

Priests, Entertainers, or Prostitutes: The Three Roles of the Female Performers (*Sadang*) in Chosŏn Korea*

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In the early Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) itinerant performer troupes (*sadangp'ae*) were comprised of lay monks and female performers, or *sadang*. This community appears to have been brought into being by the Monk Registration System (*toch'ŏpche*) that forced monks and temple slaves to leave monasteries and organize themselves into half-monastic, half-lay communities. Although the Chosŏn elites continued to stigmatize itinerant performers, it was apparent that the broader society depended on the Buddhist beliefs and practices they propagated, and after the Imjin War (1592–1598) the activities of the *sadangp'ae* became even more widespread. By the sixteenth century, because of the increased propagation of Confucianism, itinerant performers gradually lost their originally strong association with Buddhism, and by the eighteenth century they became professionalized vagrant performers. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, itinerant performers began performing at marketplaces across the country, and sexual services were added to their regular repertoire of singing, dancing, and Buddhist chanting. Although traces of the itinerant performers disappear after the nineteenth century, it is apparent that until that time they played a vital role in satisfying popular cultural demands.

Keywords: Community leaders (*sajang*), lay monks (*kōsa*), itinerant performer troupes (*sadangp'ae*), female performers (*sadang*), male performers (*namsadang*), Buddhism

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