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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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