



Seokjeon in Transition: *Continuities, Transformations, and Institutional Influences on the Confucian Memorial Rite in Post-Liberation Korea*

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Abstract

The Seokjeon ceremony (Confucian Memorial Rite), a major Confucian ritual since the Joseon period, has long carried significant symbolic and socio-political weight. Its form changed considerably across Sungkyunkwan and local hyanggyo under modernization, colonial rule, and postwar political change. Under colonial rule, Confucianism was deliberately removed from the category of religion and its functions reduced to that of education, thus turning it into an instrument for promoting imperial ideology. Although Sungkyunkwan regained its formal status after liberation, disputes over officiating the Seokjeon ceremony became a key arena for competing Confucian factions. Even amid this turbulence, Confucian groups actively sought to preserve the ritual's religious character, most notably through prolonged debates over shifting its date between the lunar and solar calendars—an effort to reaffirm its spiritual legitimacy in the face of Christianity's growing influence. In recent decades, however, the ceremony has come increasingly to reflect broader East Asian trends that reframe Confucian rituals as cultural rather than religious practices. Achieving heritage designation in 1986, the Seokjeon ceremony today exemplifies the transformation of Confucianism from a lived moral-religious system into cultural tradition and national heritage.

Keywords: Seokjeon ceremony, Confucian Memorial Rite, modern Confucian practices in Korea, Sungkyunkwan, Confucian religiosity, modernization of Confucianism, cultural heritage

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Introduction

The introduction of Western concepts such as “religion” and “philosophy” to East Asia in the modern era prompted efforts to reclassify pre-existing traditions, including Confucianism. This shift transformed Confucianism from a comprehensive spiritual and philosophical tradition into a system of moral teachings. In 1915, the Japanese Government-General of Korea (hereafter GGK) categorized religions into recognized religions and pseudo-religions, explicitly excluding Confucianism from both. However, despite its official exclusion, debates persisted regarding the religionization of Confucianism and its religious characteristics. In fact, during the latter half of the Japanese occupation, Confucianism was often referred to as a religion. With the implementation of the “Ordinance on the Gyeonghagwon” (Keigakuin kitei) on June 15, 1911 (Chōsen Sōtokufu Rei No. 73) and the establishment of the Gyeonghagwon (Institute for the Study of the Classics), the Japanese colonial administration forcibly stripped the Sungkyunkwan (Royal Confucian Academy) of its role in training bureaucratic officials and conducting ceremonies in honor of Confucius, placing it under direct colonial control. The GGK did not recognize Confucianism as a religion, but by the end of the colonial period the Japanese authorities had also taken control of the Seokjeon ceremonies held at the Gyeonghagwon. Notably, members of the Japanese Confucian association Shibunkai visited Korea to attend these ceremonies. After Korea’s liberation, Confucianism was frequently classified as one of the five major religions, alongside Christianity, Catholicism, Cheondogyo, and Buddhism, and was incorporated into various religious activities.

Much research has been conducted on the transformation of Confucianism during the modern period, particularly during the colonial era.¹ Korean dance scholar Kim Younghee (2008) examined how the GGK transformed and utilized the Seokjeon ceremonies as a means to publicize its colonial policies and to co-opt traditional Confucian intellectuals. Chang

1. See, for example, M. Kim (2008); M. Yi (1993); Rhyu (2005; 2010a; 2010b); I. Jeong (2007); Y. Kim (2008); U. Jeong (2014); S. Jeong (2016); and Chang (2020).

Soonsoon (2020) has offered an in-depth examination of the Seokjeon ceremony (Seokjeonje 釋奠祭), illuminating both its original symbolic significance and the ways in which it was deliberately transformed and appropriated under the GGK's policies to regulate the Confucian community. Meanwhile, Jeong Se-hyeon (2016) has analyzed the interactions between two major Confucian institutions of modern Korea and Japan—Gyeonghagwon and Shibunkai—through the lens of Kōshisai (Gongjaje in Korean) Confucian rituals, with particular attention on the “2400th Memorial Ceremony for Confucius” held in 1922. Rhyu et al. (2024) examined the colonial legacy within the contemporary Korean Confucian tradition, arguing that practices deemed *traditional* in modern South Korea, such as ritual formats and wedding ceremonies, are in fact remnants of colonial modifications intended to promote imperial ideology.

Regarding the post-liberation period, Yi Hwangjik (2014a, 2014b, 2016a, 2016b) empirically reconstructed the processes of formation and fragmentation within Confucian organizations, thereby demonstrating the dynamism of the Confucian community after Korea's liberation. In addition, two further studies focus specifically on internal conflicts within the Confucian community. Kim In-gyu's 2018 article, “The Division of the Confucian Community and the Foundation of the Incorporated Association Yudohoe after Liberation,” provides an in-depth analysis of the divisions within the Korean Confucian community (*yurim*) from the post-liberation era to the present, as well as the background and activities of the incorporated association Yudohoe that arose from these divisions. Similarly, Choi Young-sung, in his 2018 article “The Contemporary Confucian Community: A History of Division,” characterizes the history of modern Confucianism as one of persistent division, critically contending that these ruptures stemmed less from scholarly or ideological differences than from struggles over leadership and competing interests—consequences of which continue to shape the Confucian community today.

Although these studies are invaluable for tracing the trajectory of Confucianism from the colonial period through the post-liberation era and into the present, they devote comparatively little attention to the Seokjeon ceremony. While Jin (2011) provides a detailed account of the history and

contemporary status of the Seokjeon ceremony, a significant gap remains in the transformations of the ceremony from the colonial period through the post-liberation era. Recent scholarship on the Seokjeon ceremony has tended to focus on Munmyo jerye 文廟祭禮, with particular emphasis on ritual aspects such as music and dance. Archival records, however, indicate that the Seokjeon ceremony continued even in the immediate aftermath of liberation; notably, on March 4, 1946, Major General Archibald V. Arnold attended the ritual. The Seokjeon ceremony continued to be held annually, though its scale fluctuated over time, with periods of decline and revival. In 1986, Sungkyunkwan's Seokjeon ceremony was officially designated an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage. Much, however, remains to be understood about the changes the ceremony underwent in the decades between liberation and its contemporary form.

