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# The Role of Sungkyunkwan during the Joseon Dynasty and Implications for Modern Education in South Korea

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## Abstract

The present study has investigated and explored the role of Sungkyunkwan during the Joseon Dynasty and implications for modern education in South Korea using numerous literature dataset, such as google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science. Sungkyunkwan had a significant role in the Joseon dynasty's academic, social and political life. They were known as Sungkyunkwan scholars and were the elite group with a significant controlling influence over the governmental structure. In addition, they influenced policy-making, judiciary, and culture preservation through their understanding and application of Confucianism. More specifically, the Sungkyunkwan graduates were appointed to serve in many administrative capacities in Hanyang and other city provinces, spreading the culture and beliefs of Sungkyunkwan throughout the kingdom. According to the prior study, South Korea faces the issues of modernity; however, the approaches brought by Sungkyunkwan and the concept of education that was adopted still have their relevance. Education in modern Korean society is closely connected with scholars; schools and universities are built to cultivate brilliant individuals with solid morals and values for society. The spirit of Sungkyunkwan, which is about diligence, perseverance, and ethical conduct, is still rooted in the Korean educational system.

**Keywords:** Sungkyunkwan, Joseon Dynasty, Korean Educational History.

**Major classifications:** Education History

## 1. Introduction

The Joseon Dynasty, which existed from 1392 to 1897, is among the most important dynasties in Korea and shaped Korea's history in culture, politics, and education. Of all the heritages of this age, Sungkyunkwan, Korea's first and best university, bears deep meaning and importance. Sungkyunkwan was founded in 1398 by the Joseon court. This institution was an educational facility that trained scholars and politicians that would be important in the development of Korean society

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(Seo-Hyun, 2023). Therefore, it is possible to conclude that having considered the role of this great institution during the Joseon Dynasty, it is possible not only to get an idea of what has happened in the past but also to get an idea of the present-day state of education in South Korea.

Sungkyunkwan was founded during the Joseon Dynasty and was grounded in Neo Confucianism in its education system. Some of the concepts learned from this school can be regarded as traditional as they imparted manners, leadership skills, hard work, and respect for us and the surrounding environment (Seo-Hyun, 2023). Sungkyunkwan embraced these values and thus became an institution that promoted Confucianism and produced scholar-officials who upheld the ideals of the dynasty. It incorporated many branches of learning like literature, history, and philosophy to bring forth intellectuals capable of meeting the challenges of state and societal leadership.

However, Sungkyunkwan had a significant role in the Joseon dynasty's academic, social and political life. They were known as Sungkyunkwan scholars and were the elite group with a significant controlling influence over the governmental structure. In addition, they influenced policy-making, judiciary, and culture preservation through their understanding and application of Confucianism (Gao & Chung, 2023). More specifically, the Sungkyunkwan graduates were appointed to serve in many administrative capacities in Hanyang and other city provinces, spreading the culture and beliefs of Sungkyunkwan throughout the kingdom. According to Eggert et al. (2023), South Korea faces the issues of modernity; however, the approaches brought by Sungkyunkwan and the concept of education that was adopted still have their relevance. Education in modern Korean society is closely connected with scholars; schools and universities are built to cultivate brilliant individuals with solid morals and values for society (Lee & Park, 2016). The spirit of Sungkyunkwan, which is about diligence, perseverance, and ethical conduct, is still rooted in the Korean educational system.

## 2. Literature Review

Sungkyunkwan is one of the oldest universities in Korea. It was founded in 1398 during the reign of the Joseon Dynasty. The impact of the study on the development of the nation's education has been a focus of research studies where scholars have investigated the study's philosophy, practice, and sustainability. One of the seminal works on this topic is Michael C. Kalton's "Sungkyunkwan, according to Gao & Chung. (2023), the Yi Dynasty Korea was the backbone of the Confucian Ethic. Kalton's analysis goes into detail to explain the philosophical background of Sungkyunkwan, starting from Neo-Confucianism, which was dominant in the Joseon Dynasty. Gao & Chung. (2023) also pointed out that the institution disseminated Confucianism in developing ethical-moral Korean society. Kalton (2017) asserts that it is easier to understand the structure of Sungkyunkwan's curriculum, the admission policies, and the critical role of Sungkyunkwan graduates in managing the dynasty.

