

Scholar's Corner: Confucianism in and for the Modern World

Confucianism as Dependent Variable

Youngmin Kim*

The Confucian tradition is still alive as there are still activists, theorists, and scholars who think of themselves as “Confucian.” Compared to tradition-outsiders, tradition-insiders often show a more flexible attitude toward the tradition they support due to the fact that their main interest lies in sustaining the tradition in a changing environment. An obsession with the immutable nature of tradition, regardless of the changing environment, can lead to the demise of the tradition. To survive, a tradition must be transformed to suit the times.

As a result, today's traditions are often much different from what they were in the past. Today, the Catholic Church's organization is very hierarchical, and in its hierarchical organization, the Roman Catholic Bishop (the Bishop of Rome) has a privileged position. According to many scholars, the biblical basis for this type of organization is not as clear as one might think. Matthew 16:18-19 in the New Testament, which is often cited as the biblical basis for the Catholic Church's organization, does not explicitly offer justification for the Church's current hierarchical organization. The transformation of Christianity, originally a loose gathering of believers, into the hierarchical church organization that can be seen today is the result of Christianity's adaptation to a changing historical environment. (Spruyt 1996,46)

The same is true for New Confucians. New Confucian scholars are distinguished from scholars who study Confucian tradition as outsiders in that they are insiders of the Confucian tradition. Rather than accurately portraying the various expressions of the Confucian

* Youngmin Kim is a Professor of the Department of Political Science and International Relations. Seoul National University, Seoul, Korea. E-mail: kimyoungmin@snu.ac.kr

tradition in the past, New Confucians are concerned with adapting the Confucian tradition to the modern world and transforming the Confucian tradition so that it can maintain its relevance in the modern world. New Confucians often emphasize the religious and modern nature of Confucianism. However, although these characteristics are somewhat related to the expressions of the tradition in the past, they have been greatly transformed and modernized in the course of the reconstruction of tradition.

Despite the efforts of insiders of the Confucian tradition, like New Confucians, today's younger generation in East Asia are not very enthusiastic about Confucianism. Most of the younger generation see Confucianism as nothing more than a product of the past and do not consider it as a desirable culture to follow. The younger generation often sympathize with Western values and cultures. In contrast, when describing social phenomena in modern Asia and presenting normative alternatives, social scientists and theorists place great importance on Confucianism. Whether analyzing negative or positive phenomenon, Confucianism is often considered as an independent variable. For example, scholars often used to cite Confucianism as the cause for authoritarian governments empowered in East Asia. On the other hand, when rapid economic development occurred in East Asia, a significant number of social scientists also found the cause in Confucianism.

These explanations, which rely on Confucianism, tend to rise in popularity and then wither away. For example, when the financial crisis in East Asia broke out in 1997, the "Asian value" discourse used to explain the economic development of East Asia by appealing to Confucianism quickly lost its popularity. Recently, however, attempts to explain social phenomena in East Asia with Confucianism have re-appeared. As South Korea and other Asian countries were relatively good at dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, many people mentioned Confucianism in the process of exploring the cause. While governments and citizens in the United States and Europe were relatively slow to deal with the Corona virus, the South Korean government and its citizens were relatively quick to deal with it. Seeing their swift and effective virus testing and citizens responding well to

the government's measures, foreign media received strong positive impressions of South Korea's successful countermeasures. And they mentioned "Confucianism." For example, an article in the *Wall Street Journal* said that "the lingering cultural imprint of Confucianism" made it easier for the government to penetrate citizens' lives in times of crisis.¹

Not only journalists but also scholars and intellectuals joined the discourse. Byung-Chul Han, a Korean philosopher based in Germany, claimed in the German newspaper *De Welt* that Asian countries are authoritarian because of Confucianism, which helped to make the COVID-19 quarantine work efficient.² "When compared to Europe, what are the systemic factors that have proven to be helpful in combating the epidemic in Asian countries? Countries such as Japan, Korea, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Singapore are already authoritarian because of cultural factors (Confucianism). Residents are more obedient and docile than Europeans"; that is, in the process of analyzing Korea's handling of the COVID-19, Byung-Chul Han regards authoritarian government as a characteristic of Confucianism. On the other hand, in an article titled "Confucianism Isn't Helping Beat the Coronavirus," in *Foreign Policy*, S. Nathan Park claimed that Confucianism and the South Korean Government's leadership are irrelevant, saying "Cultural tropes don't explain South Korea's success against COVID-19. Competent leadership does."³

Concerning the very same phenomenon, an article in the *New York Times* argued that social trust in Korea is higher than that of Western democracy, which is suffering from polarization and populism.⁴ In other words, Korea's characteristic of dealing with the COVID-19 was found in social trust rather than in authoritarian gov-

¹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/east-vs-west-coronavirus-fight-tests-divergent-strategies-11584110308> (accessed 9 June 2020).

² <https://www.welt.de/kultur/plus206681771/Byung-Chul-Han-zu-Corona-Vernunft-nicht-dem-Virus-ueberlassen.html> (accessed 9 June 2020).

³ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/02/confucianism-south-korea-coronavirus-testing-cultural-trope-orientalism/?fbclid=IwAR3F5JINKoM7Hca9GcWOX5GalyW0CW-NvRXFcM3nb55-GTRXuotJkkygi8> (accessed 9 June 2020).

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/world/asia/coronavirus-south-korea-flatten-curve.html> (accessed 9 June 2020).

ernment. Interestingly, social trust is considered a characteristic of Confucianism in this discussion. The French-American professor, economist, and public intellectual Guy Sorman also found the reason why Korea was good at quarantine from Confucian culture. “Koreans trust intellectuals and experts, abide by orders, and individuals are subordinate to the group,” he said. In this case, Guy Sorman regarded the attitude of putting the community ahead of the individual as a characteristic of Confucianism.⁵

As these examples illustrate, Confucianism transforms into various beings, according to people’s needs. Confucianism was an ideology that justifies an authoritarian state, and it was a civil society ideology based on social trust. It was sometimes a secular worldview, and at other times it was considered one of the world religions. It is considered as a factor that hinders modernization but is also considered as a factor that promotes modernization. If Confucianism is so diverse, it is no exaggeration to say that Confucianism is not suitable for sociological analysis.

Social scientists are trying to scientifically explain social phenomena. Just as natural scientists pride themselves on producing scientific and rigorous knowledge about natural phenomena, social scientists are proud to produce scientific and rigorous knowledge of society. They believe their research is not based on mere impression, but rather on data sets obtained through strict procedures and precise reasoning. Social scientists try to suggest normatively correct paths for humanity to take based on such rigorous research in social science. In order to maintain the strictness and scientific rigor that scholars value, it is recommended that the *signifié* and *signifiant* used in their explanations have a one-to-one relationship. As mentioned above, the term “Confucianism” should not refer to multiple subjects. The relationship between the *signifié* and *signifiant* should be stable and consistent, so that sociological analysis can be made.

The most common type of sociological analysis is to discover the relationship between a dependent variable and an independent vari-

⁵ https://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2020/04/29/2020042900457.html (accessed 9 June 2020).

able. That is, it tracks how an independent variable causes change in a dependent variable. To explain the social phenomena of modern Korea or East Asia by appealing to Confucianism is to regard Confucianism as independent variable and to regard the social phenomena of East Asia as dependent variables. Confucianism, however, does not fit in well with this sociological analysis because it has been changing over a long period of history and time. Many social scientists cite Confucianism, but it is unclear what period or expression of the tradition and what aspects of Confucianism they refer to.

It is difficult to agree on the nature of Confucianism because Confucianism is multifaceted and has a strong historical character. First of all, Confucianism, in the sense of an organized school, did not exist during Confucius' lifetime. Confucius was influential among the ambitious young men of his time but was only a politically failed intellectual. It was after Confucius' death that his teachings developed into an organized school. If we simplify Confucianism as an autocratic state ideology, we cannot explain the fact that Qin (秦), which it is no exaggeration to say was the most despotic regime in Chinese history, persecuted Confucius' followers. "Confucianism" gained attention in the process of reflecting on the failure of the Qin Dynasty during the Han Dynasty. Moreover, it is unclear when Confucianism became a state orthodoxy. People often think that Confucianism became the state orthodoxy through the efforts of Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒), but according to Michael Loewe's (2011) research, this is not true.

Confucius did not explicitly claim to be a saint. However, after his death, Confucius was considered a saint. Confucius himself urged his disciples to distance themselves from gods. But after his death, Confucius himself was eventually deified. Moreover, modern people often treat Confucianism as if it were representative of East Asia. People also tend to think that Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism is the most conservative form of Confucianism. But when Neo-Confucianism first appeared, it was considered a very subversive group. In other words, Neo-Confucianism has long been far from a conservative force.

Many regard Confucianism as a patriarchal ideology and regard it as a characteristic of Confucianism to justify the suppression of

women. This is true in large measure. Indeed, *Zhuzi jiali* (Family Rituals of Master Zhu 朱子家禮) by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) advocates a patriarchal system. However, since most ideas during the pre-modern period contain patriarchal content, it is not enough to hold that patriarchy is a decisive feature of Confucianism. Some women during the pre-modern period used Confucianism to promote their own interests.

In short, Confucianism has evolved over a long history, transforming itself into a complex and fluid being that is difficult to easily define. Accordingly, when dealing with such a phenomenon, it is necessary to be cautious. Nevertheless, many social scientists and social theorists use a highly stylized social scientific account of Confucianism. Such a definition oversimplifies the Confucianism that exists in history. A more productive way to deal with Confucianism in history is to treat Confucianism as a dependent variable, not an independent variable. Rather than making Confucianism the cause of certain phenomena in modern East Asian society, it is more productive to ask questions like: Why did Confucianism at a certain time have such forms and characteristics? Why did certain groups in certain times want to have a self-identity called Confucian? When Confucianism, which has emerged in history, is treated as a dependent variable, it will be easier to treat the tradition with “scholarly rigor.”

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