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Article

Ritual and Identity Construction in Joseon Korea

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Introduction

Many studies have explained the establishment and development of the Joseon dynasty with the term “Confucianization.” However, while “Confucianization” is a useful term to point out the fact that there had been significant philosophical and institutional changes during the Joseon era, the term does not effectively show in what sense and how important the changes are in Korean history. Put differently, due to the vagueness of its meaning, the term Confucianization makes it difficult to discuss what political visions and intentions the founders of the Joseon dynasty had. Of course, political leaders of Joseon had consistently proclaimed that their ultimate goal was creating a state where the social ideals of the Three Dynasties could be realized and the teachings of the sages be actualized. However, the proclamation was likely made to express their social beliefs and attitudes, not their specific political purposes or policies.

Worse yet, due to the vague definition of “Confucianization,” historians’ reliance on the term results in rather arbitrary interpretations of the history of Joseon. The historical view insisting that Joseon officials’ reference to “Confucian texts” and emphasis on “ritual propriety” inevitably caused the intensification of Sino-centric view in Joseon society is one of those examples.¹ Given this, rather than simply defining the Joseon government’s various attempts to newly systematize their practices and institutions as the process of “Confucianization,” it seems more important to learn from those attempts what political vision Joseon politicians had and how they changed their ways of thought and behaviors.

Bearing this in mind, this paper will point out that the Joseon elite’s political debates and actions did not always occur as a result of their emphasis on Confucianism. In doing so, it will also suggest the possibility that, in many cases, the elite referred to Confucian sages’ teachings for the purposes of coming to better decisions on political matters. In other words, this paper will suggest that for the Joseon elite, Confucian thoughts were useful resources which could be referred to when necessary, not an absolute or inflexible tenet by which all of their thoughts and practices were restrained and controlled.

As one way of doing this, this paper will begin with a case study about the Joseon elite’s discussions on the sacrifice to Heaven. While the elite’s discussions regarding the establishment, implementation, and abolition of this ritual are directly related to their understandings on and attitudes toward ritual propriety based on the Classics, the discussions were initiated by their need to identify the newly established state and its people within the contemporary national and international situations. Therefore, a careful examination of the debates about the sacrifice to Heaven might be helpful to reveal what role Confucianism played in Joseon politics. Delving into issues relating to the sacrifice to Heaven, this case study will also provide an opportunity to rethink Sino-centrism, one of the most controversial issues in East Asian history, which, according to conventional views, came to be shared by many of the Joseon elite since they made Confucianism their dominant political ideology. After this, the rest of this paper will suggest a new way of understanding Joseon politics and many significant issues which have often been concealed by “Confucian” characteristics.

A Case Study: Joseon and the Sacrifice to Heaven

The History of the Sacrifice to Heaven

When the Joseon dynasty was established, Jo Bak 趙璞 (1356-1408), the minister of the Board of Rites (Yejo jeonseo) advised King Taejo (r. 1392-1398) to abolish Won-gu (the Round Mound 園丘), the place for the sacrifice to Heaven, insisting that only the “Son of Heaven” can perform this ritual. Jo’s insistence was supported by a group of officials who emphasized an old dictum that “only the Son of Heaven can offer a sacrifice to Heaven and feudal lords to mountains and streams.”² However, after King Taejong (r. 1400-1418) was enthroned, new officials of the Board of Rites argued that the sacrifice to Heaven should not be abolished because since the Three Kingdoms period it had been performed. Although some officials pointed out that the Joseon kings’ implementation of the sacrifice to Heaven was a violation of ritual propriety, it seems that sacrifices at Wondan were maintained for a certain time without

1. Especially in Japanese colonial historiography, Confucianism of Joseon Korea was often interpreted as an ideological tool to justify its rulers’ political and philosophical subjugation to China.

2. For details, see explanations about “Royal Regulation” (Wang zhi 王制) in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記).

serious opposition. The fact that there had been detailed discussions on the regulations regarding the construction of and performance in Wondan proves it.

However, the fact that many officials agreed that Joseon kings could perform the sacrifice rituals at Wondan does not mean that all of them agreed that the kings could enjoy the status as the “Son of Heaven.” For example, while they did not entirely oppose the ritual performed at Wondan, Ha Yun 河崙 (1347-1416) and Heo Jo 許稠 (1369-1439) insisted that instead of the sacrifice to Heaven, Joseon kings should perform sacrifices only to Dongbang cheongje³ arguing that Joseon kings’ sacrifice to entire heaven was improper. The officials who supported sacrifices to Dongbang cheongje contended that sacrifice to Cheongje was proper to Korean kings given that kings of the Qin 秦 dynasty offered sacrifices to Seobang baekje. Although King Taejong showed his desire to maintain the sacrifice to Heaven at first, he soon agreed with the proponents of abolition of Wondan.⁴ Because main argument of the abolitionists were “Heaven does not respond to improperly performed rituals,” the mutual agreement between King Taejong and the abolitionists proves that at least ostensibly, both of them admitted that Joseon kings had the same status as China’s feudal lords who were unqualified for the sacrifice to Heaven. However, the debates on the sacrifice to Heaven at Wondan were not easily concluded.

In the sixteenth year of the reign of King Taejong, Byeon Gyeryang 卞季良 (1369-1430), one of the influential court officials of the period, presented a memorial arguing that King Taejong should perform the sacrifice to Heaven to save the people across the country who had suffered from a serious drought. Even though Byeon emphasized the practical purpose to re-institutionalize the sacrifice to Heaven, he did not simply ignore the importance of Confucian propriety itself. Rather, like his opponents, he also relied on textual authority of the Classics, which were believed to present appropriate ways of people’s behavior, to prove that he also shared the same sages’ teachings with most

