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Democracy and Nationalism in Korea: *Subjectivity, Collectivity, and Pre-Subjective Relation*

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Abstract

This paper reinterprets South Korea's democracy by focusing on how relational forms of subjectivity shape political life. It makes two main claims. First, Confucian familism—its hierarchical roles, filial ethics, and family-based conception of the self—continues to structure Korean democratic culture, underpinning both solidarity and civic mobilization as well as paternalism and authoritarian residues. Second, Confucian relationality alone cannot explain Korea's extraordinary democratic resilience. To address this gap, the paper introduces the concept of the pre-subjective We: an ontological, horizontal being-with that precedes both Confucian roles and liberal individualism. This pre-subjective relationality becomes visible in democratic uprisings such as Gwangju, June 1987, the Candlelight Revolution, and the 2024 anti–martial law protests, where citizens act as a pluralistic we that cuts across established hierarchies. By placing contemporary Confucian political theory in dialogue with phenomenology, the paper proposes a layered account of relational subjectivity that reframes Korea as a key site for rethinking democracy beyond the collectivism/individualism binary.

Keywords: Confucian relationality, pre-subjective we, Korean democracy, familism, collective agency, phenomenology

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I. Introduction

South Korea's democratic trajectory has long been interpreted through institutional, economic, or civil-society paradigms. Yet these accounts often overlook a deeper cultural and philosophical question: *How do inherited structures of relationality shape democratic life?* This paper argues that Korea's democratization cannot be understood without examining the enduring influence of Confucian familism on political subjectivity and civic action. At the same time, it contends that Confucian relationality alone cannot explain Korea's extraordinary democratic resilience.

The paper makes two contributions:

> First, it diagnoses how Confucian familism—its hierarchical moral psychology, model of role-based obligation, and family-centered conception of the self—continues to structure Korean democratic culture, shaping both its strengths (solidarity, civic mobilization, care-oriented politics) and its vulnerabilities (authoritarian residues, patriarchal civic norms, moralized hierarchy).
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> Second, it offers the concept of the *pre-subjective we* as as a philosophical expansion of Confucian relationality. Drawing on phenomenological accounts of subjectivity and pre-subjective relational being, this concept helps to explain features of Korean democratic action that Confucian political theory alone cannot account for, especially the emergence of large-scale, horizontally organized collective agency during moments of crisis.

This paper positions the pre-subjective *we* in conversation with contemporary Confucian political theorists such as Sungmoon Kim and Joseph Chan, showing what Confucian relationality successfully illuminates—and where it reaches its limits—in understanding Korea's democratization.

To develop this argument, the paper first sketches the historical backdrop of Korean modernity, emphasizing how Confucian moral culture was transformed rather than erased by the pressures of colonialism, rapid industrialization, and national division. It then ana-

lyzes South Korea's democratization through the lens of five major uprisings, highlighting how grassroots mobilizations both inherited and subverted Confucian patterns of relational belonging. A discussion of civil society and grassroots nationalism follows, illustrating how collective agency in Korea emerges from a complex interplay between familial relationality, historical trauma, and pre-subjective forms of communal self-understanding.

The final section turns to the notion of the individual in democratic theory. By interrogating the limits of liberal individualism in the Korean context, the paper argues for an alternative paradigm of democratic subjectivity grounded in pre-subjective relationality. This paradigm offers a way to rethink selfhood, responsibility, and collective action beyond the dichotomy of atomistic self versus collectivist community, and thus reframes Korea not simply as a case of democratic struggle, but as a philosophical site for rethinking what democracy means today.

Although this paper is grounded in the Korean case, its aim is not merely descriptive. Korea functions here as a philosophical site in which dominant assumptions of modern democratic theory—particularly the identification of democracy with either liberal individualism or culturally specific collectivism—are brought into question. By distinguishing Confucian role-based relationality from a more fundamental, pre-subjective form of being-with, the paper contributes to broader debates in political philosophy concerning collective agency, democratic subjectivity, and the ontological conditions of "we-formation" in democratic life.

