Traditional funeral procedure was comprised of various rituals. Korean cherish funeral rituals, at the same time, stand in awe. Rituals which have foods as offerings are "calling for soul of the dead", "meals for the reaper", *Jeon*, *Sangsik*, *Sungbokje* and *Je*. For "calling for soul of the dead", there's array of foods offerings in 3 rows on the table for the dead, including liquor, noodle, meats and fish(Korea food foundation. 2014) (Fig1). Number 3 is courtesy which means lands, heaven and bearing so that every dish was prepared with 3 sets of specific food. After the ritual, they inform the death to people. 'Meals for the reaper' means asking the reaper to lead the dead to the afterlife with care by treating him with hospitality. 3 sets of coins, 3 bowls of cooked rice and 3 pairs of straw shoes are placed in front of house entrance. *Jeon* 「奠」 or as *Je* 「祭」 is offered every stage of funeral process. *Sangsik* 「上食」 is offered as ordinary meal she/he used to eat with cooked rice, soup, a few main or side dishes, tea on every mealtime through the funeral period. When the body of the dead is placed in the casket with courtesy and the bereaved were allowed to wear ceremonial funeral costume, *Jeon* is called as *Je* 「祭」 afterwards. Then, mourners are



Fig. 1. Calling for soul of the dead
(<http://archive.hansik.org/picture/>)



Fig. 2. Sungbokje: ritual of wearing funeral costume
(<http://archive.hansik.org/picture/>)

received afterwards. Fig 2 shows *Sungbokje* performed with foods, liquor and incense on the table. Tofu, cooked vegetables, fermented fish, Korean traditional cookie called *yumilgwa*, chestnut, prune were placed on the table. Series of *Je* were performed in similar principle until burial of the dead.

Funeral was domestic events so that relatives and neighbors in the community used to bring Adzuki bean porridge because the bereaved in despair couldn't eat (Digital encyclopedia of Korean local culture) (Fig 3). They believed that red color porridge could expel the devil. Porridge was shared among the bereaved and mourners. Any kinds of porridge were allowed to bring and accepted later on. Cow or pig was slaughtered for meats. Foods and liquor were served to the mourners who pay a visit.



Fig 3. Adzuki bean porridge
(<https://search.naver.com/>)

3. Funeral foods depicted in literature and media

Lee (1996) define the funeral as festival in his novel 'Chukje (Festival)' because he thinks funeral is the site not only the deceased and the bereaved forgive, embrace each other despite long-standing conflict but also reconciliation made among the bereaved. (Lee. 1996. p271) Funeral process, emotions and behaviors of people engaged were well depicted

in the novel. Narratives related in funeral customs and communication in modern Korea were introduced below. Funeral ritual was affected by Confucianism so that people believe hearty offerings on the ritual with respect, ancestors would protect the descendants from troubles and bring the wealth. The belief was expressed in narratives below.

“Death of the elder in the family means that he/she had been transited from the man of virtue to the ancestry god who would protect the descendant” (Lee. 1996. p271). “The descendant can’t expect the benefit derived from one’s ancestors without offering them rituals with love and respect” (Lee. 1996. p232). “We should give the hearty meal to the reaper because they came all the way from world beyond having hardship” (Lee. 1996. p233). “The bereaved was allowed to eat porridge only after wearing ceremonial costume. Let’s have one bowl of porridge. I wonder why people are in good shape despite of starvation” (Lee. 1996. p196).

Funeral is the site where communication occurs among people and food plays its role as medium. The author described the atmosphere of funeral where mourners socialize building relationship.

“Gloomy atmosphere of where the funeral take place turn into party-like festival when the elder had passed away” (Lee, 1996, p36). “Mourners were drinking here and there, the bereaved joined them sharing glass of alcohol, exchanging condolence and special caring to establish social network and reinforcement of relationship” (Lee, 1996, p238).

“Mourners begin to chat each other without presence of the bereaved. Sometimes even smiling, they even tell the bereaved not to worry about themselves” (Lee. 1996. p244).

‘Festival’ was produced by director Lim Kwon Taek in 1996. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNXf_ibPc7o)

Novel ‘Honbul’ describe “rites of passage” done in southwest parts of Korea in 1930–1940. There was description of rites related to death and the memorial service. The elder asked the descendant to share foods community after the memorial ritual with neighbors in the community.

“Lady Cheongam, the elder of the family, made her will to prepare enough foods with variety and to share with neighbors in the community having fun on her memorial day after death” (Vol. 4. p168). “Soul of the slave visited home on his 1st memorial day. He was surprised at seeing various foods on the table” (vol 10. p115–116). (Chung HK, Woo N, Kim MH. 2010).

