

Confucian Academies in Korea: Past and Present

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In 2016 the Permanent Delegation of the Republic of Korea to the UNESCO nominated nine Korean Confucian academies for the World Heritage List.¹ The application is called “Seowon, Confucian Academies of Korea,”² sending the important message both to domestic circles supporting the Confucian legacy of the academies and to the international audience. Korean experts were well aware of other UNESCO projects focused on Confucian academies in China and Vietnam³ and to certain degree also in the DPRK.⁴ The bid by the Republic of Korea was supposed to become the first project focusing solely on Confucian academies and to stress uniqueness of the Korean version of this Confucian institution. The competitive tone of the application highlights the special features of Korean academies in comparison to their Chinese counterparts. Such an approach was quite logical in light of the fact, that Confucian academies (as the application also acknowledges) were of Chinese origin and essentially followed the model set up during the Song (960–1125) dynasty. The stakes, above all the question who can better claim the heritage of Confucian academies in East Asia, are not small; academies were, and still are taken and understood as the symbol of adherence to Confucian teaching, which in last decades gained bigger and bigger prominence in the debates about East Asian civic values and human rights.

This study focuses only one point out of several arguments laid down by Korean scholars arguing for the uniqueness of Korean academies, the presence of the shrines within Korean academies. The UNESCO application presented this question in the simple statement arguing: “Compared to Chinese academies that focus on lecture and study, Korean seowon puts their priority on social education and memorial rites for sages.”⁵ This analysis will help us better

¹ Sosu Academy 紹修書院 in Yŏngju, Namgye Academy 藍溪書院 in Hamyang, Oksan Academy 玉山書院 in Kyŏngju, Dosan Academy 陶山書院 in Andong, P'iram Academy 筆巖書院 in Changsŏng, Dodong Academy 道東書院 in Talsŏng, Pyŏngsan Academy 屏山書院 in Andong, Tonam Academy 道南書院 in Nonsan and Musŏng Academy 武城書院 in Chŏngŭp. The original term for academies, *shuyuan/sŏwŏn* 書院 was for the first time rendered as “academy” for the first time by Matteo Ricci (1552–1610). For the discussion on Ricci’s translation of the term see Meskill, John, *Academies in Ming China: A Historical Essay* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1982), X-XII.

² See <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5648/>.

³ In 2010 Chinese Songyang Academy 嵩陽書院 achieved global recognition as part of the “Historical Monuments of Mount Song” UNESCO World Heritage Site, in 2016, UNESCO designated 379 woodblocks of the Phúc Giang Academy as “Memory of the World Asia - Pacific Regional Register”

⁴ Sungyang Academy 崧陽書院 in Kaesŏng is a part of the UNESCO site “Historic Monuments and Sites in Kaesong” registered in 2013. The same phenomena (protection of the particular academy within a broader project) is present also in the Republic of Korea, where was Oksan Academy registered in 2010 within the UNESCO World Heritage project “Historic Villages of Korea : Hahoe and Yangdong” (as a part of the historical Yangdong Village).

⁵ Ibid.

understand motivations behind both the Korean academies movement during Chosŏn times and the current interest in their legacy.

Korean Academies: Few or Many?

Confucian academies have played the prominent role within the Korean society for almost five hundred years and are likely to continue to do it in the future. In current debates on the Confucian heritage in East Asia, Korean academies play a crucial part in the argument whether Korean society adhered more to Confucian values than the Chinese (or vice versa). While the Chinese side stresses the Chinese origin of the institution, present in the all countries of East Asia, Korean scholars often argue that it was in Korea, where the academy movement reached its peak and academies played historically the most prominent role. Since the academies are taken as the foremost and the most visible Confucian institution, they are often taken as a quantitative measure in the dispute about the adherence to the Confucian values. A prime example of such an approach can be found in the thesis of Alexander Woodside, who argues that “By the 1700s Choson Korea, with a population of perhaps seven to eight million people, had more than six hundred such academies; Qing dynasty China, with a population perhaps thirty times the size of Korea’s in the eighteenth century, had little more than three times the number of Korea’s academies (about nineteen hundred). Vietnam, with a probable population of four to five million people at the end of the 1700s, had no real tradition of academies at all.” This, in his opinion, resulted in “Korea’s superiority to China, let alone Vietnam, in the density of its academies and may help to explain why polls taken even now, by east Asians themselves, show a greater predisposition to Confucian principles in Korea than in China.”⁶ The basic problem of such comparisons is the simple question whether Chinese and Korean academies are actually comparable units. The above mentioned UNESCO application arguments suggest that they rather differed in their basic purpose, and we may insert much more other variables into the comparison (number of students etc.). Yet the question behind such an anachronistic argumentation is still valid: Why did have Korea bigger number of academies per capita than in China? The simple answer lies in the fact mentioned in the UNESCO application: Korean academies were much more often established as shrines to venerate local Confucian worthies than as large scale educational institutions like in the Chinese case.

