

Sŏnggyun'gwan was the intellectual and at times the political center of Korea for the Chosŏn Dynasty's five centuries of rule.

An ancient Confucian ritual lives on in Korea

To the Great Sage

by John Holstein / photos by Kim, Eun-Ha



The majestic ginkgo trees of Munmyo belie their venerable age. In the robust girth of their trunks and in their stretching branches, in their jubilant spring green and radiant autumn gold you still see the vigor of their younger days in the fourteenth century. Daesŏngjŏn, which houses the spirit tablets, does not do as well at hiding its great age, but it carries its years with a quiet dignity which suffuses this utterly tranquil courtyard.

The stillness of Myŏngnyundang, to the rear of Munmyo, is enhanced by the voices of the old men whiling away the day in one of the seventeenth-century buildings. They are reminiscing on the past as they plan for tomorrow. *Sangjŏng*, toward the beginning of the second lunar month, is the day they will celebrate the 2,541st birthday of Confucius.

In the sixth and fifth centuries BC Confucius introduced his system of social ethics and political principles. In the first century A.D. the Later Han Emperor Ming honored the Sage and 72 champions of his system with a

memorial rite which would develop into the Sökchön.

In the fourteenth century the founders of Korea's Chosön Dynasty institutionalized the Sökchön when they proclaimed Confucianism the nation's guiding doctrine. And in the second half of the twentieth century the Chinese looked to Korea's version of the rite for help in retrieving the authenticity which the Chinese rite had lost over the centuries.

In March of 1990, a couple hundred people—including a number of international visitors—are waiting in this ancient compound on the campus of a modern university to celebrate the rite yet again.

From the east gate, to the rear of the shrine, a man in a green tunic leads around to the front of the shrine thirty-three musicians and sixty-four dancers in red cloaks. The dancers arrange themselves in front of the shrine and the musicians take their yin position on the stone porch of the shrine and their yang position at the main gate. From the west gate enter a few in black tunics, and some in simple white



(facing page) Celebrants lined up before Munmyo, the shrine at Sönggyun'gwan, dedicated to Confucius.

(above) The music of the ritual was recorded to restore its earlier form during the reign of King Sejong (1418–1450).

(below) The grounds of the shrine have been left unpaved and unmodernized, preserving the atmosphere of the Chosön Dynasty.

cloaks; these older men will conduct the Sökchön.

They bow four times toward the shrine. Then the heavy ancient doors of Munmyo's main gate startle the compound with a hoary primordial creak as they open to welcome the spirits to be honored today. At the same time, up front, the doors open to the inner sanctum of the shrine, where Confucius' spirit tablet is surrounded by the tablets of Chinese and Korean sages.

In an archaic chant the master of ceremonies invites the sages' spirits into Munmyo. Uninitiated observers do not understand what he is saying, but his haunting chant and the ethereal music that follows make perfectly clear that spirits are beckoned and coming.

Originally there were ten components to this rite, and it lasted all day. Now only seven remain, and these have been abbreviated. We have already welcomed the spirits; after this comes the offering of tribute, then the first offering of wine, and the second, and then the final offering. In closing, the ritual vessels are removed, and the



spirits are bid farewell. The ceremony these days takes less than two hours, but with the stately cadence and prolonged notes of the music and movements of the dancers there is no feeling of hurry.

Each phase of the rite is supported by music and dance. The master celebrant initiates, and the orchestra and dancers take up his lead. The basic pattern of the music is a sounding of either the metal or the stone chimes, or both together, followed by the rising and tapering glissando of a wind instrument, sometimes accompanied in voice. At some points in this two-to-three-minute recital we hear a knocking from the box drum, or a rasping from a split bamboo stick dragged down the serrated back of a wooden tiger, or bamboo whisk scraping the brim of a clay pot. The dancers begin their movement with the chime—this time a slow turn and a bow to one of the cardinal directions—and resume their former position as the last note of music fades.

The music and instruments came to Korea from China in the twelfth

The doors open to the inner sanctum of the shrine, where Confucius' spirit tablet is surrounded by those of other Chinese and Korean sages.

century. The rite's music was not written down—not even in China—and over the next couple centuries the music in both countries lost its original spirit. So the fifteenth-century King Sejong had his court scholars deduce from twelfth-century Sung Dynasty philosophical and ritual writings and the fourth century BC's *Rituals of Chou*, the basis of the original Sŏkchŏn, what the original music must have been.

"You think it's okay to smoke here?" one foreigner asks his friend. "Are you kidding? This is a shrine to the most venerated figure in the entire history of all of the Far East! How can you be so culturally insensitive? It's Westerners like you who . . ." Just in back of them a Korean asks his friend, "It's okay to smoke here, isn't it?" "Why not?" A look around the compound confirms this. If you were expecting a cathedral, you've come to the wrong place. Solemn, yes; forbidding, no. Gab with your companion, walk around the compound freely, snoop into everything except the shrine itself, get a close-up of the



musicians . . .

By the time you read this you will have missed the rite. Sorry. But don't let this ruin your trip. If you are in Korea the first Sunday in May you can enjoy essentially the same music and dance at the Chongmyo Royal Ancestral Shrine. Or you can see the Sŏkchŏn at Sŏnggyun'gwan again on *sangjŏng* of the eighth lunar month, September 19 this year.