officials. To respond to the abolitionists whose arguments were based on an old dictum that “only the Son of Heaven can offer a sacrifice to heaven and feudal lords to mountains and streams,”⁵ Byeon supported his idea with important Chinese classical texts such as the *Book of Poetry* (*Sigyeong* in Korean; *Shijing* in Chinese 詩經), which has the dictum that “people can offer sacrifices to all gods” and the *Book of History* (*Seogyong* in Korean; *Shujing* in Chinese 書經) which mentions the importance of the sacrifice to Heaven to maintain the cosmic order. He also pointed out that the ways to keep proprieties are different depending on time and space and that even Confucian sages such as Confucius and Zhu Xi had allowed different applications of Confucian propriety.⁶ Furthermore, putting much emphasis on social realities, he insisted that the sacrifice to Heaven was not a violation of the principle of propriety but a king’s duty, if their state had unusually serious problems. He even argued that if King Taejong did not perform a sacrifice to Heaven even at the time of national crisis, only out of the desire to keep ritual propriety, and just concentrated only on self-cultivation and self-reflection, it would be not only futile but also harmful.⁷ Byeon’s main argument that the Joseon kings’ implementation of the sacrifice to Heaven to solve national problems does not impair ritual propriety had been continuously used by his proponents and followers.⁸ Because two different opinions on Wondan relied on the textual authority of the Classics, the debates among those two groups could not be easily concluded and the debates were repeated until the end of King Sejong’s (r. 1418-1450) reign.

The records of the *Sillok* do not clearly show whether the ritual performance at Wondan was halted during the reign of King Sejong. Only the fact that King Sejong mentioned that he did not want to talk about this issue anymore⁹ and that King Sejo (r. 1455-1468), the son of King Sejong, said that the sacrifice to Heaven had not been performed in his days¹⁰ proves that the ritual at Wondan was not implemented for a certain period between the reigns

3. *Taejong sillok* (v. 22. 11. 12. Imjin). The three numbers within the parenthetical citations for the *Silloks* are referred to volume (*gwon*) number, the year of reign, and month, respectively. There are five gods worshipped in Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Shamanism. They are Dongbang cheongje (Blue God Responsible for the East 東方青帝), Seobang baekje (White God Responsible for the West 西方白帝), Nambang cheokje (Red God Responsible for the South 南方赤帝), Bukbang heukje (Black God Responsible for the North 北方黑帝) and Jungang hwangje or Hwangjeryo (Yellow God Responsible for the Center 中央黃帝). It was believed that Hocheon sangje 昊天上帝 is the god above these five gods and controlled entire heaven.

4. *Taejong sillok* (v. 22. 11. 12. Imjin; v. 24. 12. 8. Jeongchuk).

5. This phrase is also shown in the *Prime Tortoise of the Record Bureau* (*Ce fu yuan gui* 冊府元龜), the Song dynasty’s historical encyclopedia of political essays, autobiography, memorials, and decrees, compiled under Wang Qinruo 王欽若 and Yang Yi 楊億.

6. *Taejong sillok* (v. 31. 16. 6. Sinyu).

7. *Taejong sillok* (v. 31. 16. 6. Sinyu).

8. *Sejong sillok* (v. 125. 31. 7. Imo).

9. *Sejong sillok* (v. 105. 26. 7. Jeongmyo).

10. *Sejo sillok* (v. 6. 3. 1. Eulhae).

of King Sejong and King Sejo. However, as shown in the record, the debates on the sacrifice to Heaven were repeated during the entire reign of King Sejong as well as in the reign of King Munjong (r. 1450-1452).

Interestingly, when King Sejo actively attempted to perform sacrifices, there was no serious debate about whether the king's implementation of sacrifices to Heaven was ritually proper. Most debates on Wondan shown in the *Sejo sillok* were just about the regulations regarding construction of and ritual performance at the site (Han 2002, 53-54). For seven years, King Sejo personally performed sacrifices to Heaven at Won-gu (Han 2002, 46). However, in December of the tenth year of his reign, he abolished Won-gu sacrifice without any explanation.¹¹ Many historians believe that King Sejo gave up his right to perform sacrifices to Heaven to observe so-called "Confucian propriety."

Historical Issues Regarding the Sacrifice to Heaven

Imanishi Ryū asserted that the belief that Joseon was a loyal tributary nation of the Chinese emperor was commonly shared by Joseon people during the entire period. Influenced by Imanishi's study, some Korean historians often regarded Joseon rulers' emphasis on the propriety of *sadae* (serve the great 事大) as a humiliating part of Korean history. Refuting Imanishi's assertion, other Korean historians proved that Joseon's *sadae* policy actually gave many practical benefits to Joseon Korea.¹² However, it seems that most Korean historians agree that with Joseon's Confucianization, the idea of *sadae* inevitably became one of the most decisive factors in Joseon's political decisions. The problem here is that if one regards the purpose of various debates among Joseon founders simply as Confucianization, it is highly possible that one might be trapped in the failure narrative saying that from its beginning, the Joseon dynasty was destined to lose its political independence.

In this context, it seems that Joseon leaders' discussions on the implementation and institutionalization of the sacrifice to Heaven also need to

be carefully examined because most historians of Joseon agree that the debates on this ritual were directly related to the *sadae* idea. Also, the fact that the *Sillok* does not show any examples of the practices of this ritual after King Sejo's reign and that this ritual was removed from the *National Five Rites* (*Gukjo oryewi* 國朝五禮儀) is generally accepted as the inevitable result of the sophistication of Confucian philosophy. It is natural, therefore, that even without any specific record in the *Sillok*, most historians of Joseon came to conclude that the sacrifice to Heaven was practically abolished until it was re-established in the Daehan Empire (1897-1910). It is also said that the disappearance of the record about the ritual at Won-gu in the *Sillok* proves that Joseon people's practices finally came to be limited by Confucian ideas which cannot be entirely free from a Han China-centered view.