Statistical approaches often battle with the distinction what were Confucian academies, *sŏwŏn* and what were Confucian shrines, *sau* 祠宇, yet in the historical sources both categories were mixed. Yun Hŭimyŏn, for the whole Chosŏn period, indicates 680 Confucian academies and 1041 shrines of Confucian scholars or other heroes,⁷ but such distinction was rarely taken into consideration. A brief look at the 47 institutions, which were decided to survive great abolishment of academies during Taewŏngun 大院君 (1864–1873) rule shows that although the whole list has been referred as selection of academies, eighteen institutions were called actually *sa* 祠, shrine, one was called *myo* 廟,⁸ a different expression for shrine,

⁶ Woodside, Alexander, *Lost Modernities. China, Vietnam, Korea, and the Hazards of World History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press (2006) 22-23.

⁷ Yun Hŭimyŏn, *Chosŏn siade sŏwŏngwa yangban* (Seoul: Chimmudang, 2004), 84. For the general overview of Korean academies see Sŏwŏn yŏnhap hoe, *Hanguk sŏwŏn ch’ongnam* I-II. (Overview of Korean Confucian Academies) (2011). Academies located in the DPRK are treated in the study Glomb Vladimir, Lee Eun-Jeung, Dens of Feudalism: North Korean Discourse on Confucian Academies in: *Journal of Korean Religions* 8, no. 2, (2017) 147-180.

⁸ Ch’ŏngsŏngmyo 淸聖廟 in Haeju, but even this shrine was often called Ch’ŏngsŏngsa.

and the rest were called sŏwŏn, academy. Both types of institutions could interchangeably fulfill the two goals of academies, ritual function and educational purpose. There were academies, which limited their function almost solely on rituals and sacrifices and there were shrines actively supporting teaching activities. The situation became even more complicated with the rise of so-called family lineage academies (munjung sŏwŏn 門中書院) during the 17th and 18th century. The rituals of these academies were “confined within only one or more lineage groups” and their basic purpose was defined as venerating an important person belonging to the particular family lineage. This resulted in a phenomena were “those who should be honoured at the village shrines or family shrines were enshrined in the academies instead.”⁹ In other words, local families established and used academies in order to enhance their prestige and use privileges granted by the state to academies (tax exemptions, exemption from the military service etc.) for their own profit. Lineage academies were typically operated by one family, which enshrined their own ancestor in the academy shrine for more or less credible exploits usually within the field of Confucian virtues. Directors and official were usually recruited only within the family, or family branches and the academy served predominantly to accommodate needs of the lineage to highlight its social status. Early period Korean academies were founded with the consensus of the whole local community and were operated in the collective way. With the rise of lineage academies particular families often pulled out from the local academy (often with valuable assets) and established their own, more private, academy. This had, on one hand profound impact on the intellectual efficiency of such academies, which rapidly declined due to institutionalized nepotism because academy master were no more selected on the basis of their knowledge but rather according to their family position. On the other hand, the lineage academies phenomena caused, especially since 18th century, enormous increase of the academy numbers. The lineage academies phenomena is a clue not only to the operation of academies during Chosŏn times (and their disproportionally large numbers compare to Qing China) but also their modern destinies. Overwhelming majority of academies, which were renewed after the great purge during the Taewŏngun rule or were even newly founded in the 20th century during the Japanese occupation and later in the Republic of Korea were lineage academies, which tended to serve to interest of particular families and not to the universal community of Confucian scholars. This raises the question, to which degree we may speak in the case of Korean academies about the Confucian values and how much they were distinctively shaped by the peculiar Korea family system and the needs of the local society. The case study focusing on the early stage of Confucian academies in Korea and views of the famous scholars Yulgok Yi I 栗谷李珣 (1536–1584) shows that the tension between local elites and Confucian scholars has been present in debates on the purpose of the academies since the very beginning of their existence.

