

Korea and Confucianism



Dosan Seowon Confucian Academy

Subjects: Asian Studies, Cultural Studies, World History

Grade Levels: 6, 7, and 10

Time Required: Two to three class periods are recommended.

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 and in your school

Background for the Lesson:

Confucius (also known as Kongfuzi) was born in 551 B.C. at a time when China was not a large empire, but a collection of small kingdoms that were in constant war with one another. Confucius believed that it was possible to end the chaos by establishing a system based on virtue and harmonious relations. As a result of his efforts, Confucius became the founder of a philosophical, moral, and ethical system that has lasted for 2,500 years. The Confucian philosophy particularly influenced China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

Confucius thought that people could be molded and elevated by education and examples of virtuous people, starting within the family and extending to the ruler who was to be

honest and devoted to the welfare of the people. He believed he could create a harmonious society by developing ethical standards and principals for government, society, and family relationships.

Confucius decided that society would function properly only if virtues were taught and lived. He wanted to produce outstanding individuals who would serve in government. Those who aspired for positions in the government had to devote themselves to years of study to insure they would have the knowledge, integrity and right values to qualify for public service. For Confucius, this also 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.

Confucius believed that social harmony could be established when people would perform their social roles properly. The primary emphasis was laid on hierarchical norms, and social order would start in the home. The young are taught to respect their elders, children their parents, wives their husbands, daughters-in-law their mothers-in-law. Students must respect their teachers and when at work employees are to respect their employers. Friends are to respect their friends and to be loyal. Each family member must be committed to fulfilling his or her role. Confucianism made the role of the family and the roles of each person the foundation for morality and also harmony within the home.

The father is to be responsible for the education and moral foundation for the son and the son must be respectful and obedient to the father. The son must care for his father when he is old. The role of the mother is to see that her children perform well in school and she is judged by their performance. The eldest child (preferably a boy) is to be responsible for raising the younger members of the family and his siblings must obey him. The father is responsible for the care of his wife and she is responsible for caring for her husband. The husband has the authority in the marriage and is expected to be the protector of his wife. She is the homemaker and mother.

Children learn before the age of ten that their lives are not totally their own, but belong to their family. The family makes the decisions. The children do not. When a child becomes successful (such as being accepted to a prestigious university), it is not just because of the efforts of the child, but the success of the entire family.

The Confucian tradition also influenced 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 ideally made on the advice of the parents. The grandparents of one's father have traditionally been considered to be 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 changed over time continue to be celebrated.

In the Confucian culture, a friendship involves serious responsibilities and is expected to last throughout one's lifetime. In friendships, there is a certain hierarchy related to age, position in society, health, wealth, and knowledge. One is to acknowledge these factors with respect and loyalty.

The role of the ruler is to act as a father and assume responsibility and care for his subjects who are his children. While the Confucian social order begins within the home, it ultimately extends to a town, the province, and then the entire country.

Confucianism also influenced concerns for social rank. Everyone had a specific place in society. The young were subordinate to the elders, women to men, commoners to the upper class, and everyone to the ruler. Everyone had moral obligations related to their position in society. Everyone was to pay respect to their ancestors.

The Confucian Virtues

Some Confucian virtues, such as love of education and the arts, help individuals develop their unique talent; however, the virtues most prized by Confucianism are primarily social virtues. Individual uniqueness, although valued by Confucianism, is expected to be subdued, subtle and relational. If one is particularly talented, they are to be humble.

1. *Ren*. The *Ren* virtues are sympathy, empathy, benevolence, kindness, and consideration. Everyone should be considerate of others through their actions and words.
2. *Li*. *Li* means good manners. One should do 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.
3. *Shu*. This word relates to how one's actions affect another person. One is to consider the other person's viewpoint.
4. *Wen*. This word means culture and includes poetry, literature, calligraphy, painting and music. The educated person is expected to not only have knowledge of these arts but also some skills.

In the Confucian system, harmony is all-important. And personal excellence comes from the manifestation of these virtues. 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 duties at work and social obligations properly.

Although Confucianism originated in China, Korea became the most Confucian society in Asia. This philosophical system influenced the growth of Chinese examinations that became the path to serve in high government positions and to achieve a high status in society. It also led to the creation of a stable society and a very rigid class structure for centuries. Ten percent of the people were the upper-class landowners. Their objective was to study hard, acquire mastery of Confucian classical literature, and serve in government and military service. It was very difficult for the commoner to move up in society; however, it helped to create the belief that if and you studied hard, you could move up in society and have a better life.

Both the Goryeo (936-1392) and the Joseon (1392-1910) dynasties adopted Confucian principles for government. The system included concepts of loyalty, filial

piety, respect for age and status, and reverence for learning. People were to be loyal to the government. The ruler and his officials had to be honest in order to serve in government. If a ruler was no longer virtuous, the people would have the right to revolt against the government.

