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Refereed article

The Meaning and Role of Sacrificial Rituals in Traditional Korean Educational Institutions

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Summary
In Korea during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) Confucian scholars were able to construct a political and social order and culture around the symbolic space of the Confucian private academy (*sŏwŏn*) by relying on a tradition of iterative ritual performances. These designated each member of society with a proper social role and universal grammar. The function of the rituals at Confucian private academies was that of a social signifier within the construction of a social contract peculiar to Chosŏn society. The academies spread, which began in the sixteenth century in areas outside the capital, produced a "Confucianization" of traditional rituals, and thence the indoctrination with Confucian morals at the local level. This kind of transformation of society had been the aim of the Chosŏn rulers right from the dynasty's foundation in 1392. However, the driving force behind this transformation was not the center, but local scholars. They wanted to enhance their own social and political dominance and privileges through the creation of symbolic ritual spaces under their control, including the invention of a tradition of local sages/scholars to be enshrined and revered at the *sŏwŏn*.

Keywords: Confucian academies, ritual, Chosŏn society, education

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Introduction

From ancient times on, Korea absorbed Chinese culture and built on it its own cultural traditions. This can be seen most clearly in Confucian culture, which forms the core of traditional Korean culture. When exactly Confucian writings and thought, which had become the ideological basis of state formation during the Han dynasty in China (206 BC–AD 220), first came to Korea is not known (Park 2011: 19).[1] However, in Chinese and Korean historical texts (Annals) it is mentioned (without further detail being given) that a public educational institution called *t'aehak* was established along with Chinese examples in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula in the 4th century AD — that is, in Koguyrŏ during the period of the Three Kingdoms (1st century BC–AD 668). Aside from this institution, private village schools called *kyŏngdang* are also mentioned in the Chinese texts. There it is said that students practiced archery and horseback riding, learned Chinese characters, and read classical Confucian texts like *Lunyu* and books on the history of China (*Jiu Tangshu,* Vol. 199*, Dongyi, Gaoli*).

The dynasties that followed the Three Kingdoms — United Silla (668–935), Koryŏ (918–1392), and Chosŏn (1392–1910), whose domain comprised the whole of the Korean Peninsula — all possessed a countrywide system of public educational institutions. The top echelon was occupied by university-like institutions attached to the court, respectively named *kukhak* (Silla), *kukchagam* (Koryŏ), and *sŏnggyungwan* (Chosŏn). Their main task was the preparation of students for the entrance examinations for public office. Much emphasis was put herein on Confucian classical texts.

The emergence and the spread of *sŏwŏn*, private Confucian academies, from the middle of the sixteenth century involved a significant change in the educational landscape of Chosŏn society (*Chosŏn Sillok, Sŏnjo sujŏngbon* 28/7/1#3).[2] These academies were founded by Confucian scholars, often in rather remote places outside the capital. Their purpose was not the preparation for the state examination, but instead the study of Neo-Confucian thought as such. In this, the *sŏwŏn* were markedly different from the public educational institutions: the *sŏnggyungwan* at the center and the *hyanggyo* in the provincial capitals and counties. Even though the purpose was different, at least formally the main activities at the public and the new private institutions were the same: namely (1) studying Neo-Confucian classics; (2) archiving and publishing books; and, (3) conducting sacrificial rituals (*sŏkchŏn*) (Choi 1975: 131ff).

In this contribution we concentrate on the third function of the *sŏwŏn*. The sacrificial rituals were an effective means to generate and recreate a high degree of

1 Excavations in North Korea have unearthed text passages of *Lunyu* written on bamboo slips.

2 After the establishment of the first *sŏwŏn* — called Paegundong (built 1543), and located in P'unggi in the southeastern region of Korea — private Confucian academies grew so fast that one could say 50 years later that there were hardly any villages left that did not have such an institution.

homogeneity among scholars, their way of thinking, as well as within the goals and the character of the education as they developed at each of those academies. The performance of sacrificial rituals guaranteed the legitimacy of the local academic community and their doctrines. Apart from that, the rituals were also a means for these premodern intellectuals to dominate the surrounding local societies. Thus, sacrificial rituals were an essential part of premodern education as they secured social order and hierarchy and established a model of moral authority within the community through repetitive acts.

