

Confucianism in the Current Society of South Korea

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Abstract

This paper examines the status of Confucianism as a philosophical, thought and value framework in contemporary South Korean society. Confucianism still retains a strong influence on the daily life of society in South Korea, but it has undergone a major transformation. The two main tendencies influencing its position are, first, its strong cultural tradition and respect for it, and second, the economic and social transformation in the context of globalization and certainly the westernization of the Southeast Asian region. Paper has a character of reflective essay and provides author's considerations about the topic. Is structured in three parts; first part introduces essence of Confucianism, second provides findings about current position of Confucianism according to current research, third concludes some author's reflections about the future of Confucianism in South Korea.

Keywords: South Korea; Confucianism; cultural tradition; social and economic transformation

1. Introduction

Paper focuses on the status and role of Confucianism in modern South Korean society. The aim is to briefly introduce the essence of Confucianism and its projection in the contemporary society of the country in the East Asian region, which can be seen as the cradle of the given paradigmatic school of thought. The question is whether Confucianism and its moral tradition have a place in the modern society of South Korea as a developing country in a global world system that respects the values of democracy, capitalism and individualism (in the sense of human rights and freedoms). The paper is conceived as a reflective essay, using academic literature research as a basis for author's considerations.

1.1 Confucianism and its essence

Let us start our work with brief introduction into Confucian philosophical concept and its history. Confucianism emerges approximately 2,500 years ago in China around the philosopher

Confucius (Kushner, 2013; Mitu, 2015), who transformed his views on social and political structure into teachings (he himself plays the role of a teacher). His teachings are further disseminated by his students, even outside of China (they reach Korea due to partial Chinese ruling around the first century BC; Xiao and Hu, 2019). As Mitu (2015) points out, there is no one universal definition of Confucianism. Nevertheless, at this point, let us offer several possible ways of understanding it (Mitu, 2015):

- Part of Asian culture and tradition
- A compass of moral, social, philosophical and religious ideas, values and practices
- A set of philosophical narratives that adapt according to external conditions (here it is worth noting the self-cultivating nature of Confucianism)

Crucial to the spread and success of Confucianism in South Korea, according to Kushner (2013), was the fact that it gave voice also to people (men) outside the group of the highest nobility and developed social rights (which were to be linked to wealth redistribution) and strengthened the role of society and the state. In the 12th century, (neo)Confucianism became the state ideology of South Korea. This success was aided (e.g. according to Mitu, 2015) by the fact that it provides a relatively large degree of freedom in interpretation (it does not provide clear and precise guidelines - here a comparison is offered e.g. with Christian ideology and tradition, which is rather based on clear instructions and rules for thinking and acting; or one can see a possible link to the general rather unpleasant attitude of East Asian societies towards being bound by law in the context of legism, etc.), it is moral and practically oriented.

Interestingly, Confucianism has not gained and maintained a prominent position in all East Asian countries. A rather interesting comparison illustrating the differences in the promotion of Confucianism between China as a country of origin and South Korea is offered by Xiao and Hu (2019), who reach the following conclusions:

- In China, there was a radical spread (including the promotion of some radical movements) and there were also relatively authoritative efforts to establish other ideologies (e.g., the Cultural Revolution, etc.), whereas in South Korea, the penetration of Confucianism was gradual, and Confucianism adapted itself to other influences and the needs of society.
- In South Korea, Confucianism emphasizes moral education for life, while in China, on the other hand, a more academic approach is promoted.
- In South Korea, Confucianism and its traditions and values are also popularized and transmitted through social media and mass media (in the form of family series, quiz shows, etc.; see also Kushner, 2013; Śleziar, 2013).
- Confucianism and its moral underpinnings are still an integral part of the educational curriculum today, reinforcing the nation's alignment with Confucian values. In contrast, China's education system is performance, results and competition oriented and moral values are neglected. Kushner (2013) or Śleziar (2013) add to this issue that in South Korea, there is a merging of the two approaches, where part of individual profit is sacrificed for collective well-being, but educational outcomes are an important goal (the effectiveness of this merged approach can be illustrated by South Korea's results in international PISA surveys – see National report PISA 2022; CSI, 2023).

Based on the above, it can be concluded that the use of soft power is effective for the spread, diffusion, and modernization of Confucianism (Xiao and Hu, 2019).

The essence of Confucianism is well expressed by its 4 principles and 5 types of relationships of certain superiority and subordination, which are shown in Figure 1. It is pertinent to emphasize that it is a complex system affecting many areas of human life (see also Mitu, 2015 and the proposed definitions of Confucianism). The emphasis is thus placed on the primacy of age, experience, authority and heredity (Śleziar, 2013). Human excellence and cultivation are achieved through internal morality and external manifestations (also Mitu, 2015; Śleziar, 2013), and consequently, the harmonization and development of communities and society and nation is also achieved (Śleziar, 2013).