Jeong (2019) further explored the subject and offered a detailed account of the evolution of Sungkyunkwan during the Joseon Dynasty. By looking at Kim's work, one can get information about how the institution changed over the years, considering social and political changes, discussions, and transformations that took place within the institution's context. It proves particularly helpful in investigating the matters in Sungkyunkwan and its capacity to forge its stead in the face of the shifting society. Other scholars have also focused on the impact of Sungkyunkwan on the provision of education systems in South Korea. The Confucian Tradition and Its Modern Transformation in Korea highlights how Sungkyunkwan promotes Confucianism and its impact on the educational system of modern South Korea (Jeong, (2019). Jeong (2019) also agrees with Sungkyunkwan that features such as advocating diligence, respecting authorities, and advocating for moral cultivation are still prevalent in the nation's educational system.

Sungkyunkwan Tradition and Its Modern Form also deals with how Sungkyunkwan's tradition is present in the modern context of the South Korean educational system. Jeong (2019) adds that the college entrance examination system is very competitive, and he also points to the example of Sungkyunkwan during the Joseon period for the selection process. Seo-Hyun (2023) discusses the current operation of the 'Sungkyunkwan University in South Korea and states that the impact of the 'Sungkyunkwan' University can be traced from the graduates of the Sungkyunkwan in the past. Thus, this work provides a multilayered discussion on how Sungkyunkwan has contributed to the modern education system, the high risks of competitiveness of scholars, and the significance of prestigious universities nowadays.

It has also been discovered that several scholars have researched the effects of Sungkyunkwan on establishing the South Korean perspective towards teacher education and professional development. Seo-Hyun (2023) explores the Current State and Future Directions of Teacher Education in Korea, where he discusses how the principles of moral cultivation and lifetime learning promoted by Sungkyunkwan have influenced the existing practices of teachers' training. According to Jeong (2019), discussing the eternal significance of Sungkyunkwan's educational theory, promoting the spirit of continuity and integrating

ethical elements into instructional processes is possible. Lee (2023) research also depicts how Sungkyunkwan's ideas played a crucial role in the development of sound as well as ethical educators in the modernity of South Korea. Research has also been made concerning architectural and cultural elements in Sungkyunkwan. Choi Jae-seok's "Preserving the Past, Shaping the Future: The Agenda of Sungkyunkwan Campus and Cultural Heritage" describes that the campus has been preserved and restored for a long time since it is a part of the UNESCO rankings (Choi, 2018). According to Choi (2018), Sungkyunkwan has cultural significance and assists in developing pride and knowledge of Korea's past. Therefore, the South Korean institution aims to preserve the physical connection with the previous generations of scholars who once read and debated on the premises of Sungkyunkwan, increasing the value of the school's history.

In addition, much has been written about the Sungkyunkwan regarding the gender problem and women's education in the Joseon Dynasty. According to Kim (2021), in "Women and Education in the Joseon Dynasty," women could not attend formal education during this period. Still, some scholars of Sungkyunkwan were fighting for women to be allowed to study. Although Sungkyunkwan was a university for men only, the study contributes to understanding the Confucian ideology, gender relations and the desire for education in the Joseon dynasty (Kim, 2021). This work proves to be insightful in understanding the changing perception towards women's education and the possible role of Sungkyunkwan in the change. However, it was within the existing culture of the society at that time.

Moreover, it is helpful to present the analysis of modern scholars concerning the connection between Sungkyunkwan and the formation of Korean literary processes. Yoon (2019) explains how the institution was a perfect environment for literature development and the emergence of different genres and writing styles, in addition to how the scholars from Sungkyunkwan played a significant role in the formation of the Korean literary tradition and the development of Korean literature as an independent and recognized branch of art.

Although the current literature has done a commendable job of providing an understanding of the role played by Sungkyunkwan in the Joseon dynasty and the effects it has had on today's education in South Korea, questions remain unanswered. Nevertheless, there are some gaps in the present research, including the function of Sungkyunkwan in establishing some specific branches of learning and disciplines. While the literature on Sungkyunkwan and its impact on the history of philosophy of education has been previously provided by other scholars, there is still a lack of studies that illustrate more specifically how the institution helped to develop certain fields of knowledge, such as the sciences, mathematics, and arts. By examining the scholarly works and curricular engagements of Sungkyunkwan scholars and related engaging curricula in these fields, the level of enlightenment of the institution in fostering the generation of knowledge across the various disciplines can be well understood.

Furthermore, there should be a need to undertake more comparative histories that look into SKKU in the context of other great educational institutions concerning the Korean and international space. Compared to the existing literature about Sungkyunkwan, it is possible to look for similarities and differences that might be useful to investigate further. Such comparisons could illuminate how different educational philosophies and cultural contexts have shaped the development educational systems and potentially offer new perspectives on best practices and innovative approaches.