This study seeks to address the existing gap in research by examining the principal actors and institutions involved in the performance of the Seokjeon as well as the continuities and transformations of the ceremony, from Korea's liberation in 1945 to its designation as an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage in 1986. In so doing, it also situates the Korean case within a broader East Asian context, comparing it with developments in China, Japan, and Taiwan to highlight regional similarities and divergences in the reinterpretation of Confucian rituals. Given the scarcity of primary sources on the post-liberation Confucian community, this study primarily draws on newspaper articles and previous research as its main corpus of data, tracing and contextualizing the evolving trajectory of the Seokjeon ceremony during this period.

The Turmoil of the Seokjeon Ceremony in Colonial Korea

By the late 19th century, during Korea's Enlightenment period, the Joseon government's reform policies faced resistance from traditional Confucian scholars. In response, Emperor Gojong issued the Jonseongyuneum (Instruction to Revere Sages) in 1899, declaring: "Is not the Way of our

Master Confucius the religion of our state?” (Keum 2000, 265).² This proclamation reaffirmed Confucianism as Korea’s state religion and received strong support from the Confucian scholarly community. Moreover, certain reformists went beyond simply endorsing Confucianism as a religion; they actively promoted organized religious activities to disseminate its teachings among the populace. Representative examples include Park Eun-sik’s Daedonggyo (Teaching of Great Unity), the Korean Confucian Church of Dongsan Province—a Manchurian branch of the Beijing Confucian Church founded by Yi Seong-hui—and the Paesan School established by Yi Byeong-heon, an advocate of Kang Youwei’s Confucian reform (Keum 1989, 5–6).

As Kim Seonhee argues, the strategies of these three figures were far from uniform, and the differences between them illuminate deeper epistemological tensions at work. Their divergences reveal that the question “Is Confucianism a religion?” was not simply a definitional puzzle but an epistemological event: the arrival in East Asia of the Western category of *jonggyo* introduced a hierarchically loaded framework modeled on Christianity, one that implicitly subordinated Confucianism to a foreign standard it had never been designed to meet (S. Kim 2025). Korean Confucian scholars such as Park Eun-sik, Yi Seung-hui, and Yi Byeong-heon actively appropriated the category of religion as a civilizational strategy, yet in doing so inadvertently subjected Confucianism to the very epistemological hierarchy they sought to resist (S. Kim 2025, 127). In this context, many Confucian scholars and organizations strove to engage with the wider modernization movement, aiming to reshape Confucianism into a modern religion.

Although considerable efforts were made to present Confucianism as a religion, it was officially excluded from the category of religion under the GKG’s “Regulations on Religious Proselytizing” of 1915. This ordinance recognized only Shintoism, Buddhism, and Christianity as legitimate religions, thereby denying Confucianism such status. As a result, Confucianism gradually shifted in public perception—from a profound

2. The quote originally derives from the *Seungjeongwon ilgi*, Gojong year 36 (1899), month 3, day 18 (*eulchuk*).

spiritual and philosophical tradition to being regarded primarily as a system of moral principles and philosophical teachings applied to everyday life. Despite persistent attempts by Korean Confucianists to affirm their religious identity and to establish *hyanggyo* as religious institutions, the GGK continually rejected such claims, designating *hyanggyo* solely as educational organizations (T. Kim 2011).

Korean Confucianists also established the Gyeonghagwon (Institute for the Study of the Classics) within the Sungkyunkwan (Royal Confucian Academy) under the “Ordinance on Gyeonghagwon” (Keigakuin kitei, June 15, 1911, Chōsen Sōtokufu Rei No. 73). This effectively stripped the institution of its traditional educational role in training bureaucratic figures and overseeing the Seokjeon ceremonies, placing it instead under the direct control of the GGK. The GGK employed Confucianism as a policymaking instrument to facilitate its colonial rule, with the Gyeonghagwon serving as the focal point of this strategy. As an initial measure, Japan simplified the traditional Confucian ceremonies and made the Gyeonghagwon accessible to the public (Rhyu et al. 2024, 5).

Confucianism was revised and refined into a political ideology that was compatible with the imperial system and was ultimately fused into the *Japanese spirit* and the broader ideology of Kōdōism. As the Second Sino-Japanese War escalated, Confucianism was reframed within the context of Kōdō judō, a movement aimed at integrating Confucian teachings into the imperial ideology, thereby positioning Japan as the moral and spiritual leader of East Asia.³ In Korea, the discourse of Kōdō judō began to be actively discussed and promoted in the late 1930s. The concept of Kōdō judō represented an effort to imbue Confucianism with a Japanese spirit. The Myeongnyun (Meirin in Japanese) school was established under the Gyeonghagwon in 1930 and was subsequently elevated to Myeongnyun College in 1939. Following the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Seokjeon ceremony at the Gyeonghagwon began to be integrated into a range of events, including lecture meetings, with the aim of legitimizing

3. For a comprehensive examination of the discourse of Kōdō judō in colonial Korea, see Kang (2012; 2019).

colonial rule and advancing its propaganda (Rhyu 2010b; Chang 2020). Japanese professors such as Takahashi Tōru and Fujitsuka Chikashi from Keijō Imperial University, as well as members of Japan's Shibunkai, also delivered lectures at Gyeonghagwon and Myeongnyun College, further illustrating how the Japanese Confucian establishment actively mobilized Confucianism to serve its colonial ideological agendas (Fromell 2025).

