

CONFUCIAN EDUCATION IN KOREA

GRADES: 9-12

AUTHOR: Minhaj Arastu

SUBJECT: World History

TIME REQUIRED: 3-4 class periods

OBJECTIVES:

1. Create a visual organizer of the Confucian educational system during the Choson Dynasty
2. Examine a diagram of Tosan Sowon (a Confucian academy); support inferences with evidence from the diagram
3. Evaluate the *kwago*, the Confucian state civil service examination system
4. Interpret and apply the philosophy of T'oegye, a 16th century Confucian scholar

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- A bucket and several dowels for the concentration game pictured next to T'oegye
- Transparency copies of appendices 1A, 1B
- Copies of appendices 2, 3, 4 and 5

BACKGROUND:

As the dominant ideology of the Choson dynasty (1392-1910 CE), Confucianism gave birth to many of Korea's most important institutions. To better understand Confucian philosophy, it is necessary to examine these institutions and their function in Korean society throughout history. This lesson focuses on Confucian educational institutions and especially the academy founded by the well-known scholar Yi Hwang, or T'oegye (d. 1570) called Tosan Sowon. Using Tosan Sowon as a starting point, the lesson branches off into the life and philosophy of T'oegye; the overall structure of Confucian education; and one of the primary purposes of the Confucian education system, government service.

It would be useful for students to have studied Confucian philosophy beforehand. At least, students should know that Confucius sought to promote values such as benevolence ("humanity"), filial piety, reverence for ancestors, public service and social harmony. Confucius was a social and political reformer who tried to reinvigorate what he believed was a long past moral "golden age" and values during a time of political and moral decay.

PROCEDURE:

1. **Introduction:** Standing about 10-15 feet away from a bucket, have some students try to throw the dowels into the bucket. Explain that this was a game of concentration that was founded in a school in rural Korea. Show students the transparency (appendix 1A) of T'oegye and Tosan Sowon. Explain that the purpose of the lessons that follow is to use this famous philosopher and his school as a means of understanding aspects of Korean education, government and philosophy.
2. **Lesson 1:** Distribute copies of appendix 2. Ask students to create a diagram or visual representation of the information in the article. The diagram should use appropriate symbols (such as the spirit tablets drawn in the model), show movement of students from one stage to another and distinguish between the various types of school

(public, private, 1st level, 2nd level, etc.). Ask a few students to draw their charts on the board and then discuss any needed corrections with the class. A model diagram for the teacher is attached.

3. **Lesson 2:** Show the transparency (appendix 1B) of "Tosan Sowon" in Chinese characters. Distribute copies of appendix 3. State that we can learn a great deal about culture from architecture and that the students will use this diagram to support or refute inferences that are listed under the explanation of the diagram. Have students read the diagram and explanations. Again, show them the transparency of Tosan Sowon to give them an idea of the scale and surroundings of the school.
4. **Lesson 3:** Distribute copies of appendix 4. Have students read the article and then answer the questions below with a partner. Discuss the two questions as a class. Possible student responses are given below:

Pros: meritocracy/rule by the best; social mobility; opportunity; emphasis on education and learning; led to establishment of new education system

Cons: expense and time needed for education made it available to rich only; exclusion of non-Confucian, rival philosophies and world views; exams covered a limited body of knowledge; there is no link between writing poetry, doing calligraphy and governing; it did not test for practical experience; it did not test for qualities that cannot be tested; danger of corruption and cheating.

5. **Lesson 4:** Distribute appendix 5. Read it aloud with students and discuss any difficult points. Ask students to respond to the essay question at the bottom. Remind them that they should use what they have learned from the previous lessons as they answer the question.

EVALUATION:

- Lessons 1 to 3 can be informally evaluated through discussion. Lesson 4 is an essay that can be formally evaluated.

ENRICHMENT:

- Compare Korean education and Confucianism with that of China and Japan. Research what happened to the Korean and Chinese systems of education; why and how did they change.

