

Korea and Confucianism

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Subjects: Asian Studies, Cultural Studies, World History

Grade Levels: 9-12

Time Required: Two class periods

Instructional Objectives:

At the conclusion of this lesson students will be able to:

- 1) understand the core beliefs associated with Confucianism and its impact on relationships, government, rituals, ethics, education and society**
- 2) be aware of the impact of Confucianism on East Asia in general and Korea in particular**
- 3) realize that Western culture emphasizes the individual, Korea the group**
- 4) appreciate that Confucian views continue to influence Asians throughout the world**

Background for the Lesson:

Nothing has shaped Korean society as much as Confucianism. This philosophy was accepted so eagerly and in such a strict form that the Chinese regarded the Korean adherents as more Confucian than themselves. Confucianism influenced the growth of the Chinese examination system that became the means of attaining high government office. It also contributed to the stability of society and perpetuated a very rigid class structure for centuries. Of the total population, ten percent was of the yangban class, the upper-class landowners whose goal was education in the Confucian classics and government and military service.

Both the Koryo (936-1392) and the Choson(1392-1910) adopted Confucian principles of government. That system incorporated concepts of loyalty, filial duty, respect for age and status and veneration for learning. Loyalty governed the relationship between ruler and subjects. The bonds were hierarchical, strict and unequal. This tradition also incorporated the notion that the ruler and his officials must be virtuous in order to retain their mandate to rule. If they are no longer virtuous, the people have the right to revolt.

Confucianism also had an impact on economic development. Its beliefs helped to perpetuate a static agrarian society and promoted contempt for the development of commerce, an activity seen as self-serving and socially divisive. A road system was maintained, but trade within the country and with the outside world (except for China and Japan) remained limited.

Today more than 200 shrines and numerous academies are scattered throughout South Korea. Although large numbers of people claim to be Buddhists, Christians, or Shamanists, everyone to one degree or another is Confucian. The ideals recommended by Confucius over 2,500 years ago continue to guide people in their social relations in the home, workplace, school and government. Most Koreans still look to their leaders for major decisions. Leaders are to be moral. If they are not, as in the case in recent Korean history, leaders lose legitimacy.

The young are to respect their elders, children their parents, wives their husbands, daughters-in-law their mothers-in-law, students their teachers, employees their employers and friends their friends. Tradition dictates that each family member must be diligent in fulfilling his or her role. Children learn before the age of ten that their lives are not their own, but belong to their family. Decisions are familial, not personal. The Confucian tradition influences one's choice of a marital partner because spouses may not have the same paternal ancestor. The decision of whom to marry is one that is made on the advice of the parents. Paternal grandparents are considered the real grandparents. The Confucian system guides people in the names they use to address family members and relatives. Three traditional family rituals (marriage, ancestor worship and funerals), though somewhat changed, continue to be celebrated with a degree of ritual elaboration worthy of the past.

Living According to Confucian Values

Confucius was born in a time of turmoil. Seeing families and individuals suffering from social disorder, he concluded that society would function properly only if virtues were taught and lived. He wanted to produce excellent individuals who could be social leaders, and he wanted to create a harmonious society. He believed that excellence would be achieved through the cultivation of an individual's virtues and intellect. Therefore, education is essential. For Confucius this meant more than knowledge; it also involved the development of skills in poetry, music, artistic appreciation, manners and religious ritual. Confucius valued education because it transmitted the lessons of the past into the present. Convinced that the past provides good models for the present, Confucius thought that education could show the way to wise and happy living.

He also believed that social harmony is established when people play their social roles properly. The sense of social responsibility was codified in five great relationships.

The Five Great Relationships

In Confucianism, human beings are not individuals but interwoven threads of relationships with many people. To a great extent, in Confucianism thinking human beings *are* their relationships.

All relationships, however, are not equal. The level of a relationship may be determined by personal factors, such as friendship or family connection, or by more formal social factors, such as age or socioeconomic status. Confucianism recognizes this inequality and actually lists relationships according to a hierarchy, beginning with the most important:

Father-son. Family is the foundation of society with the relationship between father and son at its core. (This relationship also represents all parent-child relationships.) The father must be responsible for the education and moral formation of the son, and the son must be respectful and obedient and must care for the father in his old age. The parent-child relationship is so fundamental that it can function as the model for similar relationships, such as that between employer and employee.