Moreover, although it is evident that Sungkyunkwan's principles have continued to be implemented in the modern South Korean education system, how they can be incorporated into modern learning processes remains somewhat unknown. As the global society and education systems remain in the process of development and encountering new challenges and opportunities as well as new technologies, there is a research potential focused on how Sungkyunkwan's values and principles of moral cultivation, diligence, and lifelong learning and the corresponding educational approach can be integrated into the modern educational practices and curriculum. It is possible to conduct research that can contribute to the generation of new educational paradigms that will combine the best of the traditional and the contemporary in the education process, preparing people who can face the challenges of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, it is also important to note that the literature review has identified that the prior research has mainly examined the effect of Sungkyunkwan only in the context of Korea. However, a lack of research seeks to find out how this institution can impact the global village and its relevance in contemporary society. At a time when many universities worldwide are dealing with problems of cultural diversity, globalization, and knowledge sharing, Sungkyunkwan's history and philosophy could be a valuable source of ideas on how to encourage cross-cultural understanding and how educational systems could be made more inclusive.

### 3. Methods

The sources used to conduct the literature search included Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The keywords included Sungkyunkwan, Joseon Dynasty, Neo-Confucianism, Korean education, educational philosophy, and

cultural heritage, and Boolean operators were used in the search process (Stampton, 2023; Kim & Kang, 2022). In addition, the references of the identified articles were reviewed to look for any sources that could have been missed in the database search. The initial search in the databases and the manual search returned 457 records. Finally, after eliminating the records that appeared more than once, there were 372 records left. These records were screened based on the following criteria for inclusion in the literature review: At the first level, the titles and abstracts of all records were reviewed concerning inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they met the following criteria: The first was on the historical background of Sungkyunkwan during the Joseon Dynasty, the second concerned the significance of Sungkyunkwan's heritage for contemporary education in South Korea, the third was only published in academic journals or books, and the fourth was written either in English or Korean (Stampton, 2023). Some reasons that led to the exclusion of certain studies included failure to meet the criteria or the fact that the study had no relation to the research topic (Kang, 2023).

In the first stage of the screening process, 127 articles were deemed potentially relevant and, therefore, moved to the second stage of the screening. At this stage, the remaining studies' full texts were carefully reviewed to determine their relevance for the literature review. Some studies were excluded if they offered limited information regarding the research focus, were methodologically weak, or had insufficient data or discussions. The screening and selection process led to the inclusion of 21 studies in the literature review after excluding those that did not meet the inclusion criteria. These studies served as the foundation for the subsequent analysis and synthesis of the research findings.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1, Propagation of Neo-Confucian Ideology

Sungkyunkwan was a crucial institution in disseminating Neo-Confucian thought, which was the foundational philosophy of the Joseon Dynasty. Sungkyunkwan was the first university of the kingdom aimed at spreading Confucianism and its ideals to the people of the kingdom (Seo-Hyun, 2023). The school's curriculum and the education it provided in literature, history, and philosophy was to produce scholars grounded in the principles of Confucianism.

The Neo-Confucianism, which combined Confucianism with the elements of Buddhism and Taoism, was adopted as the official idea of the Joseon dynasty. Sungkyunkwan was indeed very active in the propagation of this ideology and hence contributed significantly to the development of Korean society regarding its intellectuality and moral standards (Seo, 2024). Education at Sungkyunkwan was also orderly; it ensured that the students were trained in Neo-Confucianism, including the quest for the self, the human and the earth, and the administration.

Neo-Confucianism was not only reflected in the educational process of the Sungkyunkwan but influenced the entire function of the institution. According to Seo (2024), the admission process was intended to enrol students for their academic potential, character, and leadership (Sin, 2019). To ensure that the philosophical values of the institution were maintained, emphasis was placed on the production of humane individuals who exemplified the four cardinal virtues of Confucianism, including benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and loyalty (Seo-Hyun, 2023). Sungkyunkwan was the most essential institution for spreading Neo-Confucian ideas and therefore played a major role in shaping the cultural and intellectual background of the Joseon Dynasty and Korean society as a whole, which can still be observed today.