The transformation of the Seokjeon ceremony during the Japanese colonial period unfolded as an act that simultaneously demonstrated the GGK's emphasis on Confucianism for the sake of *smooth* colonial governance, while deliberately excluding the Confucian traditions that had persisted throughout the Joseon dynasty, thereby underscoring the immediacy and authority of its own colonial rule (Chang 2020, 71–72). Rhyu et al. analyzed the transformation of the Seokjeon ceremony during the colonial period, highlighting several key changes implemented by the Japanese colonial authorities: The GGK assumed the ceremonial roles traditionally held by the kings of the Joseon dynasty, with the GGK occupying the throne that had once been reserved for the monarchs during the Seokjeon ceremony; the dates of the ceremonies were standardized to April 15 for the spring rites and October 15 for the autumn rites, reflecting the colonial government's intention to align these events with broader modernization policies and administrative objectives; furthermore, the ceremony time was moved from nighttime to 10 a.m. or 1 p.m., a shift that facilitated the more effective assembly and mobilization of influential local leaders under colonial supervision (Rhyu et al. 2024, 6–7).

These transformations were never merely procedural—they collectively recast the Seokjeon ceremony from a sacred Confucian rite into an instrument of colonial governance, while the epistemological divergence over Confucianism's religious status, compounded by the Christian institutional norms embedded in the colonial framework, left the meaning and religious character of the Seokjeon ceremony unresolved—a tension that the Confucian community would seek to address in the years following liberation.

Rebuilding Authority in a New Nation: The Confucian Community and the Seokjeon Ceremony after 1945

After liberation, the US Military explicitly guaranteed religious freedom in Korea through legislation. Article 3 of “Ordinances of the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK)” No. 6, promulgated on September 29, 1945, stipulated “Korean schools shall be without discrimination based on race or religion.” In November 1945, USAMGIK ordered the provincial governors south of the 38th parallel to burn the Shinto shrines and confiscate and store their properties (*Jayu Sinmun* 1945). These measures can be seen as efforts to restore the human rights and religious freedoms suppressed under Japanese colonial rule, while simultaneously reflecting USAMGIK’s differentiated and strategic implementation of its broader Korea policy. USAMGIK intended to prevent religious groups from leaning towards left-wing ideologies or specific groups from growing excessively large in external influence (Huh 2004, 297). When the Constitution of the Republic of Korea was enacted in 1948, a majority of the members of the National Assembly were Christian; citing both Japan’s control of religious bodies and the Soviet Union’s promotion of anti-religion policies, they sought to guarantee religious freedom, arguing that religion contributed positively to national development (Bang and Yang 2019, 118).

The GGK had consistently placed the Gyeonghagwon and the local *hyanggyo* (Confucian academies) under the jurisdiction of the Department of Education, thereby ensuring their continuous oversight and control as institutions deemed significant for colonial governance. However, after liberation, the establishment of the Gyeonghagwon, which had diminished the functions of the Sungkyunkwan, along with the creation of Myeongnyun College, was effectively reversed by Article 2 of USAMGIK Ordinance No. 15, which restored the institution’s original status by stipulating that “The name Confucian Shrine (Gongjamyo) and Gyeonghagwon shall hereby be changed to Sungkyunkwan.” The inclusion of the renaming of Keijō Imperial University to Seoul University within the same ordinance indicates that the US military government recognized, at least to some extent, the broader educational and social authority vested in the Sungkyunkwan. This

awareness is further underscored by the fact that Archibald V. Arnold, the military governor of Korea who enacted the ordinance, personally attended the first Seokjeon ceremony convened following liberation, signaling an acknowledgment of the Sungkyunkwan's symbolic and institutional significance in postcolonial Korean society.

Following liberation, the Confucian community regained full autonomy, resulting in the spontaneous proliferation of various organizations. As conflicts between the left and right intensified in the post-liberation period, the Confucian community also split along lines of region, scholarly lineage, and ideology, leading to the establishment of more than ten Confucian organizations that competed for leadership and influence (H. Yi 2014a, 125). Among these were the Daedonghoe (Great Harmony Society), formed primarily by young scholars from Myeongnyun College; the Daedong yurimhoe (Great East Confucian Scholars' Association), centered on Confucian scholars from the Yeongnam region; and the Yudohoe (Confucian Way Society), led by pro-Japanese Confucians (Choi 2018). However, before long, calls for unification in the name of solidarity among the *yurim* (Confucian scholars) began to grow louder. From November 30, 1945, over six days, around one thousand Confucian scholars from both south and north gathered at the Myeongnyun College to hold the National Confucian Assembly (Jeonguk yurim daehoe). Here Kim Chang-suk 金昌淑 was elected chairman, Kim Seong-gyu 金成圭 and Yi Gi-won 李基元 as vice-chairmen, and Kim Gu 金九 and Syngman Rhee 李承晚 among others as advisors (I. Kim 2018, 77). Subsequently, on January 19, 1946, the National Confucian Unification Conference was convened, followed by a meeting of the executive committee of the divided Yudohoe at the Sungkyunkwan on February 10, where it was resolved to achieve full integration. On March 13, a National Assembly of Confucian Representatives (Jeonguk yurim daepyoja daehoe) was convened, at which it was decided to revise the organizational structure of the Yudohhoe (I. Kim 2018).

