

The Private Academies (*Sŏwŏn*) and Neo-Confucianism in Late Chosŏn Korea*

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As an important educational institution, the *sŏwŏn* played a key role in disseminating Neo-Confucian teachings in Chosŏn Korea. Initiated by the *sarim* (Neo-Confucian literati), scholars determined to recreate the society envisioned by Neo-Confucian sages and worthies, the private academies overshadowed the state schools (*byanggyo*) as centers for education and moral cultivation in all provinces in Korea. In the early phase of their growth, the private academies were very elitist, admitting only highly motivated serious scholars, who enjoyed a great degree of privilege and prestige. Their success as educational centers led to a proliferation of private academies in all parts of the country, causing serious problems for the state, such as a decline in academic standards and abuse of power. Often private academies became havens for those who tried to dodge military tax and became involved in partisan politics. Nevertheless, the *sŏwŏn* were very successful in their objective to transform Chosŏn Korea into a Neo-Confucian state, so much so that the force that resisted the Western powers in the nineteenth century came largely from those trained at these academies.

Keywords: Private Academies, Neo-Confucianism, Education, Factional Politics, Chosŏn Society

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Introduction

From its inception, the Chosŏn dynasty was committed to realizing the ideals envisioned by Neo-Confucian sages and worthies. No regime in Asian history, including China, had ever been as serious as Chosŏn Korea in its attempts to transform its state and society into a model of Neo-Confucian ideals. This commitment became even more important and urgent for the new breed of scholar-officials who emerged after the sixteenth century. Identified as *sarim* (Neo-Confucian literati) in Korean history, these scholar-officials, accepting the inherent goodness of human nature, were convinced that the ideal social order as envisaged by the Neo-Confucian teachings could and ought to be realized in their own time. Yi Hwang (1501-70), perhaps the greatest interpreter of Neo-Confucianism in Korea, stated with confidence: "Aware that we are endowed with all that is good, we firmly believe the old Way [of the Confucian ideals] can be implemented in our days."¹

In order to achieve their goals of realizing the social order and the proper individual conduct as defined by the ancient Confucian Masters, the Neo-Confucian scholar-officials of the Chosŏn dynasty placed the foremost emphasis on education. They believed that only through the proper and correct teaching of the Neo-Confucian sages could the people be transformed (*kyohwa*) to abide by the norms of the ideal social order. Thus, the Chosŏn dynasty organized and maintained a well-structured educational system as an integral part of its government. In the capital, the *Sŏnggyun'gwan* (National Confucian Academy) was organized as the highest national center of learning. In addition, the Four Schools were set up in four of the five districts of Seoul for a lower level of education (*sahak*). In provinces, *hyanggyo* (county schools) were established in every county throughout the country to teach men of talent. How well these schools were operated was an important criterion in the periodic evaluation of the county magistrate's achievements.

Aside from this state-supported school system, private academies called *sŏwŏn* began to rise after the sixteenth century and played an increasingly important role as centers of Neo-Confucian education. *Sŏwŏn* were distinguished from the state educational institutions in that they were organized and operated by private scholars. Located in the countryside, the private academies became important institutions that promoted and popularized the Neo-Confucian teachings in rural Korea and in time overshadowed the state

1. Yi Hwang, *Chŏngbo T'oegye chŏnsŏ* (Seoul: Sŏnggyun'gwan Taehakkyo, 1978), 41.51a.

schools as centers of Neo-Confucian learning.

The thesis of this paper is that the *sŏwŏn* played a vital role in the Neo-Confucianization of rural Korea through their active intellectual efforts, and this article will examine how *sŏwŏn* were set up and functioned as academic and intellectual centers of Neo-Confucianism in rural Korea, and ascertain their impact on the politics and society of the late Chosŏn dynasty.

Beginnings of the *Sŏwŏn*

The formal beginning of the private academies (*sŏwŏn*) in the Chosŏn dynasty is traditionally dated to the year 1543 (the 38th year of King Chungjong's reign) when Paegundong Sŏwŏn, later renamed Sosu Sŏwŏn, was founded by Chu Sebung (1495-1554) at Sunhŭng in Kyŏngsang province. Thereafter, many new academies were organized throughout the country. Why did the private academies emerge in Korea after the mid-sixteenth century?

There are several important studies on the origins of the private academies. The first major inquiry into this question was made by Yu Hongyŏl in the 1930s, in which he attributes the rise of private academies to three main reasons. First, he sees a significant decline in the quality and standard of the state educational system during the course of the early Chosŏn period, especially after the abusive and decadent rule of King Yŏnsan (1494-1506). This decline of the state schools gave rise to a movement to revitalize education through private initiatives. Second, according to Yu Hongyŏl, the movement by the *sarim* scholars to enshrine loyal and martyred officials who became popular among the Neo-Confucian literati as a means of Confucianizing Chosŏn society contributed to the rise of private academies. As will be explained later, the enshrinement of distinguished Confucian personalities was one of the main features of private academies. Third, a series of literati purges carried out during and after King Yŏnsan's reign discouraged a number of Confucian scholars to seek public office in the capital city and instead many chose a life of quietude in the countryside to pursue their private studies on the Neo-Confucian sages. These three developments, according to Yu Hongyŏl, in the end gave rise to the private academies in Chosŏn Korea in the mid-sixteenth century.²

Yi T'aejin, on the other hand, sees the rise of private academies more as a manifestation of the growth of the Neo-Confucian literati (*sarim*). A new breed

2. Yu Hongyŏl, *Han'guk sahoe sasang sa non'go* (Seoul: Ilhogak, 1980), 59-92.

of scholar-officials, the *sarim* were more ideologically committed to the cause of Neo-Confucianism and were determined to realize the goals of the Confucian sages. In spite of setbacks suffered as the result of the four literati purges (*sabwa*), the *sarim* scholar-officials continued to gain strength as a new political force, and they found private academies a convenient institution to further their ideological and political objectives. Thus Yi T'aejin writes: “[The rise of] private academies is a consequence of the growth of the *sarim* force both in terms of quality and number, and it is significant that they (i.e., the *sarim*) discovered private academies to be a [useful] center [of their activities]”³ In other words, the rise of private academies after the mid-sixteenth century is attributed to the coming of age of the *sarim* as a new dominant political force in the later half of the sixteenth century (after having suffered persecutions during the four great purges) and thus the private academies became a useful institution instrumental for the *sarim* to promote and further their ideological and political goals.⁴

Implicit in the arguments of both Yu Hongyŏl and Yi T'aejin is that the rise of the *sŏwŏn* in Chosŏn Korea is closely tied to the rise of Neo-Confucianism. There is, however, a difference in the historical perspectives within which the two distinguished Korean historians place the rise of the *sŏwŏn*. Whereas Yu sees the development of the *sŏwŏn* largely as a result of the withdrawal of *sarim* from the center stage of politics to avoid political persecution, Yi explains the growth of the *sŏwŏn* as a consequence of deliberate efforts on the part of *sarim* to actively promote their ideological and political objectives with their newly found political influence. In other words, according to Yi T'aejin the rise of the *sŏwŏn* in Korea came about as a part of the plan to actively push for the Neo-Confucianization of Korean society pursued by the *sarim* scholars, not as a result of their withdrawal from active political life as suggested by Yu Hongyŏl.

Chŏng Manjo on the other hand has argued that the private academies were developed as part of the conscious attempt by the *sarim* scholars to further the Neo-Confucianization of Chosŏn society by means of “rectifying the mores of the scholar-officials (*chŏng sasŭp*).” In the view of the new *sarim* scholar-officials, there had been a significant deterioration in the mores of the Chosŏn scholar-officials after King Yŏnsan's abusive rule. In order to inject a new morality into Chosŏn society, the *sarim* scholars resumed the educational programs of Cho Kwangjo (1482-1519) and his followers. These included

3. Yi T'aejin, “*Sarim kwa sŏwŏn*,” in Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe, ed., *Han'guk sa* (Seoul: Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe, 1978), 12: 127.

4. For a more detailed discussion, see *ibid.*, 12: 115-63.

promoting the self-cultivation of morality and ethics as prescribed by Zhu Xi's *Xiao-xue* (Elementary learning), the movement to enshrine the Neo-Confucian sages of Korea such as Chŏng Mongju (1337-92) and Kim Koengp'il (1454-1504), and the strict adherence to the teacher-disciple relationship by upholding the teachings of the former Neo-Confucian masters. The emphasis on these ideas as a way to revitalize Neo-Confucian education was designed to realize "the rectification of the mores of scholar-officials" and to promote the Way of the Neo-Confucian teachings (*Tohak*). "The rise of private academies, it should be understood, was possible on the basis of these [developments]," writes Chŏng.⁵

Implicit in the need to revitalize the Neo-Confucian teachings is the decline in morality among the scholar-officials. The *sarim* blamed the deterioration of education for this decline. Indeed, a number of people during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries raised serious criticisms, decrying the sad state of education. Thus, the rise of the *sŏwŏn* was attributed by many to the deterioration of the state schools, as the great *Sirhak* scholar Yu Hyŏngwŏn (1622-1673) writes:

The *sŏwŏn* of today did not exist in ancient times. As the education in later generations declined, the *hyanggyo* were reduced to places where people sought personal fame and selfish interest through the civil service examinations. Those scholars who possessed the righteous ambition were compelled to seek quiet places elsewhere in remote regions where they built study facilities to pursue their scholarship. This is how the *sŏwŏn* originated.⁶

Although the rise of the *sŏwŏn* was often attributed to the decline in the state educational system, we can also discern in the growth of the private academies a conscious attempt on the part of the *sarim* scholars to revitalize and restructure Chosŏn society according to their idealistic image of the Confucian world. For the *sarim* scholars, the *sŏwŏn* was to play a vital role in realizing this ideal society by imbuing scholars with the teachings of the Confucian sages and worthies. The *sŏwŏn* was to become the cornerstone in the new structure of the Neo-Confucian society in Chosŏn Korea.

Let us then examine the circumstances surrounding the founding of the first private academy in Chosŏn. We have Chu Sebung's own account of how he first started the private academy:

5. Chŏng Manjo, "Chosŏn *sŏwŏn* ū sŏngnip kwajŏng," *Han'guk saron* 8 (1980): 26-35.

6. Yu Hyŏngwŏn, *Pan'gye surok* (Kojŏn Kanhaenghoe edition) (Seoul: Tongguk Munhwasa, 1958), 9.40b.

On the fourth day of the seventh month, autumn, in the year [1541], I arrived at P'ungsŏng [P'unggi] [to take office as its magistrate]. That year, there was a great drought. The year after [in 1542], there was a great famine. In that same year, I set up a shrine for Hoehŏn [An Hyang (1243-1306)] at Paegundong. In the following year [1543], I had the [county] school-building removed to the northern part of the county and established a *sŏwŏn* separately in front of Hoehŏn's shrine.⁷

Establishing a *sŏwŏn* at a time of economic hardship gave rise to much criticism. In his defense, Chu Sebung cites the examples of Zhu Xi who, he said, repaired the White Deer Grotto Academy and established shrines for several former masters in the midst of a dire crisis, when Song was at war with Jin. Chu Sebung then goes on to explain:

Heaven produced a multitude of people. What makes them human beings is because they have education (*kyo*). Without education, [there can be no Five Cardinal Principles] . . . [If this is so,] the three bonds will decline, the nine rules [of governance] will decay, and the human race will perish forever. [Therefore,] all education must begin with veneration of sages. It is for this reason that the shrine was set up to respect virtue and that the *sŏwŏn* was established to promote learning. Indeed, education is more urgently needed than famine relief in troubled times.⁸

From this account, we learn two things. First, Chu Sebung apparently regarded the period in which he lived as troubled and lacking in Confucian morality, so in dealing with this crisis situation he gave the utmost priority to teaching the wisdom of the Neo-Confucian sages. Second, Chu thought that proper education begins with venerating the Confucian sages, and thus the enshrinement of a former sage was an integral part of the first private academy he organized. It is also significant that the sage who was enshrined in Paegundong Academy was An Hyang. A noted Koryŏ scholar-official, An Hyang has been credited by most Korean Confucian scholars as the first Korean to have introduced the teachings of Song Master Zhu Xi into Korea in the late thirteenth century. Also, Paegundong is the birth place of An Hyang, and his ancestors and descendants had lived there for many generations. As the Paegundong Academy became the model for other private academies that were established afterward, it became customary for a new academy to have a shrine

7. Chu Sebung, *Munŭng chapko* 7.23a, in *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan* 27 (Seoul: Minjok munhwa ch'ujinhoe, 1988).

8. *Ibid.*, 7.23.

for a noted worthy.

In founding the Paegundong Academy, Chu Sebung also made careful arrangements so that the Academy would have sufficient endowments for its maintenance as well as for sustaining the scholars enrolled in the academy. Again, Chu Sebung left us with the following account:

The establishment of school land is an old practice. If the families of those who want to study are well-off, they can come to study bringing their own food. If their families are poor, even if they wanted to study, the circumstances do not permit them. Alas, there are those who can afford food and yet do not attend school, while there are those who have both talent and desire to study but can not do so due to lack of food. What is then [needed] for our schools? This is the reason why the *sŏwŏn* cannot exist without [school] land When I set up the shrine for An Yu [Hyang], I thought there can be no shrine without a *sŏwŏn*. In establishing the *sŏwŏn*, I thought there can be no *sŏwŏn* without [school] land.⁹

From this account, we learn that Chu Sebung thought school land was an absolute necessity that would allow the academy to attract even destitute scholars. Therefore he tried to secure a certain amount of land to make the Paegundong Academy self-supporting. After Chu left P'unggi, the officials who succeeded him and the local people continued the campaign to secure endowment, and as a result, a large amount of contributions in the form of land, books, precious metals, food products, and slaves reached the Academy from many different regions over many years making it one of the richest private academies in Korea.¹⁰

With the economic foundation thus secured, Paegundong Academy needed formal approval from the king in the form of a royal charter (*saaek*). The formal request to grant a royal charter was initiated by Yi Hwang (1501-70) when he was the magistrate of P'unggi in 1550.¹¹ This request eventually received a the king's approval; according to the annals for Myŏngjong's reign,

The Paegundong Academy of P'unggi was founded by incumbent governor of Hwanghae Chu Sebung (when he was serving as the magistrate of P'unggi). It is located at the same village where An Hyang had resided. All the rules and regulations governing the Academy have been modeled after those of White Deer Grotto Academy of the Great Master Zhu Xi. The academic setup, the library, and the land and food, and other supplies have all been richly endowed so that

9. *Ibid.*, 8.2b.

10. *Myŏngjong sillok*, 10.6a-b. See also *Sosu sŏwŏn tŭngnok* (Seoul: Chŏsen-shi henshūkai, 1937), 15a.

11. *Chŭngbo munhŏn pigo* (Seoul: Tongguk Munhwasa, 1964), 210.1a.

men of talent can further cultivate their potential. Yi Hwang petitioned the king to grant a charter in the form of a name plaque, as well as books, land, and servants. The king thereby granted the charter with the name plaque, books, and two or three additional items, and these grants have encouraged the Confucian scholars in the countryside to pursue their scholarship with great zeal. As for land, however, the endowment arranged by Chu Sebung is sufficient for the Academy to sustain itself, and also there are adequate numbers of servants. In order for the Confucian scholars to pursue their scholarship, it is essential that they do so in peaceful and quiet surroundings. If the provincial governor or the county magistrate, wishing to exalt their study, prescribe restrictive rules for these scholars, it will only deprive them of their freedom and will lead them astray from the proper way of cultivation. There should be no interference from outside.¹²

In granting the charter for the Academy, King Myŏngjong chose the name *Sosu* (continuous cultivation)¹³ and ever since this Academy has been known as Sosu Sŏwŏn of Paegundong.

