The Influence of Confucian Values on Interpersonal Communication in South Korea, as Compared to China and Japan

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Abstract

Drawing on studies by Godwin Chu, this paper asks, in what ways have the different paths pursued by South Korea, China, and Japan on their way to modernization, impacted the Confucian cultural values of their people. While each of the three cultures has Confucian influence, they are dealing with Confucianism in somewhat different ways, and as modernization impacts East Asia the communication styles are changing rapidly. However, the results of comparing Chu's two studies demonstrate that Korean traditional values are more firmly entrenched than Japanese or Chinese. We conclude that this may be due to the difference in the approach to teaching moral education, as well as strong Korean Nationalism, combined with the notion that cultural evolution is arrested in transplanted cultures.

"Confucianism dominated Chinese political ideology and provided archetypal images for Chinese communication behavior for over two thousand years" (Lu, Xia, & Heisey, 2002, p. 3). One reason that Confucianism has had such a profound impact is that it was adopted as the official philosophy of the Yi Dynasty for 500 years in Korea, of the Tokugawa shogunate in Japan for 250 years, and of numerous dynasties in China. Confucian classics were required textbooks in the school systems throughout the history of China, Korea, and Japan before modern educational curricula were implemented. Government officials were selected through national exams that chiefly examined the knowledge and the level of understanding of Confucian philosophy (Yum, 1994).

But cultural values change over time, particularly in rapidly changing societies of East Asia. Intellectual views on the impact of Confucianism in modern times vary (Lu, Xia, & Heisey, 2002). South Korea has been undergoing a process of social and economic transformation for 30 years. Urban life is replacing the slower pace of rural living. With the end of military rule, the political system is becoming democratized. And over and above these indigenous forces of change, Western values are pouring into the country, primarily through television (Chu, Lee, & Kim, 1990).

Japan has risen from the ashes of WWII to become a dominant economic powerhouse on the world scene. And although China has restored its sovereignty

and dignity as an independent country, internally it has suffered severely from the traumatic experiences imposed by Mao's revolutionary class struggle philosophy, particularly in the ten years of the Cultural Revolution (Chu, Hayashi, & Akuto, 1995).

So how have the divergent paths trod by China, Japan, and Korea led each of the cultures from their roots of Confucian practice to the variations of that practice seen today?

Comparative Studies

In two different studies, researchers Chu, Hayashi, and Akuto (1995) working in Japan and China, and Chu, Lee and Kim (1990), working in Korea, looked at the change in Confucian values in the three countries. The thrust of their research was: In what ways have the different paths pursued by China, Japan, (and in an earlier study, Korea) on their way to modernization, impacted the Confucian cultural values of their people?

In this paper, we compare the two studies and draw some conclusions about which society has retained Confucianism most faithfully; then we examine the impact that the Confucian values have on the interpersonal communication of Korea, since it emerges as the most staunchly Confucian in this study and least examined of the 3 cultures in the communication literature.

Traditional Values

The researchers classified eighteen traditional values into five categories, which are briefly discussed here.

Traditions and heritages

These three, *historical heritage*, *respect for tradition*, and *loyalty to the state* appear to have laid the foundation of cultural stability for the societies of East Asia. Significant Japanese and Korean traditions had a Chinese origin: The Chinese writing system, Buddhism, and Confucianism with its attendant examination system.

Familial Relations

Three traditional values have historically contributed to family cohesion. First is a traditional Confucian concept known as *benevolent father and filial son.* It is a cornerstone of family stability, and has been so in Confucian societies for centuries. Second, ancestors are an important part of Korean life. *Glory to ancestors* can be a powerful motive in task performance. Third, sons have been important to Confucian families in the past as they prolong the family line and

take care of aging parents. Daughters eventually belong to the families of their husbands. To many, *having a house full of sons and grandsons* was a measure of success and a sign of family prosperity.

Social Relational guidelines

Seven traditional values have provided guidelines for social relations within and beyond the family context. Most of the values derive from Confucian teachings: (1) *The golden mean* is an ethical ideology referring to a middle of the road attitude toward life, a denial of extremes; avoiding taking sides in a controversy. (2) *Generosity and virtuousness* are loosely defined; generosity translates as requiring that people treat each other with kindness and justice. Virtuousness refers to all the ethical and moral standards for interpersonal relations. (3) *Harmony is precious* is another Confucian value; whether within or beyond the family context, it is considered important to maintain harmony and avoid confrontation. (4) *Tolerance, propriety, and deference* were standards of social behavior taught by Confucius as a means of achieving a perfect social order. With propriety (*li*) at the core, these elements combine to mold a set of social norms and moral standards that constitute the foundation of Confucian teachings. (5) *Submission to authority* has been the foundation of social order in East Asian societies, based upon the Confucian system of relationships: subject/ruler; wife/husband; child/parent; younger brother/older brother; friend/friend. (6) *Discretion for self-preservation* is related to the way of the golden mean, with a more practical undertone. It means not to get unnecessarily involved in matters that are someone else's concern. (7) *Pleasing superiors* is a traditional value with a negative connotation. In the past, it could be a respected practice; it was an implicit part of filial obedience. Children were expected to please their parents as a way of showing respect and devotion. Subjects were expected to please their emperor as a demonstration of their loyalty. But today this value is clearly rejected by the Korean people