While democratic theory has long recognized the importance of collective self-understanding, the contribution of this paper lies in articulating such collectivity at a pre-subjective, ontological level rather than as a normative or juridical identity. This shift allows us to explain forms of democratic solidarity that emerge prior to shared ideology, political representation, or institutional membership—forms of collective agency that become especially visible in moments of democratic crisis.

II. Historical Context

Rather than recounting a full historical timeline, I highlight only those moments that reveal a pattern of collective agency that cannot be reduced either to Confucian familism or liberal individualism. Korea's modern history is marked by colonial rule, war, and division, but also by repeated episodes in which people mobilized not simply as isolated rights-bearers nor as obedient children of the nation-family, but as a "we" that emerges through shared risk, mourning, and responsibility.

A. April 19 Revolution (1960)

The First Republic under Syngman Rhee was marked by authoritarianism, political suppression, and the expansive use of the National Security Law, whose ambiguity enabled the criminalization of a broad range of dissent (Saxer 2002, 34–35). Rhee's constitutional manipulations in 1952 and 1954, and the blatant electoral fraud of March 1960, ignited student-led protests that rapidly became a nationwide uprising. Although the movement is often described in liberal terms—defense of constitutional rights, rejection of electoral fraud—its internal language drew heavily on Confucian moral emotions: outrage at a corrupt "father of the nation," and a collective sense of violated public virtue. The April 19 Revolution thus displays an early form of relational democratic agency: citizens acting as a moral community rather than as isolated individuals.

B. Anti-Yushin Movement (1973) and Bu-Ma Uprising (1979)

Park Chung-hee's military coup of 1961 inaugurated a period of authoritarian modernization. Economic growth was used to legitimize restrictions on civil liberties, justified by appeal to the North Korean threat and the need for "extraordinary means" (Saxer 2002, 36). The state–chaebol alliance deepened during this period, granting conglomerates privileged access to loans and foreign exchange in exchange for export performance and political support (2002, 38). Park's 1972 Yushin Constitution entrenched indefinite rule through indirect elections and relied increasingly on martial law and emergency decrees

to suppress dissent (2002, 40–41). The anti-Yushin protests beginning in 1973 and the Bu-Ma Uprising of October 1979—violently suppressed through martial law in Busan and garrison decrees in Masan and Changwon, resulting in 1,563 arrests (E. Choi 2010, 1–2)—illustrate how democratic resistance formed through dense networks of solidarity: students, workers, and local residents acting together as "our city," "our generation," and "we citizens." Again, democratic agency emerged relationally, in forms neither reducible to filial hierarchy nor liberal individualism.

C. Gwangju Democratization Movement (May 18, 1980)

After Park's assassination, Chun Doo-hwan's faction extended martial law nationwide on May 17, 1980, closing universities, suppressing speech and assembly, and deploying troops to occupy campuses. The violent repression of students in Gwangju triggered a city-wide uprising, evolving from student protest to civil uprising and, ultimately, armed resistance as citizens organized hospitals, food supplies, neighborhood defense, and deliberative assemblies. The Gwangju movement therefore represents a paradigmatic instance of relational agency: individuals acting as a community of mutual protection and moral responsibility under extreme conditions.

D. June Democracy Movement (1987)

The torture and death of Park Jong-cheol, the April 13 Constitutional Protection Measures, and the death of Lee Han-yeol from tear gas galvanized nationwide protests beginning June 10. The subsequent June 29 Declaration by Roh Tae-woo, accepting direct presidential elections, marked a turning point in Korea's democratization. Although framed as a victory of civil society and liberal rights, the June Movement also relied on relational structures—students, unions, clergy, professionals, and homemakers forming broad coalitions driven by shared moral outrage and a sense of co-belonging. This horizontal "we" demanded democratization not merely as legal reform but as collective self-responsibility.