The Sungkyunkwan Foundation was a corporate body formed around September 1946 for the purpose of establishing a Confucian university, in accordance with the decision of the Yudohoe. The appointments of Yi Gi-won, the son of Yi Seung-hui, and Yu Hae-dong, the son of Yu In-seok,

demonstrate in particular that the foundation placed the highest importance on the symbolic connection between the religious nature of the traditional Sungkyunkwan and modern nationalism (H. Yi 2016b, 92–94). In this context, Yi Hwang-jik's observation is intriguing: "Although it is a hypothetical, if the Korean War had not broken out, the Yudohoe would likely have become a religious organization more successful at eliminating the remnants of pro-Japanese collaborators than any other religious group" (H. Yi 2016b, 94). This demonstrates that the early Sungkyunkwan Foundation had a strong religious character. However, as the term *hypothetical* implies, the establishment of a religious group centered at the Sungkyunkwan was not realized. Borrowing from C. K. Yang's theory of *diffused religion*, Yi Hwang-jik viewed the non-participation of *yurim* in the central organization to be a result of Confucianism's religious character, whereby it does not require a centralized clerical body (H. Yi 2014a, 119).⁴

After liberation, various Confucian organizations emerged, but the Confucian community, centered around the Yudohoe and striving for the restoration and modernization of Confucianism, suffered a major blow to its revival with the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, and subsequently experienced political divisions (Choi 2018). In June 1954, Sungkyunkwan University was operated by Confucian scholars centered around the Yudohoe, but disputes over control of the association soon intensified. Particularly after the mid-1950s, then chairman Kim Chang-suk's announcement of a statement urging President Syngman Rhee to resign deepened divisions concomitant with Korea's deteriorating political situation, with the Confucian association experiencing turbulent leadership changes with multiple turnovers.⁵

On May 23, 1961, following the May 16 military coup, South Korea's revolutionary government issued Proclamation No. 6, ordering the dissolution of political parties and social organizations. The Yudohoe, not

4. On this theory of diffused religion, see C. Yang (1961).

5. For further details on the political conflicts within the Confucian community and organizational changes during this period, see I. Kim (2018), H. Yi (2014a, 2014b, 2016a, 2016b), and Choi (2018).

being a religious group, was forcibly disbanded just 15 years after its founding (I. Kim 2018, 85). After a hiatus of several years, two separate organizations emerged. First, Confucian scholars outside the Sungkyunkwan held a founding assembly on November 18, 1968, and on January 29, 1969, obtained official approval from the Ministry of Culture and Public Information to establish the Incorporated Association Yudohoe (Sadanbeobin yudohoe). Then, on June 21, 1970, those based at the Sungkyunkwan and the Sungkyunkwan Foundation reconstituted the Yudohoe Headquarters (Yudohoe chongbonbu), with Yi Ga-won elected as chairman. Since then, Korea's Confucian community has been divided between these two organizations: the Sungkyunkwan-based Yudohoe Headquarters and the Incorporated Association Yudohoe (Choi 2018; I. Kim 2018).

Scholars examining Confucian organizations in the post-liberation period have generally argued that the Confucian community missed a critical opportunity for renewal due to internal divisions. However, as Yi (2016b) points out, the history of the Yudohoe serves as an important case study of Confucianism's efforts to adapt to modern political and social realities. Analyzing its dynamic transformations and internal struggles will provide a better understanding of how Confucianism sought to modernize within contemporary Korea. Choi (2018) observed that the disputes within the Yudohoe, beginning in 1956, stemmed from issues such as the management of the foundation's core assets, the replacement of the president of Sungkyunkwan University, and the appointment of Yudohoe executives. The Seokjeon ceremony was also a major point of contention. The question of who presided over the Seokjeon held deep symbolic significance, reflecting broader tensions over authority and legitimacy within the Korean Confucian community.

Since the Joseon period, when Confucianism served as the governing ideal, the Seokjeon ceremony has carried significant political implications, a fact recognized by the Japanese Government-General, which sought to control and utilize the ritual for its own purposes (Chang 2020). The US Army Military Government in Korea likewise appears to have understood both the importance of Confucian organizations and the symbolic value of

the Seokjeon ceremony. It is noteworthy that Major General Arnold, the American military governor of Korea, attended the Seokjeon ceremony held at the Sungkyunkwan on March 4, 1946—the first such ritual conducted after liberation. Furthermore, in light of the efforts to establish Confucianism as a religion in the modern era, the Seokjeon ceremony can be regarded as an important Confucian religious ritual.

The leaders of the two opposing factions, Kim Chang-suk and Yi Myeong-se, became embroiled in a legal dispute over the right to preside over the Seokjeon Grand Ceremony (Seokjeon daeje), a dispute in which Kim ultimately prevailed, according to a Supreme Court ruling (*Dong-A Ilbo* 1960b). However, when Yi's faction went ahead with the ceremony at the Sungkyunkwan, disturbances broke out, eventually requiring police intervention (*Dong-A Ilbo* 1960a). Except during the Korean War, the Seokjeon ceremony has continued to be held at the Sungkyunkwan, though its form has undergone various modifications and transformations in response to the post-liberation reorganization of Confucian institutions and the broader modernization of Confucianism. The following section provides a detailed examination of the transformations of the Seokjeon ceremony within this modern context.

Seokjeon Ceremony, at the Margin of Religion and Heritage

As discussed above, the Seokjeon ceremony underwent substantial transformation during the Japanese colonial period and continued to evolve after liberation. Among these post-liberation changes, the most notable was the reorganization of the enshrinement of memorial tablets. In accordance with a resolution passed at the National Assembly of Hyanggyo Representatives in May 1949, among the 112 spirit tablets formerly enshrined in the East and West Mu (side shrines), those of eighteen eminent Korean sages were transferred to the Daeseongjeon (Main Hall) to be venerated alongside the principal sages, while the ninety-four tablets of Chinese Confucian worthies were ritually interred. On February 23, 1961, the National Confucian Scholars' Congress convened once again and

resolved to restore the tablets of Confucius' Ten Disciples (Gongmun sipcheol) and the Six Sages of the Song dynasty, including Cheng Hao and Zhu Xi, which had previously been buried.