Figure 1: Principles and Relationships in Confucianism

Principles	Types of relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanity • Justice • Politeness • Knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leader - follower • Father - son • Older brother - younger brother • Husband - wife • The older - The younger

Figure 1: Principles and Relationships in Confucianism

Source: based on Kushner (2013); Śleziak (2013)

At this point, the author takes the liberty to raise the idea that a very essential feature of Confucianism is its dynamism and its capacity for reflection (see also Śleziar, 2013). Given the fact that the East Asian space has undergone social and economic transformation, turbulent developments in the areas of human rights, free market, individualism, sustainable growth, globalization and export, it was and is essential that Confucianism and its premises also undergo change (see also Kushner, 2013). As Mitu (2015) also points out, we have witnessed such a change in the case of the post-war modernization of the East Asian region, or in the case of the division of the Korean peninsula, when South Korea was transformed from a military dictatorship to an effective democracy with features of capitalism (Śleziar, 2013).

2. Findings regarding current position of Confucianism in society of South Korea

Contemporary South Korea is heavily influenced by Confucianism in all areas of life, as all scholarly works agree (see e.g. Kushner, 2013; Mitu, 2015; Xiao and Hu, 2019; Koh 2008 or Śleziak, 2013; but also the views of the young South Korean population itself, where, according to research by Mitu, 2015, more than half of them believe that it is a strong part of Korean society, although according to Śleziar, 2013, the younger generation is more inclined to choose their ideology and religion based on utilitarianism). Although its position has changed and Confucianism is no longer a social norm in the true sense, it has been overlaid by Western culture based on capitalism, democracy, technology and progress (also Xiao and Hu, 2019 or

Kushner, 2013 for this claim). However, according to Mitu (2015), Kushner (2013) or Xiao and Hu (2019), it has by no means disappeared and has rather become part of the cultural heritage and a manifestation of the national spirit and cultural mainstream (in South Korea most strongly in the whole East Asian region - see also Śleziar, 2013 for this thesis) by influencing not only family relations but also the whole social order (Xiao and Hu, 2019; Koh, 2008; Śleziak, 2013). As outlined above, Confucianism has a self-cultivating, adaptive character that has allowed it to become the dominant normative and value system in the region under study (despite various colonial efforts by Japan and other surrounding powers and developments after World War II, see Xiao and Hu, 2019 or Śleziar, 2013; but also despite various critical voices invoking equality, democracy and human rights, see Koh, 2008), and thus it is relevant to assume that it is also able to adapt to the current conditions of the modern world and to function complementarily with its values and principles (although, for example, the Koh, 2008 or Kushner, 2013 also find arguments against this idea in their work). Thus, modern forms of Confucianism based on the original tradition are applied (Śleziar, 2013). According to Mitu (2015) or Śleziar (2013), in this way Confucianism absorbed the values typical of Western society, i.e. the emphasis on profit and performance, individualism, free market, competition and rationalization of economic activity, but managed to integrate them with the traditional values of collectivism, emphasis on family, hierarchy and harmony in relationships, diligence, education, discipline, sense of duty and motivation, but also a lower emphasis on individual rights, leading to rapid economic growth even under conditions of global democratic capitalism. Mitu (2015) thus summarizes that in contemporary South Korean society, Confucianism is a phenomenon applied both from the so-called "top" (political institutions and leaders and the education system play an important role in the promotion and implementation of Confucianism and its natural diffusion into society - see Mitu, 2015 or Śleziar, 2013), as well as from the "bottom" and functions as an instrument of social stability and harmony. A specific 'Korean' or 'Confucian' capitalism develops here, in which social ties, effective hierarchical administration and interest in the collective good allow for a rapid capacity for healing and development of society and the economy (Śleziar, 2013).

Even from the perspective of the current young population (see the work of Mitu, 2015; Xiao and Hu, 2019; Kushner, 2013), a rather positive feedback towards Confucianism and its traditions and values can be observed, with the young population still identifying with Confucian values (esp. education, diligence and motivation, subordination to the whole, respect for authority and loyalty to family, and harmony in social relations) and appreciates that it has been able to adapt to a large extent to the modern world, and can promote rationalisation of economic activity and healthy competition. Hierarchical division of roles and social spacing based on status, a certain masculinity and collectivism is respected (Kushner, 2013).

The success of Confucianism in contemporary South Korean society can also continue to be justified by the role of mass media with a wide range of content consumers (Xiao and Hu, 2019), where family relationships, career issues in line with hierarchy and morality, etc. are presented and addressed in popular series (of the type of family dramas that are a unique phenomenon here, see also Kushner, 2013) and television shows.