E. Candlelight Revolution (2008 / 2016–2017)

The Candlelight Revolution grew from widespread dissatisfaction with the Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) administrations. Public frustration had already intensified under Lee Myung-bak, whose corruption scandals, democratic backsliding, and heavy-handed governance helped cultivate the civic repertoire of candlelight protests that would later surge into a nationwide democratic uprising. This discontent deepened further with Park's mishandling of the Sewol-ho ferry disaster in 2014 and the influence-peddling scandal involving Choi Soon-sil. Massive weekly demonstrations—approximately 32% of the population attended at least one gathering (Han 2023, 187–88)—mobilized critiques of entrenched interests and articulated grassroots perspectives on Korean nationalism and democratic renewal. Drawing on Archer's account of the interplay among structure, culture, and agency (Archer 1995, 1996; cited in Han 2023, 194), Han Gil-soo interprets the movement as a form of "grassroots nationalism," in which citizens sought to shape the nation's direction through both collective and individual aspirations (Han 2023, 188, 193). The candlelight gatherings show relational democratic agency operating through peaceful, inclusive, intergenerational solidarity.

F. Martial Law and the Impeachment of Yoon Suk-yeol (2024)

In late 2024, Yoon Suk-yeol declared martial law on December 3, invoking national security to justify suspending freedoms of press and assembly and deploying the military to suppress dissent. While echoing earlier authoritarian precedents, the public response differed sharply: civil society organizations, students, labor unions, and ordinary citizens rapidly mobilized, drawing on decades of democratic struggle. Nationwide protests pressured the National Assembly to initiate impeachment proceedings, and the Constitutional Court ultimately upheld Yoon's impeachment. The episode revealed both the persistence of authoritarian reflexes and the depth of Korea's relational democratic culture: citizens acted not merely as individual rights-holders but as a community committed to defending constitutional order "from below."

Across these episodes, Korea's democratization appears not as a transition from familist hierarchy to liberal individualism, but as the recurrent emergence of a relational "we" that acts collectively in moments of crisis. The next section turns to Confucian political theory and the concept of the pre-subjective *we* to clarify the philosophical significance of this pattern.

III. Confucian Political Theory

A. Grassroots Nationalism

Recent scholarship challenges the traditional view of nationalism as a top-down, elite-driven project, emphasizing instead the everyday agency of ordinary people (Knott 2015, 12; cited in Han 2023, 190). At the grassroots level, individuals interpret, adapt, and sometimes resist the narratives promoted by political leaders, actively shaping how the nation is understood in daily life (Antonsich 2016; cited in Han 2023, 190; Herzfeld 1992; cited in Cohen 1996, 811; cited in Han 2023, 189). This perspective broadens nationalism beyond statist "blood and soil" models, opening space for "civic nationalism," where shared political values—such as democracy, liberty, and justice—form the basis of belonging (Smith 2010; Han 2023, 189).

Grassroots nationalism thus describes sub-national actors who participate in defining national identity from below, moving beyond passive consumption of elite-produced symbols (Han 2023, 191). It highlights how diverse social groups—across class, age, and region—take part in shaping national purpose, as seen in moments ranging from the 1997 gold-collecting campaign (H. Cheon 2017, 388) to shifting attitudes toward globalized cultural life (Campbell 2016; cited in Han 2023, 193). During the Asian financial crisis, for example, Kim Dae-jung's appeal for collective sacrifice drew on this participatory ethos, asking workers to endure hardships for national recovery (Chŏn 2003, 48; Kwŏn 1994, 16; cited in Han 2023, 193).

Han argues that grassroots nationalism challenges the older ethno-nationalist model of "our nation," which has historically reinforced

an exclusionary us–them divide (Shin 2006; cited in Han 2023, 192). Younger Koreans increasingly define national identity through political-legal membership rather than bloodline (W. Kang 2006, 2011; cited in Han 2023, 192), a shift accelerated by the presence of temporary migrants and naturalized citizens (Campbell 2015, 2016; cited in Han 2023, 192). However, this development coexists with a rise in "possessive individualism," fostered by democratization and economic growth, in which individuals see themselves as proprietors of their own capacities and less bound by collective obligations (Macpherson 1962, 3; cited in Han 2023, 193).