The second major change concerned the alteration of the ceremony's date, an aspect that will be examined in greater detail below. The Seokjeon ceremony is held twice a year, in spring and autumn, on the first *jeong* 丁 (*ding* in Chinese) day of the second and eighth lunar months. However, due to a lack of resources, it was decided at the 1949 National Confucian Assembly (Jeonguk yurim daehoe) to simplify the rites and perform the ceremony only once a year, changing the date from the first *jeong* day of August to the 27th of August—the birthday of Confucius—as resolved through a representative meeting of *hyanggyo* (Chosun Ilbo 1957; Cheon-sung Lee 2020). Since the expression “Commemorative Ceremony for the 2,500th Anniversary of Confucius' Birth” was used in 1949, the phrase “Confucius' birth” has been included in the ceremony's designation every year thereafter, with the exception of the Korean War period.

This indicates that, following liberation, the Confucian community was acutely aware of other religious traditions such as Christianity and Buddhism. It also suggests an attempt to reclaim the religious status that Confucianism had been deprived of during the Japanese colonial period. Such an endeavor was, in many ways, a radical departure from convention—though deliberate attempts to alter the ceremony's date had precedent in the colonial period. During the colonial period, for example, on October 29, 1922, the Japanese Confucian association Shibunkai commemorated the 2,400th anniversary of Confucius' death and organized various memorial events; however, these did not replace the traditional Seokjeon ceremony. Attempts to alter the date of the Seokjeon ceremony were made on several occasions even during the colonial period. In 1937, for instance, the *jeong* day observances were converted from the lunar to the solar calendar—a change that carried considerable symbolic weight. The GKG's decision to shift the Seokjeon date to the solar calendar ostensibly reflected a policy of discouraging the use of the lunar calendar, but it also served a deeper social and ideological purpose: the systematic erasure of Korean traditional culture (Chang 2020, 65–69).

The selection of the Seokjeon date was thus never a neutral administrative matter; it was always laden with symbolic significance and underlying intent. During the colonial period, the alteration of the date served as an instrument for erasing Korean tradition; after liberation, by contrast, the shift from the first *jeong* day to the birthday of Confucius reflected the Confucian community's acute consciousness of the growing religious prestige represented by Christianity. Such a shift reflected an effort to reframe the Seokjeon in terms legible within the modern category of religion—giving it a commemorative focus analogous to the celebration of a founder's birth, much as Christmas centers on the birth of Christ. Not all Confucian scholars, however, welcomed this attempt. The Confucian community in the provinces reacted strongly to these changes. One Confucian scholar from Cheongju, for instance, complained that “to hold a ritual on one's birthday is a custom of Buddhism or Christianity, not an act of venerating the Confucian sages” (Cheon-sung Lee 2020, 120).

During the colonial period, the Confucian ceremony lost much of its sacred and ritual significance, becoming instead a public attraction (Rhyu 2010). Following liberation, restoring the ceremony's spiritual and religious integrity emerged as an urgent and essential priority. It was also crucial to restore the religious authority that had been undermined by the GKG's “Regulations on Religious Proselytizing” (1915) and to reassert Confucianism's position as a religion in response to the growing influence of Christianity, which had become widely entrenched in Korea during the colonial period.

An intriguing article concerning the 1956 autumn Seokjeon ceremony appeared in the *Chosun Ilbo*. Entitled “The Seokjeon Ceremony and the Future of Confucianism,” the piece lamented that Confucianism no longer commanded the level of recognition enjoyed by Christianity, while at the same time calling for the globalization of Confucianism.

The Seokjeon, commemorating the 2,507th birth anniversary of Confucius, will be held on October 1st at the Sungkyunkwan. The Seokjeon was held as a national ritual for 500 years during the Joseon dynasty, but now its form is only continued by Confucian organizations,

and it is a fact that the majority of the public has forgotten it. When compared to the grand celebration of “Christmas” on December 25th, one cannot help but feel the profound changes of the times. (*Chosun Ilbo* 1956)

The author of this article distinguishes between early Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, arguing that the former emphasizes practical morality and maintains a direct relevance to everyday life. He further contends that, on this basis, early Confucianism could coexist or harmonize with other religions, such as Christianity and Islam, without significant conflict.

...When thinking this way, there is no reason to necessarily reject Confucianism just because we are importing Western thought and culture...Regarding the priority of practice, it is unlikely that a completely new norm will appear in human society, and there is no need to go out of our way to try and make those with transcendental beliefs abandon their faith. Therefore, our nation's Confucianism must re-launch itself with a stance suitable for the new era, and at the same time, have the resolve to propagate its ideas to Western and Southwest Asian nations where Confucian thought is not yet well known. Confucianism and other Eastern philosophies may be useful to other peoples and other countries, and may even be welcomed. For the advancement of human culture, I believe there is a need for Confucian thought to advance overseas. (*Chosun Ilbo* 1956)

In 1959, the *Chosun Ilbo* dedicated a full page to a special feature introducing the 2,510th anniversary of Confucius' birth as the 2,510th anniversary of the Seokjeon ceremony. The article viewed the Seokjeon as a representative Confucian commemorative day, expressing regret that it was overshadowed by days like Buddha's Birthday or Christmas. It also presented three alternative theories regarding Confucius' birth date, thereby reinforcing the equation: autumn seokjeon ceremony = Confucius' birthday (*Chosun Ilbo* 1959). In 1959, although the first *jeong* day of the eighth lunar month fell on September 12, the rite was instead conducted on the 27th day of the same

First <i>Jeong</i> day	Birth day of Confucius (8.27 lunar calendar)	First <i>Jeong</i> day	Death and birth day of Confucius in the solar calendar	First <i>Jeong</i> day
1946~1948	1949~1960	1961~1995	1995~early 2010s	Mid-2010s~

Figure 1. Shifts in the timing of the Seokjeon ceremony at the Sungkyunkwan

Source: Author.

month, regarded as Confucius’ birthday. In 1995, the date was fixed to May 11, corresponding to Confucius’ death anniversary in the solar calendar, and September 28, corresponding to his birthday. Jin (2011) notes that this practice was maintained into the early 2010s; however, since the mid-2010s, ceremonies have increasingly reverted to the first *jeong* day. In 2025, the spring Seokjeon ceremony was held on March 9 and the autumn ceremony on September 25, corresponding to the first *jeong* day of the second and eighth lunar months, respectively.