On the other hand, Confucianism has also come into the crosshairs of critical voices (see e.g. Mitu, 2015; Śleziar, 2013), where it has been labelled as a tool of feudal authoritarianism,

providing tools for authoritarian to dictatorial regimes (e.g. also through its emphasis on hierarchy, obedience and discipline, etc.); a system that promotes social inequality (e.g. feminist voices are very strong); or a system that is incompatible with the modern world (Kushner, 2013); or a harmonious and moral society is perceived as an easy target for surrounding power ambitions (Šleziar, 2013). Some voices (see, for example, the work of Koh 2008) even label Confucianism as the "enemy of feminism" and the source of a patriarchal society (see one of the typical relationships in Confucianism mentioned above - the subordination of the wife to the husband; Kushner, 2013). This is thus one of the leading challenges for Confucianism in the modern world, where few topics are as sensitive as the debate on gender equality in the context of human rights and democracy.

As a result of the mutual confrontation and accommodation between the two sides, the main areas of friction are being stripped away, so that today's women and other groups (see Mitu, 2015) are not in principle uncomfortable with the study of classical Confucianism and its projection into modern life, even though its premises explicitly speak of relations of subordination (see Koh, 2008); the justification for this may perhaps be that inequality in the sense of limitations on rights and freedoms, according to theorists of Confucian ideology, stems from misinterpretation. Other critical voices, however, counter that South Korea's modernization and the spread of Western values is incompatible with Confucianism (Kushner, 2013) and Confucianism itself does not view democracy, individual rights and freedoms in Western terms (Šleziar, 2013).

3. Considerations about future of Confucianism in South Korean society

Here, the author's reflection on the possibilities of the future development (status) of Confucianism in South Korea is provided. The future of Confucianism in South Korea raises an interesting debate about the meaning and role of traditional values in the modern world. Confucianism, as a philosophical and moral system, has played a key role in Korea for many generations, influencing lifestyles, values and social relations. However, in the context of modern globalized society and rapid social change, a decline in the influence of Confucianism on daily life in South Korea can be observed.

At the same time, Confucian values can be expected to continue to be influential within institutions such as the education system, politics and public administration, albeit perhaps with some adaptation and modernisation.

South Korea thus finds itself in a process of cultural and social shift, where old traditions meet new influences. It depends on how Koreans cope with this difference and how they integrate Confucian values into modern life. It may be necessary to strike a balance between traditional and modern values in order to create a harmonious and sustainable society.

Ultimately, the future of Confucianism in South Korea depends on the ability of society to adapt and redefine its values and norms to be relevant and meaningful in today's globalized world without losing its connection to the rich cultural heritage of the past.

The capacity for adaptation, leading to the resilience of Confucianism even in the context of globalization and modern development, is reflected in the discussion of the questions (i) what

the main characteristics of modern South Korean society (see Table 1) are, and (ii) what the reason for the persistence of traditional values (see Table 1) is.

Table 1: Characteristics of modern South Korean society and reasons for the persistence of traditional values

Characteristics of modern South Korean society	Reason for the persistence of traditional values
High technological and economic level	Historical heritage and cultural traditions
High population density and urbanisation	Family and social ties
High level of education	Collectivism and solidarity
Strong consumer culture	Emphasis on stability and harmony
Strong emphasis on work ethics	Geographical isolation
Modernization of traditional values	Self-identity and pride
High level of technological and social connectivity	Modern nationalism

Source: Author's conclusions

These characteristics give a clear picture of the dynamism and complexity of contemporary South Korean society as it struggles to cope with modern challenges and preserve its identity and culture in an era of rapid progress and globalisation.

4. Conclusion

In spite of globalization tendencies and the acceptance of the liberal-democratic and capitalist paradigm even in traditional Asian cultures, the authors venture the initial thesis that Confucianism will be a persistent value compass for generations to come.

Western values and influences continue to permeate South Korean society, especially with increasing globalisation and the development of modern technology. However, traditional Korean values still remain an important part of social and cultural life in South Korea.

Although Confucianism is still an important part of Korean identity and culture, it is clear that society is increasingly turning towards modern values and Western ideals. The younger generation expresses a greater interest in individual self-realisation, personal freedom and innovation, which may contrast with traditional Confucian principles of emphasis on hierarchy, respect for authority and collectivism. However, this does not mean that Confucianism is losing all influence.

On the contrary, many Koreans still find value in Confucian principles, especially in the areas of family relationships, education, and ethics. For example, Confucian principles of respect for parents and elderly family members are still strongly rooted in Korean society.

Also, despite modernisation and globalisation in general, traditional values remain important in South Korean society and have been passed down from generation to generation. Respect for these values helps to maintain stability, cohesion and unity in South Korean society and is therefore still seen as crucial to the functioning of Korean society today.

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