As existing research has shown, it was precisely via the conducting of the sacrificial rituals by the *sŏwŏn* that the ruling elite indoctrinated society with Confucian morals (Chŏng 1997, 1980). In other words, these rituals bound village society to the Confucian order of the state and put it under the authority of the *sŏwŏn*. This is quite a unique phenomenon, one that cannot be found in other countries sharing the Confucian tradition. It is precisely the intersection between the social and religious aspects of East Asian societies that allows us to define crucial points of divergence between particular Confucian cultures. A case study on local adjustment to and appropriation of a seemingly universal Confucian institution is offered by examining the Confucian academies that spread all over East Asia. The heterogeneous nature of this process has been described in detail in the recent literature (Glomb et al. 2020).

The shared ritual heritage that derived from the Chinese classics was applied in remarkably diverse social contexts and, needless to say, with too many different motivations and results. It was the social structure of traditional Korean society that was the crucial determinant for the adaptation of the universal Confucian discourse (Deuchler 2015). Unlike in China — where education was, at least theoretically, open to everybody and served as the road to the state examinations — or in Japan — where there were no state examinations, and elite status was the prerequisite for education — the Korean situation was unique. It followed the Chinese model of open education and state examination, but blended it with a discriminatory approach toward non-elite students and even toward some members of the elites too — secondary sons (Deuchler 1988: 121ff). Korean educational institutions in relation to their environment were predestined to be in a constant process of negotiating the boundary between the chosen elites and other social groups. In this, the ritual texts of Chinese antiquity became a highly efficient tool to redefine and transform actual Korean social and intellectual discourse. This reflects a peculiar characteristic of Korea's traditional state and society. In spite of its uniqueness, research on the sacrificial rituals of the *sŏwŏn* remains scarce (Chŏng 1998: 39ff; Kwŏn 2001: 41ff; Kim 2013: 9ff; Gehlmann 2020: 252ff; Glomb 2020: 319ff).

What will be examined here is why and how sacrificial rituals could play such an important role in Korean society. We will first look into the significance of ritualized ceremonies as a practical expression of Confucian rites. Then, the differences in the social functions between the sacrificial rituals at the *sŏwŏn* and the ones at the

sŏnggyungwan and the *hyanggyo* will be examined. It will be shown that the ceremonies associated with the sacrificial rituals were the means used by the *sŏwŏn* to disseminate knowledge about Confucian rites among village communities. Simultaneously, it will become clear that the strict implementation of the rituals also served to legitimize the *sŏwŏn* actors and their favored social order. The intrinsic function of the sacrificial rituals can, therefore, only be comprehended in this social context.

Sacrificial rituals as practices of Confucian rites

The historical roots of the concept of "rites" (*li*/*ye* 禮)[3] in Confucianism go back to ancient China, namely to the Zhou dynasty (1076 BC–771 BC). The authority of the Zhou was based on the blood relations between its kin members. The principle of fealty among kinsmen was identified with that of loyalty to the state. The obedience and obeisance of a son to his father and of the young to the old within the family was explained in the analogy of the obedience and obeisance of a subject to the king. The obeisance of the son to his father became the principal virtue of a nobleman. Relatives, too, were obliged to treat other family members in the same way. The relations between husband and wife and among brothers were governed by the same principle as well.[4]

When the Zhou established their reign, they used *li* to impose a new social order and to consolidate power. Therefore, *li* are considered to be at the root of the Chinese state, though *li* initially were a matter for the aristocracy alone. The "common people" (*min* 民) did not have to follow *li* (Gassmann 2000: 348ff). They were governed instead through punishments and laws.

The historic Confucius lived in a period when the feudal order of Zhou was nearing its end. Confucius observed the decline and crisis of conventional morality, and was convinced that it was his task to reconstitute the, from his point of view, indispensability of the traditional ethos by means of *li*. Not only Confucius but also other great masters like Mencius and Xunzi believed that *li* were the basic principle for civilizing human life and society. Following *li* helps human beings to perfect their thinking and their acts. In this sense, *li* are seen in Confucianism as a criterion for humaneness. They are the core of human existence, and encompass the whole realm of human life.

3 Chinese characters are used both in China and Korea. Yet their phonetic reading is different. In this text, typically the Korean reading is used. When both readings are mentioned, the form of citation Chinese/Korean is used.