RESOURCES:

Choi, Min-hong. *A Modern History of Korean Philosophy*. Seoul, Korea: Seong Moon Sa, 1980.

"Confucius and Confucianism." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 1997 ed.

Joe, Wanne J. *Traditional Korea: A Cultural History*. Seoul, Korea: Chung An Press, 1972.

Kang, Hugh H.W., ed. *The Traditional Culture and Society of Korea: Thought and Institutions*. Honolulu: Center for Korean Studies, University of Hawaii, 1975.

Kim, Kwang-on. "Yangdong and Oksan Sowon." *Koreana* 11:1 (1997): 74-9.

Korean Folk Museum: Guide to the National Folk Museum. Seoul, Korea: Shin Yoo Publishing Co., 1994.

Lee, Ki-dong. "T'oegye Thought and Tosan Confucian Academy." *Koreana* 2:3 (1988).

Wright, Chris, ed. *Korea: Its History and Culture.* Seoul, Korea: Korean Overseas Information Service, 1996.

APPENDIX 1A



T'oege (1501-1570 CE)
Confucian scholar, writer and educator



Tosan Sowon (Tosan Academy)
founded by T'oege in 1557

APPENDIX 1B



Name board hanging on the main Lecture Hall. These are the Chinese characters for Tosan Sowon (Tosan Academy), read from right to left. It is a work of master calligrapher Han Sok-pong and was given by King Sonjo c. 1574 CE

APPENDIX 2:

A DESCRIPTION OF KOREA'S CONFUCIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

The last dynasty to rule Korea before recent times was strictly Confucian in nature. During this dynasty, an education system emerged that was designed to teach the values and ideas embodied in the classical texts of Confucianism. This education system had three levels, some parts of which were privately run and others that were government run. The ultimate goal of the schools and colleges was to train scholars from the aristocratic class to serve as civil government officials of all kinds.

The most fundamental private Confucian educational institution was the *sodang*. These schools were privately operated for the sons of *yangban* (aristocracy) and those boys who could be spared from farm work. The *sodang* provided basic literacy and boys practiced writing in trays of sand. By the late 1800's, there were over 16,000 *sodang* in Korea. Those students with the skills and means advanced to the next level of education: either the *sowon* or the *hyanggo*.

The *sowon* was a high school or college level private academy, many of which could be found in any one town. Disciples of great teachers often founded *sowon* and dedicated them to their master's memory. Thus, the *sowon* had a dual purpose: to provide Confucian education and to commemorate a prominent teacher. In each *sowon*, a shrine was dedicated to the prominent teacher and his spirit tablet was kept within. One of the most famous *sowon* was Tosan Sowon ("Peach Mountain Academy"), built for the philosopher and teacher, T'oegye. Because each *sowon* was dedicated to a particular teacher, these academies created lifelong teacher-pupil loyalties, which often continued into later political life.