For instance, Kim Taeyeong (1973, 116-18), in his article "Joseon chogi sajeon ui seongnip e daehayeo," explains that the debates about the sacrifice to Heaven resulted from the contradictory situation of Joseon—politically independent but ideologically subject to China. He further explains that because Joseon leaders regarded their status as being the Chinese emperor's subjects, they could not officially institutionalize the sacrifice to Heaven and thus, most sacrifices performed to Heaven in Joseon should be understood as exceptional cases. That is, although Kim suggests the possibility of the ongoing existence of the sacrifice to Heaven during the Joseon era and emphasizes Joseon leaders' attempts to maintain their institutional traditions, what he points out through ritual debates on the sacrifice to Heaven is that in the process of Confucianization, Joseon came to lose its equal status with China.¹³

Han Ugeun (1976) explains the rearrangement of the code of sacrifices (*sajeon* 祀典) as the embodiment of Joseon's Confucianization with its careful considerations of other religions and beliefs. He suggests that one important reason why the sacrifice to Heaven was abolished is Joseon rulers' distrust of the ritual's "manifest function."¹⁴ It is noticeable because with this suggestion, he could insist that Joseon people tried to maintain cultural and historical independence and that their practice was not regulated only by Confucian ideology. However, his assertion that Joseon rulers maintained other religious

11. *Sejo sillok* (v. 34. 10. 12. Jeonghae).

12. Examining the tributary system, one crucial part of the *sadae* policy, Jeon Haejong points out that historically there had existed various benefits Korea could obtain from China through the policy, which is one of the main reasons Joseon kept it. For details, see Jeon 1970, 26-58.

13. Kim (1973, 118) explains it as "yogyojeok irwonhwa" (儒教的一元化).

14. Han used this English term to explain the Korean words, "myeongbun sang ui kineung."

rituals because they believed in those rituals' "latent function" makes it difficult to understand his argument.¹⁵

Among historians, it was Han Yeongu who ascribed a more positive value to Joseon's implementation of the sacrifice to Heaven. Han (1983) argues that Byeon Gyeryang and Yang Seongji's 梁誠之 (1415-1482) attempts to revitalize the sacrifice to Heaven were the ways of emphasizing a unique national identity of Joseon people. Unlike Kim Taeyeong who pointed out Byeon's acceptance of Joseon's inferior status to China in his memorials, and downplayed Byeon's requests for Joseon kings to perform the sacrifice to Heaven, Han praises those attempts arguing that these should be understood as Byeon's effort to elevate the status of Joseon and its kings. Han also insists that Yang Seongji's emphasis on Korean history and tradition and his attempts to institutionalize the sacrifice to Heaven prove that Koreans in early Joseon made efforts to develop their society with a shared consciousness as a nation.¹⁶ However, Han does not clearly explain why the rituals performed to Heaven were stopped and what the discontinuance of the rituals means in Korean history. Ironically, the more he praised Yang Seongji as a nation-centered leader, the more Yang became an exceptional person in the history of Joseon. Put differently, Han's emphasis on Yang's effort to construct a sense of communal identity without any further explanation neither denies the opinions that the sacrifice to Heaven disappeared after the reign of King Sejo nor refutes the view that China-centered views, widely shared among Korean officials, led to the abolition of the ritual.

Similarly to Han, Yamauchi Koichi (1979) tries to show Joseon leaders' independent spirit shown in their efforts to carry out the sacrifice to Heaven. Even about Ha Yun and Heo Jo's remonstrance that Joseon kings should perform sacrifices only to Dongbang cheongje rather than to the Heavenly King of all of heaven (Hocheon sangje), which is often regarded as Joseon officials' acceptance of a China-centered world view, Yamauchi insists that Ha and Heo's suggestion also should be understood as efforts to maintain the Joseon kings' right to contact Heaven. In this context, Yamauchi (1979, 69) points out that Joseon's political leaders shared the belief that their right to rule the state was

endowed by the mandate of Heaven and argues that the *sadae* policy in early Joseon should be understood as a practical and diplomatic strategy, not as the manifestation of their ideological beliefs.¹⁷ However, because he also focuses only on very early period of the Joseon dynasty, his article does not deal with how these ritual debates continued.

Recently, Han Hyeongju (2002) in his book *Joseon chogi gukga jerye yeongu* examines how the code of sacrifices (*sajeon*) had been arranged. In his book, Han attempts to more clearly reveal the relations between various state rituals and the political and social background of early Joseon. In doing so, he asserts that in the reign of King Sejo, sacrifices to Heaven were performed to legitimize the king's political authority and thus, the purpose of the ritual at the time was very different from that of earlier periods. In detail, he argues that while sacrifices to Heaven in the period between the reigns of King Taejo and Sejong were performed by high officials to pray for rain, the rituals in the reign of King Sejo were always by the king himself and there was no prayer for rain. Han (2002, 39-40) also suggests that political and diplomatic instability might be the reason why King Sejo institutionalized and personally participated in the ritual. However, he does not tackle why the ritual was abandoned after the tenth year of King Sejo's reign. He just repeated that because of the importance of ritual propriety, the sacrifice to Heaven might not have been maintained.

A Hypothetical Review of the History of Ritual Debates on the Sacrifice to Heaven

As mentioned above, most studies regarding the sacrifice to Heaven were carried out with the premise that this rite was abandoned in the Joseon dynasty until Emperor Gojong (r. 1863-1907) revitalized it because Joseon officials ascribed great importance to Confucian propriety both in ideology and practice. However, if there is any possibility that the sacrifice to Heaven had been maintained and frequently performed without detailed discussions—in other words, if the Joseon elite and intellectuals separated ideological debates and their practices—this premise, and consequent interpretations by modern historians, should be reconsidered. Bearing this

15. This English term was used to explain the Korean words, "jamjaejok gineug."

16. Han emphasizes the development of self and identity of Korean nation (minjokjeok ja-a baljeon 民族的自我發展) in Joseon period.

17. His explanation on Kwon Keun's 權近 (1352-1409) ambivalent attitude toward Ming China is referable. For details, also see Kwon Keun's *Eungjesi jipju* 應制詩集註.

in mind, one needs to carefully re-examine the record of ritual performances after the tenth year of the reign of King Sejo.