Sosu Sŏwŏn thus became the first private academy in Korea to have received a royal charter. Also, it should be noted that the petition requesting a royal charter was made by Yi Hwang, who then went on to establish himself as the foremost interpreter of Zhu Xi's teachings in Korea. The association of Yi Hwang with the academy added to its prestige. In this light, it is not at all surprising that Sosu Sŏwŏn became the model for other private academies that were organized afterward.

After the founding of Sosu Sŏwŏn, private academies came to be organized in many parts of the country either by an important individual scholar or by a group of local scholars. Among the important *sŏwŏn* that were founded before 1600 were Imgo Sŏwŏn, established in 1553 in Yŏngch'ŏn (Kyŏngsang province) enshrining Chŏng Mongju (1337-92); Tosan Sŏwŏn, which was started by Yi Hwang in 1574 at Yean (Kyŏngsang province), and where he himself was later enshrined; Oksan Sŏwŏn, founded in 1573 in Kyŏngju to enshrine Yi Ŏnjŏk (1491-1553); and Todong Sŏwŏn. Todong Sŏwŏn was at first organized in 1564 as Ssanggye Sŏwŏn in Hyŏnp'ung (Kyŏngsang province) enshrining Kim Koengp'il (1454-1504) and renamed Todong in 1604 when reestablished at a new location, the original academy having been destroyed during the Hideyoshi invasions.¹⁴ Thereafter, a number of private academies sprang up in many parts of the country.

12. *Myŏngjong sillok*, 10.6a-b.

13. See *Sosu sŏwŏn tŭngnok*, "Haesŏl," 5a-6b.

14. *Yŏriŭp wŏnu sajŏk* (Seoul: Minch'ang Munhwasa, 1991) (Kyujanggak Collection No. 9814), 2.533.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the *sōwŏn* had struck deep roots in Korea and became accepted as an educational institution essential to the state and society of Chosŏn. The importance of the *sōwŏn* was recognized and furthered even during the national crisis brought on by the Japanese invasions of 1592-98. In 1595, confronted with a desperate military situation, King Sŏnjo ordered the closing of what he called “non-essential private academies” in order to convert them into military training grounds.¹⁵ This move, however, met with strong opposition from the Office of Censor-General (*Saganwŏn*), which memorialized as follows:

Since the war, all our schools and assets have been destroyed completely. Even in the midst of a war we must continue to nurture and train [scholars]! [Adherence to] the Way alone will sustain us, and now more than ever it is time to restore the Way. Nothing is more urgent than to promote Confucian scholarship and respect the Way Even though military training and preparations are urgent, the places for the promotion of the Confucian scholarship and the Way should not be abolished. Once the royal edict [to close down the *sōwŏn*] is issued, the scholars will be frustrated and demoralized. It is requested that the article [in the edict] to abolish the *sōwŏn* be withdrawn¹⁶

The king in the end went along with this request and rescinded his order. Even during the dire crisis of the Hideyoshi invasions, an attempt to use non-essential private academies for military purposes was rejected. Instead, even greater emphasis was given to the private academies as centers for the promotion of scholarship and the Confucian way.

Rules and Regulations

As centers of Confucian scholarship, the Korean *sōwŏn* drew up rules and regulations in order to define their mission and objectives. The ultimate objective of the *sōwŏn* in Korea was for the scholars to cultivate the Confucian Way through the pursuit of scholarship as outlined by the Confucian sages. It is not surprising, therefore, that Sosu Sōwŏn adopted from its inception the “Articles of Learning” (*xuegui* in Chinese or *hakkyu* in Korean) prepared by Zhu Xi for his White Deer Grotto Academy as the basic guiding principle¹⁷

15. *Sŏnjo sillok*, 65.20a.

16. *Sŏnjo sillok*, 65.27a.

17. *Myŏngjong sillok*, 10: 6b.

and that other *sŏwŏn* followed Sosu's example. Zhu Xi's "Articles of Learning" offered fundamental principles of learning in five areas. The first article lists the Five Cardinal Principles as the basis of instruction. The second article reads: "Study it extensively, inquire into it accurately, think it over carefully, sift it clearly, and practice it earnestly. The above is the order of study." The third article emphasizes the importance of sincerity and truthfulness in one's deeds and words for self-cultivation, while the fourth article stresses the rectification of moral principle. The fifth article includes quotations from Confucius and Mencius, and reads: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you. If you do not succeed in your conduct, turn inward and seek for its cause there."¹⁸ About these "Articles of Learning," Wing-tsit Chan, an eminent Chinese-American scholar, commented that "there is no better summary of Confucian morality in such a succinct form either before or after Zhu Xi's time."¹⁹

The importance of the "Articles of Learnings" of the White Deer Grotto Academy was further reinforced when Yi Hwang included them in his famous *Sŏnghak sipto* (Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning). As Michael Kalton aptly points out, "In T'oebye's view the great value of these rules is that they express the essence of all learning, on whatever level, in terms of its fundamental content and methodology."²⁰ As such, these Articles were adopted by virtually all the private academies that were organized in Korea and were prominently displayed in their study halls as constant reminders for all the scholars who studied there.²¹ Thus, Zhu Xi's five articles became the fundamental rules for all Korean academies.

In addition to Zhu Xi's "Articles of Learning," each academy set up its own rules and regulations, and these rules and regulations set the academic standards as well as the codes of conduct for the academy scholars. The regulations of several *sŏwŏn* (*wŏn'gyu* or *hakk'yu*) make it clear that the rules prepared by Yi Hwang and Yi I, the two most influential Neo-Confucian scholars in Chosŏn, became standard for most *sŏwŏn* in Korea. Yi Hwang, a great champion of the *sŏwŏn*, played an important role in founding Isan Sŏwŏn

18. The English translation of the Rules is found in Wing-tsit Chan, "Chu Hsi and the Academies," in Wm. Theodore de Bary and John W. Chaffee, ed., *Neo-Confucian Education: The Formative Stage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 397.

19. *Ibid.*, 398.

20. Michael Kalton, tr. and ed., *To Become A Sage: The Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning by Yi T'oebye* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 107.

21. Warren W. Smith, Jr., "The Rise of the Sŏwŏn: Literary Academies in Sixteenth Century Korea," Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1971, p. 133.

in 1554 in Yŏngju in Kyŏngsang province,²² for which he composed the twelve-article rules.²³ The rules of Sŏak Sŏwŏn are also similar to those of Isan, the first five articles of the two academies being the same almost word for word.²⁴ Founded in 1561 in Kyŏngju, Sŏak Sŏwŏn also had a close association with Yi Hwang from the beginning.²⁵ This perhaps explains the similarity of the rules of these two academies.

Yi I (Yulgok, 1536-84) was another great promoter of *sŏwŏn* and founded the Ŭnbyŏng Chŏngsa (study hall) in 1578 in Haeju (in Hwanghae province), which was later renamed Sohyŏn Sŏwŏn.²⁶ He wrote the rules for this academy (Ŭnbyŏng Chŏngsa Hakkju), which consisted of twenty-two articles.²⁷ Yulgok also composed the rules for Munhŏn Sŏwŏn, which was founded in Haeju in 1549 to enshrine Ch'oe Ch'ung (984-1068), a great Confucian scholar of the Koryŏ dynasty renowned for the private schools he established.²⁸ These rules prepared by T'oegye and Yulgok became the models for many other private academies in Korea. As these rules also define what to do and what not to do for the academy scholars, we can obtain a general picture of the life of scholars in *sŏwŏn* by examining these rules.

First, who was admitted to the *sŏwŏn*? We find different admission standards among several *sŏwŏn*. Although there is no reference to the question of admission in the rules of Isan Sŏwŏn, both Sosu Sŏwŏn and Sŏak Sŏwŏn have the same specific criteria for admission. According to the rules of these two *sŏwŏn*, the first consideration for admission was given to those who had already obtained the *saengwŏn* or *chinsa* degree by passing the lower civil service examination. The second priority for consideration was offered to those who had passed the preliminary examination (*ch'osi*) in the lower civil service examination. And lastly those who had not passed the preliminary examination were also admitted if they could demonstrate their serious commitment to scholarship as well as good conduct and if they were recommended by bona fide scholars.²⁹ These were very high standards for

22. *Yŏriŭp wŏnu sajŏk*, 2.331-39.

23. The full text can be found in Yi Hwang, *Chŭngbo T'oegye chŏnsŏ* (Seoul: Taedong Munhwa Yŏn'guso, 1978), 41.51a-52b.

24. The rules of Sŏak sŏwŏn are given in Yu Hongyŏl, *Han'guk sahoe sasang sa*, 106-107. I have not been able to locate the original source of this.

25. *Yŏriŭp wŏnu sajŏk*, 2.7.

26. *Yŏriŭp wŏnu sajŏk*, 3.468.

27. Yi I, *Yulgok chŏnsŏ* (Seoul: Sŏnggyun'gwan Taehakkyo, 1958), 15.43b-46a.

28. The full text can be found in *ibid.*, 15.43b-51b.

admission and were obviously designed to attract the elite scholars in the countryside. Since these admission qualifications were almost the same as those for the National Confucian Academy, it is believed that these private academies had intended to operate their academic programs at the same level as the Sŏnggyun'gwan. Sŏak Sŏwŏn then offers the following reasons for setting such a high standard for admission:

If unqualified individuals are admitted through a lower standard, they will not only waste the provisions but also damage the books and other properties. If the unqualified are present, the sagacious scholars will be discouraged to come, which will in turn lead to decline and deterioration of the academy. Therefore, one must be extra cautious in the selection [of the scholars to be admitted].³⁰

It is clear that these early *sŏwŏn* were designed to be elitist centers of scholarship for a very select few locals.

On the other hand, Ŭnbyŏng Chŏngsa (later reorganized into Sohyŏn Sŏwŏn) and Munhŏn Sŏwŏn, both in the Haeju area, have admission rules that are different from Sosu and Sŏak. Prepared by Yi I, the admission rules of Munhŏn Sŏwŏn specify that:

For the selection of scholars, all those who have firm determination for scholarship, regardless of whether they are old or young, are admitted following the approval of the academy scholars [provided that] the reputation and conduct of the candidates are free from blame. If the number of academy scholars present is less than ten, no decision for admission may be made An individual with the *saengwŏn* or *chinsa* degree is admitted without any discussion [on his qualifications].³¹

It is interesting to note that there is no reference to the social background of the scholars to be admitted in Munhŏn Sŏwŏn other than a *saengwŏn* or a *chinsa*, who would be accepted automatically.

The admission rules of Ŭnbyŏng Chŏngsa on the other hand, which were also prepared by Yi I, have the following stipulation:

As for the rules of admission, all those who have firm determination for scholarship are qualified for admission regardless of whether they are of scholar families (*sajok*) or commoners (*sŏryu*). Before admission, however, they must

29. Yu Hongyŏl, *Han'guk sahoe sasang sa*, 105-06.

30. *Ibid.*, 106.

31. Yi I, *Yulgok chŏnsŏ* (Seoul: Sŏnggyun'gwan Taehakkyo, 1958), 15.49a.

have approval from those who had previously been admitted.³²

Here, the rules specifically say that anyone who was seriously committed to scholarship would be admitted even if he was a *sŏryu*, that is a man of commoner background. (There can be little doubt that *sŏryu* here refers to commoners.) Thus, Ŭnbyŏng Chŏngsa was open to any commoner with serious commitment to scholarship.³³

This rule of admission allowing commoners to enroll was apparently adopted by other *sŏwŏn* as well. Sŏksil Sŏwŏn, which was founded in 1656 to enshrine the brothers Kim Sangyong (1561-1637) and Kim Sanghŏn (1570-1652) in Yangju, has an admission rule which states: “Anyone, regardless of their age, whether of high birth (*kwi*) or low birth (*ch’ŏn*), who has a firm determination to study books for scholarship will be admitted.”³⁴ The specific term used here is *ch’ŏn*, which usually refers to men of lowborn status such as slaves. But it is believed that *ch’ŏn* was used here to indicate “men of lower status” in their relation to yangban – namely commoners, not slaves or other low-born groups. We also have the exactly same rules adopted by Musŏng Sŏwŏn, which enshrined Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn (b. 857), Sin Cham (1491-1554), and five other worthies at Chŏngŭp in Chŏlla province.³⁵

That the scholars of commoner background were admitted in *sŏwŏn* was further substantiated by Pak Sech’ae (1631-95), an influential scholar-official noted for his studies on ritual (*yehak*). He wrote the rules governing Munhoe Sŏwŏn, which enshrined Zhu Xi along with Yi I, Sŏng Hon, and others at Paech’ŏn in Hwanghae province.³⁶ Its admission rule is basically the same as Sŏksil and Musŏng, allowing all committed scholars into the academy regardless of “whether they were of high or low birth.” Pak Sech’ae later added an explanatory note to the phrase “high or low birth,” which reads: “Men of high birth (*kwi*) refers to the members of scholar families (*sajok*) and men of low birth (*ch’ŏn*) refers to *kyosaeng* and *sŏp’a chi ryu*.”³⁷ *Kyosaeng* of course

32. Ibid., 15.43b.

33. See also Sakai Tadao, “Yi Yulgok and the Community Compact,” in Wm. Theodore de Bary and JaHyun Kim Haboush, ed., *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 333.

34. Kim Wŏnhaeng (1702-72), *Miho chŏnjip* (Seoul: Yŏgang Ch’ul’p’ansa, 1986, reprint), 14.29a.

35. *Musŏng sŏwŏn wŏnji* (Chŏngŭp: Musŏng Sŏwŏn, 1936), 143 (Reprinted in *Sŏwŏnji ch’ongsŏ* [Seoul: Minjok Munhwasa 1987], vol. 9).

36. The full text can be found in Pak Sech’ae, *Namgye Pak Sech’ae munjip* (Seoul: Minjok Munhwasa, 1983, reprint), 65.6a-12b.

37. Ibid., 65.6b.

refers to the Confucian students in the county schools (*hyanggyo*) and their social status was mostly commoner since the mid-seventeenth century. *Sŏp'a chi ryu* (庶派之流) here means either commoners or those who were born of concubine mothers, most probably the latter. (Those born of concubine mothers (*sŏdl*) constituted a social group that was very much discriminated against under Chosŏn society.) On another occasion, Pak Sech'ae explained the reason why he entered the additional explanatory note to the passage of “high or low birth” as follows: originally, there was no problem in the usage of “high and low” (*kwi-ch'ŏn*); however, a group of *kyosaeng* in the county of Paech'ŏn formally complained to the local office that the use of the term “low birth” (*ch'ŏn*) in the admission rule might be interpreted by others as suggesting that they were low-born. In order to clarify this misunderstanding, he added an explanatory note specifically stating that *ch'ŏn* refers to *kyosaeng* and *sŏp'a*.³⁸ From these accounts, it is clear that the rules permitted the scholars of commoner background to gain admission into the Sohyŏn, Sŏksil, Musŏng, and Munhoe Academies.

The relatively open admission rules of these four academies differ significantly from those of Sosu and Sŏak Academies, which, as we have seen above, stipulated higher standards, equivalent to that of the National Confucian Academy. How can we explain this discrepancy? It is difficult to give a satisfactory answer to this question based on the available evidence. One possible explanation is that as both Sosu and Sŏak Academies belong to those *sŏwŏn* that were organized during the earliest phase of *sŏwŏn* construction, the admission rules of these two academies represented the very high academic standard that the early *sŏwŏn* aspired to, but this high standard declined subsequently with the proliferation of *sŏwŏn*, as we shall see later, allowing men of *kyosaeng* and other commoner backgrounds to enroll.

