

# CONFUCIANISM AND THE CONTEMPORARY KOREAN SOCIETY

BIANCA MITU \*

## ABSTRACT

The main concern of this article is to understand the role of Confucianism in the democratic and the capitalist development of Korea. In pursuit of this aim, the present article will argue for and against the importance of the role played by the Confucianism in the capitalist development of Korean society, will explore the Confucian tradition and its modern transformations and will trace the historical evolution of Confucianism, showing how, more recently, Confucianism has changed in response to the challenges of the capitalist development. Employing a large survey on more than 200 Korean young people, this article will identify the contemporary forms of Confucian values and their importance for the development of the Korean society.

*Keywords:* Korea, Confucianism, East Asia, capitalism, development.

## INTRODUCTION

Lately there is an increasing body of scholarship dealing with Confucianism and its impact on the contemporary East Asian societies, although Confucianism is currently not functioning as a social norm. Youngjin Choi (2010) reinforces this idea by stating that 'Confucianism does not presently function as a social norm in the areas of East Asia where it first developed. Nations such as Korea, China, Japan, and Taiwan, which formed the Confucian cultural sphere in the past, have accepted western technology and capitalist culture as the means to become 'successful'. Of these nations, Korea and Taiwan have succeeded in establishing capitalism and democracy as norms, achieving both modernization and westernization in less than half a century' (2010, IX). Even so we cannot consider that Confucianism has disappeared from the minds of the Asian people, it is part of their cultural heritage, as the same author implies that 'Confucianism has not disappeared from the minds of the Asian people. Especially in the case of Korea, where the Confucian tradition is said to be now the strongest, Confucianism as a

---

\* Lecturer, University of Huddersfield, UK. E-mail: [b.mitu@hud.ac.uk](mailto:b.mitu@hud.ac.uk)

cultural grammar regulates the customs and the consciousness of the Koreans' (2010, ix). Therefore, any discussion about the Korean development should start with a discussion about Confucianism, because 'even in contemporary Korea the Confucian tradition remains intact, more so than in neighbouring East Asian countries such as China and Japan' (Choi 2010, 34). The capitalist development in Korea is a process which involves the interaction between Confucianism and capitalism. Capitalism failed to develop in the Far East when it first emerged, due to the inhibitions of traditional Confucianism. But after it had triumphed in the West and was introduced to these societies by the colonisers, Confucianism could no longer resist the force of capitalist modernity, it had no choice but to adapt to the new situations. As a result, Confucian culture adsorbed the idea of profit seeking, competition and rationalisation of economic activity, but retained its emphasis on collectiveness, family and harmony. Combined with the continuing Confucian emphasis on education, merit, hard work, discipline and high achievement motivation, these values form a potent underpinning for economic growth. Some scholars believe that this force that has given rise to a special kind of capitalism in the Korean society '...the indigenous Korean way of thinking – the harmony of opposites – is at work behind Korean Confucianism, whose ideal is to achieve the continuity of theory and practice, philosophy and real life. Nowadays, in spite of many challenges, Confucianism is still meaningful in Korea, because many are actively pursuing Confucian resolutions to the social and cultural issues of postmodern and late-capitalist society' (Choi, 2010: 51). The main concern of this article is to understand the role of Confucianism in the democratic and the capitalist development of Korea. In pursuit of this aim, the present article will argue for and against the importance of the role played by the Confucianism in the capitalist development of Korean society, will explore the Confucian tradition and its modern transformations and will trace the historical evolution of Confucianism, showing how, more recently, Confucianism has changed in response to the challenges of the capitalist development. Moreover, this article will identify Korean young people perceptions of Confucian values and their importance for the future development of the Korean society.