Roles of Women

First is the emphasis on the *chastity of women*, which condemns premarital and extramarital relations with men as unforgivable, and places a social stigma on widows who remarry. Second is parallel to chastity, a value known as *three obediences and four virtues.* A woman is to obey her father before marriage, obey her husband during marriage, and follow her son as a widow. The four virtues are rules of behavior: the virtue of morals, the virtue of language, the virtue of manner, and the virtue of work: a woman must be economically productive as well as morally unimpeachable. The last value regarding roles of women is known as *differentiation between men and women.* This means that men and women should be treated differentially and there is no need for men to

be apologetic about it. This is one of the few traditional values that the respondents rejected. Age of respondents made a difference; the younger the respondents, the more they tended to reject the value.

Work Ethic and Economic Status

The last two traditional values are *diligence and frugality,* which have served as a cultural basis of the Asian work ethic, and *farmers high and merchants low.* Frugality is considered just as important as diligence for the purpose of survival in a traditional society where productivity was low and opportunities were few. The "farmers high and merchants low" concept is traceable to the old Chinese mentality. Farmers were important because agriculture had historically been the mainstay of Chinese economy. Rulers of imperial China had looked upon merchants with suspicion because they saw a potential threat if economic power was aligned with political interests. Thus merchants in China were assigned low social prestige even though they had accumulated financial resources. The same mentality seemed to be prevalent among the Korean elite. Now that Korea is highly industrialized, the survey found that the majority of respondents said this traditional value should be discarded.

Findings

A finding that the researchers consider highly significant is that the "seven traditional values" are not only strong but also widely endorsed in all demographic groups. They form a core of social relational guidelines that appear to be accepted by Korean people in all walks of life.

In Chu's, et al studies, the factors of gender, education, and religion each reflected slight variations in opinion. However, the most consistent factor suggesting a clear trend of cultural change was age. Compared to their parents' generation, those under thirty show less respect for traditions, feel less strongly about loyalty to the state, are less inclined to submit to authority, attach less importance to the one-sided notion of chastity for women, and feel less strongly about the 3 obediences and 4 virtues. Interestingly, the young people also are less dedicated to the value of diligence and frugality.

Korean culture is changing, perceptibly though not abruptly. The younger generation is clearly deviating from some of the Confucian values that have guided the lives of their parents (Chu, Lee, & Kim, 1990). However, the Koreans are still more firmly holding to the Confucian traditional values than their neighbors the Japanese and Chinese.

According to the comparison of Chu's studies of traditional Confucian

values, Korea is most Confucian, Japan next, and China is least Confucian. Chu points to a high degree of cultural integrity in Japan in spite of its industrialization and modernization. We would add that rampant capitalism has brought western ideas that wear away at this cultural integrity. "With economic activities came the awakening of the individual. By no coincidence is the simultaneous coming of age of the 'fourth generation,' those born in the 1960s and 1970s, and the period of the cultural Revolution" (Ng, 2002, p. 44). Chu suggests that the Cultural Revolution in China eroded the cultural underpinnings of society by denouncing the "4 olds" (old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits) and attempting to dismantle the traditional family structure. Additionally the disturbance of the educational system and the loss of a generation of intelligentsia further impacted Confucian teaching. Chu shows that the minority in China who still hold traditional values are experiencing social conflicts and psychological tension. He states that Chinese political leaders denounce traditional values as no longer functional.

There may be numerous reasons why Koreans are more traditional in upholding Confucian values. The case could be made that strong Korean nationalism combined with the homogeneity of the culture reinforces traditional values. Add the fact that once a cultural artifact is removed from the original culture and transplanted, it tends to retain its original character in the transplanted culture longer than in the original culture where it continues to evolve.

In the vortex of rapid social and economic change, it seems that Korean people are going through a process of cultural reassessment. Some of the Confucian-based traditional values are being reinforced, some modified, and still others fundamentally altered (Chu, Lee, & Kim, 1990). But the importance of education in Confucian cultures holds some interesting insights.

Analysis of the Three Educational Systems—Some Answers?

> The perfectibility and educability of human beings is central to Confucian thinking. This emphasis on education has become one of the most important characteristics of Chinese culture, and the tradition is carried over to every Asian nation, especially the Asian Five Dragons (Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan) (Chen & Chung, 1997, p. 322).

