

Korean Ideas and Values

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Since the 14th century, the Confucian tradition has most deeply influenced the idea and values of the Korean people. Neo-Confucianism predominates in the intellectual and spiritual life of Korea. In modern Korea, Confucius and his disciples are no longer revered as sages, Confucianism is also no longer the heart of the curriculum in modern colleges and universities but simply a specialized topic pursued by academic specialists. But Korean fundamental ideas and values are derived from Confucian teachings.

1. Family and Social Relationships

The common Western view, each person lives in relation to God, therefore each bears a sacred and inviolable dignity, and in this dignity all men are equal, whatever their social status may be. The Confucian view is quite different. It includes the Five Relationships: between father and son there should be affection, between ruler and minister there should be proper distinction, between elder and younger there should be proper order, and between friends there should be faithfulness. This doctrine of the Five Relationships is the cornerstone of all Confucian moral and social teaching. In the Confucian tradition, self-centeredness is viewed as the primary root of evil and disorder, and the special dignity of man is based upon the degree to which he can rise above self-interest in relating to others. Because modern Korea is still a hierarchically structured society, the plain fact is that people are unequal in talents, age, wealth, education, and opportunity, ideally this does not mean putting people down and limiting them to something less than they could be.

2. Decorum

Closely connected with this emphasis on reverence is the traditional Korean fondness for *yeui*, the rules of proper and polite behavior. Even though Koreans now frequently criticize their pre-modern society for an excessively externalistic formalism, *yeui* provides innumerable ways of smoothing relationships and making them pleasant by small indications of good will, respect, or friendship.

3. Age

An almost universal human concern is age. In Confucian society, the elder should always have precedence over the younger, age was one of the primary yardsticks of hierarchy. Youth must bide their time, wait their turn rather than openly and aggressively challenge the views of their elders.

4. Filial Piety

Traditionally the family stood at the center of everything. Modern society is modifying the place and nature of the family in Korea. And the dynamics of a modern economy favor a kind of mobility which works against the traditional ideal of the extended family unit. In Confucian thought, filial piety provided the groundwork for all the other virtues, and its practice touched on every aspect of life. This way of thought is founded upon a very serious and deep consideration of the basic biological facts of our existence, one's whole existence as a human being is fundamentally a continuation or extension of the existence of one's parents, just as they are continuing the existence of their parents before them.

5. Family

Family encompasses not only the living but also the ancestors who have gone before and the generations yet to come in a single unity. One exists as a member of the transgenerational family, a link in the chain of life which stretches both into the past and into the future. In traditional family, one should obey parents even after adulthood, and subordinate one's personal interests to the family.

6 "Unhae"

One clear indication of this the persistence of unhae, "gracious favor," which plays a role in Korean society somewhat parallel to that of rights and duties in the more egalitarian societies of the west. For example, The gift of life and nature one has received from one's parent is considered the most fundamental unhae of all. This awareness extends beyond the family circle to encompass all sorts of relationship in society. It means that one doesn't make enemies or leave people feeling resentful. It was simply a condition of life that you depend on others and others depend on you.

7 Personalism

Koreans are indirect and do not "come to the point." They approach to things typically puts great weight on personal factors. Nunch'i, "reading the eyes," the art of quickly and accurately assessing another's emotions, attitudes, and reaction or likely reaction to a given proposal or situation, is a highly developed and valued skill in Korean society. In handling conflicts between objective and interpersonal values, the Korean approach is more likely to be that connections weigh heavily but ability is so necessary.

8 Education

Education must be numbered among the highest Korean values. Families are often willing to endure great hardship to send their children to the best schools. Korea thus entered the modern world with a firm conviction that education was key to success in life. In Confucian view, by learning, man becomes fully human. But in modern society the institutional link between the academic world and that of government has been severed, but traditional attitudes nonetheless tend to make the educational institution the watchdog and foremost moral critic of government. As a result, the relationships between government and the world of higher education has become a very difficult one.

9 Male and Female

Traditionally everything in the universe was accounted for in terms of the interaction of UM and Yang. UM-Yang view of the universe are deeply embedded in Korean language, custom, symbols and thus are still very much alive in the mind of modern society. In the Confucian classic, women should be "Three—Following" "follow her father, follow her husband, follow her eldest son." It still creates a very uncomfortable situation for a woman to be in a position of authority over men in Korea. The Confucian doctrine emphasized the woman's role was "within", the man's role was "outside". In theory the woman was to be subordinate to the male and follow him as Earth follows Heaven. Males occupy the predominant position in society. Long centuries of Confucian reflection on these values support them in Korean society even while they are being more and more eclipsed by other types of value in American society.