Although the officiating agent of the Seokjeon ceremony changed, the practice of holding the rite on Confucius’ birthday continued for some time. However, beginning in 1961, the Seokjeon was once again performed on the first *jeong* day of the lunar calendar, and the spring Seokjeon ceremony was reinstated in 1962. Around the time of the 1962 spring ceremony, two factions within the Confucian community engaged in heated disputes. This suggests that within the Confucian community, there were differing views on whether to adhere to the traditional ceremonial calendar or to introduce new, symbolically meaningful dates. Nevertheless, returning to the traditional date did not mean abandoning the commemoration of Confucius’ birthday. In fact, promotional materials continued to link the Seokjeon with anniversary celebrations of Confucius’ birth. This reflects the ongoing efforts within the Confucian community to have Confucianism recognized as a religion in its own right.

While the Yudohoe was dissolved in 1961 after failing to gain official recognition as a religious organization, the Sungkyunkwan continued to preserve its identity as a religious institution of Confucianism. In 1966, Sungkyunkwan University participated in the University Religious Festival held at Wonkwang University as the representative institution of

Confucianism, alongside Catholic University (Catholicism), Dongguk University (Buddhism), Korea Theological University (Protestantism), Wonkwang University (Won Buddhism), and the Cheondogyo Seminary (Cheondogyo) (*Kyunghyang Shinmun* 1966). Furthermore, when the Yudohoe was reestablished as a legally incorporated association in 1969, the government explicitly designated it a religious organization from its inception (I. Kim 2018).

Despite these preservation efforts, according to statistics on religious affiliation in South Korea, the percentage of those identifying as Confucian stood at 2.8 percent in 1985 but had plummeted to 0.41 percent by 2005 (Jin 2011, 268). A 2025 survey by Korea Research further categorizes Confucianism under “Other” (1%), making it difficult to determine the precise figure (Hankook Research 2025). While acknowledging the religious nature of Confucianism, Jin notes that in contemporary Korea it has effectively been marginalized as an institutional religion. He observes that the activities of the Confucian community—represented by institutions such as the Sungkyunkwan, local *hyanggyo*, and the Yudohoe—remain far more limited in scope compared to those of Christianity and Buddhism, and concentrate primarily on moral cultivation and the education and dissemination of ritual etiquette (Jin 2011, 269).

As these statistics suggest, Confucianism has increasingly lost its foothold as a living religion, and the Seokjeon ceremony gradually came to be recognized more as a national and cultural event than as a distinctly Confucian ritual in South Korea. This perception was further reinforced when the Seokjeon ceremony was designated an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage in 1986. Moreover, the elevation of the Seokjeon ceremony as a cultural symbol is not unique to Korea; similar trends can be observed in China, Japan, and Taiwan.

From Sacred Rite to Cultural Heritage: The Modern Status of Confucian Ceremonies in East Asia

Research on the Seokjeon ceremony in modern times has expanded in

recent years, with new studies addressing not only the Korean context but also regional variations in China. Nevertheless, such scholarship remains relatively limited in Korea, China, and Japan, especially when compared to the extensive body of work on the rites of other religions such as Buddhism. Among the notable contributions is James McMullen's study (2020), which traces the Japanese Seokjeon ceremony (Sekiten) from a chronological perspective. His monograph, *The Worship of Confucius in Japan*, warrants particular attention, as it provides a detailed analysis of the historical and cultural significance of the state-sponsored memorial rite for Confucius, known in Japan as Sekiten.

Lee Hana (2015), in her article "The Particularity and the Meaning of Reception of the Munmyo Ritual in Korea," emphasizes the function of the Seokjeon ceremony as a form of traditional cultural heritage, noting that "in contemporary Korea, the tradition of Confucian culture functions as cultural heritage" (Hana Lee 2015, 313). McMullen also describes the Sekiten in the present day, noting that the ceremonies performed at the Yushima Seidō and other surviving Confucian sites are no longer official state rites, but rather cultural events commemorating international heritage, recognition of Confucianism, cultural nostalgia, or local identity (McMullen 2020, 480–481). In China, while some studies have examined Confucianism as a religion (Billioud 2018), the revival of Confucian rituals in contemporary China is evident not only in sacrificial ceremonies at Confucius temples but also in various other forms, and these rituals are sometimes utilized as tourism resources. Since 2004, the Chinese government has officially conducted commemorative ceremonies for Confucius, and the scale of these events has gradually expanded (Yang and Tamney 2012). Furthermore, Yan and Bramwell, paying particular attention to its relationship with the Tourism Administration, observed that the revival of the Confucius "cult ceremony" was largely led by the Tourism Administration, with the Cultural Heritage Preservation Administration playing only a secondary, facilitative role (Yan and Bramwell 2008).