As briefly stated above, the records that the sacrifices to Heaven were performed at Wondan or Won-gu are not shown in the *Sillok* after the reign of King Sejo, which is believed to prove that the Joseon kings abandoned the right to perform this ritual because of ritual propriety. But, if one carefully examines the *Sillok*, one might find other possibilities. First of all, one needs to refer to the following record of the reign of King Jeongjo (r. 1776-1800): “Our dynasty’s institution of Won-gu was changed to that of Namdan.”¹⁸ As a matter of fact, this remark was made by King Jeongjo when he mentioned the sacrifice to wind, cloud, thunder, and rain (*pung-wun-noe-u* 風雲雷雨) which was performed in Namdan. However, it seems that what the king wanted to express and emphasize in this was that Joseon kings never fully relinquished their right to contact Heaven directly. In this context, he specifically indicated that Namdan had as much significance as Won-gu, the place for the sacrifice to Heaven. Moreover, King Jeongjo later repeated the same attempt to link the significance of Namdan to Won-gu.¹⁹ This suggests the possibility that Namdan had previously been the most significant ritual place symbolizing the Joseon kings’ right (or duty) to perform sacrifices to Heaven.²⁰ This significance of Namdan makes it necessary to more carefully examine sacrifices performed there. In this regard, the record of the ninth year of the reign of King Injo (r. 1623-1649) is worth examining. Confronting a serious drought, King Injo ordered: “Because we are in this serious situation, I intend to personally pray at Namdan. All of you, officiants and stewards at rites, should try to move Heaven’s mind with your sincerity.”²¹ This record shows that King Injo attempted to impress Heaven with his personal prayer at Namdan. The next day’s entry in the *Sillok* shows that the king went to “the southern place (Namgyo 南郊) where the altar is located”²² and performed a ritual for rain.²³ Given that he prayed for rain at this place during a natural disaster and he clearly

mentioned Heaven, it is highly possible that the ritual performance at Namdan he mentioned was the sacrifice to Heaven. However, because it is still possible that he wanted to move Heaven’s mind with a prayer to other gods, more evidence might be needed. Fortunately, the record of the seventeenth year of the reign of King Injo shows that an official complained that while ritual officiants performed sacrificial rituals at Jongmyo (the Royal Shrine 宗廟) and *sanneung* (royal mausoleum 山陵) with sincerity, they did not at *gyosa* (the place for the sacrifice to Heaven and Earth 郊社) and at *sancheon* (mountains and streams 山川), and asked them to ameliorate and revitalize the original institutional and ritual propriety.²⁴ These records of the reign of King Injo suggest the possibility that the sacrifice to Heaven had been maintained and performed without the need to have serious ritual debates in the late Joseon period.

One might argue that even though during King Injo’s reign the Ming dynasty still existed, because its power was seriously diminished, he could, in exceptional circumstances, perform the sacrifice to Heaven. However, if Joseon rulers really had a China-centered (or Han China-centered) view and obediently followed ideologically regulated ritual propriety and regarded themselves as subjects of Ming China, they could not perform the ritual while the Ming emperors still reigned. Moreover, the regime of King Injo was born of a military coup supported by pro-Ming groups who put much emphasis on Confucian propriety in their diplomatic dealings with foreign countries. That is, if even the king who agreed with the importance of Confucian rules performed sacrifices to Heaven, it also could be crucial evidence proving that Joseon rulers were not seriously subject to a China-centered view or *sadae* idea unless they were in the situation where they should, for their benefit or to avoid any trouble, refer to or follow those ideas, such as having diplomatic interactions with Ming China. Because it is still true that the reign of King Injo was during a time of political and diplomatic turmoil where exceptional political behaviors can occur, however, whether there were other cases of the sacrifice to Heaven in different times should be examined. Furthermore, because Namgyo or Namdan did not always mean the place for the sacrifice to Heaven,²⁵ it also needs to be more

18. *Jeongjo sillok* (v. 22. 10. 8. Musin).

19. *Jeongjo sillok* (v. 35. 16. 8. Muin).

20. In his article, Yi Uk (2003, 118) points out that by linking the meaning of Namdan to that of Won-gu, King Jeongjo attempted to insist that Joseon kings had continuously maintained ritual practices performed for Heaven.

21. *Injo sillok* (v. 24. 9. 5. Jeonghae).

22. The record reads “namgyodanso” 南郊禮所 which can be contracted as *namdan* 南壇.

23. *Injo sillok* (v. 24. 9. 5. Muja).

24. *Injo sillok* (v. 38. 17. 5. Jeongchuk).

25. An entry of the *Injo sillok* shows that King Injo performed sacrifices to *sancheon* at Namgyo, not to heaven (v. 25. 9. 7. Jeongchuk). As mentioned above, Namdan also meant the place where sacrifices to wind, cloud, thunder, and rain were performed.

carefully examined how great the possibility was that sacrifices performed at Namgyo were actually the same sacrifices for Heaven as those done at Won-gu.

Regarding this issue, entries in the *Sejo sillok* show that Won-gu and Namgyo appearing in the *Sillok* have an identical meaning in many cases as the place for the sacrifice to Heaven. On March in the third year of his reign, King Sejo sent several civil governors a document mentioning he had performed a significant ritual at Namgyo on the fifteenth day of the month.²⁶ According to the entry on the fifteenth day, the ritual King Sejo personally performed was the sacrifice to Heaven at Won-gu.²⁷ These examples prove that the recorders of the *Sillok* often identified “the sacrifice at Namgyo” with the sacrifice to Heaven at Won-gu. As a matter of fact, according to the cosmology of Confucianism, the sacrifice to Heaven should be performed at the Round Mound south of the capital.²⁸ Therefore, to Joseon rulers who had this knowledge, Namgyo was a word which could easily replace Won-gu. This can be proved by the fact that when talking about the sacrifice to Heaven in China, Joseon rulers often used the word “Namgyo” to indicate the place Ming emperors performed the ritual.²⁹

Another example suggesting that it is highly possible that the sacrifices at Namgyo are the sacrifices for Heaven is the discussion between King Gwanghae (r. 1608-1623) and his subjects regarding ritual propriety. When King Gwanghae showed his desire to personally perform a ritual at Namgyo, he was opposed by many of his subjects among whom, the Office of the Special Counselors (Hongmun-gwan) said as follows,