4 The importance of these principles for the maintenance of the rule of the Zhou is amply documented in *Zhoushu*.

Using Chinese characters, *li* is written 禮. Initially, the term indicated specific rituals that were performed in order to obtain favors from the gods. This character is composed of two parts. The left-hand side's radical 示 means etymologically "Heaven's omens that inform the living of impending good or ill." The right-hand side's radical 豊 symbolizes a sacrificial vessel meanwhile. That means that *li* in ancient China were a religious act indicating a relationship between god and man.[5] For this reason it is said in *Liji*, which is an essential book of Confucian rites, that *li* know five rules — and that the most important among them is *jisi/chesa*, the one on ritual ceremonies (*Liji*: *Qu Li* I, 8). Thus, sacrificial rituals form the core of Confucian rites.

Sacrificial rituals, as they were practiced by the *sŏwŏn*, were part of Confucian rites too. In this, the *sŏwŏn* followed the rules written down in chapter 8 of *Liji*. There it says that *sŏkchŏn* for great kings and scholars ought to be conducted when a new school is established. In fact theses rituals, just like in China, were not only conducted at the time of the establishment of a school but also on a regular basis thereafter. In the case of the *sŏwŏn*, the *sŏkchŏn* rites followed the example set by the *sŏnggyungwan* and the *hyanggyo*. Joseph Needham (1978) was very much impressed by the *sŏkchŏn* rite he observed in China. In the second volume of his *Science and Civilization in China* he writes:

> The cult of Confucius thus became what it remained through the centuries, a hero worship, celebrated everywhere but with a special ceremony at the sage's tomb-temple in Shantung, and a symbol of the power and prestige of a non-hereditary social group, the literati, in the framework of society. […] Still, to this day, once a year, on the Sage's traditional birthday, the officials and scholars of the district assemble between midnight and dawn, there to make the thai-lao sacrifice (an ox, a sheep and a pig), to read liturgical essays and listen to speeches. Music and a solemn ritual dance were part of the ceremony until contemporary times. (Needham 1978: 31f.)

As can be read in the Chinese and Korean Annals, in AD 717 a portrait of Confucius and his 72 disciples was taken to Korea (United Silla) and hung up in the *t'aehak* (*Samguk sagi,* Vol. 8, *Silla: Sŏngsŏkwang*, 16th year). The Silla rulers, who were actually Buddhists, nevertheless made Confucius a sort of patron saint of their newly created "public system of learning" (*kukhak/t'aehak*) and even sought to underpin these efforts by conducting the corresponding sacrificial rituals in the way they were practiced in Tang China. There are good reasons to suspect that the Silla kings participated in these *sŏkchŏn* rituals at the "literary temple" (*munmyo*) and then listened to the lecture by a *kukhak* scholar. Whatever the concrete circumstances may have been, the rituals conducted at that time are mentioned in the *Samguk Sagi*, a historical record finished in 1145.

5 According to *Shouwen jiezi*, *li* means "the way to serve the spirits and secure blessings." *Shuowen jieyi*, 1A, 4b, cited in Wilson 2001: 15.

During the Koryŏ dynasty, which was still Buddhist-dominated, following the example of Song in China a portrait of Confucius and his 72 disciples was installed in the *munmyo* of the new capital (modern-day Kaesong). The sacrificial rituals were conducted too. In 1022 and 1116 Silla scholars were added as Confucian scholars in this literary temple.[6]

In 1398 — that is, six years after the establishment of Chosŏn dynasty, which was explicitly based on Confucian thought — a new *munmyo* (situated within the already-mentioned *sŏnggyungwan*) was built in the new capital Hanyang (Seoul). Since then and up to the present, the *sŏkchŏn* rites have been conducted twice a year (in spring and autumn) at this literary temple (*Chosŏn sillok*, *T'aejo sillok* 7/6/3#3). Aside from the *sŏkchŏn* rites, which were conducted officially and publicly at the literary temple, there existed also private sacrificial rituals at "private shrines" (*sau*), which were conducted to honor those who had brought major merit to the country — for example in the handling of natural disasters or in defending the nation. The construction of such shrines dedicated to individual persons had already begun in the Three Kingdoms period. Family shrines, which can still be seen in many parts of Korea today, first appeared in the thirteenth century with the introduction of Neo-Confucianism (Choi 1975).