If the admission rules of Sohyŏn Sŏwŏn, Sŏksil Sŏwŏn, Musŏng Sŏwŏn, and Munhoe Sŏwŏn were indeed faithfully adhered to, there is little question that at least some Korean *sŏwŏn* did admit scholars of commoner origin as long as their commitment to scholarship was determined to be serious. If this is the case, it certainly challenges the traditional belief that *sŏwŏn* were exclusive institutions reserved only for the yangban. There is, however, one unanswered question – that is, there is no clear evidence as to whether the relatively open admission rules for men of commoner background were actually observed. It should also be pointed out that the admission rules emphasized the serious commitment to scholarship as an essential qualification for admissions, and

38. *Namgye Pak Sech'ae munjip*, 52.12b-13a.

therefore one's admittance into a *sōwōn* was contingent upon his academic qualifications, not his commoner social status.

Curriculum

Once scholars were enrolled in the *sōwōn* to pursue serious scholarship, the next logical question we have to ask is: what subjects did these scholars study? In other words, what were the curricula of the Korean academies? Fortunately, a few *sōwōn* regulations have survived, enabling us to get a general picture of what the Korean scholars studied at these private academies. As far as I can determine, there is no information available on what subjects were studied at Sosu Sōwōn, the oldest academy in Korea. However, in the collective works of Yi Hwang, we find the Rules of Isan Sōwōn (Isan Wōn'gyu), prepared by T'oegeye himself, thus reflecting his idea of what a Korean *sōwōn* ought to be.³⁹ The first article prescribes the basic subjects to be studied as well as the objectives the Academy should pursue. It reads as follows:

For all students, the Four Books and the Five Classics should be studied as the roots and origins [of all things], while the *Elementary Learning* and the *Family Rites* should be studied as the door. While observing the state policy of nurturing talent, they should uphold the meticulous teachings of the sages and worthies. Aware that we are enowed with all the goodness, we firmly believe that the old Way can be realized today. [Therefore,] everyone should do his utmost to comprehend in his mind and heart the essence and usefulness of the learning. While it is necessary to study various histories, philosophies, collective writings, literary works, and prose and poems and also to prepare for the civil service examinations, these should be studied for secondary importance One should constantly exert himself lest one becomes indolent. Books that are depraved, insidious, or licentious are not allowed into the academy lest one's pursuit for the Way may be disturbed and one's determination may be confused.

For the Isan Sōwōn, the study of the Four Books and the Five Classics of the Confucianism was regarded as the fountainhead of all things and thus the foremost priority was placed on these subjects. The *Elementary Learning* and the *Family Rites* were treated as a gateway through which one entered into the sources of learning. It is interesting to note that T'oegeye considered the study of histories, philosophies, and literary works of secondary importance in the academy's curriculum.

39. The full text can be found in Yi Hwang, *Chūngbo T'oegeye chōnsō*, 41.51a-52b.

Sŏak Sŏwŏn, which was founded in 1561 in Kyŏngju, used exactly the same article in its Rules.⁴⁰ Because Yi Hwang was closely associated with the founding of the Sŏak Academy from the beginning,⁴¹ it is understandable that Sŏak Sŏwŏn adopted the same rules that Yi Hwang had prepared for Isan Sŏwŏn.

Yi I on the other hand did not prescribe any specific curriculum for either Ūnbyŏng Chŏngsa or Munhŏn Sŏwŏn. For the Ūnbyŏng Chŏngsa, the Rule only states that “Any writing or thought that is not the work of the sages and worthies is not allowed to be read within the academy.”⁴² The Rules of Munhŏn Sŏwŏn make no reference at all to the subject matters to be studied.⁴³ Absence in the rules of any list of subjects to be studied, however, does not necessarily mean that Yulgok did not have a specific curriculum in mind for these academies. On the contrary, Yi I wrote the School Rules (*Hakkyo mobŏm*) in 1582, which consisted of sixteen articles providing extensive guidelines on how to study. These Rules eventually became widely used as a basic guide for students in both the government schools and the private academies.⁴⁴

In Article Three of the School Rules, Yulgok outlines the sequential order of the books to be studied:

The first book to study is the *Elementary Learning* in order to nurture one's base and roots. The next books [to be studied] are the *Great Learning* and the *Reflections on Things at Hand (Jinsi lu)* so as to build the basic structure [of one's learning]. And then, one should study the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, and the Five Classics, interspersed with occasional study of histories and works on Nature and Principle by the former sages in order to broaden one's outlook and refine one's knowledge. Any book that is not by a sage should not be read and any writing that is of no use [to the sagely learning] should not be looked at.⁴⁵

Here, we have the list of books that Yulgok considered to be the core subjects to be studied at schools, and it is believed that many private academies followed the same or similar curriculum.

40. The rules of Sŏak Sŏwŏn can be found in Yu Hongyŏl, *Han'guk sahoe sasang sa*, 106.

41. See *Yŏrŭp wŏnu sajŏk*, 2.7.

42. *Yulgok chŏnsŏ*, 15.45a.

43. See its rules in *Yulgok chŏnsŏ*, 15.49a-51a.

44. The full text can be found in *Yulgok chŏnsŏ*, 15.33b-43b.

45. *Yulgok chŏnsŏ*, 15.35a.

Pak Sech'ae likewise prescribed a curriculum for the Munhoe Sōwōn, in which he emphasized the core curriculum of the Four Books, the Five Classics, the *Elementary Learning*, and the *Family Rites*. After the completion of the study of these works, he suggested the further study of "other classics (such as *Zhouyi*, *Liji*, and *Xiaojing*), histories (such as *Spring and Autumn* and *Zizhi [tongjian] gangmu*), and the writings of Master Zhu Xi and the two Cheng Masters (such as the complete works of the two Chengs and the complete works and *Yulei* of Zhu Xi)."46 Similarly, for Sōksil Sōwōn, Kim Wōnhaeng (1702-72), a noted scholar of the *Noron* faction, outlined the books to be studied in a sequential order. It started with the *Elementary Learning*, to be followed in sequence by the *Great Learning*, the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Xinjing*, *Jinsi lu*, and then by the study of other classics, and when this cycle was completed, the students were to start from the beginning again.⁴⁷

These lists of books suggest the orientation of scholarship pursued at the Korean private academies. It is clear that they placed great emphasis on the study of the School of Nature and Principle of Song China, toward whom the Korean Confucian scholars were largely attracted. The core curricula of the Korean *sōwōn* consisted basically of those works that were emphasized by the Neo-Confucian scholars of Song China, and the Korean scholars at the private academies committed themselves to the study of the teachings of these Neo-Confucian sages. All other studies such as histories and philosophies that are not directly related to the Song Neo-Confucian teachings were regarded as of subsidiary importance. From these curricula, one can easily appreciate the degree of serious commitment Korean scholars had toward the study of Neo-Confucian learning.

Inculcated with Neo-Confucian learning at the *sōwōn*, these Korean scholars became the dedicated disciples of the Neo-Confucian masters and exerted their effort to transform their communities by disseminating and popularizing the Neo-Confucian teachings. In this way, the *sōwōn* played a crucial role in the Neo-Confucianization of rural Korea.

Life in the Sōwōn

What kind of life did the scholars of the Korean private academies lead? The

46. *Namgye Pak Sech'ae munjip*, 65.6a-b.

47. *Miho chōnjip*, 14.20b.

rules of Söksil Söwŏn and Munhoe Söwŏn prescribe a rather strict and rigid life for the students.⁴⁸ Students were to get up from their beds at daybreak and clear their bedding. The younger members carried out the chores of cleaning the rooms in which they slept. After washing up, they put on their formal caps and gowns and went to the shrine to pay homage to the enshrined worthies. They then exchanged bows before going back to their room to study. Seniority played an important role in the interaction among students as the younger ones were required to yield in almost all things ranging from seating arrangements for meals to cleaning chores. The academy students appear to have studied individually most of the time. Students were expected to put their entire mind and heart into their books while maintaining proper posture and decorum at all times and were not allowed to talk during the study hours. At leisure periods after meals and in between studies, they were allowed to exchange views on issues concerning righteousness and principle, compose prose and poetry, practice calligraphy, examine books in the library, or walk around the court yard. After supper, they resumed their study until late in the night. Above all, their mind and heart was to be focused on the study of the sagely learning at all times.

There was a monthly lecture session, which was set on the sixteenth day of every month in the case of Söksil Söwŏn. For this lecture session, each scholar attending the academy was assigned beforehand certain chapters to study and if under thirty years of age, he was to recite and discuss them before the instructor from memory. Older students could use the text. Their recitations and discussions were evaluated and graded into four categories. The elderly who did not wish to recite the text were also allowed to participate and were encouraged to take part in the discussion. Visitors were also permitted to take part in the lecture session.⁴⁹ It is apparent from this rule that the study by means of memory recitation was very much emphasized at the academies.

At the same time, however, discussion was an important part of academy life. A summary of the discussion that took place at the monthly sessions was recorded, and some of these records indicate that the monthly discussion sessions were extremely lively as students raised many serious questions, such as ambiguity and seeming inconsistency in the writings of the former worthies. For example, one of the topics discussed in a session at Söksil Söwŏn was on the nature of men and material objects. A student, Yu Hŏnju, raised the

48. For the full text of Söksil Söwŏn, see *Miho chŏnjip*, 14.29a-32; and for Munhoe Söwŏn, see *Namgye Pak Sech'ae munjip*, 65.6a-10b.

49. *Miho chŏnjip*, 14.20b-21a.

question that although Zhu Xi said in the discussion of the *Doctrine of the Mean* that the nature of men and material objects is the same, “why is it that he speaks of the nature of humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom that are part of human nature, but does not extend this nature as inherent in material objects?” Another student, Chŏng Yŏngŭi, discussed the passages on the inherent goodness of man that appear in the *Great Learning* and the *Elementary Learning* to point out the lack of any reference to the nature of material objects. Yu Hanjŏng, a third student, added his comments by citing passages from the *Doctrine of the Mean*. There were more than one hundred topics discussed between Kim Wŏnhaeng, the instructor, and the students at one monthly lecture session. This was indeed an impressive academic meeting.⁵⁰ There are also records of the gist of discussions that took place when Pak Sech’ae gave a lecture at Munhoe Sŏwŏn and Hwagok Pyŏngsa respectively, and these records inform us of equally serious debates on various philosophical issues between the instructor and the students.⁵¹

In addition to this regular monthly lecture session, *sŏwŏn* students further pursued academic inquiry by sending out written questions to certain distinguished scholars to solicit their views on certain issues that arose in their discussions. In the collective works of Kim Wŏnhaeng, there are eight such responses he made to six different *sŏwŏn* such as Sohyŏn Sŏwŏn and Hwayang Sŏwŏn.⁵² Pak Sech’ae likewise responded in writing to four different *sŏwŏn*.⁵³ All these suggest that the *sŏwŏn* scholars spared no effort in their attempt to further their understanding of the Neo-Confucian masters.

As *sŏwŏn* became the center of Neo-Confucian education in the countryside of Korea, they required their students to devote their full attention to the study of the Neo-Confucian teachings and did not permit the students to read anything that was not related to the teachings of the Neo-Confucian sages. Thus, both Sŏksil and Musŏng Sŏwŏn stipulated that “any book that is not by the sages and worthies and any idea that does not deal with the Neo-Confucian teachings is not allowed to be read within the *sŏwŏn*.”⁵⁴

Furthermore, in order for the students to concentrate their mind and hearts on the emulation of the Neo-Confucian sages, the study for the preparation of the civil service examinations was discouraged at the *sŏwŏn*. As noted earlier, in

50. See *Miho sŏnsaeng kangŭi* in *ibid.*, 607-24.

51. See *Namgye Pak Sech’ae munjip*, 65.23a-26a.

52. See *Miho chŏnjip*, 8.37a-42a.

53. See *Namgye Pak Sech’ae munjip*, 35.36b-40b.

54. *Miho chŏnjip*, 14.31a and *Musŏng sŏwŏn wŏnji*, 144.

the rules of Isan Sŏwŏn and Sŏak Sŏwŏn, Yi Hwang considered the study for the preparation of the civil service examinations less important than the study of Neo-Confucian teachings.⁵⁵ Other influential scholars likewise downgraded the importance of the study for the civil service examinations. Yi I prescribed for Ŭnbyŏng Chŏngsa: “If one wants to study for the civil service examinations, one has to do so outside [the *sŏwŏn*].”⁵⁶ This same rule was adopted word-for-word by both Sŏksil Sŏwŏn and Musŏng Sŏwŏn.⁵⁷ Pak Sech’ae was even more emphatic in discouraging the study for the civil service examinations. In the rule of Munhoe Sŏwŏn, he explained as follows:

The reason the former sages founded *sŏwŏn* to be independent of *hyanggyo* was that the students at *hyanggyo* studied for the civil service examinations, and this prevented them from devoting their effort solely to the study of the [sagely] learning. If the *sŏwŏn* continue this obsolete practice, in the end there will be no more place to study the [sagely] learning and the root [of all learning] will be eradicated. Therefore, it would be better to build a separate hall outside the *sŏwŏn* for those who want to prepare for the civil service examinations, and these people should not be allowed to enter the lecture hall [of the *sŏwŏn*]⁵⁸

Pak Sech’ae regarded the study for the civil service examination to be a cause of the decline in serious scholarship and thus did not want the *sŏwŏn* to have any association with the civil service examinations. Here we can see that Yi Hwang, Yi I, and Pak Sech’ae all were adamant that a *sŏwŏn* was not a place for a scholar to prepare for the civil service examinations and that the *sŏwŏn* was to be solely a center for pursuing Neo-Confucian scholarship.

There were other stipulations to make the *sŏwŏn* devoted exclusively to scholarship. There was to be no interference from government officials in the affairs of the *sŏwŏn*. As noted earlier, in 1550, shortly after Sosu Sŏwŏn was founded, the king ordered the governor and the local magistrate not to meddle in the affairs of the academy such as by making restrictive regulations, lest the students be deprived of their freedom to pursue scholarship.⁵⁹ As the *sŏwŏn* guarded their autonomy, they also tried to stay away from politics by prohibiting students to talk about matters related to politics. Both Sŏksil Sŏwŏn and Musŏng Sŏwŏn stipulated that “one should not speak in favor or against court affairs and government appointments” and that “one should not speak in favor

55. *Chŭngbo T’oegye chŏnsŏ*, 41.51a, and Yu Hongyŏl, *Han’guk sahoe sasang sa*, 106.

56. *Yulgok chŏnsŏ*, 15.45a.

57. See *Miho chŏnjip*, 14: 31b and *Musŏng Sŏwŏn wŏnji*, 144.

58. *Namgye Pak Se-ch’ae munjip*, 65: 10a.

59. See *Myŏngjong sillok*, 10.6a-b.

or against the local magistrate and his staff, nor about their good deeds or misdeeds.”⁶⁰ Similarly, Pak Sech’ae emphatically prohibited Munhoe Sŏwŏn students from even visiting the local magistrate on matters concerning their *sŏwŏn*.⁶¹

Ideally, thus, the students at the *sŏwŏn* were to study the prescribed curriculum focused mainly on the Neo-Confucian teachings. Books and writings unrelated to the Neo-Confucian teachings were prohibited, and students were discouraged from studying for the civil service examinations within the *sŏwŏn* compound. To remain autonomous, there was to be no interference from government officials, and the *sŏwŏn* scholars had to keep aloof from politics. Instead, they were to devote their time and effort to the pursuit of the teachings of the Neo-Confucian sages and to the cultivation of their mind and hearts in order to live up to the ideals of Neo-Confucianism. These were the goals of the *sŏwŏn* in Chosŏn Korea, which made them the true centers for the promotion of Neo-Confucianism.