Personally performing a ritual at Namgyo is not allowed for feudal lords. Nevertheless, you attempt to construct the Round Mound now, which makes your subjects confused and embarrassed by your intention.³⁰

The two points of the Hongmun-gwan’s opposition, that the ritual at Namgyo was a ritual allowed only for the emperor and that King Gwanghae

attempted to construct a Won-gu for this ritual, indicate that Namgyo was the place Joseon kings performed the sacrifice to Heaven. If it can be said that the ritual performed at Namgyo was the sacrifice to Heaven, it can be also said that the records in the *Sillok* show that Joseon kings performed the sacrifice to Heaven in various periods as needed. According to an entry, King Seonjo (r. 1567-1608) personally performed a sacrifice at the altar placed at Namgyo to pray for rain.³¹ Other than the examples mentioned above, King Injo performed sacrifices praying for rain at Namgyo from the beginning of his reign.³² King Hyojong (r. 1649-1659) and Sukjong (r. 1674-1720) personally visited the place and performed the rituals for rain³³ and King Yeongjo (r. 1724-1776) ordered high officials to perform the sacrifice for rain at Namgyo.³⁴

It is possible that not all the rituals performed at Namgyo were sacrifices to Heaven and that details of the rituals were not exactly the same as those of Chinese emperors’ rituals at the Round Mound. However, given that in many cases the *Sillok* entries clearly indicate the name of other state rituals and the places and altars where the rituals were performed, there is no need to simply deny the possibility that Joseon rulers performed the sacrifice to Heaven by simply calling it “the sacrifice at Namgyo” for a variety of political reasons.³⁵ The record of the seventh year of the reign of King Hyojong (r. 1649-1659) is another example suggesting the possibility that Joseon kings continuously attempted to perform the sacrifice to Heaven. Before personally praying at Namgyo, the king stated that he would perform the sacrifice most sincerely to impress Heaven. Put differently, as some of previous Joseon kings did, King Hyojong officially remarked that he would solve a national disaster by observing his duty of contacting Heaven. Moreover, in this remark, he emphasized that all the ritual processes for this sacrifice at Namgyo should be based on those at Sajik (Altars of Earth and Grain 社稷), one of the Grand Sacrifices.³⁶ Given this, the sacrifice at Namgyo King Hyojong mentioned

26. *Sejo sillok* (v. 6. 3. 1. Gapsin).

27. *Sejo sillok* (v. 6. 3. 1. Gyeonggo).

28. Another ritual, allowed only for the emperor, the sacrifice to Earth was performed at the Square Pool 方澤 in northern place of the capital. For detailed explanation, refer to Zito 1997, 128-92; 144-52.

29. *Yeonsan-gun ilgi* (v. 5. 1. 5. Sinmyo); *Seonjo sillok* (v. 58. 27. 12. Imja).

30. *Gwanghaegun ilgi* [jungchobon] (v. 106. 8. 8. Muo).

31. *Seonjo sujeong sillok* (v. 4. 3. 4. Musul).

32. *Injo sillok* (v. 6. 2. 5. Gapsul); *Injo sillok* (v. 18. 6. 6. Gyeongso).

33. *Hyoyong sillok* (v. 8. 3. 4. Musin); *Sukjong sillok* (v. 24. 18. 5. Gyehae); *Sukjong sillok* (v. 28. 21. 5. Gapsul).

34. *Yeongjo sillok* (v. 31. 8. 4. Sinyu); *Yeongjo sillok* (v. 118. 48. 5. Gimi).

35. This exemplifies how the kings avoided any political conflict with the Ming.

36. *Hyoyong sillok* (v. 16. 7. 5 [leap month]. Gimi). Sacrifices at Sajik were generally regarded as the

might not be the same as some other rituals whose significance was lesser and whose status was lower than the Grand Sacrifices. In this context, it can be argued that the sacrifice King Hyojong wanted to perform at this time should have been a ritual with which the king could officially proclaim he was the person who could contact Heaven and move its mind. Then, the existing view that with the emphasis on Confucian propriety, Joseon rulers were voluntarily subjected to China both practically and ideologically which, according to this view, led to their abandonment of the sacrifice to Heaven, should be reexamined. As shown in examples of the reigns of King Gwanghae and King Injo who had totally different views on the application of Confucian propriety to their diplomacy with Chinese states,³⁷ it is highly probable that Joseon rulers, regardless of their attitudes towards ritual propriety, performed or had desires to perform the sacrifice to Heaven, which proves that they were not willing to depreciate the status of themselves and their state.

As a matter of fact, it seems more reasonable to insist that although Joseon rulers could not openly proclaim their state as an empire due to the international situation at the time, they still wanted to have their people believe that their kings were the politically highest and their state was the center of the world. In this context, the conventional view that the emphasis on Confucian propriety accompanied by Sino-centrism made Joseon kings abolish royal rituals that were only allowed to the Chinese emperor does not seem to be persuasive. Rather, more persuasive is the suggestion made in the section above, that Joseon kings desired to maintain and possibly performed the sacrifice to Heaven, which suggests that they were not entirely subjected to Confucian ideas but aptly used them for their political purposes. Again, there is no need to hastily conclude that Joseon kings simply gave up their right to perform rituals of the highest degree of importance which were useful to legitimize their political authority. As will be shown, the view that Joseon rulers voluntarily and rigorously limited their rights as independent ritual performers must be reconsidered with the reexamination of the premise that Joseon people could not but have a China-centered view as a result of its “Confucian transformation.”

The Joseon King Presiding over Politics and Rituals

As briefly mentioned above, the reason why many existing studies commonly insist that Joseon rulers abandoned the sacrifice to Heaven is that these studies agree with the premise that Joseon rulers became reluctant to perform any ritual that was only allowed to the emperor according to the expansion of their knowledge of Confucian ritual propriety. Due to the premise whereby Joseon kings' abandonment of rituals of the highest degree of significance has been regarded as natural, careful examination of Joseon kings' sacrifices to Earth, which are also categorized as an imperial ritual, has often been neglected. This ritual was merely mentioned together with the sacrifice to Heaven as evidence showing that unlike Goryeo's ritual manual, the National Five Rites of Joseon did not contain these two imperial rituals due to the Joseon elite's emphasis on Confucian propriety (Han 2002, 9).