Ritualistic ceremonies and ritual space

The *munmyo* is a separate shrine within the precincts of the *sŏnggyungwan* and of the *hyanggyo*. Within the *munmyo* there are tablets with the names of Confucius, his 72 disciples, and of certain Korean scholars, all written in Chinese characters. Within the grounds of the *sŏwŏn* there were shrines too. The tablet inside them (initially there was only one) bore, however, the name of a local scholar who had led a virtuous and meritorious life and was held in high esteem. Sacrificial rituals were performed to honor these individuals. Yi Yi (1534–1586), one of the most renowned Korean Confucian philosophers, once wrote that the main reason for the establishment of the *sŏwŏn* was the desire of local scholars to have a shrine where they could honor a worthy and exemplary scholar from within their own community and induce its members to emulate that person's virtuous life (*Yulgok chŏnsŏ*: Vol. 13, Tobong sŏwŏn-gi, 044, 276c).

The *sŏnggyungwan*, the *hyanggyo*, and the *sŏwŏn* all had a ritual and an educational function. Correspondingly, they had a ritual space and one for learning too. Although there were certain differences in the spatial arrangements in the *sŏnggyungwan* and the *hyanggyo*, the ritual space was of higher importance and more exclusive. Whereas the space for learning is an open one, the sacrificial space is one of

6 The philosopher Ch'oe Ch'i-wŏn (857–?) and the writer Sŏlch'ong (655–?) of the late Unified Silla period. Ch'oe had passed the Tang imperial examination and risen to high office before returning to Silla, where he made several attempts to reform the government bureaucracy. Sŏlch'ong was the first scholar to develop a transcription system for Chinese characters (*idu*).

exclusivity that can only be accessed by certain persons and for specific rituals and procedures.

The construction of the *sŏwŏn* was adapted to the conditions of the terrain that they were built on. Therefore, in some cases, the space for learning is located above the ritual space. However, as can be seen in the floor plans of the *sŏwŏn*, the learning spaces are always located in the front part, while the ritual spaces are in the rear (Lee 1998).

The learning space symbolizes the world of *xue*/*hak* 學 ("to study, to learn"), and the ritual space the one of *dao*/*to* 道 ("the way"). How these two worlds relate to each other is the core concern of Confucian philosophy. On this issue Yi Hwang (1501–1570) and Yi Yi, Chosŏn society's most influential Confucian philosophers, were involved in a fervid, prolonged, and famous debate (Hwang 2003: 203ff). For Yi Yi, *hak* and *to* were inseparable. They needed each other to be complete (*Yulgok chŏnsŏ*: Vol 5., 20). Yi Hwang, in contrast, believed that *hak* and *to* belonged to different worlds. The ritual and the learning space were two fundamentally different ones, and needed to be kept apart. Accordingly, there was no need to have a ritual space in the *sŏwŏn* (*T'oegyejip*: Vol. 42, Isan sŏwŏngi).

Yi Hwang's attitude does not mean that he did not appreciate the value of sacrificial rituals. For him, teaching and studying belonged to the "lower world", while ritual space was the world of the metaphysical *to*, which one could never reach through *hak* (*T'oegyejip*: Vol. 14, 32). This is not the place to go deeper into the debate between these two scholars. It should only be noted here that their perceptions of these two spaces did not have a noticeable impact on the layout of the *sŏwŏn*. What one can observe instead is that the ritual function of the *sŏwŏn*, whose number increased exponentially from the middle of the seventeenth century, over time gained a clear upper hand over their educational one.

These later developments stand in a certain contrast to the initial efforts of the Chosŏn Confucian scholars to construct the educational space as a nodal point of the community, and indeed of their own existence. This space needed to be sanctified through sacrificial rituals. Every activity related to the shrine was ritualized. For instance, building a shrine would start by holding a ritual for the god of earth and end with a ceremony to place the spirit tablet with the name of the person to be honored inside the building. Through the ceremonies, the educational institution gained moral authority from society (Chŏng 1998). The school space, built in an elaborate process, became a signifier, one that encompassed the complex semantic system of Confucianism. Simultaneously, by performing these rituals the Confucian scholars of Chosŏn society asserted their academic authenticity and authority.