And if you are not going to be around then, come to Sŏnggyun'gwan anyway. As the center of Confucian rites and learning, Sŏnggyun'gwan was the intellectual and at times the political center of Korea for the Chosŏn Dynasty's five centuries of rule. This is where every future leader of government studied and sat for the higher civil service exam. Sŏnggyun'gwan's resident scholars had the moral authority and political clout to stand up to the king, absolute monarch as he was. The shrine, the quadrangle, the lecture halls and dormitories—all pristine Sung Dynasty architecture, except for the wisteria bower where today's Sŏnggyun'gwan



(facing page) One of the two orchestras that accompany the rite.

(above) The ceremony preserves many elements of Confucian ritual that have passed out of usage elsewhere in the Far East.

(below) The symbolic ritual dance is performed by 64 dancers in an 8 by 8 square. Originally done by men, the dance is usually done today by women in male garb.

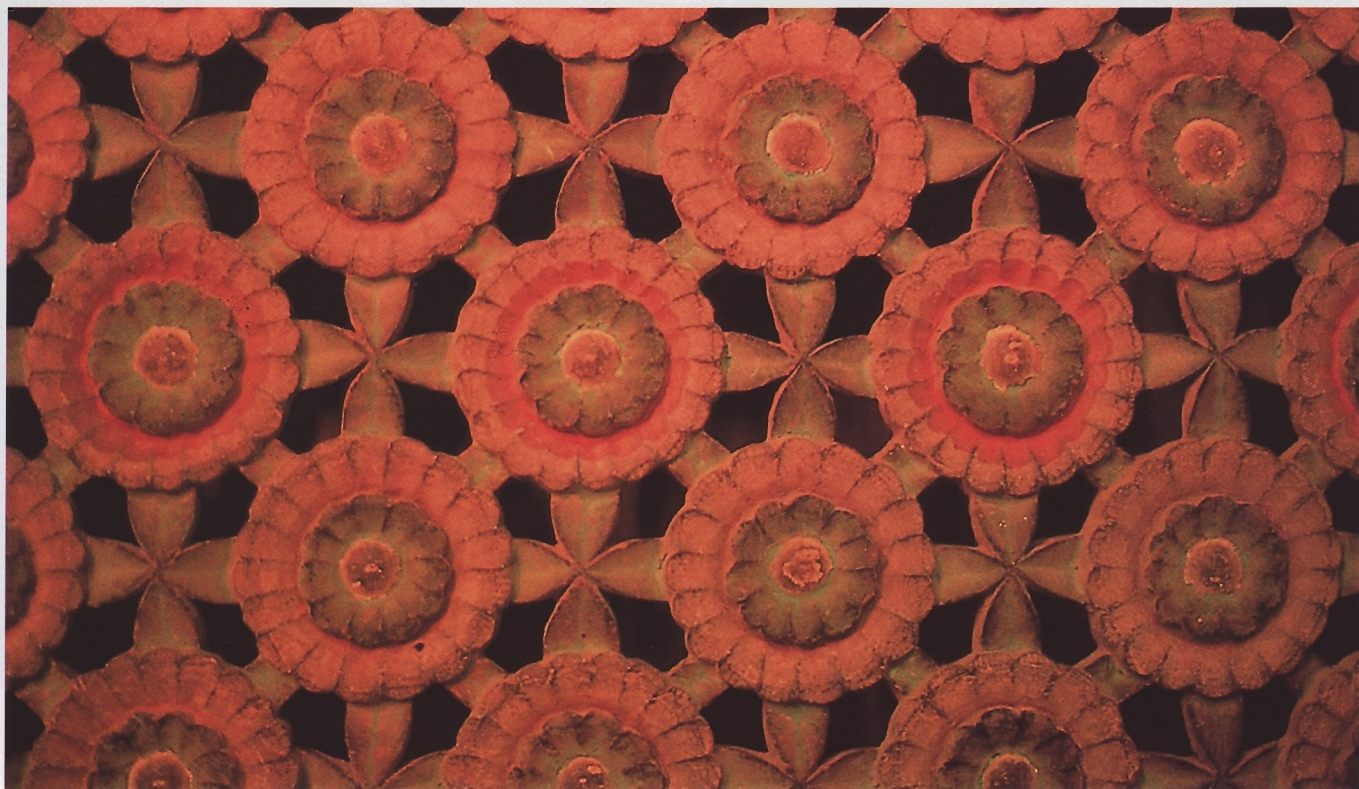
University students will gather for a chat or a study group.

This is probably why they come here from Hong Kong and Taiwan to make their movies about China's past. Korea's Confucian Association has not replaced the earthen yard with neat gravel paths and cropped lawns and pretty tulip gardens, has not put up new wood trim with varnish nor fancied up the eaves with synthetic paints impervious to the elements. The worn granite steps, weathered wood pillars and lattice windows, the great graying pine . . . Have you ever seen a camera drool?

What you see at Sŏnggyun'gwan today is most likely what its students and Confucius' spirit saw from its beginning, 600 years ago. Except that it is not quite as new as it was then. And the ginkgos are bigger now. *WZ*

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Latticework on the doors of Taejangjŏn at Yongmun Temple in Ch'ungch'ŏngnam-do.

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Cover: A pine tree on the beautiful island of hukura-jima, located off the northeast coast near Matsushima.

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