#### WHAT IS CONFUCIANISM?

The numerous books and articles that analyse Confucianism do not provide a clear definition of the term. Roger Ames (2010) tried to offer a definition for this controversial term, underlining that 'we might define Confucianism as the always changing yet still persistent cultural core of the Chinese population itself, and then by extension and in different degree, of the Sinitic cultures of Korea, Japan and Vietnam' (2010: 67). Another scholar, Ronnie Littlejohn, considers Confucianism as 'the great Chinese tradition that has gathered around the teachings of Confucius

(Kongzi) for over 2.500 years. Confucianism encompasses a broad array of moral, social, philosophical and religious ideas, values and practices. It is an ancient and immense tradition of great subtlety and complexity' (2011, XX). Chang and Kalmanson (2010) see Confucianism as 'a set of evolving philosophical narratives, which can adapt themselves to address any number of unique circumstances. As in the case with ren, ideas in the Confucian tradition are indirect yet productively vague, allowing interpreters from various philosophical eras and cultures to elaborate Confucianism differently in different contexts' (2010: 2). Choi (2010) believes that 'confusion arises due to the many positive interpretations of Confucianism coexisting alongside the many negative ones. Until the mid-1990s Confucianism is criticized as a form of authoritarian feudal ethics. Yet, at the same time, Confucianism is recognized as a political ideal that cannot only support democracy, but that can supplement the shortcomings of liberalism. And, despite those who criticize Confucianism as oppressive toward women, many feminist scholars are reconstructing Confucianism as a theoretical basis for an ethics compatible with feminism' (2010: X). Therefore, before considering Confucianism positive or negative we should first try to understand the complexity of the term and how it has changed over time.

#### CONFUCIANISM AND CAPITALISM IN KOREA

Choi (2010) realises a history of Confucianism in Korea. He divides the history of Confucianism in Korea into two periods: before and after the introduction of new-Confucianism and argues that 'indigenous Korean culture had contact with Confucianism since ancient times, making Korean intellectual history an integral part of the development of Confucian philosophy' (2010: 34). The author also identifies morality and practicality as the two pillars of Confucianism 'comforting the people through self-cultivation' is a definitive Confucian idea. It means that excellence must be pursued in both inner morality and outer achievements (2010: 33).

Even if much has been written about Confucianism, scholars are still unable to identify when Confucianism came to the Korean peninsula, as Choi (2010) also notices 'a written record of when Confucianism came to the Korean peninsula is not available. Many scholars speculate that Confucianism penetrated into Korea, along with the character of classical China, prior to the beginning of Three kingdoms period (57 BCE-668CE), which includes the Koguryo, Silla, and Paekche kingdoms' (2010: 36).

In the early 1960s few economists were able to predict the development of South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong, the so-called four Asian dragons. Back then these countries seemed to be trapped in poverty and they were seen as unable to ever succeed in economic development. South Korea had been devastated

by the Korean War, Taiwan appeared little more than a beleaguered outpost of a defeated government, Singapore was a small city state facing internal economic and ethnic problems and external hostilities and Hong Kong was inundated with refugees. Despite all these problems these economies have grown faster than any other countries for the past three decades and worked their ways into modernization and westernization. At first sight the present economic situation of these countries may seem paradoxical, since Confucianism tradition was not oriented at all towards the development of wealth.

The concern of this article is to understand the role played by Confucianism in the capitalist development of the Korean society. In the pursuit of the same aim, some authors focus in their works on the relationship between Confucian political philosophy and state intervention in economic activities, on Confucian family practice and its links to modern organisations, on the Confucian emphasis on frugality and hard work and its influence on the work ethic, and on the Confucian stress on knowledge and high level modern education. It contends that through these mechanisms contemporary Confucian values have helped to facilitate the development of capital order and economic growth in Korea. There are authors who argue that in the context of contemporary Korea, the Confucian emphasis on hierarchy, responsibility and duty, and the low priority given to individual rights, are weapons deployed by the powerful, designed to provide a 'fig leaf of legitimacy' to authoritarian political regimes (Chan, 1996: 43) and/ or to exploitative relations of production (Palat, 1996). There is much force to this argument, but at the same time we need to bear in mind that it ignores the presence of vernacular traditions with roots in common sense and everyday life. Contemporary Confucianism is a bottom-up as well as a top-down phenomenon. The variants of Marx's 'dominant ideology thesis', deployed by critics such as Chan (1996), miss the interplay between these levels. Daniel Bell (2006) argues that 'the government of China is using Confucianism to fill in the 'ideology vacuum' of the country since Marxism has radically diminished in significance and religious sects and extreme nationalism are too radical for the Beijing government. Promoting Confucianism today is being seen as a way to protect 'social stability' and create 'a harmonious society'' (cited in Littlejohn, 2011: 180).