Why were sacrificial rituals so important in Chosŏn society? One important reason is related to the orthodox lineage of *to*, 道統, in the Korean "*tot'ong*."[7] *Tot'ong* is

7 Zhu Xi (1130–1200) put *tot'ong* at the center of his interpretation of Confucianism. He introduced the concept in his introduction to *Zhongyong*, which initially was a short chapter of *Liji*, the book of

also related to the legacy of academic legitimacy, as it was considered to be of higher value than *ch'it'ong* 治統 — the secular legacy of the lineage of sovereign power.[8] Thus the scholars who conducted ritual ceremonies for the sages of their *sŏwŏn* would implicitly pretend that those sages had followed the same *tot'ong* as they themselves had. Hence these ceremonies were used to corroborate their moral superiority and their right to control the secular political authorities.

At the center of *tot'ong* there were the teachings of Master Zhu Xi, a Confucian philosopher of twelfth-century China who was one of the founders of what later became known as Neo-Confucianism. This school of thought became the dominant ideology in the Chosŏn era. Only the writings of Master Zhu had canonical status. Only scholars that had followed his teachings could be considered for enshrinement. As a result, the government and the scholar-officials thoroughly and systematically repressed Buddhism, Taoism, and the ideology of utilitarianism (*Sambongjip*, Vol. 9).[9] The philosophical schools of Wang Yangming and of utilitarianism were barred. Also, geomancy, Taoistic yin-yang thought, and the "Five Elements" theory, in which the peasants and the general public took great interest, were officially banned too.

By their strict adherence to Neo-Confucianism, the scholar-officials of the sixteenth century were able to monopolize access to government offices and to acquire far-reaching social powers through their control of educational institutions and literary production. They also wielded hegemonic power in the interpretation and implementation of *tot'ong*, and ruled over the rural communities by occupying and apportioning among them government functions and privileges. The *sŏwŏn* allowed them to ascertain their moral authority by celebrating and honoring scholars who had followed *tot'ong* in an exemplary manner. This ideological construct of the moral superiority of the scholarly class was the basis of the civil administration during the Chosŏn dynasty. In this construct, the *sŏwŏn* assumed the role of controlling and supervising the desires and aspirations of wider society (Chŏng 1998).

The sacrificial rituals performed at the *sŏwŏn* formed a symbolic system within Korean Confucian culture and functioned as a nodal point, one in which the will and the interests of members of society came together. The literary temple of the *sŏnggyungwan* in the capital was designed as the hub of the world, around which all Confucian behavioral rules revolved. The *hyanggyo*, the *sŏwŏn*, and eventually the

rites. It later gained prominence in the Song Confucian renaissance. Zhu Xi made *Zhongyong* part of the so-called Four Books, and thus made it one of the first book to be studied within the compulsory Confucian curriculum. It remained in this position until Western education was introduced in China and Korea centuries later. The initial short and concise text was subject to numerous commentaries — with the most crucial one written by Zhu himself.

8 *Chosŏn sillok* (*T'aejong sillok* 14/7/11#4) says: "Even Confucius was no king, he is the teacher of all kings. Therefore everybody [even King T'aejong] has to bow before him."

9 Chŏng To-chŏn, who had played a decisive role in the initial formation of the Chosŏn system of rule, wrote that the prime minister had read nothing else except the Confucian classics.

family shrines too were an integral part of this design of the world. In Chosŏn society, every household, village, and clan was ideologically and so to speak physically connected with a Confucian educational institution and the shrine belonging to it (Chosŏn sillok).[10] The power structures in villages and their hierarchical order followed agnatic, patrilineal principles, and were characterized by remarkably high levels of stability (Chŏng 1999: 149ff).[11]

The Chosŏn sacrificial rituals were of three types: namely high-, middle-, and low-level rituals. The highest sacrificial rituals were conducted at the *chongmyo*, the royal shrine, the repository of the tablets of the Chosŏn kings. These ceremonies, which are still performed annually, were characterized by quite demanding and complex procedures. At the middle level, there were the sacrificial rituals at the *munmyo* of the *sŏnggyungwan*. The low-level sacrificial rituals, meanwhile, were reserved for the *hyanggyo*, the public colleges situated in the counties and prefectures that were mentioned earlier. In fact the *sŏwŏn* rituals were outside of this classification, as they were at a level below that of the *hyanggyo* (Kwŏn 2001: 56; Chang 2002: 4).[12] Apart from these public rituals, there were private sacrificial ones conducted by families for their ancestors and on the occasion of marriages, funerals, and births too (*karye*).[13]

At the *munmyo* inside the *sŏnggyungwan*, the *sŏkchŏnje* were, as noted, conducted in spring and autumn (*ch'unch'u chehyang*). In the course of this ceremony ritualized music (*munyocheryeak*) and dances (*p'alilmu*) were performed. Furthermore, a series of ritualized acts were officiated. At the literary temple of the *hyanggyo*, too, the *sŏkchŏnje* were conducted twice annually, but the offerings were much more limited and there were no music and dance performances. All of these ceremonies were important social events, and attracted many spectators.