Proliferation of Sŏwŏn

Inspired by these goals, dedicated Neo-Confucian scholars came to believe that only through the *sŏwŏn* could they realize the ideals of the Neo-Confucian sages. Initially, the *sŏwŏn* were to become elitist academic institutions for a selected few serious scholars. But as they caught the imagination of Neo-Confucian scholars in Korea as the centers of Neo-Confucian scholarship and moral cultivation, there was a tremendous growth in the number of the private academies in all parts of the country during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the middle of the seventeenth century, there were virtually no administrative districts without a *sŏwŏn*, and in many counties, there were more than two *sŏwŏn*. The *sŏwŏn* movement in fact became so popular that, according to State Councillor of the Right Min Am (1636-94), “scholars in various regions regarded it as shameful if their counties did not have a *sŏwŏn*.”⁶² Maintaining a private academy in one’s home county became a matter of pride for local scholars and they competed to establish private academies.

As the *sŏwŏn* became accepted as important educational institutions, their numbers grew by leaps and bounds. Chŏng Manjo has made a careful study to

60. *Miho chŏnjip*, 14.30b-31a and *Musŏng Sŏwŏn wŏnji*, 145.

61. *Namgye Pak Sech’ae munjip*, 65.9b.

62. *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok*, 524 (Sukchong 18/4/3).

determine the number of *sŏwŏn* and *sau* (shrines) that were established during the reign of each king. The following table is based on his study:⁶³

Table 1. Number of New *Sŏwŏn* by Reign

Rulers	Numbers	Per Year
Myŏngjong (1546-67)	17	0.8
Sŏnjo (1568-1608)	82	2.1
Kwanghae (1609-22)	38	2.9
Injo (1623-49)	55	2.1
Hyojong (1650-59)	37	4.1
Hyŏnjong (1660-74)	72	5.1
Sukchong (1675-1720)	327	7.3
Kyŏngjong (1721-24)	29	9.7
Yŏngjo (1725-76)	159	3.1
Chŏngjo (1777-1800)	7	0.3
Total	823	3.2

This table shows that the number of newly established *sŏwŏn* increased steadily during the seventeenth century, rising sharply during the reigns of Sukchong and Kyŏngjong – that is to say in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Chŏng Manjo also gives the distribution of *sŏwŏn* by province for the period from 1609 till 1800 as follows:⁶⁴

Table 2. The Number of *Sŏwŏn* by Province, 1609-1800

Kyŏngsang	257	35.5%
Chŏlla	142	19.6%
Ch'ungch'ŏng	101	14.0%
Kyŏnggi	53	7.3%
Hwanghae	39	5.4%
Kangwŏn	43	5.9%
P'yŏngan	56	7.7%
Hamgyŏng	33	4.6%
Total	724	100.0%

From this table, one can see that *sŏwŏn* were largely concentrated in the three southern provinces of Kyŏngsang, Chŏlla, and Ch'ungch'ŏng, taking up nearly

63. Chŏng Manjo, "17-18 segi *sŏwŏn*, *sau* e taehan siron," *Han'guk saron* 2 (1975): 263. The annual average is based on my calculation.

64. *Ibid.*, 265.

seventy per cent of the total number of *sŏwŏn*. Kyŏngsang province alone maintained more than one third of the *sŏwŏn* in the country with 257. Even Hamgyŏng province, the remote northeastern border region, established thirty-three *sŏwŏn*. Since there were eighteen counties in Hamgyŏng province, many counties had more than one *sŏwŏn* each. This phenomenon of establishing *sŏwŏn* in all parts of the country had without doubt a significant effect in disseminating and popularizing the Neo-Confucian teachings in rural Korea.

The drastic increase in the number of new *sŏwŏn*, however, presented many serious problems. There were a number of flagrant abuses committed by the *sŏwŏn*, as they deviated from the original objectives of the early founders. Through the criticisms raised by public officials as well as private individuals, we can get a good picture of the abusive practices of *sŏwŏn*. Perhaps the most serious charge made against *sŏwŏn* was by Sŏ P'irwŏn (1614-71), the governor of Ch'ungch'ŏng province, in 1657.⁶⁵ Some people had accused *sŏwŏn* of abuse before, but they had been mostly piecemeal critiques. Sŏ P'irwŏn's, however, was the first comprehensive criticism against the prevalent practices of the Korean private academies. Known for his outspokenness, Sŏ P'irwŏn singled out four problems in particular. The first point dealt with the general neglect of county schools as a result of the popularization of *sŏwŏn*. He said:

There arose difference in the degree of importance between *hyanggyo* and *sŏwŏn*. Those rural members of scholar families who have some talent and literary skill are all registered with *sŏwŏn*, and they are called *wŏnyu* (*sŏwŏn* scholar). They regard the *hyanggyo* as if it is an inn and treat the *hyanggyo* students as if they are slaves. The places of sacrificial offerings for the former sages [i.e., *hyanggyo*] [have been neglected] to allow weeds and grass to grow, and the places designed by the state to promote scholarship [*hyanggyo*] have been reduced to a waste land. This is the first problem.

As the *sŏwŏn* were organized widely, men of reputable family background with talent favored the *sŏwŏn* over the *hyanggyo*, which no longer functioned as effective educational institutions. This neglect of the *hyanggyo* resulted in a significant lowering of the standard and quality of the county schools. The *hyanggyo* became a victim of the rise of *sŏwŏn*.

The second point concerns the loss of men who would otherwise perform military service:

[*Sŏwŏn*] actively recruit idle men, both commoners and low-born, to keep them

65. The full text of the memorial is found in *Hyojongillok*, 18.54b-55a.

as *pono* (auxiliary slaves). [*Sŏwŏn*] use them at will as servants and take possession of whatever they produce. Such practices deprive [the state] of men for military tax and thus a multitude of men clamor [to work for *sŏwŏn* in order to avoid military tax] until they get what they wish.

The private academies became favorite places for those who sought to escape burdensome military taxes, thus depriving the state of badly needed male adults. As we shall see later, this became a serious issue that plagued the Chosŏn government.

The third point concerns abuse in the selection of persons enshrined in *sŏwŏn*. Governor Sŏ states:

The individuals enshrined for reverence have not been selected through open discussion. Instead, some [have been chosen merely because] they are either descendants [of worthies] or ancestors of [the organizers] and some [were chosen] only to flatter their favorites.

As individuals selected to be honored at the *sŏwŏn* were often not well qualified, there arose disputes, sometimes even brawls. Such a situation, according to Sŏ P'irwŏn, only harmed mores and morality. The fourth point is that the sacrificial rites offered in spring and autumn by the *sŏwŏn* exacted heavy expenses from local administrations as the local magistrates were obliged to provide the needed provisions and supplies.

Having made these charges, Sŏ P'irwŏn proposed two important reforms. The first proposal dealt with the problem of enshrinement. He suggested that those enshrined individuals whose merits were unworthy of *sŏwŏn* enshrinement should be demoted to *hyangsa* (village shrines), and that those *hyangsa* that enshrined unsuitable individuals should be abolished. He also proposed to limit the enshrinement of an individual to only one *sŏwŏn* within each province as it was not unusual at the time for certain individuals to have been enshrined at more than one place. In addition, he also recommended the government to scrutinize the qualifications of and give approval to all the prospective candidates for enshrinement before allowing the construction of a new *sŏwŏn* to begin. He then suggested the punishment of those who would violate this rule. These proposals, if they had been adopted and put into effect, would have severely constrained the construction of new *sŏwŏn*. The second proposal called for freeing all the auxiliary slaves. He said: "The so-called auxiliary slaves ... should all be abolished and be reassigned to military ranks so as to bring them under official control." He wanted to eliminate a practice that had illegally kept a large number of male adults under the control of the

academies at the expense of the state. Sŏ P'irwŏn then concluded by saying that his memorial was intended "to rescue and rectify the mores and practices of the scholars (*sasŭp*) and to make the shrines of former sages [more] respected and honored."

In response to this memorial, the Ministry of Rites, while recognizing the abuses concerning enshrinement, stated that it opposed Sŏ's proposal to abolish any shrine because "the establishment of shrines in *sŏwŏn* and villages comes from good intention and [the shrines of] sages and righteous men exercise good influence upon the future generations." As for the auxiliary slaves (*pono*), the Ministry recommended that the number of *pono* be limited to seven for the chartered *sŏwŏn*, five for the non-chartered *sŏwŏn*, and two for village shrines. The Ministry further recommended that all other servants should be returned to serve military duty. The Ministry of Rites agreed that the proposal to require prior permission before establishing a new *sŏwŏn* or village shrine was "an extremely good idea" and that those who violated this rule should be punished. Finally, it also acceded to Sŏ's proposal that the government not provide any material assistance to the sacrificial rites of the *sŏwŏn*. The king approved these recommendations of the Ministry.⁶⁶

Two officials in the Office of Special Advisers, Yi Chŏngyŏng (1616-86) and Min Chŏngjung (1628-92), however, vehemently opposed Sŏ P'irwŏn's proposal, labeling it "useless words." Although there might have been one or two problems with the *sŏwŏn* system, they declared that *sŏwŏn* were "the fountainhead of the nation's morality" and that the worthies enshrined in the *sŏwŏn* inspired later generations to emulate them. Therefore, there should be no attempt to abolish any of them. They then demanded the dismissal of Sŏ P'irwŏn from office and the relief of senior officers in the Ministry of Rites for going along with Sŏ's proposal.⁶⁷ This controversy was further taken up by the High State Councilors and other officials but came to no clear-cut resolution.⁶⁸ This debate may have also involved factional strife as can be seen from the criticism Song Chungil made against Chŏng Kaech'ŏng (1529-90), whose shrine had been destroyed largely because of Chŏng's factional affiliation.⁶⁹ This factional issue will be taken up later for further discussion.

The controversy started by Sŏ P'irwŏn's proposals suggests a serious split within the ranks of the Chosŏn dynasty officialdom in their view of the *sŏwŏn*.

66. Ibid., 18,55a-b.

67. Ibid., 19,2a-3b.

68. Ibid., 19,3b-4a and 22a-b.

69. Ibid., 19,29a-b.

Sŏ P'irwŏn saw that the proliferation of and the abuse of power by the *sŏwŏn* had reached a dangerous point, requiring the government to take a firm stand to control them. His opponents, however, took the position that the *sŏwŏn* were playing an important role in providing appropriate training for scholars and that if there was any problem, it was only minor. This split may have been related to political struggles among various factions. Sŏ's suggestion to demote or destroy some existing private academies may have given a danger signal to those groups who maintained a large number of shrines and academies under their control. In such a case, it was only natural for them to oppose Sŏ's proposal. On the other hand, as one looks through the *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok* (Records of the private academies) and other sources, one cannot help but be struck by the fact that the proliferation of *sŏwŏn* was indeed a serious problem, and there was constant warning against the excessive number of academies. In spite of repeated attempts by the government to limit the construction of new *sŏwŏn*, the number of *sŏwŏn* continued to grow, and the government was simply unable to control its proliferation. This also raises the question as to the extent of the central government's ability to exercise its authority over the regions. Space, however, does not permit to delve into this question in this article.

Hyanggyo and *Sŏwŏn*: Implications on Social Status

One of the problems Sŏ P'irwŏn pointed out was the decline of the *hyanggyo* as an educational institution. Although both *sŏwŏn* and *hyanggyo* served the same objectives as centers of Confucian learning in rural regions, there was a significant difference between the two institutions in terms of quality and standard as well as the prestige and privileges enjoyed by the students. Yi Chesin (1536-84), a scholar-official well versed in literature and calligraphy, writes as follows:

Provincial *hyanggyo* are the institutions where the shrines of Confucius are maintained and where the government appoints instructors to teach. Compared to *sŏwŏn*, there is a vast difference in esteem and honor. Following the rules first established by Second Minister Chu [Sebung], the *sŏwŏn* selects from those who passed the *hyangsi* (preliminary examination) [in the civil service examinations for admission]. If the preliminary examination graduates are not available, further selection is made only from those who comprehend literary works. Therefore, those who are not devoted to scholarship as a profession are not allowed admission. The *hyanggyo* on the other hand is the place where those who hold

the *saengwŏn* or *chinsa* degree do not go; [instead,] it [attracts] many who are vulgar and dull as well as those who are hiding from military tax. Hence, the people presently hold *hyanggyo* in the lowest esteem and treat *sŏwŏn* with honor and respect.⁷⁰

Here, Yi Chesin makes it very clear that there was a marked difference in prestige and honor between *sŏwŏn* and *hyanggyo* and that by the late sixteenth century no respectable scholars attended *hyanggyo*.

Along with the difference in prestige, there was a marked distinction in standard and quality between *sŏwŏn* and *hyanggyo*. According to Pak Sech'ae, "Whereas the *hyanggyo* admits all, the *sŏwŏn* seeks excellence. Hence, regardless of whether one prepares for the civil service examinations or not, all those who simply want to study are admitted to the *hyanggyo*. The *sŏwŏn*, however, enrolls only those who have a single-minded determination for scholarship."⁷¹ Moreover, the practices and atmosphere of *sŏwŏn* and *hyanggyo* were also different as Pak Sech'ae again describes:

Hyanggyo are located in the administrative counties and are thus bound by various laws and regulations. *Sŏwŏn*, however, are situated mostly in leisurely and isolated surroundings so that the scholars there can devote their minds and hearts to the study of the classics and lives of the sages and to exchange what they have learned. Truly this is the reason why Confucian scholarship flourishes nowadays.⁷²

In addition to these differences, there was also a significant gap in the social status of the students enrolled in these two institutions. In discussing various issues related to *sŏwŏn* in 1699, Chief State Councillor Yu Sangun (1636-1707) stated as follows:

The *sŏwŏn* is different from the *hyanggyo* [in the following respect]. In the *hyanggyo*, there are [two types of] students – those who are admitted within the assigned quota and those who are admitted as non-quota students.⁷³ Those who

70. Yi Chesin, *Ch'ŏnggang sŏnsaeng huch'ŏn soeŏ*, in *Taedong yasŏng* (Seoul: Kosŏ kanhaenghoe, 1911), 188.

71. *Namgye Pak Sech'ae munjip*, 52.10b-11a.

72. *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok* (Seoul: Minch'ang Munhwasa, 1990) (Kyujanggak Collection No. 12905), 577 (Sukchong 20/10/6).

73. Originally, the number of students enrolled in *hyanggyo* was prescribed by the state. But as the number of people who wished to study at *hyanggyo* increased, it became an accepted practice for *hyanggyo* to admit additional students. Thus, those students who were admitted according to the assigned quota were called *aengnae kyosaeng* (quota students) and those who were admitted

are enrolled as the non-quota students are all either sons of concubines (*sööl*) or commoners (*yangmin*) . . . [Those enrolled in] *söwön* on the other hand are the honored members of the scholar families (*saja chi chonsungja*), who are concurrently listed in the rosters of Confucian scholars (*Ch'önggümmok*) . . .⁷⁴

So, there was a marked distinction in the social status of those who were enrolled in *söwön* and *hyanggyo* – yangban in the former and commoners in the latter.

As the social status of the scholars in *söwön* and *hyanggyo* was different, the obligations imposed upon those enrolled in these two institutions also varied. In 1644, the Ministry of Rites made the following remark: “From the beginning, the *söwön* have not been same as the *hyanggyo* and therefore the system of assigning those who fail the periodic test (*kogang*) to bear military tax is not applied [to the *söwön* scholars].”⁷⁵ In other words, the *söwön* students were not obliged to take the *kogang* test that was given periodically to determine whether students were keeping up the minimum academic standard, whereas *hyanggyo* students were required to take the *kogang*, and when they failed the test, they became liable for military tax. I have argued elsewhere that the demarcation between yangban and commoner was largely determined by whether or not one bore military tax.⁷⁶ According to Yu Sangun, the *söwön* scholars were exempted from taking the *kogang*, and this means that those who were enrolled in the *söwön* were automatically exempted from military tax. With such privileges and honors enjoyed by *söwön* scholars, the *söwön* naturally attracted members of yangban families and became the gathering place for local yangban. *Hyanggyo* on the other hand were looked down upon by the people, and the respectable families characteristically avoided any association with *hyanggyo*. According to Chöng Yangp'il, who was the governor of Ch'ungch'öng province in 1641, “Family members of government officials who wanted to be known for being Confucian scholars regarded any association with *hyanggyo* as shameful.”⁷⁷ In 1651, Hwang Ho, the headmaster of the Sönggyun'gwan, stated that “scholars abhor belonging to *hyanggyo* and . . . none from the scholar families of distinguished lineage can ever be found there.”⁷⁸ I have explained elsewhere that the social status system

beyond the assigned quota were called *aegoe kyosaeng* (non-quota students).

