

# The Change Process in Korean Education: A Philosophical Tug-of-War between the Old and the New

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2009, Korea ranked first in both reading and math on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Science scores, while impressive, lagged slightly behind countries such as China, Hong-Kong, Singapore, and Japan (OECD, 2014). By 2012, Korea had achieved top scores in all three subject areas (CIEB, 2015). This academic achievement is truly impressive, and has subsequently led to assertions that Korean education should serve as an exemplar for other countries (“Obama Cites Korea for Educational Excellence,” 2009).

While gains represented on standardized assessments are indeed impressive, they come at a cost. Research suggests that over 80% of primary students receive supplementary education, which constitutes more than 10% of a family’s monthly income (\$3,946) (Kwaak, 2014; OECD, 2014). Such expenditures exemplify an extreme commitment to education, yet they can also promote socioeconomic disparity, explaining a gap between top and low-performing students that has widened over the last decade (OECD, 2014).

In addition to growing socioeconomic iniquity, research suggests that performance outside core subject areas is lackluster. Despite extreme expenditures on English education, for example, South Korea ranked 24<sup>th</sup> in English ability in 2012. This standing has continued to slip, dropping to 27<sup>th</sup> place in 2015 (EPI, 2015; Kwaak, 2014). It appears that a singular focus on core subject areas has left students ill-equipped to effectively learn other subjects. This perspective is further exemplified by South Korean college students. Despite having at least six years of English education in primary and secondary school, they are generally unable to maintain rudimentary conversations with native English speakers (Niederhauser, 2012).

Like issues associated with English, other learning problems become particularly salient upon entrance to university. Freshmen, for example, who have undergone intense study for the national college entrance exam, tend to exhibit little motivation (Niederhauser, 2012). They also reveal an inability to critically assess political, economic, or societal issues external to South Korea. Due to a singular focus on Korean concepts within high school curricula and college entrance exams, learners appear unable to consider problems from alternative perspectives. Issues with critical thinking are further intensified by university curricula, which almost exclusively examine the impact of foreign matters on Korean society (Niederhauser, 2012). Education from a one-sided perspective has ultimately impeded discussion of diverse viewpoints and processes that occur on a global level.

While gains on standardized assessments within PISA are impressive, they mask key issues within South Korean education that may preclude further progress. Contemporary challenges represent more than modern-day issues with competition; they are the product of historical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors that have shaped Korean society. Thus, to understand modern educational problems, comprehensive examination of past cultural traditions is needed. Such analysis will allow for the development of solutions tailored to the unique context of Korean education.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1049-9.ch077

## PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF KOREAN EDUCATION

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Confucianism has had a significant impact on Korean education since the implementation of high-stakes civil service examinations in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (So & Kang, 2014; Yi, 1985). Because government test scores served as the main determinant of social mobility, educational institutions became firmly ensconced within Korean cultural traditions. To this day, prevalent Confucian values control behavior of educational leaders, staff, and students. Five basic virtues are thought vital for both academic and social success.

The first basic virtue of Confucianism is *Ren*, which asserts that all members of society have an ability to be altruistic and benevolent (Park & Chesla, 2007). The concept compels group members to consider others, thereby enhancing cohesion and observance of group norms. *Ren* also serves to quell individualistic behaviors, such as praise, that may honor one group member above another (Kim 1996). Like *Ren*, the concept of *Yi*, which represents a sense of righteousness, encourages group cohesion and harmony. Through fair treatment of others, *Yi* ensures a kind of collective justice that allows participation in the decision-making process (Kim, 2013). The next virtue, *Li*, defines social roles for group members, thereby maintaining social order (Ishibashi & Kottke, 2009). According to this tenet, there are five main roles mandated by heaven: ruler and minister; father and son; husband and wife; older brother and younger brother; and friends. If these roles are observed, it is believed that harmony will result (Hadley, 1997). *Chih* describes an individual's ability to discern good from bad (Park & Chesla, 2007). Since this virtue outlines a personal ability to choose the correct path, it may empower individuals to work independently. The fifth virtue, *Shin*, represents trust and may be another factor to empower individuals in Confucian societies (Park & Chesla, 2007).

While Confucian ideals are thousands of years old, they remain a prevalent force in Korean schools today. The five virtues continue to influence behavior of leaders, staff, and students. *Ren* and *Yi*, for example, ensure that all group members are prepared to sacrifice for the organization in which they serve. To maintain harmony, teachers are inclined to obey group norms, as are students. Rather than motivation for individual recognition, subordinates within schools (either staff or students) are driven by group norms and standards. In addition to expectations for collective action, social roles assigned according to *Li* motivate subordinates to accept or expect direct guidance from a leader. Teachers often feel compelled to follow commands of a principal; students, likewise, feel obligated to follow commands of a teacher. Preference for autocratic relationships may explain partiality for pedagogical instruction among adult Confucian learners (Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2015). Since andragogical freedoms often create relationships that are not well-defined, students from Asian countries may feel uncomfortable voicing individual opinions or initiating individualistic behaviors. Like subordinates, superiors in Confucian schools may prefer autocratic approaches to leadership and instruction, explaining the prevalence of dictated exercises like pattern drills and rote memorization. Such activities do not require creative thinking or independent action, making them more congruent with Confucian power relationships.

In addition to group behavior, Confucianism appears to significantly impact conceptions of democracy. Whereas democratic and autocratic ideals appear diametrically opposed in Western contexts, Confucianism integrates them into one overall framework. According to virtues such as *Ren*, *Yi*, and *Li*, subordinates obey and sacrifice according to their role. Leaders, however, must observe and rule according to the will of the people. Confucian values conceptualize both autocratic and democratic strategies as complementary and synergistic. This perspective is illustrated by leadership research in Asian contexts. Surveys from 292 South Korean principals, for example, reveal simultaneous correlation of Confucianism to both democratic ( $r = .45$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and autocratic ( $r = .44$ ;  $p < .01$ ) ideals (Bryant & Son, 2001). The coexistence of both leadership concepts reveals underlying Confucian values that govern school

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