Regarding this issue, the record in the *Yeongjo sillok* is worthy of notice. When King Yeongjo mentioned his opinion on the amendment of the Procedures of Rituals (*holgi* 笏記), Sin Chiun 申致雲 (1700-1755), the third minister of the Board of Rites (Yejo chamui), said: “Because kings' personal ritual performance at Bukgyo was not recorded in *Oryeui*, we remade *holgi* with some addition and alteration this time.”³⁸ Responding to Sin, King Yeongjo said, “I personally performed a ritual at Bukgyo (the northern place 北郊) in the year of *eulsa* referring to precedents.” This conversation between Sin and King Yeongjo is sufficient to raise a question: why did the king personally perform, and Sin made a *holgi* for, this ritual at Bukgyo which was not institutionalized in *Oryeui*? What significant meaning did the ritual have for Joseon kings?

As a matter of fact, *Oryeui* describes some rituals such as the sacrifice for great mountains, seas, and rivers 嶽海瀆 at Bukgyo. Therefore, what Sin's remark clearly reveals is that with the king's personal visits at Bukgyo, rituals performed there underwent some changes and came to have more significant meanings compared to the past, so existing regulations on the rituals should be amended. This suggests that Bukgyo was a place that had the potential to be one of the most important ritual places in the Joseon dynasty, and historical records support this conjecture.

most important state ritual. Regarding this, see Yi 2000, 159-64.

37. Regarding this, see Kye 2006; Han 2000.

38. *Yeongjo sillok* (v. 31. 8. 6. Imsin).

The *Sillok* entries show that, from the beginning of the state, Joseon kings had frequently prayed for rain at Bukgyo which suggests that this ritual had contained a great deal of significance for Joseon kings as one of their representative ritual performances. Several entries in the *Sillok* might support this conjecture. When Byeon Gyeryang asked King Taejong to reinstate the sacrifice to Heaven, King Taejong refused it saying that due to his subjects' requests that he pray for rain to *sangje*, he had ordered one of his subjects to perform the ritual at Bukgyo, but to no avail.³⁹ Although this entry does not clearly show whether the ritual performed at Bukgyo was exactly the sacrifice to Heaven, it sufficiently proves that the ritual at Bukgyo had a great significance, sufficient to satisfy those who asked the king to perform the sacrifice to Heaven, a ritual reserved for the emperor. An entry in *Yeongjo sillok* also shows the importance of the Bukgyo ritual. In the twenty ninth year of his reign, King Yeongjo mentioned that even though several rituals for rain had already been performed, that year's drought persisted. What the king decided in order to resolve this problem was to personally perform the ritual for rain at Bukgyo.⁴⁰ This might mean that Joseon people believed that the ritual at Bukgyo was very effective and powerful and suggests that the object to which this ritual was performed had the highest status compared to the objects of other rituals. The fact that "Bukgyo," which was regarded as a place for an important state ritual, is not mentioned in both Chinese and Korean ritual manuals⁴¹ might mean that the term was used to replace another appellation of a ritual or the place the ritual was performed in, just as "Namgyo" was often used instead of Won-gu. As a matter of fact, in Chinese states, "Beijiao" (Bukgyo in Korean 北郊) had been used to mean the place where the Square Pool (Bangtaek 方澤) for the Grand Sacrifice to Earth was located. Given the Joseon elite's knowledge of the Grand Sacrifices to Heaven and Earth, it is highly possible that they could easily use "Bukgyo" to mean the place for the sacrifice to Earth just as they used "Namgyo" to mean the place for the sacrifice to Heaven.⁴² If the ritual at Bukgyo

corresponds to the emperor's ritual at Bangtaek, the Joseon kings' frequent reliance on the ritual at Bukgyo and their recognition of the significance of the ritual becomes understandable. It is true that there is no clear evidence proving that Joseon kings performed the same ritual for Earth as Chinese emperor. However, given that they often regarded the Bukgyo ritual as being as important as that of Sajik,⁴³ which was also often regarded as the place for the sacrifice to Earth,⁴⁴ there is no need to deny that through Bukgyo rituals, the kings wanted to symbolize their power and right to perform rituals appealing to Earth when necessary.

In fact, even if we only consider the fact that Joseon kings attempted to maintain the Namgyo-Bukgyo structure, a spatial configuration of ritual places which was originally created for the emperors' rituals, it is sufficient to assert that Joseon kings desired to proclaim their status as the highest authority in terms of politics and rituals, at least within their state. Put succinctly, it can be said that Joseon kings did not necessarily agree with the idea that Chinese emperors had higher status than Joseon kings, nor were they obsessed with ritual propriety that would reinforce this idea.

This does not intend to argue that Joseon Korea had equal political status with Ming China in their relationship. It is true that Joseon Korea was in the inferior position when it had diplomatic relations with Ming China and thus, needed to accept China's political requests in many cases. The fact that in *Oryeui*, Grand Sacrifices to Heaven and Earth were removed clearly proves Joseon's relatively inferior political status, whether its kings performed those rituals temporarily or unofficially. However, if Joseon leaders' political activities were free from China-centered interpretations of the Classics, it might prove that continuously repeated serious ritual debates did not result in an incorrigible Sinicization of Joseon people's thoughts and practices. Put differently, given the records about the rituals at Namgyo and Bukgyo, there is a need to reexamine the widely accepted historians' generalizations: 1) The Joseon founders' attempts to Confucianize their state inevitably caused the result that its rulers' behaviors came to be limited by Confucianism; and 2) Their *sadae* policy was ideologically justified and taken for granted as their Confucian philosophy became more sophisticated. Unfortunately, whether the rituals at Namgyo and Bukgyo were

39. *Taejong sillok* (v. 34. 17. 12. Euryu).

40. *Yeongjo sillok* (v. 79. 29. 5. Gapja).

41. In "Lizhi" 禮志 in *Mingshi* 明史, the terms "dongjiao" 東郊 and "xijiao" 西郊 are shown. But *beijiao* 北郊 was not used as the official name for a ritual.

