

# Ancient Chinese Philosophy in Korea: Implied Influences of Confucianism in Contemporary Korea and the Korean Idealistic Alteration

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## Abstract

This paper methodically described the implied influences that the traditional Chinese philosophy of Confucianism enacts in contemporary Korea. In ancient times, Korea has a strong link to China and has imported China's traditions and thoughts that contributed in the enrichments of Korean culture, while Confucianism is an ideal representative among them. After 2000s, Confucianism preserved in the sociocultural aspect of Korea as part of its tradition. However, the younger generation's thoughts and habits are highly affected by the Korean Wave and the advancements of eras, therefore, certain idealistic alteration in contemporary Korea have produced. By clarifying the implicit influences of Confucianism in current Korean society and its unique alteration, this paper can contribute in the research field of Korean culture while also provide a fair view regarding the cultural exports of Confucianism from ancient China.

## Keywords

Confucianism, cultural exports, Korea, philosophy

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

The Korean Peninsula has a long-term connection to China in multiple aspects since ancient times, especially for China's philosophical thoughts and concepts have directly influenced the Korean culture and thinking perspectives. Among multiple schools of philosophy, Confucianism is a representative branch that firstly imported to the Korean Peninsula in a systematic format in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. The ancient Chinese philosophical concepts have long-lasting to the entire East Asia, while Japan's Meiji Restoration is considered as a successful example of westernization, it is still rooted in the Chinese philosophy of Confucianism (Chan, 2018). Therefore, it is tangible that Confucianism has blended in the traditional culture of Korea and exerted its influence to the modern Korean society ideologically. In this paper, Korea refers to South Korea, which is the political entity officially known as the Republic of Korea.

### 1.2 Objectives

The era is advancing to the current stage with opportunities, challenges, and risks, which formatted a polytropic society with diverse thoughts. Meanwhile, the ancient wisdoms and thoughts can still affect the society's function through implied ways. Undergone a long period of time, wars, chaos, and cultural transformation, the contemporary Korean society has different cultural patterns than the ancient times of this country, especially in 2000s when the Korean Wave was just ushered a completed ending. Although prior research concerning the Korean culture and the role that Chinese philosophy played in modern Korea suggested that Chinese culture and thoughts shaped the Korean traditions even in nowadays, there is still a lack of discussions on the specific philosophical thought that led to this outcome, as well as the Korean

versions of philosophical alterations based on the Chinese thoughts. Thus, this study is concentrating in investigating the specific effects that Confucianism made in contemporary Korea and the idealistic alterations that Korea depicted with the represent on education, which can clearly point out the changes of Korean thoughts regarding Confucianism and can provide another perspective for analyzing the implied influences.

### 1.3 Thesis Statement

In contemporary Korea, the implied influence of Confucianism has involved in Korean law, the interpretation of family values and relationships, and educational system, while Korea composed the alteration on Confucianism and applied it as the apparatus for modifying education, intermediary for cultural promotions, and strengthening the recognition of national identity.

### 1.4 Research Values

Through a comprehensive analysis on the difference of philosophical conception between contemporary and ancient Korea for clarifying the implied influence of Confucianism exerted on the current Korean society, this paper contributed in the broadness of interpreting Confucianism's influence outside of China, the current situation of Confucianism in Korea as a philosophy, and the specific aspects that Confucianism exerted its implied influence on. Meanwhile, along the elucidation of the Korean alterations on Confucianism, this paper expanded the knowledge regarding the transformation of Confucianism in Korea and how it defers from the traditional thoughts, which is also the point that current scholarly discussion lacks of.

## 2. Implied Influences that Confucianism Exerted in Contemporary Korean Society

### 2.1 Definition of the Term “Implied Influence”

To clarify the specific definition of “implied influence” in this paper, any unobservable factors caused by the philosophy of Confucianism in Korea belong to “implied influence”. For instance, Korean people have the tradition of respecting elders, this phenomenon occurs because of Confucianism and itself is considered the outcome of the influence, which is considered implied.

### 2.2 Confucianism in Korean Law

Indeed, the contemporary jurisprudence of Korea is impliedly affected by Confucianism, even though there is no official declaration that the law used Confucianism for reference, this ancient thought has blended in the legal justice aspect of modern Korea. To clarify, the legislation for a country should be fixed in the country's situations in order to ensure the efficiency and fairness of legalism, while culture is one of the factors that legislative procedures should consider. Korea is not an exception, as Confucianism has blended in its culture, it has the implied influence to the Korean legislation.

People in the modern world just generally consider that the legislation and jurisprudence of East Asian countries are just duplications of western models, however, besides the fact that Korea adopted the continental law system with imports from US of “separation of the three powers”, the contemporary Korean law is partially shaped by its culture and the Chinese philosophy of Confucianism made an implied impact at this point.

Specifically, the Korean law is traced to the native tradition that composed of Confucianism as its root, but structured its jurisprudence in the western framework. An example regarding this fact from the chapter *Wei Zheng* of the *Analects*, when Kongzi said: “If the people be led by governing (*zheng*), and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments (*xing*), they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they be led by virtue (*de*), and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of ritual proprieties (*li*), they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good” (Chen, 2021). The goal of punishments (*xing*) is to prevent crimes and reform criminals for cultivating their virtues (*de*), but not to destroy their lives or just causing pains for their crimes. While this process is the outcome of the Confucius' concept of ritual proprieties (*li*).