The development of capitalism and its interaction with Confucianism provides an excellent case study of the value of this approach. Capitalism failed to develop in the Far East when it first emerged, due to the inhibitions of traditional Confucianism. But after it had triumphed in the West and had been introduced to these societies by the colonisers, Confucianism could no longer resist the force of capitalist modernity, it had no choice but to adapt to the new situations. As a result, Confucian culture adsorbed the idea of profit seeking, competition and rationalisation of economic activity, but it retained its emphasis on collectiveness, family and harmony. Combined with the continuing Confucian emphasis on education, merit, hard work, discipline and high achievement motivation, these

values form a potent underpinning for economic growth. And this force has given rise to a special kind of capitalism in Korea and led to a new scientific term 'Confucian capitalism' used to define the cultural traits of East Asian industrial society (Cha, 2003: 486).

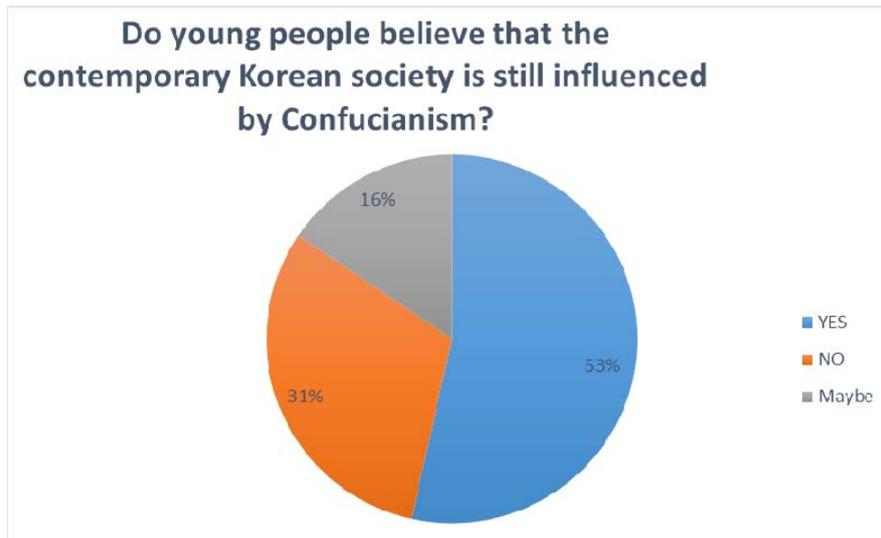
All the East Asian societies have undergone and are still undergoing rapid and radical social change. Hence, as these societies pursue economic development, new values such as individual rights, political freedom and pleasure are seeking emerge in response to the altered environment brought by sustained growth. These new values are now straining the limits of a Confucian tradition that has survived and adapted for centuries. Moreover, the East Asian societies, with their economies based largely on exports, have been particularly responsive to changing external conditions. In an era of increasing globalisation, they are securely tied to the outside world, especially the West, by trade, economic penetration and international conflict. Inevitably, western culture is entering these societies and challenging the retention of the old ways. It is unavoidable that people's attitudes and ideas would change in accordance with the rapid social change brought about by the process of modernisation.

This article argues that Confucianism has played an important role in the process of post-war modernisation in East Asia. After more than thirty years of rapid development, these societies, especially South Korea, have now become both highly industrialised and highly commercialised. They are changing in the direction set by the West and Confucianism itself is under pressure to change into the same direction. So, will Confucianism continue to be conducive to capitalist economic development? In a more fundamental sense, will Confucianism still be relevant to Korean people's life in the future? Also, given the seeming incompatibility between Confucianism and democracy, it is reasonable to ask if the present democratisation movement signals the end of Confucianism's cultural centrality.

The continuing Confucian emphasis on education, hard work, discipline and motivation, all these values form a potent underpinning for economic growth. The answer to the question of Confucianism's continuing relevance to the Korean economic life might also be 'no'. After a period of rapid and centrally orchestrated development, the Korean economy has grown into colossal complexes. The nature of economic management has changed greatly and government intervention had come to be seen as less desirable. To stimulate future growth, spending is now needed more than saving. Moreover, there are signs that the ethics of hard work and discipline is softening in Korea.