74. *Söwön tǔngnok*, 700 (Sukchong 25/7/15).

75. *Söwön tǔngnok*, 23 (Injo 22/8/28).

76. Ch'oe Yöng-ho, “Chosön wangjo chön'gi üi kwagö wa sinbun chedo,” *Kuksagwan nonch'ong* 26 (1991): 171-79.

77. *Hakkyo tǔngnok*, 36 (Injo 19/7/3).

in Korea became rigidified with greater emphasis on birth during the seventeenth century.⁷⁹ It appears that the rise of *sŏwŏn* during the seventeenth century also contributed to the greater social differentiation based on birth by polarizing the social status of those who were admitted to *sŏwŏn* and *hyanggyo*. Thus, the *sŏwŏn* as the centers of Neo-Confucianism in rural Korea may have worked as an instrument to solidify the ascriptive status system in the late Chosŏn dynasty.

Sŏwŏn and Military Obligations

The different treatment given to scholars of the *sŏwŏn* and the *hyanggyo* led many to seek admission into *sŏwŏn*, shunning *hyanggyo* in order to enjoy the privileges given only to the *sŏwŏn* scholars. Perhaps the most coveted privilege that most people wanted in the late Chosŏn period was exemption from military obligations, which, after the sixteenth century, were fulfilled in general by means of paying military tax. Before the *sŏwŏn* began to be established in the mid-sixteenth century, all students registered with a *hyanggyo* were exempted from military obligations. As a result of this privilege, many students flocked to *hyanggyo* to escape military tax, causing in turn a significant decline in academic standards. As many have pointed out, this decline was an important factor contributing to the rise of the *sŏwŏn*. As *hyanggyo* increasingly became favorite places for those who wanted to dodge military tax, the so-called *kogang* system was devised to detect delinquency and to determine whether the students' academic standards were adequate. Those *hyanggyo* students who failed the *kogang* test became liable for military tax. So it was imperative for the *hyanggyo* students to maintain a minimum academic standing by passing the *kogang* test.⁸⁰

As we have just seen, such an obligation was not required of the scholars in the *sŏwŏn*. Instead, the *sŏwŏn* scholars enjoyed other privileges and prestige, far exceeding those granted to the *hyanggyo* students. Under such conditions, it is only natural that people preferred the *sŏwŏn* to the *hyanggyo* and that those who wished to avoid military obligations would try to enroll in *sŏwŏn*. Thus, one of the most serious criticisms raised against the *sŏwŏn* during the

78. *Hyojong sillok*, 7.12a.

79. See Ch'oe Yŏng-ho, "Yuhak, haksae, kyosaeng ko," *Yŏksa hakpo* 101 (1984): 1-21.

80. See Ch'oe Yŏng-ho, "Yuhak, haksae, kosaeng ko," 6-14, and "Chosŏn wangjo chŏn'gi ū kwagŏ," 171-79.

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was that many unqualified people gained admission to *sŏwŏn* for the purpose of avoiding military tax.

In an instruction issued in 1675, the Border Defense Council made the following statement: “The non-quota students of all *hyanggyo* today are the dodgers of [military] tax. They do not attend *hyanggyo*. Instead they try to enroll in *sŏwŏn* in order to avoid the annual *kogang* test given by the provincial inspectors. This abuse has become a serious problem, which is truly deplorable.”⁸¹ This situation was especially bad in the southern provinces where, according to the Ministry of Rites, the *sŏwŏn* were occupied by many who were avoiding military obligations.⁸² On another occasion in 1707, Yun Segi (1647-1712), then the Minister of Rites, stated that “Because the *sŏwŏn* scholars are given preferential treatment over those of *hyanggyo*, people compete with each other to gain admission into *sŏwŏn*. *Sŏwŏn* thus have become a haven for the dodgers of military tax.”⁸³

As the private academies attracted many who wanted to escape military tax, the academic qualifications of these people were also lowered significantly, and this in turn had a deleterious effect upon *sŏwŏn* as centers of Neo-Confucian learning. As one official put it, “As the morality of the country has deteriorated, people have no respect for law. They built so many *sŏwŏn* without scruple that nowadays there is hardly any empty space left in the country. Students of *hyanggyo* who are not literate vie against each other to gain admission as *sŏwŏn* scholars to avoid military tax.”⁸⁴ The scholarly atmosphere of the *sŏwŏn* also deteriorated as a result. In 1738, Pak Munsu (1691-1756), Minister of Military Affairs, criticized the abusive practices of *sŏwŏn* as follows:

The *sŏwŏn* nowadays are established with magnificent structures by the sons of former high ministers and by wealthy individuals who try to avoid military obligations Several hundred treacherous individuals belong to one *sŏwŏn* to escape their military tax. They collect money and grains as if they were tax officials. They made the *sŏwŏn* into a place where they cook chickens, slaughter animals, and get drunk. Fearful of these people, the local magistrates avoid them.⁸⁵

81. *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok*, 183 (Sukchong 1/9/28).

82. *Ibid.*, 381 (Sukchong 11/5/22).

83. *Sŭngjŏngwŏn ilgi* (Seoul: Kuksa P'yŏnch'an Wiwŏnhoe, 1969), 23.62d (Sukchong 33/8/30).

84. *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok*, 181 (Sukchong 1/9/28).

85. *Yŏngjo sillok*, 47.38a.

There is another similar account. In a memorial presented in 1793, Yi Pokhyu, a section chief (*chŏngnang*) in the Ministry of Rites, wrote as follows:

The Sŏwŏn is a place for the promotion of scholarship. But lately the practice of scholarly exchanges among scholars has been wholly neglected. The *sŏwŏn* have been reduced to places for drinking and eating by loafers. As many as several hundred people at each *sŏwŏn* are taking advantage of *sŏwŏn* to escape military tax. The severe drain in the number of military tax bearers in various counties is caused by this phenomenon.⁸⁶

Both Yi Pokhyu and Pak Munsu may have exaggerated the number of people escaping military tax at *sŏwŏn*. Nevertheless, the problem of *sŏwŏn* being used as a place to avoid military obligations was one of the most serious problems that plagued the Chosŏn government. As the number of people admitted into *sŏwŏn* swelled, the *sŏwŏn* students also came to be classified into the quota (*aengnae*) and non-quota (*aegoe*) students, just as in *hyanggyo*. Yu Sangun thus proposed to return all the non-quota students of the *sŏwŏn* to the military registers. Although the king approved Yu's proposal,⁸⁷ the government was apparently helpless to stop the military dodgers. Another measure the government introduced to deal with this problem was to limit the number of scholars to be admitted in *sŏwŏn* by setting up quotas. In 1710, King Sukchong issued a decree prescribing the maximum number of scholars: thirty for the *sŏwŏn* whose enshrined worthies were included in the shrine of the National Academy, twenty for *sŏwŏn* that had received the royal charter, and fifteen for *sŏwŏn* that had no royal charter.⁸⁸ A series of edicts and orders to eradicate the abuses were issued, but it appears that the government was not very successful in dealing with the problem of military tax dodgers in the *sŏwŏn*. The abuse of power on the part of the *sŏwŏn* was getting out of control.

Sau and Sŏwŏn

Ever since Chu Sebung established a *sau* (shrine) for An Hyang as an integral part of Sosu Sŏwŏn, it became an accepted practice for virtually every private academy in Korea to set up a shrine for a Confucian worthy or worthies within its compound. Originally there was a difference in the roles and functions of

86. *Chŏngjo sillok*, 38.26b.

87. *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok*, 700-701 (Sukchong 25/7/15).

88. *Chŭngbo munhŏn pigo*, 210.15b.

sŏwŏn and *sau*. Min Chinhu stated in 1717: “The *sŏwŏn* is a place where scholars receive their training whereas the *sau* is a place where former worthies are enshrined. Recently, however, these two objectives became merged into one, thus losing their original purposes.”⁸⁹ In other words, the *sŏwŏn* was a place where scholars gathered for the purpose of pursuing scholarship while the *sau* was a structure that enshrined certain worthies whose distinguished scholarship would serve as an ideal that the academy scholars would strive to emulate. To renew their commitment to live up to the ideals of the enshrined worthies, sacrificial offerings were made regularly in spring and autumn. Although normally all *sŏwŏn* maintained a *sau*, not all *sau* were attached to *sŏwŏn*. There were what may be called independent *sau* that did not have *sŏwŏn* facilities. Thus, there were two types of *sau* – one that was a part of a *sŏwŏn* and the other an independent *sau*.⁹⁰

Historically, the formation of *sŏwŏn* came first and the establishment of *sau* came about afterward as the following *sillok* account tells us:

[As the environment for studies deteriorated in the course of history], scholars in remote regions became frustrated and sought refuge in mountains and forests. The rise of *sŏwŏn* was an inevitable product of these developments, and Zhu Xi was truly the first proponent and promoter [of *sŏwŏn*]. As *sŏwŏn* were established, many scholars congregated there to study old texts and to reflect on [the teachings of] ancient scholars until their mind and hearts became moved and aroused. They then selected former sages and worthies for emulation and illustrious native-born Confucian scholars for adoration, and set up their tablets of enshrinement to offer sacrificial rites in spring and autumn. [In this way,] how can it be not possible for scholarship to be promoted and the way of nurturing talent to be encouraged? As these objectives are secured, [*sŏwŏn*] have become the fountainhead of the country's morality. Therefore, the foundation of establishing *sŏwŏn* lies in cultivating and nurturing the men of talent, and the rites for the enshrining worthies are originated from *sŏwŏn*. Thus there are also many *sŏwŏn* which do not have enshrined worthies.⁹¹

In other words, a *sŏwŏn* was founded first, and then a *sau* was established afterward as a part of the *sŏwŏn*.

What kind of individuals were selected for enshrinement in *sŏwŏn*? It was customary, at least in the early stage of *sŏwŏn* development, to choose individuals for enshrinement based solely on distinguished achievements in the

89. *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok*, 868 (Sukchong 43/11/19).

90. There is a good discussion on the difference between *sŏwŏn* and *sau* by Chŏng Manjo. See his “17-18 segi ŭi *sŏwŏn*, *sau*,” 215-22.

91. *Hyojong sillok*, 19.2a-b.

field of scholarship. In a memorial submitted in 1644, Yi Sik (1584-1647), the Minister of Rites, writes: “Initially, *sŏwŏn* were established as the sites where scholars can cultivate their scholarship in a quiet surrounding. Those honored enshrinees were always selected from those who were well-known in their times as men of exemplary scholarship and virtue.”⁹² Ideally, the enshrined worthies in *sŏwŏn* were men of distinguished scholarly achievements. Thus, most of the early *sŏwŏn* established during the sixteenth century enshrined individuals who were known for their scholarship in Neo-Confucian teachings such as An Hyang (at Sosu), Chŏng Mongju (1337-1391) (at Imgo), Yi Hwang (at Tosan), Yi Ŏnjŏk (1491-1553) (at Oksan), Kim Koengp’il (1454-1504) (at Okch’ŏn), and Ch’oe Ch’ung (984-1068) (at Munhŏn). Because of this emphasis on scholarly accomplishment, the notable individuals who had distinguished careers in government service were not eligible to be enshrined unless they had attained equally distinguished scholarship. In 1700, State Councillor of the Right Sin Wan, lamenting abuses in enshrinement practices, stated:

[In the past,] all those who were enshrined in *sŏwŏn* were chosen from those who distinguished themselves in Confucian scholarship. Recently, however, this has not been the case. Those who, while serving as provincial governors and county magistrates, exerted great influence upon Confucian students and made notable achievements in their public careers are also allowed to be enshrined. Not all those who are enshrined are men of scholarship. Even such individuals as the late prime ministers Yi Wŏnik (1547-1634), Yi Hangbok (1556-1618), and Yi Tŏkhyŏng (1561-1613), who were not primarily known for their scholarship, are now enshrined.⁹³

Yi Wŏnik, Yi Hangbok, and Yi Tŏkhyŏng all had distinguished careers as government officials, reaching the apex of power before their death, but, according to the original standard of *sŏwŏn* enshrinement, their high office did not qualify them to be chosen as enshrined worthies. Similar views were also expressed by Ch’oe Sŏkchŏng (1646-1715), Deputy Director of Royal House Administration,⁹⁴ and Kim Ku (1649-1704), Minister of Rites.⁹⁵ Those with scholarly distinction alone could gain acceptance as enshrined worthies. Only after this standard was lowered with the proliferation of private academies did

92. *Injo sillok*, 45.41a.

93. *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok*, 710 (Sukchong 26/10/12).

94. *Ibid.*, 709.

95. *Ibid.*, 710.

these individuals become enshrined in *sŏwŏn*. Such an emphasis on Confucian scholarship as the primary qualification for enshrinement in private academies underscores the importance the *sŏwŏn* placed on scholarship.

But with the decline of the academic standards and the proliferation of *sŏwŏn* during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the characteristics of those who were chosen to be enshrined underwent significant changes. The men selected for enshrinement were no longer men of scholarly achievements alone. They were frequently individuals who served as government officials with no notable academic distinction. In some cases, they were native sons who had attained little or no significant achievements in their lifetimes, and in other cases, wealthy and influential families set up *sau* to honor their clan ancestors. More significantly, however, as factional strife intensified, partisan consideration played an increasingly important role in selecting the deceased individuals for *sau* enshrinement.