42. As shown in Bak Jiwon's *Yeolha ilgi* (*The Jehol Diary*), to the Joseon elite, it might be a common sense that Won-gu was located at Namgyo and Bangtaek at Bukgyo. For the reference, see Bak Jiwon's *Yeolha ilgi* 熱河日記 ("hwangdo giryak" 黃圖紀略; "hwangseong gu-mun" 皇城九門).

43. *Yeongjo sillok* (v. 95. 36. 5. Byeongin).

44. Regarding this, see Yi 2003, 113-18.

exactly the same as sacrifices to Heaven and Earth at Won-gu and Bangtaek is not clear. However, only with the fact that Joseon kings had maintained the belief that they had the right to directly contact Heaven and Earth, and the fact that they used the textual authority of the Classics very wisely for their national benefit, the Joseon rulers' remarks, professing to be subjects of Chinese emperors as shown in their ritual debates, should be carefully reexamined and reassessed.

One might argue that ritual propriety was an important issue to the early Joseon leaders and their ritual debates on the sacrifice to Heaven facilitated the state's Confucianization from its beginning. But, there still remain some questions. If maintenance of ritual propriety was so important to Joseon rulers, how could they frequently perform so-called improper rituals even after the code of sacrifices, the *National Five Rites*, was completed? How was it possible that the kings chose to perform rituals not institutionalized in official code even in the late Joseon period when Confucian philosophy was more sophisticated? The term "Confucianization" only simplifies various political activities and accompanying ritual debates in early Joseon and thus makes it difficult to understand the complicated historical processes of the Joseon dynasty. Therefore, to understand Joseon rulers' political intentions hidden in the debates about ritual propriety and the contents of the Classics, various ritual debates other than those about the sacrifice to Heaven should also be examined.

Making a New Self-consciousness

When Byeon Gyeryang insisted on the need to perform sacrifices to Heaven, he supported his idea with history. In a memorial, he stated: "Our [Eastern] country had had and fulfilled the duty of sacrifice to Heaven, which cannot be overlooked now....Our state was founded by the progenitor, Dan-gun, who came from Heaven, and is not one of the states enfeoffed by the Son of Heaven 天子 in China."⁴⁵ Byeon emphasized not only the fact that the sacrifice to Heaven had been a long tradition of Joseon Korea but also that Joseon Korea had a unique historical path which began from Dan-gun. He criticized some officials who contended that Dan-gun did not have much opportunity to learn

Chinese culture and thus, was not very civilized. Refuting their arguments that the ways of ritual in the period of Dan-gun were improper and that Koreans should follow the rituals introduced by China after the Dan-gun period, Byeon pointed out that even the Hongwu emperor (r. 1368-1398) allowed for Joseon to maintain its own traditional ritual ways.⁴⁶ Therefore, traditional Korean ritual ways, such as non-Confucian sacrifices to Heaven, to Byeon, were not a deviation from the principle of propriety which Joseon rulers should maintain. It is notable that in his argument relying on the existence of Korea's own primogenitor Dan-gun, Joseon was defined as a totally different political and cultural entity from Ming China.

The emphasis on Dan-gun was repeated by Yang Seongji during King Sejo's reign. In his memorial, stating the importance of sacrifices for previous Korean rulers, Yang presents an interesting genealogy of Korean rulers. In the genealogy, Yang called Dan-gun the king of early Joseon and Gija the king of late Joseon.⁴⁷ Positioning Gija after Dan-gun in the genealogy and making Gija a successor of Dan-gun, Yang insisted that Korean history had begun even before Chinese thought and culture were introduced. The examples of Byeon and Yang show that the two officials who asserted the need to perform sacrifices to Heaven also tried to construct a strong self-consciousness of their state. Then, what were the opinions of other officials who emphasized ritual propriety more and opposed the Joseon kings' sacrifice to Heaven?

Heo Jo was one of the officials who opposed Joseon kings' sacrifice to heaven. As a matter of fact, he was one of the officials who suggested that national sacrifices be offered to Gija who had contributed to Korea's civilization. In modern historiography, Joseon officials' intellectual inclinations emphasizing Gija have often been regarded as distinguishable from those highlighting Dan-gun.⁴⁸ Then, was Heo, who suggested sacrifices to Gija but opposed Joseon

46. This is one of the repertoires Joseon officials frequently used to argue that Koreans should not unconditionally follow the ways of ritual recorded in the Classics. For instance, the same statements can be found in *Taejong sillok* (v. 22. 11. 10. Gabin) and *Sejo sillok* (v. 3. 2. 3. Jeongyu).

47. *Sejo sillok* (v. 3. 2. 3. Jeongyu).

48. In her *Confucian Transformation of Korea*, Martina Deuchler (1992) argues that the architects of the Joseon dynasty such as Jeong Dojeon, Kwon Keun, and Ha Yun attempted to remove the vestiges of indigenous, that is "non-Gija customs." That is, she explains that the architects of Joseon had different ideas and blueprints for their state from other officials who put much more emphasis on Korean tradition (*tosok*). In *Voice from the North*, Sun Joo Kim (2013) suggests the possibility that by the eighteenth century, Dan-gun had not gained popular recognition by Joseon central elites

45. *Taejong sillok* (v. 31. 16. 6. Sinyu).

kings' sacrifice to Heaven, an intellectual and philosophical opponent of Byeon Gyeryang? Can one argue that Heo put much more emphasis on Chinese culture and philosophy than Korean tradition? Before answering the question, one needs to bear in mind that, as John Duncan (2016) indicates, many Joseon officials came from the same scholarly background and possibly held "the same historically and culturally-informed view of Joseon identity." As a matter of fact, both Heo Jo and Byeon Gyeryang studied under Kwon Keun 權近 (1352-1409). When Heo suggested sacrifices to Gija, the Board of Rites, where he belonged, and its minister Ha Yun continuously emphasized the importance of sacrifices to Dan-gun.⁴⁹ Given these, it seems highly possible that what Heo wanted to emphasize by insisting on performing sacrifices to Gija was Korea's brilliant culture and history proclaiming that the rise of Confucianism in Korea was coeval with that of China. In this context, rather than simply regarding the debates on sacrifices to Dan-gun and Gija as ideological conflicts between a Korea-centered view and a China-centered view, it seems more reasonable to understand the debates as discussions on how to define and construct the identity of Joseon.