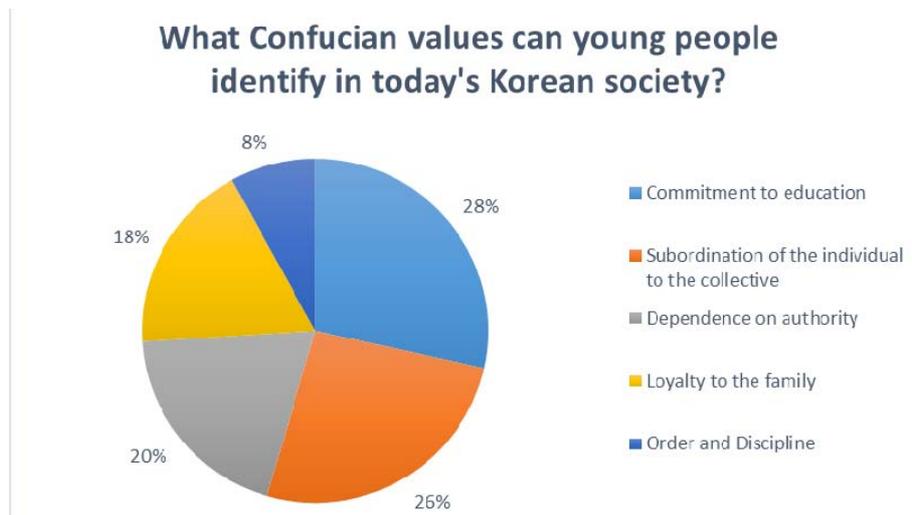
In order to investigate all these different aspects, a quantitative audience research was conducted, using a structured questionnaire. The aim of the survey was to investigate the participants' attitudes and issues towards Confucianism and the influence of Confucianism on contemporary Korea. The survey was conducted in January-February 2015 and used a sample of 250 Korean young people studying in the UK (20-30 year old) with a strong knowledge of what Confucianism means. Only 200 responses were valid for the present study, representing 41% men and 59% women.

According to the results of the survey, Korean young people believe that the contemporary Korean society is still influenced by Confucianism, as 53% of the respondents stated (Figure 1). Only 16% of the respondents believe that Confucianism is not a dominant ideology in contemporary Korea.



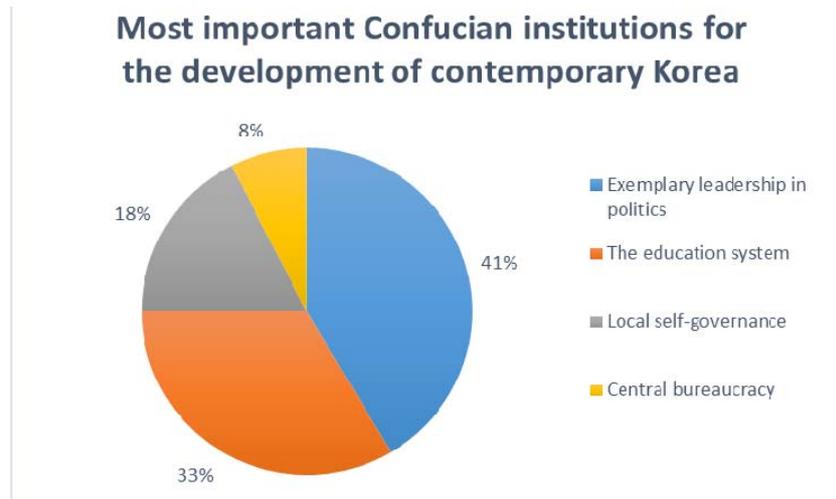
**Figure 1** – Contemporary Confucianism influence in Korea.

Despite their ages the respondents appreciate the Confucian values and identify them in today's Korean society (Figure 2).