Confucian philosophy also influenced economic development. Confucius believed that the most harmonious society would be based on agriculture. As a result, his convictions promoted contempt for the development of commerce in the belief that it would cause tensions within society. Road systems were developed, but trade within the country and with the outside world (except for China and Japan) remained limited.

Today more than 200 shrines and academies exist in what is now South Korea. Although large numbers of people claim to be Buddhists, Christians, or Shamanists, everyone is essentially still influenced in some way by the Confucianism beliefs that 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.

Confucianism Today

The Confucian system of virtues and behaviors are still very much alive. Although China, Japan, and Korea 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, 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 a solution to social ills and therefore continue to view education as the building of good character. Confucian values continue to be approved 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 stories of contemporary life.

It is now believed that Confucian values have contributed to rapid economic development in South Korea's and in other Asian economies. The stress on harmonious relationships in the workplace, respect for those in authority, and loyalty to the company has contributed to successful business operations.

There are changes in South Korea as to how Confucianism is practiced. Families are smaller and more people are living alone. Women are more educated and demand greater equality and opportunity. They are marrying later, want no more than two children, and are not opposed to being childless. Since many of them work, they want their husbands to help more with the raising of their children; however, men spend much of their time in the workplace as their employers want them to work long hours. Women want to make their own decisions and to be emotionally closer to their husbands. Divorce is much more common. There is obviously more individualism and less emphasis on the group or society as whole. Korea has definitely become a more fluid society and open to change.

The younger generation in South Korea is not necessarily observant or appreciative of Confucian traditions. They did not experience the Korean War, economic hard times or authoritarian government. The young tend to think of their family as united by affection and are more individualistic and independent than in the past in spite of being financially dependent on their families. Those who were born after 1990 are known as the Internet generation.

The Korean War (1950-1953) led to the division of the Korean peninsula. The Democratic People's Republic (DPRK) was created in 1948 following the armistice in the Korean War. Kim Il Sung became the founder of the DPRK, and created an authoritarian form of government that incorporated traditional Confucian beliefs, such as respect for authority, loyalty, obedience, and the importance of the group over the individual. The leader of North Korea has absolute power to make decisions for the country, speak for the people, impose strict controls over society, and demand absolute loyalty.

Confucianism is in a new stage of its long life. The core beliefs of Confucius are unassailable. It has been primarily ethical, because it has focused on correct behavior; however, it has been more because it has rested on a vision of human unity and the harmony of the universe. In the case of North Korea, there is unity because of constant indoctrination. Traditional religion was replaced by the personality cult of the founder of the DPRK, Kim Il-Sung. The people of North Korea suffer in poverty in an authoritarian state while the people of South Korea live in a democratic and capitalistic republic in one of the largest economies in the world.

For Discussion and Increased Understanding:

1. Consider your own “home culture.” If Confucianism became an influence in your family, how would its principles or rules be expressed in everyday language, family dynamics, and activities? Would Confucian standards be helpful in any way to you and your family?
2. What Confucian values seem to be particularly important to you? If Confucianism exists in your home, how is it influencing your life and your family?
3. What Confucian virtues have contributed to South Korea’s economic growth?
4. At a time when there is great divisiveness in the United States, could Confucian be helpful to bring greater harmony? If so, how?
5. After reading about Confucianism what understanding do you have about students of Asian heritage at your school?

Supplementary Lesson

Confucius is considered one of the most influential persons in the history of the world. He was a teacher and philosopher who lived 2,500 years ago, a time of intense political turmoil and civil unrest. Based on his own research into the past and his thoughts on the tumultuous world of his time, he developed a philosophy that emphasized compassion and respect at all levels of society and promoted education as a way to develop the mind and to shape good character. It was his hope that rulers would adopt his approach to social and political morality and interpersonal relations to spread harmony and peace.

The Analects, the most famous work associated with him, is a compilation of his teachings created by later generations of his followers. What quotations from *The Analects* seem to be relevant in today's world and to you personally? Do you disagree in any way with his philosophy?

From *The Analects*

“Above all, be loyal and stand by your words. Befriend only those who are kindred spirits. And when you are wrong, do not be afraid to change.”

“It’s honoring parents and elders that make people human. Then they rarely turn against authority. And if people don’t turn against authority, they never rise up and pitch the country into chaos. The noble-minded cultivate roots. When roots are secure, the Way is born. To honor parents and elders – isn’t that the root of Humanity?”

“To be born enlightened: that is highest. To study and so become enlightened: that is next. To feel trapped and so study: that is third. To feel trapped and never study; that is the level of the common people, the lowest level.”

“If you scold your sovereign too often, you will end up disgraced. If you scold your friend too often, you’ll end up alone.”

“Is there any one word that could guide a person throughout life? The Master replied: “How about “*shu*“: never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself?”

“How can you love people without encouraging them? And how can you be loyal to people without educating them?”

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