A look at the education systems of the three countries provides insight to the approach to teaching traditional moral values. From the time that the early Confucian examination system was established traditional values based on the Confucian ideals have been taught in China, Korea, and Japan. They remained intact varying with the political winds occasionally, but with filial piety,

benevolence, harmony, and societal hierarchy rather firmly in place for hundreds of years.

The philosophy of Confucian education is based on the idea of "providing education for all people without discrimination" and completely emphasizes the teaching of ethics; thus the purpose of education is to help students develop an ideal personality (Chen & Chung, 1997, p. 322).

In Japan, during the Edo Period (1603-1867), Bushido, the code of the samurai emphasized loyalty, self-sacrifice, justice, sense of shame, honor, and other such values based on ideas of Confucianism and the Zen sect. During the period of Nationalism (1868-1945) moral education was called Shushin, which means "self-discipline" in the classics of Confucianism. The Primary Objective Education (1879) said, "The essential task (of) education is to clarify the virtues of humanity, justice, loyalty and filial piety, and to allow one to enhance his knowledge and various talents" (Takahashi , 1998).

But since 1945 Japan began to rebuild itself into a peaceful democratic nation under the indirect rule of the Allied Force, primarily the U.S. military. The major goals of the occupation of Japan can be stated as the democratization, demilitarization, and decentralization of Japanese society. One of the major goals of the change was to establish moral education based on democracy, and as the first step in that direction, Shushin (self-discipline) was suppressed. The U.S. Education Mission to Japan stated in 1946 that "manners that encourage equality, the give-and-take of democratic government, the ideal of good workmanship in daily life…should be developed and practiced in the varied programs and activities of the democratic school" (Taku, 1996, p. 5). In this new system of education, the independent spirit was encouraged to build the peaceful state and society.

While moral education is still taught per the national curriculum it is said that not all teachers take it very seriously and often use the time allotted for other purposes. Still teachers endeavor to inculcate good character traits in students through the hidden curriculum (Ellington, 2001). The course of study describes six objectives of moral education, two of which mention individuality and independent decisions. None deal with the traditional Confucian ideals except in a vague way of "fostering a sense of morality."

Although the seat of Confucian learning was China, the Chinese education system has strayed from teaching traditional Confucian values in favor of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, and Deng Xiaoping's Theory as its theoretical guidelines and "Five loves: love the motherland and love the people, love labor, love science and love socialism" as its basic contents. Moral education includes political, ideological, moral and psychological quality education. Weekly Moral education is included in the national curriculum focused on improving the students' socialistic consciousness; reinforcement is

provided through social activities after school and organizational work of the Young Pioneers and the Communist Youth League (China Education & Research Network, 1998-2000).

Contrast Japan and China with Korea: there seems to be no country like Korea where moral education is so emphasized in the formal education system. There is an old saying in Korea: "One should not step even on the shadow of one's teacher." This proverb relays the degree of respect traditionally accorded to teachers. While there have been many changes to the Korean educational system since its adoption of modern teaching methods, much of the old tradition remains ("Historical Review")

Formal education in Korea began during the Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE-668 CE) under the influence of the Chinese educational system. In 372 a state-operated institute for higher education known as T'aehak (National Confucian Academy) was established. A similar institution was set up in 682 and named Kukh'ak (National Confucian College). During the Shilla Kingdom (57 BCE-935 CE) a unique training system called the hwarangdo (The way of Flower of Youth Corps) was established to educate the elite youth of the aristocratic class. Higher education of all these kingdoms tended to be focused on the study of Chinese classics, which of course took Confucian ideals as their texts.

The founders of the Choson Dynasty (1392-1910) took Confucianism as the source of basic principles for national politics, ethics, and social institutions. The premier educational institution during the Choson period was the Songgyungwan (National Confucian Academy), which was the center of Confucian studies. Education during this time was mainly viewed as a means to prepare young aristocratic men for public service; examinations in the Chinese classics were the major criteria for qualification—a tradition that survived as the backbone of Korean education system until the late 19th century ("Historical Review").

Presently every student has to take moral education classes 2 hours per week for 12 years (Moon, 1995). 1945 is considered a watershed for diverging traditional Confucian and Western moral education in Korea. A Westernized compulsory school system was established and moral education was taught with a clear intention of inculcating democratic ways of life. The main orientation became individualism and democratic rationality, although traditional and Confucian ethics were included in the textbook and taught as a part of it. The curriculum has changed 5 times since 1945 but still includes filial piety, brotherly love and "ethical thought"—oriental tradition, Western tradition, and Korean tradition (Moon, 1995).