Again, Chŏng Manjo gives us an excellent study on the people who were responsible for organizing new *sŏwŏn* and *sau* as well as their motivations. He divides the organizers of *sau* largely into two categories. The first was local officials or semi-officials who set up shrines mostly for martyred individuals, such as Yi Sunsin (1545-98) and Chŏng Mongju, to honor their dedicated loyalty for the country and for principle. Such cases, however, were very small in number and not important, according to Chŏng Manjo. Most shrines were erected by private individuals, who are divided into three groups by Chŏng. The first group consists of the descendants of the enshrined worthies who set up *sau* to honor their ancestors. To have one of their family members enshrined as a worthy enhanced the pride and prestige of their clan and helped to bring about clan harmony and solidarity. The second group active in setting up new *sau* were the disciples of the enshrined individuals. In the hope of continuing the academic and political precepts of their teachers, disciples often organized *sŏwŏn* where they enshrined their teachers. As the philosophical views of the influential individuals were invariably tied to the political debates of the time, these *sŏwŏn* often became involved in factional struggles. The third group active in establishing *sau* were local individuals who attempted to gain political influence in their regions by establishing *sŏwŏn* in the name of well-known personages. By identifying themselves with the enshrined worthies, these local leaders, according to Chŏng Manjo, could receive political support from the clan members of the enshrined, who were usually influential and powerful in politics.⁹⁶

96. Chŏng Manjo, "17-18 segi ūi *sŏwŏn*, *sau*," 232-55.

Having examined virtually the same materials that Chōng used, I have reached similar conclusions.⁹⁷ Let us now look at how the enshrinement was made. First, the lineage affiliation was an important factor for enshrinement. Anbong Yōngdang in Sōngju in Kyōngsang province is a good example. Anbong Yōngdang enshrined eighteen notable members of the Sōngsan [Sōngju] Yi clan, spanning over fourteen generations from Yi Changgyōng, a Koryō official, to Yi Kwangjōk (1628-171). Founded in 1581, Anbong Yōngdang was destroyed during the Hideyoshi invasions, but was rebuilt in 1606 by the Provincial Governor, Yi Tōg'on, who was a maternal descendant of the Sōngsan Yi clan. Since then it was maintained and protected by both the paternal and the maternal descendants of the Sōngsan Yi clan.⁹⁸ Samgang Sōwōn at Miryang in Kyōngsang province was first established in 1563 with the name of Ou Hyangsa (Five brothers shrine) enshrining five Min brothers, Min Kuryōng, Min Kuso, Min Kuyōn, Min Kudo, and Min Kusō. In 1694, Ou Hyangsa was reorganized to become Samgang Sōwōn.⁹⁹ Not much is known about these brothers except that they lived during the reign of King Chungjong (1504-44) and spent their lives together amicably at Samgang.¹⁰⁰ Apparently they held no governmental office, nor were they known for scholarship. Their brotherly affection to each other was a good enough reason to immortalize them. Tongyang Sōwōn of P'yōngsan in Hwanghae province is another example of a clan-affiliated academy. In the last decades of the sixteenth century, Tongyang Sōwōn was founded to enshrine two Koryō loyalists, Sin Sunggyōm (d. 927), who sacrificed his own life to save the life of the Koryō founder, and Yi Saek (1328-96), who steadfastly remained loyal to the Koryō dynasty until his death. P'yōngsan is the seat of P'yōngsan Sin clan, to which Sin Sunggyōm belonged, and is also the place where Yi Saek retired following his resignation from public office after the demise of the Koryō dynasty. Tongyang Sōwōn was then removed to a more spacious location in 1642. This removal was made possible, according to *Yōrūp sau sajōk*, by generous assistance given by Yi Sōngyōn, a descendant of Yi Saek, Sin Iksōng (1588-1644), a scion of the P'yōngsan Sin clan who was a royal consort, and other clan members. Thereafter, Tongyang Sōwōn was maintained largely by the joint

97. *Sōwōn tǔngnok*, 1006-1007 (Kyōngjong 4/4/28).

98. *Yōrūp wōnu sajōk*, 2.115-17. See also Chōng Manjo, "17-18 segi ūi sōwōn, sau," 235-36.

99. *Chodurok*, n.p. (See Miryang section), and *Chōngbo munhōn pigo*, 213.9b.

100. *Chūsen jimmei chishō* (Keijō: Chōsen Sōtokufu, 1937), 1521. See also *Han'guk minjok munhwa taebaekkwā sajōn* (Sōngnam: Han'guk Chōngsin Munhwa Yōn'gwōn, 1989), 8: 837 and 11: 276.

efforts of the descendants of the Sin and Yi clans.¹⁰¹

Second, *söwön* were organized by the disciples of the enshrinees or by those who followed the teachings of the enshrined in the hope of promoting the teachings of their masters. Oksan *Söwön* was founded in 1572 to enshrine Yi Önjök (1491-1553) at An'gang, near Kyöngju in Kyöngsang province, by his disciples. According to Hö Yöp (1517-80), the Headmaster of the National Academy, the initiative to establish Oksan *Söwön* was started by Kwön Töngnin, magistrate of Hapch'ön and a disciple of Yi Önjök, with the support of the local people and officials "to admire his preeminent virtue and to study his profound scholarship" at the site where Yi Önjök often spent his leisure time.¹⁰² Founded in 1576 at Chinju in Kyöngsang province, Tökch'ön *Söwön* enshrined Cho Sik (1501-72), whose teachings on Neo-Confucianism attracted many loyal followers from the Northerners faction. Cho Sik's followers were instrumental in organizing Tökch'ön *Söwön*. Ha Ŭngdo (1540-?) donated the land for the original site, Ch'oe Yönggyöng (1529-90) took charge of the construction of the academy, and Yun Künsu (1537-1616), as the Governor of Kyöngsang province at the time, used his influence to secure endowments for the academy.¹⁰³ The roster of the scholars who studied there (*Tökch'ön Söwön ch'önggüm nok*) between 1609 and the mid-seventeenth century lists some 1,500 names.¹⁰⁴

Hwangsan *Söwön* in Ch'ungch'öng province was established to enshrine Kim Changsaeng (1548-1631) by his disciples because Hwangsan was a place Kim visited often before his death. Later, Kim's teachers, Yi I and Söng Hon, were also enshrined as co-worthies, to which Cho Kwangjo and Yi Hwang were added still later. Then, in 1664, many scholars in both Ch'ungch'öng and Chölla provinces requested the king to grant a charter for the academy. King Hyönjong, however, rejected the request on the grounds that no charter could be granted for individuals who had already been enshrined elsewhere.¹⁰⁵ Hwayang *Söwön* is a classic example of an academy organized by the disciples of the enshrinees. Founded in 1695, Hwayang *Söwön* enshrined Song Siyöl (1607-89) in the scenic valley of Hwayangdong, near Ch'öngju in

101. *Yöriup wönu sajök*, 3.532-38. See also Chöng Manjo, "17-18 segi üi söwön, sau," 237-38.

102. *Yöriup wönu sajök*, 2.15-17.

103. Yi Suhwan, "Chosön sidae söwön üi inchök kusöng kwa kyöngjaejök kiban," Ph.D. dissertation, Yöngnam University, 1990, 42-43. See also his "Söwön üi chöngch'i sahoesajök koch'al," *Kyonam sahak* 1 (1985): 25-28.

104. See *Tökch'ön Söwön ch'önggüm nok*, in *Söwön chi ch'ongsö*, v. 7.

105. *Hyönjong sillok*, 8.10a and 13a.

Ch'ungch'ŏng province. Song's faithful disciples, Kwŏn Sangha (1641-1721), Chŏng Ho (1648-1736), and others, were responsible for starting this academy. Hwayangdong was chosen as the site because it was Song Siyŏl's favorite retreat place, where he meditated and taught his followers.¹⁰⁶ In spite of the rule prohibiting a charter to be issued to a worthy who had already been enshrined elsewhere, King Sukchong granted the charter in 1716 with his personal calligraphy. Hwayang Sŏwŏn in time became the bastion of the *Noron* scholars wielding an enormous influence upon politics, economy and scholarship in late Chosŏn Korea.¹⁰⁷

Third, certain geographic connections with the enshrined worthies also led to the enshrinement. The birth place of a distinguished individual was often a favorite site for an academy dedicated to his honor. As we have seen earlier, Sosu Sŏwŏn, the first private academy in Korea, was organized at Sunhŭng where the enshrined worthy An Hyang was born and his descendants lived for many generations. Chŏng Mongju, whom many Chosŏn scholars regarded as the father of Neo-Confucianism in Korea, was born in Yŏngch'ŏn, Kyŏngsang province. In 1553, the local scholars, officials, and people, according to a report of the Provincial Governor, pooled their resources to organize a private academy at the site where Chŏng Mongju was born and studied in his youth. This academy was later named Imgo Sŏwŏn.¹⁰⁸ In 1657, scholars from Kobu in Chŏlla province petitioned to grant a royal charter for the shrine that enshrined three native sons – Song Sanghyŏn (1551-92) and Sin Ho (1539-97), who gave their lives during the Hideyoshi invasions, and Kim Chun, who sacrificed his life for the loyal cause during the Yi Kwŏl Rebellion of 1624. The petition stated, “Enshrining at their native places the loyal individuals who sacrificed their lives for the upright causes is a time honored practice.” This request was soon approved with a grant of the title “Upright and Loyal (Chŏngch'ung).”¹⁰⁹

The place where one attained a significant achievement was also a favorite site for enshrinement. Both Noryang and T'ongyŏng on the southern coast were important places for Yi Sunsin (1545-98), the great naval hero, the former being the place where he was killed in his last battle and the latter where he had his naval command. At both of these places, a shrine was set up for Yi Sunsin by the local people, and King Hyŏnjong granted a charter with the title

106. *Hwayang chi*, (n.d.), 2.36a-48b; *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok*, 639-44 (Sukchong 21/12/16) and 650-51 (Sukchong 22/9/6).

107. *Hwayang chi*, 2.51b-52b.

108. *Myŏngjong sillok*, 16.63b-64a; *Yŏrŭp wŏnu sajŏk*, 2.555-56.

109. *Hyojong sillok*, 18.13a-b and *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok*, 57-58 (Hyojong 8/2/16).

of “Loyal and Brave (Ch’ungyŏl)” to both in 1663.¹¹⁰ A brief visit by an eminent person also became a cause for enshrinement. Kosan Sŏwŏn in Kyŏngsan, Kyŏngsang province, was first set up as a study hall in the late sixteenth century. One day, Yi Hwang visited the place and named it Kosan Sŏwŏn. Having been destroyed during the Hideyoshi invasions, Kosan Sŏwŏn was rebuilt in 1605, when Chŏng Kyŏngse (1563-1633) visited as the Governor of Kyŏngsang province. Because of this visit, Chŏng Kyŏngse was chosen as an enshrined worthy in 1690.¹¹¹ A place where a person spent his life in exile was often selected for an enshrinement. A powerful leader of the *Noron*, Kim Ch’angjip (1648-1722) was exiled briefly to the remote Puryŏng in Hamgyŏng province during his long turbulent political career. In 1771, a group of scholars in Puryŏng circulated a letter proposing to establish an academy in honor of Kim Ch’angjip. The letter stated that “it would be a shame for our community” if an academy was not organized for this “great worthy” at the site where he spent his exile. This private academy was named Ch’unghyŏn Sŏwŏn.¹¹² In some cases, the marriage with a local woman was a ground for enshrinement. A victim of the History Purge in 1498, Kim Ilson (1464-98) was widely admired by the *sarim* scholars for his uprightness and courage. Among many shrines that honored him, one at Mokch’ŏn in Ch’ungch’ŏng province was unique in that it enshrined Kim Ilson on the grounds that “he, as a man from Yŏngnam, was married to a local woman.”¹¹³

As the private academies and the shrines became popular, those who wanted to start these institutions were quite resourceful in finding reasons for enshrinement. But, as the number of *sŏwŏn* and *sau* proliferated, there were bound to be abuses. For example, in 1645, the governor of Chŏlla province reported that Sin Kyŏngjik and Sŏng Kyŏngch’ang established a *sŏwŏn* next to a *hyanggyo* enshrining their grandfather, who did not meet any qualification. When, following public outcries, the county magistrate, Pak Changwŏn, had the building destroyed, they started a campaign to remove the magistrate and even mobilized a mob to destroy one of the buildings in the magistrate office.¹¹⁴ In another case, which took place in the northwestern province of P’yŏngan, a *sŏwŏn* was constructed without even deciding on which individual to enshrine, and only after the construction was completed did they look for a

110. *Hyŏnjong sillok*, 7.25a.

111. *Yŏrŭp wŏnu sajŏk*, 2.287-88.

112. *Ch’unghyŏn Sŏwŏn chi*, 79-89 (in *Sŏwŏn chi ch’ongsŏ*, vol. 9.)

113. *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok*, 203 (Sukchong 2/5/11).

114. *Ibid.*, 25-26 (Injo 23/1/19).

person to be honored.¹¹⁵ In these and other cases, the selection of enshrined worthies was sometimes based not on academic considerations but on selfish motivations.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the issue of enshrinement vexed the Chosŏn government. The original purpose of enshrining noted individuals was to revere and emulate the good deeds of the worthies. Contrary to such an expectation, the enshrinement was often made for selfish purposes. In 1724, after traveling through Chŏlla province as a secret inspector (*Amhaeng ŏsa*), Yi Chinsun (1679-?) reported as follows:

Nowadays, the establishment of *sŏwŏn* does not come from the desire to emulate the worthies. Wanting to advance their personal positions, the opportunistic people in rural areas organize a *sŏwŏn* at a place where a former Confucian worthy or a high government minister might have traveled or if they find a notable individual among their relatives. Their scheme [in setting up a *sŏwŏn*] is to gain selfish advantages. Such a practice is deplorable. When they organize a *sŏwŏn*, they send out letters to all counties and provinces requesting monetary and material support, and the donations then flow in ceaselessly. After a *sŏwŏn* is organized, they then recruit non-duty adults (*hanjŏng*), who are then called *sŏwŏn* students, and also make a roster of individuals who regularly donate rice or land to the *sŏwŏn*. [By this means,] a countless number of individuals receive exemption from military tax. Such a practice makes it very difficult for each county to secure non-duty adults. In the small county of Kŭmsan alone, there are as many as five *sŏwŏn* and virtually all male adults within this county belong to these *sŏwŏn*. From this example, one can easily surmise the overall situation [within the province].¹¹⁶

It appears that the state was unable to control the proliferation and abuse of the *sŏwŏn*.

Sŏwŏn and Factional Politics

The enshrinement of worthies in *sŏwŏn* during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was completely entwined with political and factional considerations. As Chŏng Manjo points out, the factional alignment of late Chosŏn dynasty politics in general followed the scholastic lineages deriving from the two giants of sixteenth-century scholarship, namely Yi Hwang (T'oegye) and Yi I

115. Ibid., 524-25 (Sukchong 18/1/20).

116. *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok*, 1006-1007 (Kyŏngjong 4/4/28).

(Yulgok). Thus the *Sŏin* (Westerners) followed the philosophical beliefs of Yulgok and his friend Sŏng Hon (1535-1598), whose ideas were continued by Kim Changsaeng (1548-1631), Kim Chip (1574-1656), Song Siyŏl and their followers, while the *Namin* (Southerners) continued to embrace the philosophical precepts of T'oegye and his followers: Yu Sŏngnyong (1542-1607), Hŏ Mok (1595-1682), Yun Sŏndo (1587-1671) and others.¹¹⁷

As factional strife intensified during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it had a significant effect upon the establishment of the private academies. When one faction gained power, it encouraged its followers to organize new academies while denying its opponents the right to do the same. Such politicization is clearly demonstrated in Chŏng Manjo's study on the number of the royal charters granted to private academies during the reign of King Sukchong (1674-1720), a period known for partisan politics. The following table is taken from Chŏng Manjo's study:¹¹⁸

Table 3. Number of Royal Charters Granted

Years	In Power	<i>Namin</i>	<i>Sŏin</i>	No faction	Total
1674-80	<i>Namin</i>	13	1	3	17
1680-89	<i>Sŏin</i>	0	19	4	23
1689-94	<i>Namin</i>	13	1	1	15
1694-1720	<i>Sŏin</i>	2	55	19	76
Total		28	76	27	131

According to this table, when the *Sŏin* were in power, they permitted charters to only two *Namin* sponsored academies while granting seventy-four to academies sponsored by the *Sŏin*, and likewise, when the *Namin* were in power, they granted charters to only two *Sŏin* academies while giving twenty-six to academies established by their followers during Sukchong's reign. Such politicization of course had a serious impact upon the academies affecting their standard, objectives, and orientations as the center of academic pursuit.