Access to the *sŏwŏn* ceremonies themselves was restricted to persons of merit. One needed a recommendation by a member of the *sŏwŏn*, and then had to go through a selection procedure in the hands of the *sŏwŏn* officials. Among the criteria used were age (over 30) and the level of knowledge and virtuousness.[14] The successful candidates' names were then put down in the *yuwŏnrok*, the register of the persons

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10 The Chosŏn dynasty's declared aim was to teach Confucian morals to all subjects.

11 The *hyanggyo* and the *sŏwŏn* had the right to oblige local people to cooperate in the construction or modification of their premises.

12 These levels could be identified through the number of dishes used in the ceremonies too. Fruit and dried meat were put in dishes made from bamboo (*pyŏn*). For kimchi and salted fish, wooden dishes (*tu*) were used. *Pyŏn* and *tu* symbolized yin and yang. For the ritualistic ceremonies at the royal shrine (*chongmyo*) and at the *munmyo*, 12 *pyŏn* and 12 *tu* were placed on the sacrificial table. At the hyanggyo, only eight *pyŏn* and eight *tu* were used meanwhile. In *sŏwŏn* ceremonies, the number of plates varied with the rank of the revered person (between four to six of each). In Confucianism, the act of sacrificing foodstuffs or food symbolically creates harmony between yin and yang.

13 We cannot go here into the role of Confucian rituals at the family level, and only want to mention that Zhu Xi's abovementioned book is based on family rituals. See Ebrey (1991: 102ff).

14 The rituals performed in *sŏwŏn* in the Andong area are carefully documented in the Andong Folklore Museum (2009).

who were responsible for certain tasks within the *sŏwŏn*. Only then was one allowed to participate actively in ritual ceremonies. Clearly the social standing and prestige of a person was raised by such an admission to the inner circle of the *sŏwŏn*. It was also an incentive for the scholar-officials to study Confucian teachings meticulously (Chŏng 1980: 144; Chang 2002: 3).

This "selection process" (*ch'wisa*) took place every three years. The number could vary, however normally between 15 and 20 persons were approved. The successful scholars then had to assume responsibility for the preparation of a complete ceremony. To avoid mistakes being made in the complex and highly formalized procedures, they could count on the help of "experienced scholars" (*sŭmrye*) (Andong Minsok Pangmulgwan 2009: 36).[15]

The largest ritual ceremonies of the *sŏwŏn* took place, as outlined, in spring and autumn. Each month, on the first day of the lunar calendar and on the day of the full moon, a "simplified ceremony" (*punhyangrye*/*hyangsarye*) was conducted. There were ceremonies on other occasions too. All these ceremonies were organized according to the same principles as the *sŏkchŏnje* at the public schools. In this way the ritual ceremonies at the center of Chosŏn rule permeated the whole country, and thus were practiced even in remote villages.

The *punhyangrye* was conducted at the opening of a lecture session on Neo-Confucian works (*kanghoe*). In this ceremony there were no food offerings; only incense was used. At the end of this simplified ceremony the *kanghoe* participants recited passages from books on Confucian ethics and rites in a loud voice. Only then would the actual lecture session begin. Different *sŏwŏn* may have used different texts for this recitation, yet the books normally used, like *Xiaoxue*, dealt with ethical and moral rules for the community and its members. The intention behind the joint recitation of these texts was the internalization of Confucian teachings on morals and ethics (Kim 2001: 35ff).

The ceremonies at the *sŏwŏn*, as in the case of the *sŏkchŏnje* at the *hyanggyo* too, were important social events. However, they played a more important role, as mentioned earlier, in the indoctrination of the populace as well (Chang 2002: 6). The ceremonies varied to some extent from *sŏwŏn* to *sŏwŏn*, but were in line with the principles of the *sŏkchŏnje*. For example, Tosan sŏwŏn did not conduct a *chŏnp'yerye*, a type of opening ceremony, while other *sŏwŏn* did (Andong Minsok Pangmulgwan 2009).