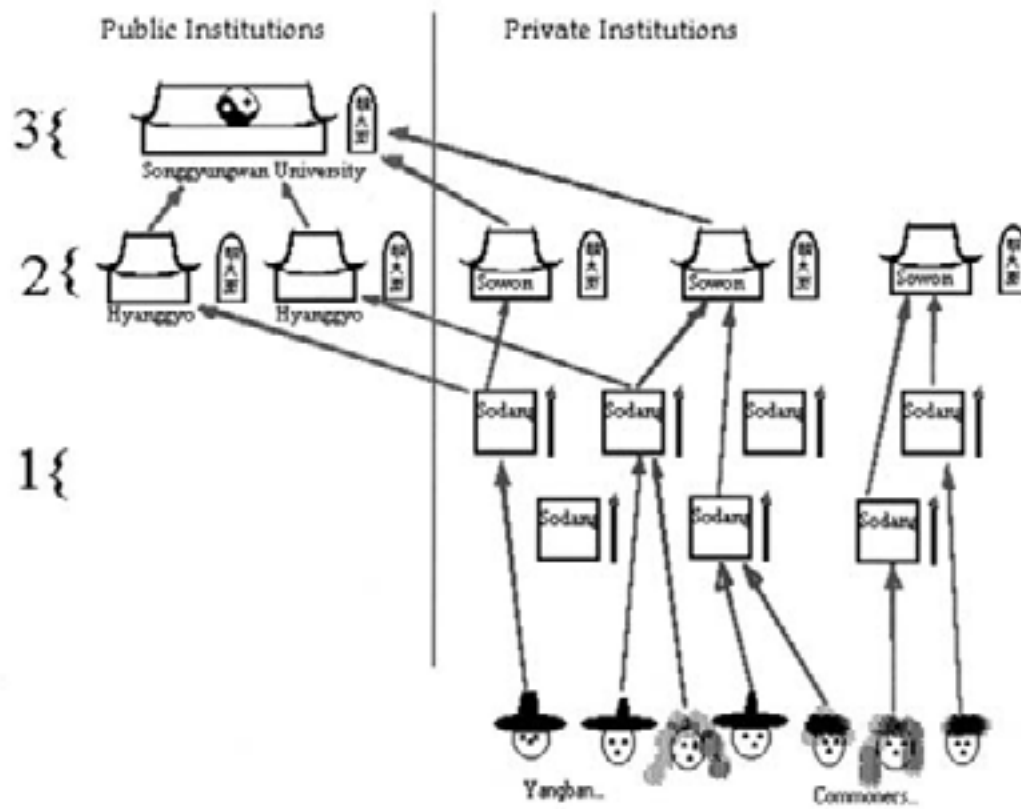
The parallel public institution that corresponds to the *sowon* is the *hyanggo*. The government began establishing *hyanggo* in the 12th century to train students for the state civil service exams. Each major town in Korea usually had a *hyanggo*, which served two purposes: to educate and to enshrine the spirit tablet of Confucius. Enrollment numbers were set at 90 students for a town, 50 students for a county and 30 students for a sub-county. Thus, graduates of a *sodang* could choose to attend a private *sowon* or a public *hyanggo*.

After studying in a *sowon* or a *hyanggo*, the ablest students progressed to the single national university in Seoul, Songgyun'gwan. This public, national university had a central shrine dedicated to Confucius and it was the site of the highest level government exams. Songgyun'gwan is still a functioning university where students study Chinese philosophy. A modern curriculum is taught as well.

The Confucian education system described above declined in the later 1800s, especially when the civil service exams were no longer given. But, memorial services are still performed for Confucius in the *hyanggo* and Songgyun'gwan University. Descendents of scholars such as T'oegye also perform ancestral rites in the various *sowon* that still exist in Korea.

Draw a diagram or chart that puts the above information in a clear and meaningful visual form. Consider using relevant symbols and if necessary, a legend.

MODEL DIAGRAM FOR APPENDIX 2



APPENDIX 3A: DIAGRAM OF TOSAN SOWON



APPENDIX 3B: EXPLANATION OF DIAGRAM

1. Tosan Sodang: T'oegye built this building as a study and private school in 1557.
2. Cholusa: T'oegye looked after this garden of plum trees, bamboo, chrysanthemums and pine trees.
3. Dormitory: This was the building in which T'oegye's students lived and studied. The rooms are built in the shape of the Chinese character (I) for "studying."
4. Library: These two library buildings were built several feet off the ground to keep out the humidity. Almost 5,000 books were stored in this library, the Korean name of which means "Books give us hope."
5. Dormitories: These two buildings were used as quarters for visiting scholars.
6. Lecture Hall: This hall was built in 1574. The hanging name board was given by King Sonjo, who asked the master calligrapher Han Sokpong to write the Chinese characters for Tosan Sowon, literally, "Peach Mountain Academy."
7. Printshop: In this building, 2,790 wooden printing blocks were stored. Scholars used these blocks to print the works of T'oegye, King Sonjo and other scholars.
8. Shrine: The shrine houses the spirit tablets of T'oegye and one of his disciples, Cho Mok. Every February and August, memorial services are performed for these men. Women are prohibited from entering the shrine.
9. Storehouse: Food and wine are stored here for use during the memorial services. These items are offered to the spirits of T'oegye and Cho Mok.
10. Caretakers Quarters: These large rooms contained kitchens and living quarters for the caretakers of the academy.
11. Dormitory: The father of one of T'oegye's students built this room as a study and dormitory for students when his son entered the academy.
12. Examination Island: In 1792, King Chongjo ordered the state civil service exams to be given on this island in honor of T'oegye's 222nd death anniversary. 7,228 scholars took the exam, but only 11 passed.