The politicization of the *sŏwŏn* often led to bitter fighting among the political factions over the authorization of a new *sŏwŏn* and the destruction of existing ones. The issue surrounding the enshrinement of Song Siyŏl as the "co-deity" at Tobong Sŏwŏn in Kyŏnggi province is a case in point. The leader of the *Noron* (Old Doctrine), an offshoot of the *Sŏin*, Song Siyŏl dominated the

117. Chŏng Manjo, "17-18 segi ūi *sŏwŏn*, *sau*," 245-46.

118. *Ibid.*, 276.

politics of the Chosŏn court for a long time until he was forced to take poison in 1689 at the age of 82. A formidable scholar with single-minded dedication to the causes he considered just, he commanded unflinching loyalty from his followers before and after his death. If he was a paragon of virtue in the eyes of his admirers, he was anathema to those who disagreed with him for he was seen by his opponents as an evil man who ruthlessly persecuted his political enemies. In 1694, when the *Namin*, who had earlier forced the death of Song Siyŏl, lost power, the *Sŏin* gained the control of government, and as a result Song Siyŏl's honor and respect were restored along with the conferment of a posthumous title, *Munjŏng* (Literatus and Upright). Thereafter, as many as seventy private academies throughout the country enshrined him as their guardian worthy, of which no less than thirty-seven were honored with the royal charter.¹¹⁹

As Song Siyŏl's honor was being restored under the *Sŏin* administration, a scholar, Yi Suk, proposed in 1694 to enshrine Song as "the co-worthy" in the prestigious Tobong Sŏwŏn,¹²⁰ which was founded in 1573 to enshrine Cho Kwangjo (1482-1519). The main victim of the 1519 purge, Cho Kwangjo was universally respected as a martyr for a just cause by the Neo-Confucian literati in Korea, and the enshrinement of Song Siyŏl in Tobong Sŏwŏn would elevate Song's stature as a Neo-Confucian worthy to the level of Cho Kwangjo, and Song's admirers in fact compared his life and achievements with those of Cho Kwangjo.¹²¹ His opponents, however, vehemently opposed his enshrinement in the academy where the respected Cho Kwangjo was enshrined by calling Song Siyŏl "a man who only promoted the selfish interest of his political party and brought malady to the state and ruin to the government."¹²² In spite of such opposition, Song's enshrinement in Tobong Sŏwŏn was approved by the king in late 1694¹²³ and in the following year he was formally accepted in the Tobong Academy.¹²⁴ But, in 1721, when the *Noron* lost power to the *Soron*, the enshrinement of Song Siyŏl in Tobong Sŏwŏn came under criticism. His opponents accused him of having violated the cardinal Confucian principle and having deceived the ruler and demanded that he should be removed from the shrine of Tobong Sŏwŏn. So, in 1723, Song Siyŏl's tablet was removed from the

119. Yi Yŏngch'un, "Song Si-yŏl," *Han'guk minjok munhwa taebaek kwa sajŏn*, 13: 22.

120. *Sukchong sillok*, 26.42b.

121. *Ibid.*, 27.39a-b.

122. *Ibid.*, 28.14b.

123. *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok*, 646-47 (Sukchong 21/12/16).

124. *Chodurok*, 32.

Tobong Academy, a victim of the bitter factional strife between the *Noron* and the *Soron*.¹²⁵

The *Soron* domination, however, did not last long. With the enthronement of King Yŏngjo in 1724, the *Soron* was placed once again in a defensive position as the *Noron* demanded reprisal against the *Soron*.¹²⁶ This shift in political fortune in turn prompted the followers of Song Siyŏl to start a campaign to restore Song's enshrinement in Tobong Sŏwŏn¹²⁷ and he was finally enshrined once again in the Tobong Academy in 1725, this time for good.¹²⁸ There are many similar cases in which enshrinement in a *sŏwŏn* became entangled with factional struggle.

With the rise of factional politics, many private academies became identified with political factions. According to Yi Suhwan's study, most of the *sŏwŏn* that were organized after the seventeenth century can be categorized into two groups, one belonging to the *Namin* and the other to the *Sŏin* – based on the intellectual lineages of the enshrinees or the founders.¹²⁹ Yi Suhwan also finds that geographically the *Namin* academies were largely concentrated in Kyŏngsang province while the *Sŏin* academies were distributed mostly in Kyŏnggi and Ch'ungch'ŏng provinces.¹³⁰ Moreover, there was a difference, according to Yi Suhwan, in the backgrounds of the officers and administrators of the academies. In the cases of the *Namin* academies in the Kyŏngsang region, most of the directors and staff officers were drawn from the locally distinguished scholars who had little or no ties with the central government. The *Sŏin* academies, on the other hand, had appointed high officials in the central government as the director while assigning locally distinguished scholars as the deputy director for the actual day to day management of an academy. For example, Tonam Sŏwŏn, which was founded in Yŏnsan (Ch'ungch'ŏng province) in 1634 to enshrine Kim Changsaeng (1548-1631), counted among its directors such individuals as Song Chun'gil (1606-72), the Sixth State Councillor; Yi Chae (1680-1764), the Minister of Personnel; Pak P'ilchu (1665-1748), the Fourth State Councillor; and Yi Kijin (1687-1755),

125. *Kyŏngjong sillok*, 11.18b, 22a-b, 25a-26b, and *Kyŏngjong sujŏng sillok*, 4.6a-9a.

126. For a good discussion on these factional politics, see JaHyun Kim Haboush, *A Heritage of Kings: One Man's Monarchy in the Confucian World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), Chapter 7; and Yi Ŭnsun, *Chosŏn hugi tangjaengsa yŏn'gu* (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1988).

127. *Yŏngjo sillok*, 3.14b, 18a-b.

128. *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok*, 1020-21 (Yŏngjo 1/1/14).

129. Yi Suhwan, "Chosŏn sidae *sŏwŏn* ŭi inchŏk kusŏng kwa kyŏngjaejŏk kiban," Ph.D. Dissertation, Yŏngnam University (1990), 3 and 39.

130. *Ibid.*, 86-87.

the Minister of Personnel.¹³¹ Tonam Sŏwŏn later added Kim Chip (1574-1656), Song Chun'gil, and Song Siyŏl, all powerful leaders of the *Sŏin*, in its honored roll of enshrines. As for Sŏksil Sŏwŏn, which was founded in Yangju in 1656 to enshrine the brothers Kim Sangyong (1561-1637) and Kim Sanghŏn (1570-1652), the academy regulation stipulated that the director should be "a person of high position and moral virtue who is widely admired by the scholars of the time."¹³² When Musŏng Sŏwŏn, which enshrined Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn (b. 857), Sin Cham (1491-1554) and others, received the royal charter in 1696, Nam Kuman (1629-1711), the Chief State Councillor and the leader of the *Sŏin*, was the director of that academy at the time.¹³³ Musŏng Sŏwŏn also had a stipulation that its director should be "an official of the third grade or higher rank with a high reputation of virtue."¹³⁴ Thus, the *Sŏin* academies usually maintained close political connections with the central government that had been dominated largely by the *Sŏin* during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This situation in turn made the *sŏwŏn* in the countryside an important power basis of political factions.

One of the important activities undertaken by *sŏwŏn* was publications of books.¹³⁵ According to *Nup'an ko* (On book printing) by Sŏ Yugu (1764-1845), some 167 different titles of books were published by seventy-eight different *sŏwŏn*, and it was customary for the *sŏwŏn* to exchange their publications with each other. In 1968-69, Yi Ch'unhŭi conducted an inventory of the books preserved by thirty-three surviving *sŏwŏn* in South Korea and discovered that none of the *Namin* sponsored *sŏwŏn* in Kyŏngsang province carried in its library collections any work written by Yi I or Song Siyŏl, the spiritual leaders of the *Sŏin*, and likewise the *Sŏin*-sponsored academies did not keep in their libraries any work of Yi Hwang, Yi Ŏnjŏk, or Yu Sŏngnyong, the spiritual leaders of the *Namin*.¹³⁶ The factional rivalry apparently did not allow the scholars of the private academies even to read the scholarships of the factional opponents.

131. *Ibid.*, 69-92.

132. *Miho chŏnjip*, 14.20b.

133. *Musŏng sŏwŏn wŏnji*, 28.

134. *Ibid.*, 141.

135. Book publication and collection is an important part of the Korean *sŏwŏn*'s activities; however, space does not permit the examination of this topic in this paper.

136. Yi Ch'unhŭi, *Yijo sŏwŏn mun'go mongnok* (Seoul: Kukhoe Tosŏgwan, 1969), 23-24.

Sŏwŏn and Local Power

As the *sŏwŏn* became increasingly politicized during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they also contributed to regional tension and conflict. Perhaps the most serious incident involving regional conflict arose in the mid-eighteenth century when members of the *Sŏin* faction attempted to establish a *sŏwŏn* for Kim Sanghŏn in Andong, the center of the *Namin* scholars.¹³⁷

The region surrounding Andong in northern Kyŏngsang province was known during the later part of the Chosŏn dynasty as the heartland of Korean Neo-Confucianism. Yi Hwang (T'oegye), perhaps the greatest interpreter of Zhu Xi's philosophy in Korea, was born and spent much of his long scholarly life in Yeon, near Andong. Influenced by the teachings of T'oegye, the scholars in this region generally adhered to Yi Hwang's philosophy in the academic debates on such issues as the primacy of principle vs. material force (*i-ki*) that raged during much of the middle and later periods of the Chosŏn dynasty. The whole Yŏngnam region gained a reputation as the cradle of many distinguished scholars.¹³⁸

In the factional politics of the late Chosŏn dynasty, the followers of Yi Hwang's philosophy were usually identified with the *Namin*. In the struggle for power, however, the *Namin* were outmaneuvered constantly by the *Sŏin* except for a few brief occasions, and were forced to remain in retirement most of the time. The long political alienation of the Yŏngnam people became a source of concern for some officials within the central government. Thus, in 1733, Cho Hyŏnmŏng (1690-1752) stated to King Yŏngjo:

As for the people in Yŏngnam, they have been forsaken by the court for almost forty years. Even descendants of renowned worthies have now been reduced to the status of peasant, having lost even low-ranking local positions. They all say that if they discuss factional issues, they are treated as traitors and that even if they become successful in the civil service examinations, they are abandoned by the court. So, they would rather become peasants to work the soil in order to make living.¹³⁹

137. For a good study of this, see Chŏng Manjo, "Yŏngjo 14-nyŏn ũ Andong Kim Sanghŏn Sŏwŏn kŏllip sibi – t'angp'yŏngha no-soron punjaeng ũ iltan," *Han'gukhak yŏn'gu* (Tongdŏk Yŏja Taehakkyo) 1 (1982): 49-83.

138. *Sŏngjŏngwŏn ilgi*, 42.118b (Yŏngjo 9/3/4)

139. *Sŏngjŏngwŏn ilgi*, 41.948a (Yŏngjo 9/1/13).

As the sense of alienation became pervasive among the scholars in Kyŏngsang province, Andong became the center of the embittered *Namin*, who harbored resentment toward their political opponents in control of the central government.

Then, in 1738, local individuals, headed by one An T'aekchun, attempted to establish a *sŏwŏn* to enshrine Kim Sanghŏn with the support of the provincial governor and the county magistrate. A moral purist known for his dedication to principle and loyalty, Kim Sanghŏn (1570-1652) was a leader of the *Sŏin* in his life time and was also the grandfather of Kim Suhang (1629-89) and the great-grandfather of Kim Ch'angjip (1648-1722), both of whom were powerful leaders of the *Noron* faction, an offshoot of the *Sŏin* faction. Andong was the Kim family's ancestral clan seat and was also the place where he retired after the humiliating defeat in the Manchu invasion in 1636.¹⁴⁰ Hence there was ample justification for establishing a *sŏwŏn* for him according to the prevailing practices, even though there were no less than twelve different *sŏwŏn* within the county of Andong at the time.¹⁴¹

But it provoked a violent reaction in Andong. An angry mob of more than a thousand people surrounded the magistrate's office, heaping insults on the official, and then turned against the shrine, smashing it into pieces.¹⁴² The construction of a Kim Sanghŏn *sŏwŏn* in Andong was regarded by the local people as a politically motivated action on the part of the *Noron*, an attempt to secure a foothold in the heartland of the *Namin*. This incident in turn touched off an angry debate within the court between the *Noron* and the *Soron* factions threatening King Yŏngjo's ambitious policy of *T'angp'yŏng* (Grand Harmony).¹⁴³ A split within the ranks of the *Sŏin* had led to the formation of *Noron* and *Soron* in the late seventeenth century, and the *Noron* in general pursued an uncompromising position toward the *Namin* while the *Soron* sought more lenient measures during Yŏngjo's reign.

Representing the *Noron*'s position, Kim Chaero (1682-1759), the Second Minister in the Office of Ministers-without-Portfolio, deplored the decline in morality among the people in Kyŏngsang province and stated:

140. *Yŏngjo sillok*, 47.28b. *Sŏngjŏngwŏn ilgi*, 48.133 (Yŏngjo 14/6/20). He had advocated to fight the Manchu until the last man rather than to surrender).

141. *Chodurok*, 2. [52-56].

142. *Sŏngjŏngwŏn ilgi*, 48.133a (Yŏngjo 14/6/20).

143. For a good discussion of *t'angp'yŏng*, see JaHyun Kim Haboush, *A Heritage of Kings*, 142-65.

The late upright Minister Kim Sanghŏn is a great worthy, whose dedication to the cause of justice and loyalty will be adored by hundreds of generations. Unable to find fault to criticize him, those in the Yŏngnam region who disagreed with him could not help but admire him. They fear that the construction of a *sŏwŏn* [after him] would threaten their control of local power (*hyangkwŏn*) and thus oppose it. The opposition comes from a vicious heart. If they had disagreed [with the establishment of the *sŏwŏn*], they still could have appealed to the court. [Instead,] they destroyed the shrine for the former upright minister . . . and this is an act of robbery. If this act is not stopped now, the country will face unending worries in the future While I was the governor there, there was not a single case of partisan dispute. Ever since the memorial of Yi Inji . . . which the court failed to firmly reject and chastize, the mores of the Yŏngnam people became wily and impudent leading to this incident Those who are guilty of this crime must be punished severely, and only then can we expect that they will develop a sense of fear [toward the authority] and reform themselves.¹⁴⁴

Blaming the general deterioration of morality in Kyŏngsang province, Kim Chaero demanded severe punishment for those who were responsible for the destruction of the Kim Sanghŏn *sŏwŏn* to prevent a similar incident from taking place in the future.

A *Soron* member, Pak Munsu, the Minister of War, however, disagreed, criticizing those who were responsible for trying to establish a *sŏwŏn* for Kim Sanghŏn in Andong as the trouble makers. Praising Kim Sanghŏn as an exemplary worthy, Pak Munsu admitted there were good reasons for setting up a shrine for him. He then went on to say:

When one establishes a [new] *sŏwŏn*, [it is customary that] one first listens to the opinions of the local scholars [before undertaking the construction], irrespective of whether the scholars' view is right or wrong. This has been the correct practice generally followed in our country. Therefore, one of his descendants, [a great grandson,] Kim Ch'angjip, even though his power could have moved heaven at his time, in the end did not build a shrine [after Kim Sanghŏn] because the general opinion of the local people opposed it. Presently, local opposition still persists, and yet An T'aekchun and his gang, relying on the power of the magistrate, built a shrine all of sudden [without following proper procedures]. Truly, is this the way to honor Kim Sanghŏn? Their intent is to slander There are numerous scholars in Andong, and all of them are descendants of prominent officials, who had served under former rulers, and have maintained their own points of views for many generations. How can it be possible to change their hearts overnight just because they are pressured to do so?¹⁴⁵

144. *Sŏngjŏngwŏn ilgi*, 48.147b (Yŏngjo 14/6/23).

145. *Ibid.*, 48.148a (Yŏngjo 14/6/23).