Shrines and Yulgok

Yulgok’s activities connected to the Munhŏn Academy form an important testimony for a discussion concerning the ritual significance of local academies vis-a-vis literati communities. The ritual role of academies had been deemed crucial ever since the founding of the first such institutions in Korea. Chu Sebung, in connection with the Paegundong Academy, emphasised:

⁹ Ryu Je-Hun, “The Evolution of a Confucian Landscape in the Andong Cultural Region of Korea: Universalism or Particularism?” *Acta Koreana* 10, no.1 (2007), 85.

“Cultivation must begin with the veneration of worthy individuals. This is the reason for setting up shrines to honour such worthies. This is the reason to honour virtue, and for establishing academies to esteem learning.”¹⁰ Similarly T’oegye Yi Hwang 退溪 李滉 (1501–1570), in his proposal for chartering the same academy, stated that academies should be established in “places in which there are remains of the exploits of former worthy individuals.”¹¹ The selection of these worthy individuals for the academy shrine was a complicated process, as the demands of the local elites and Confucian literati ideals were often in conflict with each other. The two letters written in 1577 by Yulgok to Ch’oe Hwang 崔滉 (1529–1603) show the delicate nature of maintaining a balance between the requirement for a worthy individual to be enshrined and the need to keep up good connections with the local community. Village families often championed their own candidates—i.e., the more renowned members of their clans—for enshrinement, and they understood the act of building an academy shrine as a tool for enhancing their own elite status. Confucian literati, on the other hand, demanded that the enshrined person to be a scholar of significant moral credit and outstanding scholarship according to the requirements of the Learning of the Way. Probably the most renowned case of such a conflict—which entered into Korean folklore—is the story of the enshrinement of the Silla general Kim Yusin 金庾信 (595–673) in the Sōak Academy 西岳書院 in Kyōngju. When a Confucian scholar objected to the enshrinement in the academy of a military figure lacking scholarly accomplishment, the infuriated ghost of the Silla general approached the startled Confucian and reproached him for his misbehaviour.¹²

The conflicts between local elites and zealous young Confucian students were present as well in the Haeju academy. Many literati were not satisfied with the enshrinement of Ch’oe Ch’ung, who was an important local personality but—being a scholar of the Koryō era—his commitment to the Learning of the Way and scholarship were in doubt.¹³ According to Yulgok’s statement “all literati believe that Munhōn’s teaching concerned only state examinations, and moreover, that he composed stela texts for Buddhist monasteries.” The consequence of this attitude was that the students of the academy often did not participate in offerings for such a figure and that some of them, when before the shrine, “do not [even] bow, but only raise their clasped hands.”¹⁴ The conscientious Confucian students did not consider Ch’oe Ch’ung to be worthy of their respect, but at the same time, the removal of an important local personality from an academy shrine could lead to potential conflict with the village community who could always be counted on to come to the defense of their ancestors. Yulgok himself was a distant relative of the Ch’oe family and stressed this fact as a sign of his impartiality when attempting to reconcile both parties. His resolution to this conflict was to move Ch’oe Ch’ung to an adjacent shrine and reserve the main position in the shrine for Confucius: this would honour both the Sage and Ch’oe Ch’ung, who would be enshrined as a local worthy individual (*hyanghyōn* 鄉賢).

¹⁰ *Myōngjong sillok* 1554/07/02, for the translation see Hejtmanek, Milan, “The Elusive Path to Sagehood: Origins of the Confucian Academy System in Chosōn Korea.” *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 26, no. 2 (2013), 252.

¹¹ *T’oegye chōnsō* 退溪全書 (further abbreviated as *TGCS*) 9:7b, for the translation see Hejtmanek, Milan, “The Elusive Path to Sagehood: Origins of the Confucian Academy System in Chosōn Korea.” *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 26, no. 2 (2013), 260

¹² See various editions of *Tonggyōng chapki* 東京雜記 or *Ch’ōnyerok* 天倪錄.