The precise procedures that had to be followed during all those ceremonies were laid down in great detail in books called *hŭlgi* that were preserved with great care by each *sŏwŏn* (Andong Minsok Pangmulgwan 2009: 62).The members of the *sŏwŏn* were under the obligation to precisely follow the rules and procedures and to internalize all the relevant knowledge about these rituals, and Neo-Confucian

15 At the Tosan academy, this exercise (called *sŭmrye*) is still performed on the eve of other ceremonies.

thought. Because the *sŏwŏn* were so much part of local rural society, these Confucian sacrificial rituals became an integral part of village life (Yun 2004: 315).

Rather than dealing with metaphysical questions like life and death, these ancestral ceremonies would make a statement about the social system and the social relationship between participants. The Confucian scholars of the time did not attach much significance to the actual meaning of death. Rituals performed for their own kin and for Confucian sages or honorable scholars of their community did not differ much. The procedural aspects of these events were much more significant, as were other issues like: "Who was the master of ceremony in the ritual?"; "What kind of mourning garment should be worn?"; "What kind of food offerings should be prepared?" In this sense we should think of the rituals as significant, not as a *signifié*. This is why there was so much emphasis put on the procedural aspects. Generally speaking, rites in Chosŏn society did not signify death; instead they put the focus on the social procedures regarding death and the appropriateness of the ritual. Therefore, sacrificial rituals dealt with the social contract of the living rather than with the dead (Chŏng 1998: 47ff).

Such a view helps one to understand the fact that fierce disputes occurred on deciding, for example, the rank of the mourned person or the correctness of the rituals and rites (Yun 2004: 329ff). Controversies concerning rank were intense social disputes about whose ancestral tablet should be placed in a higher position. The actual dispute was framed as one of ethics and morality, but the essence of it was who should be bestowed the higher-ranking position. The enshrined ancestral tablets were a symbolic representation of *li*, whereas in reality tablets stood for a social contract framed as a cultural symbol.

When examining the rituals of the *munmyo* from a modern-day perspective, we often find that there had been too many tedious, seemingly unimportant, and unproductive arguments over procedures. Those olden times were characterized by exasperating discussions over whether to use a cow, a lamb, or a pig as offering. The whole scholar-official class was in conflict with one another about whether the king should make his visit to the *sŏnggyungwan* in the red court dress or with the official crown and in the royal robe, which were rather usually worn for ancestral rituals. Another prolonged dispute was over what material should be used to make ancestral tablets. It is not possible to understand the ferocity of such disputes purely in terms of the religious aspects brought forward. Rather, they need to be understood as conflicts over social signifiers within the realm of the social or political contracts of the time (Chŏng 1998: 47).

Then, what social meaning is attached to the *munmyo*, the mid-level state shrine? The essential function of a state shrine is of course political, namely the veneration of the spiritual parent of the state through sacrificial rituals organized by the latter — the enhancement of its legitimacy coming therewith. One of the first measures taken by the founder of the Chosŏn dynasty was to put an end to the aristocratic remnants of feudal society from the preceding Koryŏ dynasty. To this end the

government promoted and implemented a new interpretation of the rituals conducted at the *munmyo*. Through this scheme the government gained exclusive control over the educational institutions. Aside from the elimination of the last vestiges of feudalism, the new king had another motive too: the reorganization of the *munmyo* within the *sŏnggyungwan* was intended to make absolute and consecrate the new Neo-Confucianism state ideology. The sacrificial rituals at the *munmyo* had to validate the moral legitimacy of state power, and indeed of all those who were faithful to the genealogy of Confucian orthodoxy.

The result was a new form of autocratic rule, one that was not accepted enthusiastically by local scholars and the literati — who, furthermore, grew in number over time. As they dared not enter into open conflict, how could they express their dissatisfaction? They did so by calling into doubt the scholarly legitimacy of some of the Confucian sages enshrined in the *munmyo*. Were these scholars truly qualified for enshrinement therein? Voicing this point of disagreement was useful at their home bases too, as they preferred to enshrine different sages in their own *sŏwŏn*. In fact, at the level of the *sŏwŏn* quite a variety of social groups participated in the interpretation and management of the low-level sacrificial rituals, thus creating a certain degree of differentiation within a centralized state, with its unitary, all-pervading ideology.