In Taiwan, there are over 40 Confucian temples, and Confucian ceremonies (*shidian*) are held annually at many Confucius temples such as Tainan Confucian Temple, the oldest Confucian temple in Taiwan, and

Taipei Confucius Temple (Huang 2012). During Japanese rule in Taiwan, Japan's policy regarding Confucian temples in Taiwan shifted to Japanese initiative starting in 1916, and from 1936 onwards, the ritual style of the Confucian sacrifice was changed to a Japanese format, thereby strengthening the dominance of Confucian temples and Japan (Minakuchi 2018, 34–38). In 1952, the Taiwanese government officially established September 28 as the birthday of Confucius and conducted the commemorative ceremony on that day, though it was not held on an annual basis (Taipei Confucius Temple Governing Board). In 1968, the *shidian* were made legally compulsory by the Taiwanese government. Under the direction of President Chiang Kai-shek, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of the Interior jointly established a commission composed of scholars and experts to research the Shidian ceremony's ritual procedures, costumes, ritual implements, music, and dance (Taipei Confucius Temple Governing Board). Major temples, including those in Taipei and Tainan, were officially taken over by their respective city governments, returning them to publicly managed status (Minakuchi 2018, 41–43). Currently, the Confucian ceremony at Taipei Confucius temple is administered by the Taipei Confucius Temple Governing Board, which operates under the jurisdiction of the Department of Civil Affairs of the Taipei City Government (Taipei Confucius Temple Governing Board).

In this way, the Confucian ceremony today is regarded less a religious rite than a cultural event—an elaborate reenactment of classical music, dance, and ritual decorum that embodies the nation's Confucian heritage. Across East Asia, this transformation reflects a broader reconfiguration of Confucianism from a living moral-philosophical system or religious body to a form of cultural memory and intangible heritage. In Korea, China, Japan, and Taiwan alike, the Seokjeon has come to serve as a symbolic expression of national identity, cultural continuity, and regional shared tradition, while also functioning as a medium for heritage preservation, tourism, and international cultural diplomacy.

The Seokjeon daeje was inscribed as Important Intangible Cultural Heritage No. 85 on November 1, 1986, under the category of rituals and ceremonies. The designation of traditional cultural and religious rituals as

cultural heritage is also evident in many cases related to shamanism. Due to the need for political legitimacy and social integration, Korean shamanism (*musok*), which was previously seen as an obstacle to modernization, has been emphasized as a symbol of national culture and begun to receive state support (Y. Yi 2011, 419). State efforts to promote national culture and spiritual identity have encompassed various traditions, including shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. For example, the Eunsan byeolsinje (Village Ritual of Eunsan), a shamanic practice, was registered in 1966, and Yeongsanjae (Celebration of Buddha's Sermon on Vulture Peak Mountain), a Buddhist ritual, was registered in 1973 under the same category. Given that 1986 was the year of the Seoul Asian Games and that the 1988 Seoul Olympics were approaching, this designation likely reflected an acknowledgment of Confucian rites as traditional cultural practices worthy of international recognition.

However, designating religious rituals as cultural heritage carries the potential risk that such performances may be viewed not as sacred religious practices, but merely as forms of traditional cultural art (Y. Yi 2011, 433). A striking illustration of this is that Korean shamanism and its rituals have lost their vitality and significance in the social and religious life of Korea, reduced instead to remnants of the past—mere artifacts preserved for display in a museum (Domenech and Kim, forthcoming).

This risk also applies to the Seokjeon ceremony. As discussed earlier, the Seokjeon ceremony had already undergone a change of character during the Japanese colonial period, transformed into a ceremonial event with its religious significance weakened. To regain its religious status, the Confucian community sought to promote the recognition of Confucianism as a religion by various means, such as changing the date of the Seokjeon ceremony and deliberately holding events reminiscent of Christian Christmas celebrations. However, it failed to be perceived by the public as a solid religious institution. In this context, the cultural heritage designation has similar results as the cultural heritage designation of shamanism: while it produced positive outcomes such as increased social interest in *musok* and *gut* rituals, it also brought with it the problem of standardizing and fossilizing such rituals (Y. Yi 2011, 433).

In Taiwan, this transformation occurred even more rapidly, with Confucian memorial rites evolving into prominent cultural and educational events. Taiwanese scholar Huang De-shi (1909–1999), wrote extensively on Confucian temples and shrines in Taiwan, emphasized that these institutions were not religious facilities but should instead serve as moral and cultural exemplars:

Confucius' teachings and philosophy do not constitute a religion, nor was Confucius himself a religious founder. Accordingly, reverence for Confucius differs fundamentally from the veneration of Buddhist statues, which are often associated with attracting wealth, averting misfortune, and invoking blessings....Therefore, I propose the following: while it is appropriate for temples and shrines to fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior, Confucius temples should be administered separately—by the Department of Social Education under the Ministry of Education at the central government level, and by the Education Bureau at the county or city level. Such a clear administrative delineation would underscore the unique character of Confucius temples and reinforce Confucius' enduring authority as a moral and cultural exemplar. (Huang 2012, 863)

The approaches of Taiwan and South Korea to the Seokjeon ceremony were very similar. In 1998, the National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage of Korea published a study of Seokjeon daeje as the 17th volume in its series on important intangible heritage of Korea. There it wrote:

The sages and teachers of Confucianism, including Confucius himself, were human rather than divine; they served as models of the ideal person—individuals who had attained, or closely approached, the status of a sage through learning and moral cultivation. Accordingly, the Seokjeon ceremony is a rite in which students pledge to pursue learning and strive toward sagehood before the spirit tablets of these figures, enshrined in the Confucian shrine (Munmyo), which functioned as both a school and a place of scholarly formation. This is the central significance

of performing the Seokjeon ceremony at the Munmyo. For this reason, the Seokjeon was understood as an educational ritual rather than a religious ceremony aimed at securing blessings or good fortune. Consequently, it became customary for all newly enrolled students of the National Academy (Taehak) to perform the Seokjeon rite to honor the sages and teachers. (National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage of Korea 1998, 8)

The translation of the term Seokjeon daeje in this volume is “Grand Ceremony in Honor of Confucius,” a translation that carries no religious overtones. However, the current official English designation—National Rite to Confucius—places greater emphasis on the ceremony’s character as “a national event” (Korea Heritage Service), as well as foregrounding the use of “rite” over “ceremony.” In April 2008, the Seokjeon daeje Preservation Society was established to ensure the protection and continuation of this ritual tradition. Today, Seokjeon daeje is celebrated as a national event in South Korea, with ceremonies also held at local *hyanggyo* and various other institutions throughout the country.