Find evidence from the diagram and explanations that either supports or refutes the inferences below. List the specific pieces of evidence that you find.

1. The architects paid little attention to the natural geographic environment as they built Tosan Sowon.
2. The school was built in several phases, not all at once.
3. Students perform veneration ceremonies at the school.
4. There were probably 70 students and 10 teachers at this school.
5. One part of a student's education was serving his teachers by cooking and cleaning for them.
6. This school primarily taught the philosophy of its founder T'oegye.
7. This school received a great deal of royal attention.
8. Students are encouraged to isolate themselves from the outside world and focus their attention on studies.
9. Literacy was widespread in 16th century Korea.
10. The education at this school was primarily literary (as opposed to practical, physical, religious, etc.).
11. *Make your own inference and find support for it.*

APPENDIX 4: KWAGO SYSTEM

In Confucius' lifetime (551-479 BCE), no one would have known that his philosophy would later come to shape the culture of East Asia. The Chinese emperor Wu Di (141-87 BCE) was the first to give Confucius' teachings a major role in Chinese government. He established a university and gave the classic texts of Confucianism their codified form. Later on during the T'ang Dynasty (618-907 CE), the Chinese government administered civil service exams through which it chose the most qualified to work as officials. From these earlier developments in China, Korea adopted the idea of civil service exams (*kwago*) when the Koryo ruler Kwangjong administered the first exam in 958 CE.

The *kwago* of Korea tested a scholar's knowledge of the Confucian classics, which consisted of six major works. The only work that represents Confucius' own thoughts is the *Analects*. The other five books are thought to be older than Confucius, coming from a time of ancient sage-kings. *The Classic of Poetry*, *The Classic of History*, *The Classic of Rites*, *The Classic of Changes* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* together make up the literature that an educated man would know in 10th century Korea.

Over the several centuries that the examination system was in effect in Korea, the subjects on the exam changed several times. At first, the examination dealt with composition, the classics and miscellaneous affairs. Later on, the higher officials had to take a literary exam that covered composition (poetry, prose and calligraphy) and the classics. Military officials and lower clerks had separate exams.

Once the exam was instituted, it became clear that a system of formal education would be necessary to train and educate future scholar-officials. Thus, the government founded secondary schools (*hyanggo*) and a national university (Songgyun'gwan) where the Confucian classics were studied. At the private level, former government officials also built their own secondary schools (*sowon*) and primary schools (*sodang*). The king personally rewarded and recognized those scholars who excelled on the different parts of the government exams.

Theoretically, the government exam system was to open up the bureaucracy to the most conscientious and diligent individuals. In practice, though, the exams reinforced many divisions and hierarchies in Korean society. Only the wealthy could afford the time and expense of a very long educational career. Also, Confucian philosophy emphasized the importance of fulfilling one's social role, whether in the family or in the society, for harmony within society as a whole. Every person's social and government rank was made very apparent through clothing, home decoration and other privileges. The exam system had several biases that prevented it from creating a truly merit-based government bureaucracy.

1. Evaluate the pros and cons of the *kwago* system in Korea. List the positive aspects on the left and the negative aspects on the right.
2. What should be the requirements for government service? Describe them in order of importance. How can they be tested or measured?