¹³ For a general information of the development of Ch’oe Ch’ung’s cult see Yi Sōngho, Ch’oe Ch’unge taehan yōktae insik pyōnhwawa Munmyo chonsa onūiūi ihae,” *Yōksawa kyōnggye* 3 (2012), 95–135.

¹⁴ *Yulgok chōnsō* 栗谷全書 (further abbreviated as *YGCS*) 12:14a.

This solution finally prevailed and is reflected in the regulations of the academy which speaks of two shrines, which peacefully co-existed. Witness to discussions surrounding the topic is borne out by Yulgok's second letter in which he offers an overview of the whole issue in significant details. In the time period between the writing of the two letters, the conflict had escalated and Yulgok was obliged to employ both threats and arguments now to bring the two sides to reconciliation. The academy students were reluctant to venerate Ch'oe Ch'ung as the main patron of the academy, and Ch'oe Ch'ung's family and their local allies were horrified by the possible demotion or removal of their ancestor from the shrine. The most extreme solution would be the establishment of two separate academies, one venerating Confucius and one Ch'oe Ch'ung, but this could create, according to Yulgok, even more animosities and jealousy. Yulgok further argued that two separate academies for one single community would not at all be economically feasible, and he threatened both parties that under such circumstances he would cease all involvement with the academy. Yulgok continued to maintain that a solution of compromise — namely, to devote the main location in the shrine to Confucius and to move Ch'oe Ch'ung to an adjacent location — by no means offended anybody, since the highest respect belonged to Confucius, and in “there is no shame at all in sacrificing to Munhön as to a local worthy.”¹⁵

Yulgok's argumentation was not based solely on his personal views, but relied heavily on precedents from previous traditions, both Chinese and Korean, as to the necessary qualifications for a person to be enshrined in an academy. Local elites or families of scholars often pushed for the enshrinement of their candidate, but Yulgok warned that matters of such importance “must be entrusted to public debate and not disputed according to the selfish emotions of the ancestors' descendants.” The enshrinement of important local figures could attract the economic support of local families to new academy, but the venerated individual needed to have the sufficient moral prestige and record of scholarship in order to gain the respect of the Confucian literati. The Korean literati preaching the radical interpretation of the Learning of the Way generally had little respect for scholars or officials outside of *sarim* circles and tradition: in their eyes, the main qualifications which called for enshrinement were flawless scholarship and an utmost devotion to Confucian ideals. Prominent local personalities were often officials from the Koryŏ or early Chosŏn eras who were interested in securing an elite status for their families; hence, Yulgok and other *sarim* literati did not consider them as part of their own tradition. For Yulgok, genuine Confucianism, i.e. the Learning of Principle (*ihak* 理學) began in Korea only with Cho Kwangjo 趙光祖 (1482-1519), and he had a rather skeptical view concerning the credentials of older generation scholars. In his treatise composed for King Sŏnjo, Yulgok even flatly denied the existence of authentic Confucianism in Korea during previous times, stating: “At the end of the Koryŏ period, Chŏng Mongju had the slight spirit and appearance of a Confucian scholar, but he was not able to accomplish his learning, and if we trace his deeds, he was nothing more than a loyal subject.”¹⁶ The dilemma Yulgok faced was not the first case of tension between local elites and Confucian literati, and he made the remark that “There are indeed many unsuitable people who are enshrined in academies.”¹⁷

The solution Yulgok proposed in the case of Ch'oe Ch'ung was based on the subtle difference between enshrinement as a local worthy individual in an adjacent shrine, or as the

¹⁵ YGCS 12:16a.

¹⁶ YGCS 19:9a.