It seems that Joseon officials' debates on the sacrifice to Dan-gun was one of their efforts to construct a very new self-consciousness which was totally different from that of the previous period. For those who have a primordialist vision of the nation as timeless, it might not be easily acceptable that the debates on the sacrifice to Dan-gun, whose name had already been in historical records written in Goryeo, were their endeavor to make a significant conceptual change to construct the identity for the state and its people. However, the *Sillok* shows that even King Sejong was reluctant to accept the idea that Dan-gun was a common ancestor of all people in Joseon Korea. When Byeon Gyeryang asked the king to perform sacrifices to Dan-gun together with the primogenitors of the Three Kingdoms at the same altar, King Sejong refused the suggestion at first, saying that if sacrifices to Dan-gun were performed at the same shrine with the primogenitors of the Three Kingdoms, the rituals might be improper because,

compared to Gija. Even Han Yeongu (1985, 349-74), who points out that to many Joseon officials, Gija was not a symbol of Korea's political subservience to China but that of Korea's political independence, agrees that Gija was somehow a symbol of Koreans' efforts to maintain "a polite relationship with China." Regarding this, what I want to emphasize here is that Joseon officials' Gija worship should not be simply regarded as a reflection of their China-centered world view.

49. *Taejong sillok* (v. 23. 12. 6. Gimi).

according to his knowledge, the Three Kingdoms were different political entities from that of Dan-gun.⁵⁰ That is, the historical genealogy that regards Dan-gun as the primogenitor of the Korean nation which is widely accepted by modern Koreans, was not necessarily accepted by the king. Before long, Yu Gwan 柳寬 (1346-1433), the former Third State Councilor (*uuijeong*), sent King Sejong a memorial saying that a shrine in the county of Munhwa (Munhwahyeon 文化縣) dedicated to Danung cheonwang (the king as the Son of Heaven 天王), Danin cheonwang, and Dan-gun cheonwang reveals the possibility that this county was the old capital of the state of Dan-gun. In this memorial, he also asked the king to order the office to find the exact site of the capital to build complete and correct knowledge of the history of Dan-gun, which Joseon people had different understandings about and attitudes toward. On top of that, Yu argued that Dan-gun lived in the same time period as emperor Yao more than one thousand years before Gija came to Korea and thus, sacrifices to Dan-gun, the primogenitor of Joseon, should not be performed at the shrine for Gija, who belonged to a later generation.⁵¹ These examples show that in early Joseon, its leaders tried to define their state and people as a unique group emphasizing their distinct history and culture. As a way to advance this endeavor, a group of elites attempted to complete the state's genealogy which could embrace the entirety of the people of Joseon as members of a community which originated in the distant past, the state of Dan-gun; this is an effort to consolidate scattered knowledge and to transform various groups' different memories into a collective memory at the national level.

Concluding Remarks

Catherine Bell (1992, 221) indicates that ritual can work as a social device giving its practitioners and spectators a "sense of community." It seems, therefore, that examinations of the debates about state rituals can help us understand how Joseon people perceived their social and political position within their contemporary national and international situations and how this perception influenced the construction and development of the new political entity. Based

50. *Sejong sillok* (v. 37. 9. 9. Gichuk).

51. *Sejong sillok* (v. 40. 10. 6. Eulmi).

on this, the paper attempted to examine ritual performances and related debates during the Joseon dynasty. This is not an attempt to discuss how and how much the state was “Confucianized” but to discuss the ways the state’s leaders defined their state’s identity which should then be shared with the people belonging to the state. To do this, this paper focused more on how the state’s leaders flexibly used their cultural and historical knowledge to manipulate rituals and related regulations for their political purposes, one of which was to construct identities of the state and its people.

As Anthony Smith (1986, 157-61) aptly points out, religions and priesthoods can play a central role in transmitting and disseminating communal memory, and in celebrating the sense of common identity, especially in societies where formal systems of education were lacking or deficient. In this vein, it is natural that Joseon rulers, who needed to legitimize their political authority and to secure the people’s loyalty, considered how to elaborate various rituals which would be useful not only to proclaim their socio-political supremacy but also to transform the people under their rule into a collectivity sharing a common history. Joseon officials’ debates about ritual propriety were not simply discussions about their philosophical or religious beliefs. Rather those debates were made to extend a sense of collective identity to the constituents of Joseon and to construct a more stable state. In this context, even though Joseon politicians referred to the Classics, filled with Confucian precepts and ideas, it should not be simply said that their repeated debates on ritual propriety were intended only to Sinicize their state or dogmatize a specific ideology. Rather, those ritual debates should be understood as Joseon’s own way of state building which is worthy of study as an example for better understanding the diversity and difference of the historical developments of various states in the world.

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Abstract

The term "Confucianization" often simplifies various political activities and their accompanying ritual debates in early Joseon and thus makes it difficult to understand the complicated historical processes of the Joseon dynasty. Examining Joseon officials' debates about the sacrifice to Heaven and the sacrifice to Dan-gun, this paper challenges the historical premise that Joseon people could not but have a China-centered view as a result of its "Confucian transformation." This paper also suggests that for the Joseon elite, Confucian thoughts were useful resources which could be referred to when necessary, not an absolute or inflexible tenet by which all of their thoughts and practices were restrained and controlled. Even though Joseon politicians referred to the Classics, which were filled with Confucian precepts and ideas, it should not simply be said that their repeated debates on ritual propriety were intended only to Sinicize their state or dogmatize a specific ideology. Rather, those ritual debates should be understood as Joseon's own way of state building which is worthy of study as an example to better understand the diversity and differences in the historical development of various states in the world.

Keywords: Confucianization, sacrifice to Heaven, sacrifice to Dan-gun, state building, ritual