In sum, one can say that Chosŏn society established a new state order based on Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism. It reconstructed and reoriented the *munmyo* rituals, and made — in order to stress the genealogy of Confucian orthodoxy — the reverence of Confucius the cornerstone of the new regime. Some members of the newly created scholar-official class outside the capital, whose aim was to enhance their own power bases, put forward certain (minor) criticisms of the sacrificial rituals practices at the center and posited which local sages/scholars should be venerated in the newly created *sŏwŏn*.

Conclusion

Confucian scholars are those who, through studying, recover the nature of the mind, restore the true self, and aspire to finally reach the level of sagehood. Ritual space symbolizes these aspirations. Based on the teachings of Zhu Xi, Chosŏn scholars were able to construct a political and social order and culture around the symbolic space of the *sŏwŏn* through a tradition of iterative ritual performances. The latter designated to each member of society their proper social role and social grammar. The function of the *sŏwŏn* rituals was that of a social signifier within the construction of the social contract peculiar to Chosŏn society.

The spread of the *sŏwŏn*, which began in the sixteenth century in areas outside the capital, produced a "Confucianization" of the traditional rituals and thence indoctrination with Confucian morals at the local level. This kind of transformation of society had been the aim of the Chosŏn rulers right from their dynasty's founding in 1392. Paradoxically the driving force behind this was not the center but rather

local scholars who wanted to enhance their social and political dominance and privileges through the creation of symbolic ritual spaces under their own control, including the invention of a tradition of local sages/scholars to be enshrined and revered at the *sŏwŏn*. The sacrificial rituals were, in terms of performativity, an intermediate phenomenon located between the *sŏkchŏnje* at the state shrines and the private *karye* at the family level.

Just as in the case of the ceremonies of the *munmyo* and the *hyanggyo*, the real aim of the *sŏwŏn* ceremonies was the indoctrination of the populace with Neo-Confucian thought so as to renew and strengthen the legitimacy of the political and social order. To bolster the acceptance of this order, the ritual ceremonies were organized as large and, in their elaborateness, memorable events for local villagers. To stress the extraordinary nature of these events, not only the local scholarly elite but also the governor and representatives of neighboring villages honored them by their presence.

To be selected for the preparation and conduction of these ceremonies, in particular for the task of master of ceremony, was a matter of great honor, and one reason why the local scholar-officials would to the best of their ability lead an exemplary and meritorious life. Such incentives too increased the acceptance of the hierarchical order of Confucian society under Chosŏn rule — and helped to make local scholar-officials loyal followers of the teachings of Zhu Xi and of the Chosŏn regime. At the same time, they were a kind of observable role model for the villagers — in particular in their perfect command of the ceremonial requirements and of Neo-Confucian teachings.

There is one final aspect that deserves attention. All the details to be observed in the sacrificial ceremonies — from the specificities of the sacrifices to the chosen wording — were laid down in the book of rituals. Despite these exact prescriptions, as has been described often in the literature, heated arguments on one or the other detail would often arise. One reason was that the exact meaning of the numerous details of the prescribed rites could not be explained at times through reference to the Confucian texts and their inner logic alone. There was always a possibility, in particular when circumstances changed, that ambiguities would arise — and thus spur scholarly disputes. A second reason is that the Chosŏn scholars were not free from personal ambitions, and consequently would at times in pursuance of their own career interests favor a certain interpretation of a text in order to leave either a positive impression on their examiners or demean their competitors.

Finally, the scholars often belonged to one or another competing political faction. Under such conditions a particular interpretation of a certain passage of a classical text could easily become a weapon against competing factions, and lead to much wider and deeper conflicts than one might expect in scholarly debates based on facts and reason. Thus, for example, the strict interpretation of Zhu Xi's writings and adherence to the ceremonial rules by certain scholars, or a certain group of scholars, could then be used to position themselves as the true representatives of Confucian

ideals and righteousness. Thereby they sought to validate their entitlement to certain positions of power in the central government or in the provinces.

Such cases abound in the history of Chosŏn society, and certainly contributed — together with the adaptability of and changes to its knowledge system — mightily to the perpetuation of this dynasty over 500 years. As one might note, this did not rely on military power at all. Eventually it collapsed under the impact of Western (and Japanese) imperialism and their military might. Unsurprisingly, Chosŏn society's Neo-Confucianism had no answer to such challenges.

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