Additionally, summer schools in Korea teach traditional values and etiquette. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism announced that during the

summer of 2001 three hundred schools nationwide, including 234 “hyanggyo”, the traditional schools of Confucian classics, offered summer sessions to teach traditional Confucian values and etiquette. The weeklong programs are offered to about 100,000 students from elementary through senior high. The offerings were begun in the early 1990s and took shape as a serious undertaking in 1996 when the government began to provide financial support (“Summer Schools,” 2001).

Influence of Confucian Values on Interpersonal Communication in South Korea

With the traditional values in mind, let us turn to the impact of those values upon the interpersonal communication demonstrated in Korean culture. The undergirding of much Korean interpersonal communication can be traced to the traditional values found in the “social relational guidelines” section of Chu’s study. Ideally, Koreans strive to uphold harmony through their communication. They attend to relationships first, then subject matter, using honorifics to indicate respect for others and modesty about self (Crane, Seonghong, & Park, 1996). Koreans speak to enhance one another’s self respect while encouraging group conformity. Korean language stresses the importance of the group, family, and harmony, and Confucian righteousness is an influencing factor (Park, 1996).

Seeing vs. Hearing

Lee explains one difference in Korean and U.S. American communication style (in Park, 1996). He relates that the Koreans use hearing as a metaphor for understanding a communication, while most American speakers use seeing as a metaphor for understanding. When English speakers want to convey “I know,” they often say “I see.” Koreans will say, “I hear.” Koreans understand things by hearing and not by seeing. They will say, “He didn't hear my words well”—in other words, he didn't understand. Professor Park Chong-hong of Seoul National University indicated in his thesis “On Seeing and Hearing” that seeing is logos and hearing is pathos. Thus, a culture of the eye (American) is intellectual, rational, theoretical, and active, while a culture of the ear (Korean) is emotional, sensitive, intuitive, and passive.

The inclination to be intuitive, emotional, sensitive may spring from the traditional value of propriety and deference: propriety (*li*) means to respect the human relationships of a hierarchical order. Deference is yielding to different or opposing views. One who practices propriety and deference will certainly be perceived as sensitive, intuitive and passive.

The Use of "Yes"

Koreans use "yes" in a linguistic context where Americans say "no." For instance, when a Korean speaker is asked, "Didn't you go to school yesterday?" he will answer, "Yes, I didn't." In Korean the content of a sentence is not determined at the beginning, but at the end of the sentence. The first response "yes" in this sentence indicates agreement with the question. This kind of mental attitude seems to have originated from the fact that Korean speakers avoid the stimulus that may disturb the other, such as hearing "no" in the beginning of the sentence. In other words, even though the answer is negative, the listener will be embarrassed if the speaker uses a direct "no." The same is true of the Japanese and Chinese (Park, 1996).

In most aspects of Korean interpersonal communication, one must take into account the other person's feelings and speak to avoid hurting his/her feelings. This, of course, is a manifestation of the traditional value of preserving harmony. Avoiding confrontation and maintaining harmony are valued in most Asian societies.

High Context

The Asian style of communicating is more "affective" or "situation-oriented" than the Western style. Non-linguistic elements such as feelings and attitudes play an important role in the interpersonal communication. The Western instrumental style places emphasis on ideas or thoughts, while the affective communication style emphasizes the communication of feelings (Park, 1996).

In connection with this, there is *nunchi*, a kind of sense by which Koreans can detect whether others are really pleased and satisfied or not. Kim and Steinberg (1996) explain *nunchi* which is translated as "eye-measure": *Nunchi* is an interpretation of others' facial expression or what they say plus a mysterious "alpha" hidden in their hearts. It is usually an interpretation by the lower social class of the feelings of the higher social class, necessary in an unreasonable society in which logic and inflexible rules have no place (Kim & Steinberg, 1996). The high-context practices, especially *nunchi*, are directly relatable to the traditional values of preserving harmony and pleasing superiors.

In a round table discussion published in *Koreana* (1998), B.Y. Choi states that he believes that the largest portion of today's Korean values derive from the Confucian culture that developed during the 500 year Choson Dynasty. C. B. Hahm in the same article, goes further: Whenever Koreans meet someone new, they inquire about each other's age or their school associations to establish "the elder" and "the younger" in order to use the proper honorific terms, body language, and deportment. By this example it is evident that the Confucian value system has affected even the most routine behavior.

Conclusions

Korean, as well as Japanese and Chinese communication is heavily influenced by Confucian traditional values. Chu has demonstrated that those values are changing. But they seem to be more well preserved in Korean society based upon the educational system of teaching moral values, nationalism, and arrested cultural evolution. As the values are slowly discarded, will the interpersonal communication be permuted as a result? A longitudinal study tracking the communication patterns compared to the traditional values is certainly in order.

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