Grassroots nationalism reveals a complex interplay between collective belonging and individual autonomy. It loosens the ethnonationalist frame but still operates within the nation-state's boundaries, making it an important yet limited resource for understanding Korea's evolving political identity.

B. Familism and Nationalism

With the end of the Cold War, scholars have turned increasingly to the cultural foundations of Korean political life, particularly the enduring influence of Confucian familism (Helgesen 1998, 99). Although the Joseon dynasty ended in 1910, its Confucian values—hierarchy, filial piety, role-based ethics—continue to structure Korean society. The prominence of Joseon Confucian scholars on modern Korean currency symbolizes this long afterlife. Confucianism remains deeply embedded across private and public spheres, shaping nationalism through the idea that "the ideal society is like a family" (Helgesen 1998, 122).

In this family-model of society, leaders function as paternal figures and citizens as siblings. While the explicit rhetoric of "the leader as father" has weakened in South Korea, its traces persist in everyday kinship terms used among unrelated people—"brother," "aunt," "uncle"—and in patriarchal expectations governing social interaction (Helgesen 1998, 122). Helgesen notes that widespread acceptance of the patriarchal family system, even without explicit reference to Confucian doctrine, shows how deeply it regulates behavior (1998, 139).

This familist ethos underlies Korea's ethno-nationalism, long described as the gukga or "country-family," imagined as a homogeneous lineage (Campbell 2016; cited in Han 2023, 189). Muller frames this view as the nation-as-extended-family (Muller 2008, 20; cited in Han 2023, 189), while Stacey emphasizes ancestry and cultural superiority as central to ethno-national identity (Stacey 2018, 11; cited in Han 2023, 189). Nationalism here provides not only belonging and loyalty (Stacey 2018, 8) but also moral and cultural significance (Y. Kim 2016, 230; cited in Han 2023, 189).

Choi Jang-jip argues that Korea's civil society developed under this collectivist orientation. Unlike the Western model in which civil society arises to protect private property, Korean civil society emerged to defend democracy itself against centralized authority (2010, 223). The blurred line between public and private spheres, shaped by familist norms, means Korea has a weak liberal foundation but a strong democratic tradition (2010, 223).

C. Culture of Authority

Confucian familism also informs Korea's hierarchical political culture. Anthony Smith (2008) characterizes East Asian societies as "hierarchical nations," where leaders are imagined as "fathers of the nation" (Han 2023, 200). Korean politics often prioritizes personal character and paternal authority over ideology (Helgesen 1998, 139). Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan explicitly invoked Confucian paternalism to justify authoritarian rule, presenting themselves as benevolent protectors against communist threat (Helgesen 1998, 99).

Cold War anti-communism further entrenched this paternalistic structure. The U.S. Military Government introduced democratic institutions, but the dominance of anti-communist hegemony limited substantive democratic development (Helgesen 1998, 94; Choi 2010, 81).

Under Park's Yushin regime, media criticism was suppressed (Choi 2010, 113), and by the 1980s, media had become integrated into authoritarian legitimacy-building (Choi 2010, 113–14). Choi argues that democratization occurred not through institutional reform but through mass civil activism—"No movement, no democratization,"

contrasting Barrington Moore's "No bourgeoisie, no democracy" (2010, 108–109).

After democratization, civil society weakened under corporatist ties and ideological conservatism (Choi 2010, 232). The result, ironically, is a civil sphere that often undermines rather than strengthens democratic values, lacking sustained engagement and relying instead on episodic mobilization (Choi 2010, 239–43).