There was national campaign for simple funeral process because of adverse effect of hearty food offerings which caused economic burden to the household. (Dong-A daily newspaper, 1968). Recommendation was made to exclude “calling for soul of the dead” and “Meals for the reaper” in funeral procedure. Replacement of ritual foods by ‘burning incense’ was advised. The movements urged the public to reform ritual foods protocol into favorite foods the deceased used to enjoy.

4. Funeral foods in contemporary Korea

There are changes in funeral rituals in contemporary Korea due to social upheaval and economic growth. Traditional funeral food offering for rituals retain existence only to Confucian or Buddhist family nowadays. Food offering were replaced with flowers and burning incense most households.

The mourning period lasts mostly 3–5 days. Koreans tend to give priority to visiting the bereaved no matter how they are busy. Home or funeral hall open 24 hours a day during the mourning period and mourners are allowed to visit anytime of the day. Funeral hall provide all necessary services for the funeral process including rituals and catering service, so that the bereaved can concentrate on reception for mourners. They serve meals and drinks including alcohols. Span of mourners is expanded to more broad range of friends and colleagues of the bereaved. They visit in group or individually. Funeral foods provide a vehicle by and through which communication occurs building relationship (Fig.



Fig. 4. People gathered for mourning



Fig. 5. Meal for mourner in funeral hall

4).

According to the survey on visitor's satisfaction on funeral hall food service, food quality and service had positive influence on the funeral hall image and mourners' satisfaction. Cleanness was the most effective attribute on visitor's satisfaction, followed by food taste, food quality, freshness and food variety. They mostly serve set menu home-style meal including assorted rice cake *Tteok*, red hot-spicy beef soup *Yukgaejang*, with various side dishes-*Jeon*, pressed cooked pork *Pyeonyuk*, Spicy fermented fish with radish, *Kimchi*, stir-fried anchovy, fruits, nuts and dried squid. (Fig. 5) Spicy vinegar-seasoned fermented fish, *Pyeonyuk*, steamed fish *Kodari* and *Tteok* were preferred among mourners (Kim and Kim, 2012). *Yukgaejang* and *Tteok* act as symbolically. Red color of *Yukgaejang* was regarded as defeating the evil spirit and *Tteok* as medium which connect human to the god. Because of commercialized funeral halls, the menu has become conforming to a single standard nationwide diminishing traits of traditional funeral foods in households.

5. Funeral foods as vehicle of communication

Foods often are used to communicate with others and as means of demonstrating personal identity, group affiliation and disassociation, and other social categories, such as socioeconomic class (Carey J.1992). According to communication theory, message is encoded by sender and is decoded as meanings by receiver. The more what meant by sender is overlapped with what perceived by receiver, the better communication is made. We communicate through food all the meanings we assign in the context. Food can be understood as encoded, organized into systems that provide the rules, explicit or implicit, and agreed upon by members of a culture or society (Wessell and Jones, 2011). Food becomes a medium of communication that establishes relationships and social barriers. Food becomes a tool in building relationship, connecting people and expressing cultural differences (Karaosmanoglu, 2011). Food plays role as communicator of meaning especially in the construction and reinforcement of group identities (Krögel 2009).

Food is closely related to rituals and culture so that we can see it as form of communication (Cramer, Green, Waters, 2011). In this sense, funeral food is a communicator because we assign meanings with symbols, ideology, social values, economy and cultural identity. The meaning is understood by people who can decode the messages. Identity, relationship, connection, solidarity, hospitality were understood by decoding message funeral foods convey (Fig.6). Funeral foods also become the channel in

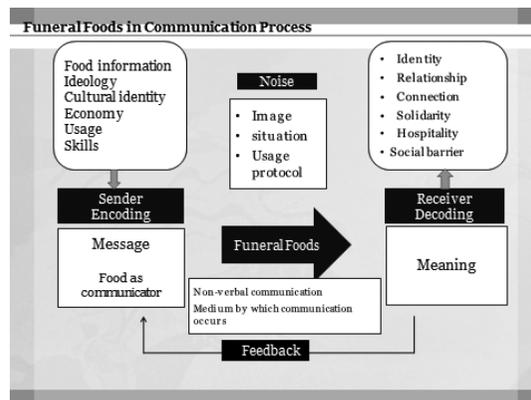


Fig. 6 Modified communication process of funeral foods

communication process as non-verbal communication. Funeral foods play roles as the vehicle of communication contributing consolidation of relationship among people in contemporary Korea.

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