1. Elder brother-younger brother. An elder brother must assume responsibility for raising the younger siblings, and the youngest siblings must be compliant. He has a unique and important status in the family.
2. Husband-wife. Each person in this relationship is responsible for the other's care. In Confucian thought, the relationship is hierarchical. The husband is an authoritative protector, and the wife is a protected homemaker and mother.
3. Friend to Friend. In Confucian culture, a friendship entails serious obligations, and a friendship made in youth is expected to last a lifetime. In friendship there is often a certain hierarchy: the friends may differ in age or rank or health or wealth or knowledge. The mentor relationship – which implies a difference in age between the two – is common in Confucian cultures, too. This type of relationship might be, for example, that between a teacher and a student, which in Confucian cultures entails serious mutual responsibilities.
4. Ruler-subject. Above all, a ruler must act like a father, assuming responsibility and care for the subjects who are like his children. Thus, the father-son relationship is primary in that it is the model for most other relationships. Confucianism holds that social order begins in a harmonious home and then extends outward – to town, province and country. The last item then brings the list full circle, back to the smallest unit of society – the family.

In Confucian societies, consequently, people see each other quite strongly in terms of their relationships and social roles, and because the family is the primary model for all groups, age determines position. The implications of the Five Great Relationships may be seen modern Japanese and Korean companies which act like large families, and management plays a fatherly role. Similarly, an employee's identity comes largely from his or her place in a company, and job titles are significant. The exchange of business cards – on which the person's title is prominently featured – is a careful ritual. Seniors have responsibility for juniors, and one's pay and role are largely based on seniority.

Harmony is all-important. And personal excellence comes from the manifestation of five virtues.

The Confucian Virtues

Although they emphasize harmony between people, the Confucian virtues do not lead to antlike conformity. Some Confucian virtues, such as love of education and the arts, help individuals develop their unique talents. But the virtues most prized by Confucianism are indeed largely social virtues. Individual uniqueness, although valued by Confucianism, is expected to be muted, subtle and relational.

1. *Ren*. It is translated in numerous ways: sympathy, empathy, benevolence, kindness, and consideration. One must be considerate of the other person through one's actions and words. Be polite.
2. *Li*. This word relates to doing what is appropriate for the situation. For each situation, there are appropriate words to say, proper ways to dress and correct things to do. Self-control is a sign of strength. In Western culture, which values individualism, the notion of *li* might seem oppressive. *Li* means good manners.
3. *Shu*. The common translation of *shu* is reciprocity, but its essence addresses the question, how will my action affect the other person? One is to consider his/her actions from the other person's viewpoint.
4. *Wen*. The term *wen* means "culture" and includes all the arts. Confucianism has a special love for poetry and literature, as well as a fondness for calligraphy, painting and music. The educated person is expected to not only have knowledge of these arts but also to have an amateur skill in them as well.

Confucianism stresses additional virtues, particularly loyalty, consensus, hard work, thrift, emotional control and sincerity. The Confucian sense of sincerity means to do what is right, particularly in fulfilling one's job duties and social obligations properly.

Confucianism and the Modern World

In every country influenced by China, such as Korea and Japan, we find the Confucian system of virtues and behaviors still very much alive. Although these countries have adopted Western science into their curricula, their cultures maintain an ethic that is Confucian. They highly value the extended family, education, personal discipline and public order. In South Korea and Taiwan, Confucian temples and ritual temples are maintained throughout the country.

The leaders of Confucian countries are horrified by what they have seen of the chaotic individualism and violence in some Western countries. They see the Confucian ethic as an antidote to social ills and therefore continue to view education as character building, not merely as intellectual formation. Confucian values continue to be promulgated in schools, companies and government work throughout East Asia. Confucian instruction appears on television and behavior expressing the values of harmony, loyalty and filial piety is visible both in historical dramas and in stories of modern life.

Confucian teaching is, in practice, being modified for modern life. The lesser status of the female is gradually being abandoned as women are beginning to demand equal opportunity. Confucian societies everywhere now offer curricula that blend science and a focus on the future with studies of the past. Greater latitude is gradually being given to individual needs and personalities. With these modifications, Confucianism is gaining a renewed attractiveness.

Rather than dying, Confucianism is possibly beginning a new stage in its long life. The core of Confucianism is unassailable. It is primarily ethical, because it focuses on correct behavior. Yet is it more, because it rests on a vision of human unity and a connection with the harmony of the universe.

For Discussion and Increased Understanding:

1. Complete the chart, “Principles of Confucianism.”
2. Do some research on contemporary life in Korea and Japan. Look particularly for evidence of Confucian virtues that seem to contribute to their economic growth.
3. Consider your own “home culture.” If Confucianism became an influence there, how would its principles or rules be expressed in everyday language and activity?
4. After reading about Confucianism what understanding do you have about students of Asian heritage at your school?

Bibliography:

Mary Connor, “The Koreas: A Global Studies Handbook”

Michael Molloy, “Experiencing the World’s Religions: Tradition, Challenge & Change”

(A good part of the information is directly from Molloy’s text)

Rhoads Murphey “East Asia: A New History”