The example from Confucius functions properly in contemporary Korean jurisprudence, as the legal system usually assign criminals lighter punishments and focus on reformations and educations, rather than only applying the deterrent effect to crimes for the sake of prevention.

### **2.3 Confucianism in Korean Family Values and Relationships**

The ancient philosophy of Confucianism influenced contemporary Korean society positively through proposing and advocating the family atmosphere of respecting elders with the emphasis on filial piety, but also resulted in the negative influence of raising patriarchal authority.

Confucianism has strongly influenced the Korean culture in a family context and the tradition of family-centered has been practiced and maintained that is originated by the Confucian concept of filial piety, the influence comes with additional social norms and cultural practices in Korea including the respect to elders, especially parents (Park, 2021). The tradition of family-centered is originated in Confucianism, as it occurs in ancient China, as the *Analects of Confucius* demonstrated the importance for people to obey such a tradition, as the Master (Kongzi) said “Nowadays, ‘filial’ is used to refer to anyone who is merely able to provide their parents with nourishment. But even dogs and horses are provided with nourishment. If you do not treat your parents with reverence, wherein lies the difference?” (Ivanhoe, 2001). Even the animals can fulfill their parents’ fundamental needs of materials, while people should serve their parents with not only the materials, but with inner respect and esteem, or there is no difference between people and horses. Thus, Confucius believes that respecting is important, while it should not only stay in format but also present the inner thoughts of respect and esteem when serving parents.

While in contemporary Korea, Confucianism has shaped the family values and relationships impliedly, as it combined in Korea as part of its traditional culture. Especially the thought of filial piety from Confucianism, it implied the expression of filial obligations that the newer generation has to esteem their parents through providing care, support, and the fundamental nourishments (Park, 2021). Otherwise, the people who did not fulfill such an obligation of filial piety deserved moral criticisms from the Korean society, just like what the Confucius’ quote described, there lies no difference between people and animals if they chose not to follow the filial piety in a correct manner.

## **3. Korean Alteration on Confucianism Within the Example of Education**

### **3.1 Reasons Behind the Occurrence of Alterations on Confucianism**

Confucianism is originated in ancient China, with the diffuses to the Korean Peninsula and Japan, it gradually spread throughout East Asia and became the moral reference for people to learn about how to behave decently, as well as philosophy that truly blended in other countries’ culture. Among this process, in order to flexibly adapted in foreign cultures, the Chinese philosophy of Confucianism was revised within the local atmosphere. Therefore, as a philosophy with continuity, Confucianism has developed into different alterations as it travelled widely throughout East Asia interpreted and rewritten by historiographers (Kim, 2009). Such an ancient philosophical concept is not purely a represent of classical Chinese thoughts, yet it combined in other countries’ culture and contributed in the shape of different cultures.

### **3.2 Korean Alteration of Confucianism in Educational System**

A distinct alteration that Korea made on Confucianism is related to the country’s educational system, which modified the education to be culturally apropos with the national situation of Korea. The emphasis of collective good and harmony is highly respected and both values are efficient ways of filling personal fulfillment as well as for achieving scarce accomplishments, while these two values are originated in the philosophy of Confucianism.

The alteration of Confucianism has blended in Korean education as a transformed cultural signal and it initiated Korean students to dedicatedly invest their time and energy in study. Specifically, the alteration of Confucianism becomes the philosophy combined in contemporary Korea that helped to educate their nationals to accomplish more individual achievements and for cultural fulfillments. In terms of the national study of Korea regarding the purpose of educational achievement, 37% parents want their next generation to obtain desirable job positions, while cultivating meritorious moral characteristics ranked the second reason at

35% (Kim & Park, 2000). While both of these top reasons are the result of Confucianism's beliefs that Korean parents are highly desirable in educating their children to be achievers and competitive workers with bright futures.

Regarding the highly competitive educational system and high expects from parents, students in Korea are stressed out with their academic burden. This phenomenon is simply considered the result of Confucianism, specifically, its concept of "universalistic achievement" shaped the educational system to modern days (Śleziak, 2013). This is also the cultural alteration that Korea made on Confucianism for enhancing the students' desire of making achievements.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the ancient Chinese philosophy of Confucianism has blended in the traditional culture of Korea while it is continuously exerting its implied influence in multiple aspects of the modern Korean society, within the most representative aspects of law and family values. Thanks to the emphasis on the Korean legal justice, the influence of Confucianism becomes the cultural perspective that the government holds in ruling its country, which it helps to create a fairer legal system for people and a suitable govern for maintaining social stability. On the other hand, the most distinct alteration that the current Korean government made is regarding their educational system of being competitive, meanwhile, schools are dedicated in educating their students to be high achievers and hard-workers. This indicated that the philosophy of Confucianism has gradually became the tool that Korea adopts in educating their citizens to be "productive" next generation, who are able to serve their country with good moral qualities, and this fact demonstrated the alteration that Korea made on Confucianism for achieving a better educational system.

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#### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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