Conclusion

The Seokjeon ceremony has been a major Confucian ritual since the Joseon period, carrying significant symbolic and socio-political meaning. However, as this ceremony was performed both at the Sungkyunkwan Confucian Shrine and at local *hyanggyo*, it underwent considerable changes over time due to modernization, the colonial period, and the aftermath of the Korean War, with political factors exerting a particularly strong influence on its form and practice.

During the Japanese colonial period, the Japanese Government-General of Korea deliberately excluded Confucianism from the official category of religion, instead relegating it to the status of an educational institution. As a result, Confucianism was transformed into a political ideology compatible with the Japanese imperial system—known as *Kōdō judō*—and traditional

rituals such as the Seokjeon were repurposed as instruments to legitimize and promote colonial rule. This exclusion was not merely institutional—the epistemological divergence over Confucianism’s religious status, compounded by the Christian institutional norms embedded in the colonial framework, left the meaning and religious character of the Seokjeon ceremony unresolved, a tension that would persist long after liberation.

After liberation, the Sungkyunkwan was restored to its original status under US Army Military Government legislation. However, the structural legacy of Japan’s exclusion of Confucianism from the category of religion remained, and the legislation concerning the Sungkyunkwan placed it, together with Seoul National University, under the jurisdiction of the education sector. Moreover, the Confucian community, which had been unable to complete the modernization of Confucianism during the colonial period, experienced considerable organizational turmoil in the post-liberation era. Within this context, the officiation of the Seokjeon ceremony became a crucial symbolic event through which different factions sought to assert and maintain their hegemony.

There was much debate and conflict surrounding the ceremony’s ritual dates. Originally performed on the first *jeong* day of the second and eighth lunar month, the tradition was upheld immediately after liberation, but from 1949 onward attempts to modify it to the solar calendar, aligning it with Confucius’ birthday, persisted. After enduring intense conflict within Confucian circles in 1960, the ceremony returned to the first *jeong* day of the eighth lunar month in 1961. However, in 1995, the date was fixed to May 11, corresponding to Confucius’ death anniversary in the solar calendar, and September 28, corresponding to his birthday—a practice maintained into the early 2010s. This was a conscious response to the growing influence of Christianity, which had become deeply entrenched in Korean society during and after the colonial period; it exemplifies the Confucian community’s sustained effort to reassert the religious character of the Seokjeon ceremony.

In recent decades, however, Seokjeon ceremonies have been reframed as a cultural rather than a religious practice, a transformation seen not only in South Korea but also across East Asia more broadly. Across Korea, China, Japan, and Taiwan, scholarly and governmental interest in the Seokjeon has

expanded, but research remains modest compared to the study of other ritual traditions. Modern states have played a key role in transforming Confucian ceremonies into expressions of national identity, cultural continuity, and intangible heritage—whether through heritage designation in Korea, tourism-driven revival in China, or education-centered administration in Taiwan.

This shift echoes the institutionalization of other religious traditions, such as shamanistic or Buddhist rites, which have at times become standardized and aestheticized cultural performances. In the case of the Seokjeon, this tendency was further reinforced by its inscription as Important Intangible Cultural Heritage in 1986, which played a significant role in consolidating this shift toward cultural heritage. Confucian groups in Korea sought to reassert the Seokjeon's religious significance by realigning its dates with Confucius' death and birth anniversaries in conscious response to the ritual practices of other religions. Yet the reversion to the first *jeong* day since the mid-2010s need not be read as a deliberate exclusion of Confucianism's religious character; it does, however, clearly signal a conscious move toward privileging traditional ritual practice. Taken together, these developments suggest that the Seokjeon ceremony is now widely understood as an educational or cultural ritual based on long Confucian tradition. Ultimately, the contemporary Seokjeon ceremony embodies the reconfiguration of Confucianism from a lived moral-religious system to a form of cultural tradition—preserved, performed, and mobilized as part of Korea's national cultural heritage.

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GLOSSARY

Korean Terms

Daedonghoe 대동회

Daedong yurimhoe 대동유림회

Daeseongjeon 대성전

Eunsan byeolsinje 은산별신제 (恩山別神祭)
 Gongjamyo 공자묘 (孔子廟)
 Gongjaje 공자제 (孔子祭)
 Gongmun sipcheol 공문십철 (孔門十哲)
 Gut 굿
 Gyeonghagwon 경학원 (經學院)
 Hyanggyo 향교 (鄕校)
 First jeong day 상정일 (上丁日)
 Jonseong yuneum 존성윤음
 Munmyo 문묘
 Munmyo jerye 문묘제례
 Myeongnyun 명륜
 Myeongnyun hagwon (Myeongnyun College) 명륜학원
 Seokjeon / Seokjeon daeje 석전 (釋奠祭) / 석전대제 (釋奠大祭)
 Yeongsanjae 영산재
 Yurim 유림
 Yudohoe 유도회

Japanese Terms

Keigakuin kitei 經學院規程
 Kōdō shugi (Kōdōism) 皇道主義
 Kōdō judō 皇道儒道
 Kōshisai 孔子祭
 Meirin 明倫
 Sekiten 釋奠 (Seokjeon in Korean and Shidian in Chinese)
 Shibunkai 斯文會
 Yushima seidō 湯島聖堂

Chinese Terms

Ding 丁, the fourth Heavenly Stem in the traditional Chinese calendar cycle
 Shidian 釋奠 (Seokjeon in Korean and Sekiten in Japanese)