Concerned about the alienation of the Andong people, Pak Munsu was calling for a more cautious approach so as not to offend the sensibility of the local people. He then accused the instigators of the *sŏwŏn* of having ulterior motives charging them as “*kunbo* (military provisioners) and *kyosaeng* (students of a county school) who wanted to elevate their status to yangban by making trouble.” “If the government or any family sets up a *sŏwŏn* against the will of the local people, it is not the way and principle of *sŏwŏn*,” he declared.¹⁴⁶

From the heated debates that followed, we can discern one underlying issue – that is, the challenge the Kim Sanghŏn *sŏwŏn* had posed to the local power (*hyangkwŏn*) of Andong.¹⁴⁷ Kim Chaero and his colleagues blamed the people of Andong for the trouble and attributed their violent actions to the potential threat the Kim Sanghŏn *sŏwŏn* would have posed to the local power. Pak Munsu on the other hand interpreted the attempt to organize a Kim Sanghŏn *sŏwŏn* as an unnecessary intrusion of an outside force into Andong, which constituted an act of provocation to the local people. Thus, in this case, the *sŏwŏn* became embroiled in a conflict between the central government and the local people.

According to Yun Yangnae (1673-1751), the governor of Kyŏngsang province, there were many *Namin* and a few *Sŏin* in Kyŏngsang province:

The state wanted to take away the control of the local power of Andong but was unable to do so. The *Sŏin* people were unable to put their feet into the *hyanggyo* [in that region]. As the situation developed not to their liking, they wanted to establish a place of their own [by building a *sŏwŏn*]. But the *Namin* were not willing to share their wealth. This is how the present situation developed.¹⁴⁸

In other words, according to Yun Yangnae, the *Sŏin*, who were in control of the central government, wanted to extend their influence over a region dominated by the *Namin*.

As the Yŏngnam people resisted, there were those who wanted to “reform” them by teaching them a lesson. In a memorial, Yi Suhae, a censor official, stated that the Yŏngnam people often committed flagrant crimes and yet showed no sign of repentance, which he attributed to their lack of good

146. Ibid.

147. Some South Korean scholars have called attention to the rising tension surrounding the power of local offices in the late Chosŏn dynasty. See Kim Ingŏl, “Chosŏn hugi ūi hyangkwŏn ūi ch’ui wa chibaech’ŏng tonghyang,” *Han’guk munhwa* (Seoul National University), 2 (1981): 167-251; Chŏng Manjo, “Yŏngjo 14-nyŏn Andong Kim Sanghŏn *sŏwŏn* kŏllip sibi;” and Kim Yongdŏk, *Hyangch’ŏng yŏn’gu*, (Seoul: Han’guk yŏn’guwŏn, 1978).

148. *Sŏngjŏngwŏn ilgi*, 48.211b (Yŏngjo 14/7/16).

education. He then suggested that a Kim Sanghŏn *sŏwŏn* would have been conducive to “transforming” the people through proper teaching.¹⁴⁹ Like Kim Chaero, Yi Suhae saw the deterioration of morality among the Kyŏngsang people as the cause for this affair. As Chŏng Manjo points out, the Kim Sanghŏn *sŏwŏn* incident became embroiled with factional politics as well as the conflict over the control of local power between the central government and the local elites.

In the end, anxious to maintain his Policy of Grand Harmony, King Yŏngjo adopted a middle ground, placing blame on both sides. He ordered the dismissal of the governor and the magistrate for permitting the construction of the *sŏwŏn* in spite of the existing prohibition against a new *sŏwŏn*. At the same time, he decreed the banishment of those who were responsible for instigating violence against the Kim Sanghŏn *sŏwŏn*. As to the *sŏwŏn* itself, the king gave no permission to rebuild it.¹⁵⁰

This incident suggests at least two issues surrounding the *sŏwŏn* during the eighteenth century. One is that the establishment of a *sŏwŏn* became heavily politicized as one political faction attempted to use the *sŏwŏn* to gain political advantage over its opponent. The other is that it demonstrates the difficulty the central government had in controlling the *sŏwŏn* in rural Korea as the *sŏwŏn* increasingly became the bastion of local scholars who tried to secure their own spheres of influence in their regions, leading to serious conflicts between the center and the periphery.

Abuse of Power

As the government was losing control over rural *sŏwŏn*, private academies increasingly became the power bases of local scholars. Relying upon their vast economic resources¹⁵¹ the local scholars used the *sŏwŏn* as an instrument to expand their power and influence in their regions. In the end, the *sŏwŏn* began to abuse their power. Use of numerous adult males at the expense of state’s military tax, as pointed out above, was one such example. Perhaps the most extreme abuse of power exercised by the *sŏwŏn* was the practice of compelling

149. *Ibid.*, 48.231b (Yŏngjo 14/7/22).

150. *Ibid.*, 48.149b (Yŏngjo 14/6/23).

151. Space does not permit me to look into the economic resources of the *sŏwŏn* in this article. There are two useful studies on this issue: Min Pyŏngha, “Chosŏn *sŏwŏn* ūi kyŏngje kujo,” *Taedong Munhwa Yŏn’gu* 5 (1968), and Yi Suhwan, “Chosŏn sidae *sŏwŏn* ūi inchŏk kusŏng.”

individuals and organizations to offer financial and material contributions. Periodically, many *sŏwŏn* sent out letters requesting donations from various individuals as well as from government offices, and any individual who received such a request was obliged to comply for fear of severe reprisals from the academies. In *Kŭnse Chosŏn chŏnggam*, Pak Chehyŏng (d. 1884), a reform-minded scholar who died during the abortive Kapsin coup, writes as follows:

Wherever there are scholar families (*sajok*), there is the exploitation of the common people (*p'yŏngmin*), and the worst violators are assembled at *sŏwŏn*. The *sŏwŏn* sends out letters signed in a black seal to many counties requesting donations of goods and money to be used in ceremonial rites. Anyone who receives these letters, regardless of whether he is a scholar or a commoner, must empty his purse to pay. If he does not, he will be taken to the *sŏwŏn* where he is threatened with severe punishment. The authority and influence of Hwayangdong Sŏwŏn is especially overbearing, and its letters are called "the black warrants of Hwayangdong (*Hwayangdong mukp'ae*)."¹⁵² The people are already suffering from hardship at the hands of the corrupt officials and are additionally subjected to exploitation by the scholars of the *sŏwŏn*. Unable to make a living, people harbor grudges, gnaw their teeth, and merely look up at heaven [with resignation].¹⁵²

According to Pak Chehyŏng, the *sŏwŏn* in general, not just Hwayang Sŏwŏn, were engaged in the practice of extortions from the general public. Although this account was written in the latter half of the nineteenth century, there is evidence suggesting that many *sŏwŏn* were engaged in such practices even before the nineteenth century. As early as 1724, the Minister of Rites, Yi Chinyu reported the practice of forcible aggrandizement of land and other properties by some *sŏwŏn*.¹⁵³

The most notorious case was the abuse of power by Hwayang Sŏwŏn. Founded in 1696 in Hwayangdong near Ch'ŏngju in Ch'ungch'ŏng province, it was dedicated to Song Siyŏl (1607-89). Having granted it a royal charter, King Sukchong further honored this *sŏwŏn* by bestowing it with a plaque bearing his own calligraphy. Following the will of Song Siyŏl, Mandongmyo was also established in 1717 to enshrine two Ming emperors, Wanli and Chongzhen, within the compound of Hwayang Sŏwŏn.¹⁵⁴ Because of these associations (Song Siyŏl and the two Ming emperors), Hwayang Sŏwŏn in time became one of the most powerful and influential private academies in Korea.

152. Pak Chehyŏng, *Kŭnse Chosŏn chŏnggam* (Tokyo, 1886; reproduced in *Chŏsen gakuhŏ* 59 [1971]), 37b-38a.

153. *Sŏwŏn tŭngnok*, 989 (Kyŏngjong 4/3/29).

154. *Yŏrŭp wŏnu sajak*, 3.117-19 and 165.

As its influence grew, Hwayang Sŏwŏn began to abuse its power and became “one of the most predatory private academies,” as James Palais puts it.¹⁵⁵ Its missives, according to Yi Kibaek, “carried greater authority than government instructions.”¹⁵⁶ Its letters requesting monetary and material contributions were feared, as Pak Chehyŏng has pointed out, by people as “the black warrants of Hwayangdong.” There is an interesting document that suggests the nature of one of these “black warrants of Hwayangdong.” A letter, dated the 16th day of the 8th month in the year of Kyemyo (probably 1783) and written by the leading members of the *hyanggyo* of nearby Kongju, angrily rebuts one of “the black warrants of Hwayangdong” that had been sent to one No Kyŏngyŏl, a Confucian scholar in Kongju. In this letter, the Kongju scholars accused the Hwayangdong Academy of flagrant abuse of power with total disregard for reason:

The letter of your Academy reached his [No Kyŏngyŏl's] house on the seventh day of the last intercalary month. The letter in summary states that “he [No Kyŏng-yŏl] be brought [to Hwayangdong] to face charges that are punishable by castration.” It is an extremely serious crime to face castration¹⁵⁷

In other words, when No Kyŏngyŏl failed to comply with the request of Hwayang Sŏwŏn, the Academy apparently sent out another letter demanding No Kyŏngyŏl to surrender to face castration. Castration, it appears, was one of the punishments dealt out by Hwayang Sŏwŏn!

In 1871, when the Taewŏn'gun ordered the destruction of all but forty-seven *sŏwŏn* throughout the country, there were vehement protests from the *sŏwŏn* scholars. Against these protests, the angry Taewŏn'gun was said to have replied:

I will never tolerate anyone who causes harm to the people, even if he were Confucius reincarnate. [How can I tolerate] *sŏwŏn* that only enshrine the Confucian worthies of our country and are being used to rob [the people]!¹⁵⁸

The abuse of power by means of extortion became an extremely serious

155. James B. Palais, *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 120.

156. Yi Kibaek, *Han'guksa sillon* (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1976), 313.

157. Ch'oe Sŭnghŭi, *Han'guk komunsŏ yŏn'gu* (Sŏngnam: Han'guk chŏngsin munhwa yŏn'guwŏn, 1981), 422-24.

158. Pak Chehyŏng, *Kŭnse Chosŏn chŏnggam*, 38a.

problem that the government of the late Chosŏn dynasty had been unable to control until the extreme measures taken by the Taewŏn'gun in the nineteenth century. The extreme abuse of power such as described above may have been a phenomenon that developed in the later stages of the Chosŏn dynasty. Nevertheless, there had been serious abuses on the part of many private academies already during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The destruction of the private academies may have served Taewŏn'gun's political objective of undermining the power and influence of the *sŏwŏn* in the mid-nineteenth century. But it was an unmitigated disaster for the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Chosŏn dynasty. With Buddhism marginalized because of the severe persecution by the Chosŏn state, there was no religious institution or organization whose inspiration could have produced creative works such as temples, sculptures, and other edifices on a par with those built under Silla and Koryŏ. The Chosŏn dynasty, under its ascetic Neo-Confucian ideology, was singular in that it produced virtually no monumental architecture or art works that can rival those created under Silla and Koryŏ (perhaps with the exception of palace buildings in Seoul). The *sŏwŏn* was the institution most similar to a religious entity that we can find in Chosŏn. Hundreds of *sŏwŏn* that once adorned all parts of the country (mostly at scenic spots) may have represented the best architectural works of Chosŏn Korea. But at the behest of the Taewŏn'gun, all of them except forty-seven were reduced overnight to ruins. Their demolition also resulted in the loss of thousands of valuable books¹⁵⁹ and precious items that these *sŏwŏn* had preserved for many generations. Seen in this perspective, the Taewŏn'gun's destruction of the *sŏwŏn* can only be regarded as an act of vandalism against the cultural heritage of Chosŏn Korea.

Conclusion

Founded by idealistic Neo-Confucian scholars, the *sŏwŏn* became an important center of scholarship in rural Korea. Scholars in the countryside competed to establish *sŏwŏn* in their districts: it was a matter of scholarly pride to have at least one *sŏwŏn* in the area of their residence. In setting up a *sŏwŏn*, it was customary to have a shrine erected within the compound of the *sŏwŏn* to enshrine certain worthy individuals to honor and emulate them. Initially, only

159. For example, a copy of the *Samguk sagi* survived at Oksan Sŏwŏn (near Kyŏngju), one of the forty-seven that eluded Taewŏn'gun's wrath.

those individuals with distinguished scholarly achievements were selected for enshrinement as “patron saints.” But later on, those with political influence, such as high offices in the central government, were also chosen. Ideally, the individuals who dedicated their life to the cause of principle and loyalty – the characteristics particularly cherished in the Neo-Confucian teaching – were selected for enshrinement. Those enshrined worthies provided the models for the scholars and the local people to emulate. However, as the standard and quality of the *sŏwŏn* deteriorated, the selection of enshrinees was often based on political or factional considerations and in some cases even depended on family connections.

During the early phase of its history, the *sŏwŏn* was designed to be an elite institution of scholarship. Those who were admitted were primarily the *saengwŏn* or *chinsa* degree holders, and only when vacancies were available the less qualified were permitted to enroll. Such admission rules were virtually the same as for Sŏnggyun'gwan, suggesting that the original intent of the *sŏwŏn* was to maintain a very high academic standard equal to that of the National Confucian Academy. The admission rules of several other *sŏwŏn* on the other hand were relatively open allowing the qualified scholars of commoner background to enroll. Although it is difficult to determine the actual enrollment of the commoners, the primary emphasis placed in the admissions was on one's qualification and commitment to pursue serious scholarship.

As a center of scholarship, in its curriculum the *sŏwŏn* placed the foremost importance on the study of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, focusing on the writings of Zhu Xi and other Neo-Confucian worthies. The *sŏwŏn* scholars were to devote their time and effort solely to Neo-Confucian scholarship, and the *sŏwŏn* provided stimulating intellectual environments to discuss wide-ranging subjects and issues within the confines of the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. With the proliferation of the *sŏwŏn* as academic centers in rural Korea, they played an important role in disseminating and popularizing Neo-Confucian teachings in rural communities. The *sŏwŏn* became increasingly important agencies through which the Korean Neo-Confucian scholars tried to implement their ideals of Neo-Confucianism.

There were, however, a number of problems created by the proliferation of the *sŏwŏn*. The privilege of exemption from military tax accorded to *sŏwŏn* scholars was apparently abused, as many unqualified individuals attempted to gain admission for the purpose of avoiding military obligations. With the intensification of factional struggles, the *sŏwŏn* became embroiled in partisan politics. As the *sŏwŏn* became both economically and politically powerful in the countryside, they misused their power to aggrandize their resources at the

expense of the common people.

The Korean followers of Neo-Confucianism in the late Chosŏn dynasty were convinced that civilization was measured by the degree of acceptance and implementation of Neo-Confucian ideas and values in their society. As Yi Hwang confidently declared, Korean Neo-Confucian scholars believed that the old “Way” idealized by Confucius could be realized in their time. The ultimate arbiters in this quest for a civilized society were the scholars who interpreted the Neo-Confucian teachings. Thus, the Korean Neo-Confucian scholars occupied a unique position in the rural communities of the late Chosŏn period. Using the *sŏwŏn* as their bases, these scholars zealously proselytized the teachings of Neo-Confucianism to their people. In their attempt to realize the ideal social order envisioned by the Neo-Confucian masters, the *sŏwŏn* played a crucial role as centers of Neo-Confucian scholarship. In spite of many problems that accompanied the rise of the *sŏwŏn*, the private academies became an effective instrument for the Neo-Confucianization of rural Korea.

In fact, Chosŏn’s private academies had been so successful in infusing the Neo-Confucian ideals at all levels of Korean society that, when Korea was challenged by the intrusion of the Western powers in the nineteenth century, these Confucian scholars formed a formidable force determined to reject any idea or value that disagreed with their world views. Armed with the core values cultivated and transmitted at these private academies, they were at the forefront in resisting the Western powers. Their slogan, *wijŏng ch’ŏsa* (defend orthodoxy and reject heterodoxy), embodied their belief cultivated at the private academies that the Neo-Confucian ideals alone constituted the correct way for humanity and had to be defended at all cost against Western powers that posed a mortal threat to their civilization.