¹⁷ YGCS 12:16b.

main shrine figure (*chǒngwi* 正位). This strategy was derived from the earlier case of a similar problem with which Yulgok was quite familiar, and he quoted it as a precedent. In order to persuade Ch'oe Hwang to agree with the proposed adjustment of the academy shrine, he introduced the example of his own father-in-law, who had discussed in 1560 with T'oegyē a similar problem about the enshrinement of Yi Chonyōn 李兆年 (1269–1343) in the Sōngju Yōngbong Academy 迎鳳書院 Academy.¹⁸ Several scholars have noted that Yi Chonyōn's portrait bears features of Buddhist iconography, leading to the supposition that he was an adherent of Buddhism. T'oegyē defended Yi Chonyōn and considered his enshrinement as legitimate,¹⁹ but as a compromise solution, removed him to an adjacent position so that “To Yi Chonyōn were offered sacrifices as to local worthy, and the brothers Cheng and Master Zhu were installed in the central position of the shrine.” T'oegyē was even more sceptical of the qualities of Koryō-era scholars than Yulgok, but both thinkers understood very well that the support of local elites was crucial for the success of the academy and were willing to somewhat relax their strict standards. Local figures could therefore be enshrined in academies, but the central place in the shrine was reserved for a venerable scholar or sage of undisputed scholarly renown, such as Zhu Xi, the brothers Cheng or Confucius, by himself or together with the Song masters as was the case in the Munhōn Academy.

Yulgok's opinion concerning local worthies is best illustrated by his own choice, when he had the opportunity to decide such a question on his own. In the course of the year 1578, he started to plan a shrine dedicated to Zhu Xi as a part of the Ŭnbyōng Study Hall. It was completed only after his death, but the dedication of a shrine to Zhu Xi in the study hall that Yulgok himself planned and built shows that it was intended to serve Confucian ideals alone and that he felt no particular need or desire to find any strategy accommodating local powerful families via the enshrinement of their prominent illustrious ancestors. Both Yulgok and T'oegyē²⁰ exhibited strong scepticism concerning local figures who were selected for enshrinement in academy shrines, yet they accepted this custom as a practical method of securing the support of the local elites for the academies.

Conclusion

Changing patterns of Korean academies are the important argument in the ongoing debate of the role of Confucian values in the Korean society. The form of Korean academies was since the very beginning heavily influenced by the demands of local elites and as we have seen in the case of Yulgok and related academies. Confucian scholars had rather limited means to prevent academies privatisation vis-à-vis local yangban lineages. Uneven balance between Confucian scholars and local elites finally resulted in the state were “the *sōwōn* in Korea, modeled after the *shuyuan* in Southern Song China, gradually transformed from being

¹⁸ There was probably close exchange between T'oegyē and Yulgok on both cases of Sōngju Academy and Munhōn Academy. Note that in the same way Yulgok knew the first precedent, T'oegyē was well informed about the process of enshrinement in Haeju and observed it with a full approval, see Hejtmanek, Milan, “The Elusive Path to Sagehood: Origins of the Confucian Academy System in Chosōn Korea.” *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 26, no. 2 (2013), 267.

¹⁹ *TGCS* 21:35b.

²⁰ For later critique of enshrinement abuses see Ch'oe Yōng-ho. “The Private Academies (Sōwōn) and Neo-Confucianism in Late Chosōn Korea.” T'oegyē even privately argued that shrines do not have to be part of academies as in the Chinese case, see Chōng Manjo, *Chosōn sidae sōwōn yōn'gu*, 67–68.

an educational place into a local base for social and political power.”²¹ This could serve as the further argument to the thesis of Martina Deuchler arguing that traditional Korean elites favoured “the primacy of socially manipulated and legitimised pattern of hierarchy and dominance”²² over the political structures of the Korean state, and we may also add that the institutional patterns of Confucian teaching. Appropriating of Confucian institutions for the private use was to certain degree also present in the China, where mighty families often strived via founding and sponsoring of academies to “expand the range of their cultural authority in local society and transform themselves into lineages with cultural prestige”²³ but this phenomenon never reached the level common in both pre-modern and modern Korea. Seen in the light of above facts, we may hope that ongoing research on the nature of Korean academies will help us to answer the question, to which degree were values of Korean local elites truly Confucian and to which degree were motivated by their specific class interests.

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²¹ Ryu Je-Hun, “The Evolution of a Confucian Landscape in the Andong Cultural Region of Korea: Universalism or Particularism?” *Acta Koreana* 10, no.1 (2007): 70.

²² Deuchler, Martina, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes: Kinship, Status, and Locality in Premodern Korea*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press (2015): 2.

²³ Lee Junghwan, Wang Yangming Thought as Cultural Capital: The Case of Yongkang County. *Late Imperial China* 28, no. 2 (2007), 43.