APPENDIX 5: LIFE AND PHILOSOPHY OF T'OEGYE

T'oegye was born in 1501, the last of six sons in a family of scholars. His birthplace was Onhye, a small village two miles from Tosan Sowon. His father died when he was a year old, so his mother brought him up along with all of his brothers. She was eager to have them educated even though she was poor. It is said that T'oegye started to learn the *Thousand Chinese Characters* text at age six from an old man in his village and the *Analects* of Confucius at age twelve from an uncle. From that time on, he enjoyed reading the classics and poetry whenever he could.

His steady reading and studying enabled him to pass the highest government service exam at the early age of 33. However, the political climate in the 1530's was not suitable for him. Realizing that his ideals could not come to fruition in such an environment, he devoted himself to studying the Confucian classics and to cultivating his mind. He also kept company with many intellectuals from across the country who came to the capital.

Though he volunteered and served as the local county head, his ideals finally made him leave the post in 1549, and he began to live in retirement in his home town. From that time on, he was given the honorific penname T'oegye after a stream in his hometown. As soon as he settled there, many young students came to learn from him. During the following two decades, he devoted himself to studying and teaching, spurning worldly fame and success, and educating more than 300 pupils.

His profound learning and virtue were famous throughout the country. He was summoned to serve as one of the king's special advisors and as the president of Songgyun'gwan. These were among the highest offices in Korea and most educated men aspired to them. T'oegye served the government several times, always retiring to Tosan Sodang for long intervals. For T'oegye, the purpose of learning and studying was to cultivate one's mind and to maintain correct behavior. He lived, taught and served according to the principles until he died at age 70.

Adapted from an unpublished pamphlet by Dr. Hyun Tae-Duck:

T'oegye's philosophy is built upon the basic ideas and ideals of Confucius. The ultimate goals in Confucianism are social harmony and the development of benevolence (or "humanity") in people. Confucius and Confucian scholars have explained that many ingredients are required to produce this desired state of affairs. Filial piety, or reverence for parents and family, is one of the most essential values of Confucian thought. Public and family rituals are another means of teaching benevolence and creating social harmony. Finally, self-cultivation and education are a third way of attaining Confucian goals.

T'oegye focused his attention on the issue of benevolence and self-cultivation. When one writes about shaping and improving human nature, it is not a great leap for a philosopher to ask: What is human nature to begin with? Are we trying to salvage a creature who is inherently evil? Are we trying to encourage a person who is already inherently good to become an even better person? With what kind of animal do we have to work?

T'oegye and other scholars argued that human nature was essentially good but that it could never stay good for very long because there was a great deal that could go wrong in human nature as well. T'oegye wrote that there were seven emotions (joy, anger, sor-

row, pleasure, love, hate and desire) that had the potential to lead to good or evil. There were also four virtues: sympathy, shame, modesty and a sense of right and wrong. Even though we are born with the four virtues, the seven emotions will overcome us and extinguish any virtue we possessed sooner or later.

But, T'oegye believed that there was some medicine for this illness. If humans are to maintain the four virtues and attain benevolence or humanity, then they must educate themselves in the true sense of the word. The first part of this education is to be mindful: to be respectful of others, to reflect on one's life and to be constantly vigilant about one's thoughts and actions. The second part of this education is the disciplined pursuit of knowledge: knowledge of oneself, nature and society.

Scholars like T'oegye encouraged many practices that were consistent with the above mentioned educational goals. Among those practices are reading, sitting quietly, ritual practices, physical exercise, calligraphy, mathematics and gardening. All of these practices promote an attitude of mindfulness and the pursuit of knowledge. Through this form of education, T'oegye wrote, a person can preserve the innate virtues and control the innate emotions. This done, an individual is on his way to becoming benevolent and fully human; society is on its way to becoming harmonious.

Essay: You have learned about the structure and purpose of Confucian education, about T'oegye's school Tosan Sowon, and about the life and teachings of T'oegye himself. Now put yourself in T'oegye's shoes and critique American education, including curricular and extracurricular activities. Make sure to explain why you approve or disapprove of the various aspects of American education.