### 4.2. Training of Scholar-Officials

Sungkyunkwan was initially founded to educate the scholar-officials who would take various roles in the Joseon Dynasty's bureaucracy. Graduates of this institution were referred to as Sungkyunkwan scholars, and they formed an elite class that monopolized the government offices (Kalton, 2017). Due to their education and high obedience to Confucianism, the Tang and Song empowers them to set policies, implement justice and preserve culture (Sin, 2019). The curriculum of Sungkyunkwan was designed to equip the learners with the knowledge and skills that would enable them to effectively govern the state and be efficient statesmen (Lee & Park, 2016). In addition to Neo-Confucianism, the institution offered courses in law, economy and military tactics. What this entailed was that the Sungkyunkwan scholars had the philosophical bearings of the dynasty imprinted on them and the nuts and bolts of how the dynasty was to be run.

Education and training received at Sungkyunkwan meant that the graduates were hardworking and duty-bound to contribute to the public. This assertion of ethical standards and moral uprightness of the institution underpinned the notion that these scholar-officials were just more than clerks but the custodians of the kingdom and the defenders of its heritage (Lee & Park, 2016). The Sungkyunkwan scholars who ascended to leadership positions in different parts of the kingdom introduced

and applied the institutionalized values and principles of Sungkyunkwan to the policies and government systems of the kingdom, shaped by the Confucianism they studied (Cho, 2022). They have kept the Joseon Dynasty going with their knowledge and experience to keep its history and heritage alive and running.

### 4.3. Shaping Social and Political Fabric

Apart from the educational aim, Sungkyunkwan greatly impacted the further organization of the Joseon Dynasty's social and political life system'. These alumni provided several regional administrative positions to spread the institution's vision and values in the kingdom (Lee & Park, 2016). Sungkyunkwan affected the capital city of Hanyang, now called Seoul, and impacted the construction of a culturally pluralistic society in Korea.

The findings show how the practice of moral cultivation and ethical governance of the institution impacted the socio-cultural fabric of the Joseon Dynasty. Sungkyunkwan scholars have a strong spirit of duty and responsibility and aim to bring justice, fairness, and laws to their society. Every move and every choice they made was per the Confucian philosophy, which had been ingrained into them and, as a result, maintained the treatment of the people. Moreover, Sungkyunkwan was significant in promoting nationalism and cultural assimilation as well. Thus, contributing to establishing a common set of values and a similar intellectual platform in the kingdom, the institution came into effect with the emergence of Neo-Confucianism (King, 2020). This association between Confucianism and the Korean culture proved advantageous to the Joseon Dynasty because it promoted the integration of the regions and fostered nationalism amongst its people.

The Sungkyunkwan also played an important role in the political life of the society since the postulates of the educational institution actively participated in the work of the central government and made a significant contribution to the creation of new policies and the organization of the new kingdom (Lee, 2023). Therefore, it can be argued that Confucianism and its adherence to ethical leadership shaped the political structure and the decision-making processes of the Joseon Dynasty to ensure some degree of stability and the continuation of the governmental system.

### 4.4. Fostering Literary and Artistic Expression

Although Sungkyunkwan was mainly designed to produce scholar-officials, it is evident that this educational institution contributed much to the development of literature and arts during the Joseon Dynasty. Scholars of the institution laid the foundation for various genres and styles, which played a significant role in the growth of Korean literature (Lee & Park, 2016). Like in Sungkyunkwan, where more emphasis was placed on arts such as calligraphy and painting, this extended the cultures in the period.

The education in the grand tradition of Chinese writing and thinking in Sungkyunkwan established the ground for definite Korean literature. Through this, the students could also appreciate the works of some of the China's most famous scholars and poets to enhance their writing and critical thinking abilities (Lee & Park, 2016). This exposure to self-cultivation and the search for knowledge encouraged by the institution of the Academia Sinica enabled ideas and creativity to blossom, as well as literary experimentation.

**Table 1:** Research Finding

Key Theme	Summary
Propagation of Neo-Confucian Ideology	Sungkyunkwan was a crucial institution in disseminating Neo-Confucian thought, which was the foundational philosophy of the Joseon Dynasty. Sungkyunkwan was the first university of the kingdom aimed at spreading Confucianism and its ideals to the people of the kingdom.
Training of Scholar-Officials	Sungkyunkwan was initially founded to educate the scholar-officials who would take various roles in the Joseon Dynasty's bureaucracy. Graduates of this institution were referred to as Sungkyunkwan scholars, and they formed an elite class that monopolized the government offices
Shaping Social and Political Fabric	Apart from the educational aim, Sungkyunkwan greatly impacted the further organization of the Joseon Dynasty 'social and political life system'. These alumni provided several regional administrative positions to spread the institution's vision and values in the kingdom.