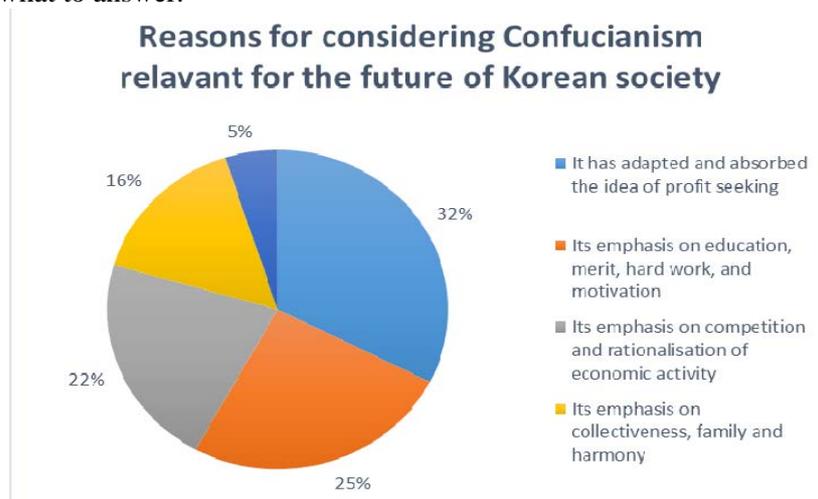
**Figure 2** – Confucian values in today's Korean society.

When it comes to identifying the most important Confucian institutions for the development of contemporary Korea, the respondents consider that the emphasis on exemplary leadership in politics and the promotion of a modern educational system are the most important parts of the Confucian heritage (Figure 3).



**Figure 3** – Most important Confucian institutions.

Furthermore, the results show that the respondents consider Confucianism relevant for the future development of the Korean society because it managed to adapt to the idea of profit seeking and also because of its emphasis on education, merit, hard work, competition and rationalisation of the economic activity, community, family and harmony (Figure 4). Only 5% of the respondents declared that they do not know what to answer.



**Figure 4** – Is Confucianism relevant for the future of the Korean society?

## CONCLUSION

The article argued for and against the importance of the role played by the Confucianism in the capitalist development of Korean society, implying that Confucianism is still playing an important part in the process of Korean modernisation. In summary, today Korean scholars believe that the Confucian values are considered both a support and an impediment for democracy in Korea. Confucianism is considered non-democratic in nature because of its emphasis on the collective, authority or harmony. Therefore, in contemporary Korea we still find an unstable combination of western democratic practices and Confucian values. In modern Korea, the Confucian tradition has become a code-word for a set of widely-held values such as: loyalty to the family, subordination of the individual to the collective, commitment to education and dependence on authority. This article only raised new research questions regarding the analysis of Confucianism in the contemporary East Asian societies and aimed to provide a new framework for further examination and evaluation of Confucianism rhetoric and practice.

## REFERENCES

- AMES, R. T. (2010). What is Confucianism? In: Chang, W. Kalmanson, L. (eds). *Confucianism in Context: Classic Philosophy and Contemporary Issues, East Asia and Beyond*, Albany: State University of New York Press. 67–86.
- BELL, D. A. (2008). *What's Left of Confucianism?*, available online at <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/what-is-left-of-confucianism->
- CHA, S. H. (2003). Myth and Reality in the Discourse of Confucian Capitalism in Korea. *Asian Survey*, 43 (3). 485–506.
- CHAN, A. (1996). Confucianism and development in East Asia. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. 26(1). 28–45.
- CHANG, W., KALMANSON, L. (2010). *Confucianism in Context: Classic Philosophy and Contemporary Issues, East Asia and Beyond*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- CHOI, Y. (2010). The History of Confucianism in Korea. In: Chang, W. Kalmanson, L. (eds). *Confucianism in Context: Classic Philosophy and Contemporary Issues, East Asia and Beyond*, Albany: State University of New York Press. 33–52.
- LITTLEJOHN, R. L. (2011). *Confucianism: An Introduction*. London & New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.
- PALAT, R. A. (1996). Pacific century: myth or reality?. *Theory and Society*. 25. 303–347.
- YIN, L. C. (2003). Do traditional values still exist in modern Chinese societies? The case of Singapore and China. *Asia Europe Journal*. 1. 43–59.