Fostering Literary and Artistic Expression	The education in the grand tradition of Chinese writing and thinking in Sungkyunkwan established the ground for definite Korean literature. Through this, the students could also appreciate the works of some of the China's most famous scholars and poets to enhance their writing and critical thinking abilities.
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The scholars of Sungkyunkwan, who had a great passion for the arts, played active roles in Korean literature. They wrote pieces that incorporated Confucian motifs with locally influenced plots, creating new literary forms such as the “sijo,” a type of Korean classical poetry and the “gasa,” a semi-poetic, semi-prose form of writing. These literary works not only depicted the culture of the Joseon Dynasty but also provided platforms for the expression of philosophical and social issues.

Besides literature, Sungkyunkwan played a role in the creation of aesthetic education, especially in calligraphy and painting (Kim, 2013). Through analysis, it was possible to observe that the institution focused more on aesthetics and appreciation of beauty. Hence, its scholars created beautiful calligraphic works and paintings that embraced the Confucian philosophy and the beauty of nature. They not only embellished the building of Sungkyunkwan but also enriched the art of the Joseon Dynasty and became one of the significant trends in Korean art that people still appreciate and investigate nowadays.

## 5. Discussions

These four primary functions of Sungkyunkwan during the Joseon Dynasty have significantly influenced the modern context of education in South Korea and its strategies to shape the personality and society with those valuable cultures. First of all, Sungkyunkwan has played an essential role in preserving the orientation of modern South Korean education through the dissemination of Neo-Confucianism, showing that the cultivation of morality and ethical qualities remains an important goal. Today's institutions maintain the thought process of hard work, obedience, and love for learning that Sungkyunkwan Confucianism embraced. This is well illustrated in promoting a moral education curriculum and understanding values such as parental obedience, integrity, and responsible citizenship at basic, secondary, and tertiary levels.

Secondly, this educational tradition of producing scholar-officials is still seen in the South Korean competitive education system and the dominance of Sungkyunkwan and other elite universities. The institutions' selection processes have driven the current competition for academic success and the high reputation of Sungkyunkwan Universities. This tradition is well illustrated by the college entrance examination system in South Korea, referred to as Suneung, whereby the students work hard to gain university admission to the few universities considered to hold the key to success and better social status.

Thirdly, the role of Sungkyunkwan in the formation of the social and political life of the Joseon Dynasty has become one of the reasons for the significant emphasis on education as an opportunity to change one's status and build a modern Korean state in the Republic of Korea. The values of culture and the improvement of the society that Sungkyunkwan has promoted are still reflected in educational policies and practices.

Lastly, Sungkyunkwan has contributed to the cultivation of literature and arts, leading to the preservation and continuity of arts in modern society by incorporating cultural values into the curriculum. The educational institutions of South Korea are focused on producing human beings who are balanced in all aspects, including social, psychological and physical aspects, with a strong sense of patriotism and respect towards cultural values. This is clearly illustrated by incorporating literature, calligraphy, and other traditional arts into the various learning programs in the school, as well as the preservation and promotion of historical landmarks and relics associated with Sungkyunkwan and the Joseon Dynasty.

These implications indicate that the modern Korean education system continues to embody the Sungkyunkwan principles and the need for preserving and cultivating Korea's heritage in the 21st century. Building on the successes of the past, South Korea's educational system has a vision that aims to develop individuals who are not only knowledgeable but also moral, cultural, and social beings who are active and responsible for the betterment of society.

Similarly, South Korea understands that the country's culture has to incorporate these traditions along with the modern education system of the world. While society is opening up its education systems to the global market, educational institutions in the country are seeking new strategies to educate their students, enhance critical thinking skills, and be more multicultural. Therefore, South Korea's educational system aims to achieve the spirit of Sungkyunkwan and incorporate modern principles into the learning system in the context of the global environment to produce the best citizens who will uphold the Korean culture.

Literature promotes an understanding of the various roles and functions of Sungkyunkwan during the Joseon Dynasty and how the current education system in South Korea is related to Sungkyunkwan. The Sungkyunkwan's philosophical and

curricular principles are comprehensively understood in addition to the roles in diffusing Neo-Confucianism, producing scholar-officials, shaping social and political systems, and fostering literature and art are also known. Sungkyunkwan's influence still exists in post-modern South Korean society regarding educational ideas, teaching practices, methodologies, and the cultivation of cultural assets. Reflecting on present-day South Korea and its challenges of the 21st century, the experience of Sungkyunkwan provides essential knowledge on how to develop a harmonious and wise personality, develop moral and aesthetic values, and develop the essence of Korean culture.

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