D. Confucian Relationality and the Limits of Normative Personhood

Contemporary Confucian political theory has developed a sophisticated picture of relational personhood that is highly relevant for understanding Korea's political landscape. Rather than treating the individual as an atomistic bearer of rights, thinkers such as Sungmoon Kim and Joseph Chan argue that persons are constituted through role-based, relational, and virtue-centered forms of life. On this view, to be a person is to occupy roles—child, parent, citizen, ruler—embedded in hierarchical but potentially democratizable networks of obligation and care. Confucianism thus appears as a resource for articulating a form of "democracy after Confucianism": a democracy that incorporates Confucian moral psychology and role-ethics rather than simply discarding them (Kim 2014, 2018).

Sungmoon Kim's work is exemplary in this respect. In his accounts *Public Reason Confucianism* and *Confucian Democracy*, Kim argues that Confucianism can underwrite a modern constitutional order in which citizens are treated as free and equal while still being understood as relationally constituted moral agents (Kim 2014, 2016). Drawing on Mencian moral psychology, he emphasizes that individuals are born with sprouts of concern for others, which are cultivated through *li* (ritual propriety) and role-based practices. Political legitimacy, on this model, does not rest on the aggregation of private preferences but on the formation of civic character and the mutual recognition of citizens as bearers of relational responsibilities. Kim's "democracy after Confucianism" thus presents Confucianism as a source of a role-based, relational moral psychology that is compatible with, and even

supportive of, democratic institutions.

Joseph Chan's *Confucian Perfectionism* further develops this line of thought by articulating a model of modern Confucian politics oriented toward the cultivation of civic virtues rather than the mere protection of individual choice (2014). For Chan, the political community is a moral project: the state has a responsibility to promote the conditions under which individuals can develop excellences of character, including relational virtues of care, loyalty, and civic responsibility. Persons are not primarily possessors of inviolable rights but participants in a shared perfectionist enterprise, where relational moral cultivation—within families, schools, and public institutions—forms the basis of legitimate political order. Chan's account makes explicit that Confucian relationality is rooted in hierarchical ethics: roles are asymmetrical (parent/child, ruler/subject, elder/younger), yet they can be reinterpreted in ways that support modern civic equality.

These theories are crucial for this paper because they clarify what I call the **normative layer** of Confucian relationality: the level at which persons are defined by roles, cultivated through rituals and institutions, and guided by hierarchically structured virtues. They help explain why Korean political culture can be highly relational and family-inflected, and yet also capable of democratic reform. The language of "our nation," "our people," and "our democracy" in Korea can be read, in part, through this Confucian lens: as the extension of familist moral concern to wider circles of community, mediated by modern institutions and civic education.

At the same time, there are important limits to what this normative Confucian relationality can explain, especially when we turn to Korean democratic activism. Both Kim and Chan presuppose a subject who is already capable of ethical self-relation and reflective participation in moral practices: a self who learns to be relational through education, ritual, and virtue cultivation (Kim 2014; Chan 2014). The relational self is, in this sense, an **achieved** self—a person who has been successfully formed by Confucian (or Confucian-compatible) institutions. This makes their frameworks powerful for thinking about how democratic citizens *ought* to be formed, but less equipped to account for the more primordial forms of solidarity that emerge in moments of crisis,

where existing roles and hierarchies are suspended, contested, or even reversed.

Korean democratic uprisings illustrate this difficulty. In events such as Gwangju, the June 1987 Movement, or the Candlelight Revolution, people did not act only as dutiful sons and daughters within a Confucian family-state, nor simply as liberal individuals asserting private rights. Students, workers, parents, and children formed horizontal bonds of solidarity that cut across established roles and often turned against paternalistic authority grounded in those very roles. Citizens confronted the "fatherly" state not as isolated monads, but as a *we* bound together by shared exposure to violence, grief, and responsibility. Confucian role-ethics can describe some of the moral idioms at work (filial outrage, shame, righteous anger), but it cannot fully account for this horizontal, cross-role solidarity that enables citizens to oppose authorities who still claim Confucian legitimacy.

It is here that the concept of the **pre-subjective we** becomes indispensable. By "pre-subjective we," I do not mean a community of already-formed moral subjects, nor a set of normatively defined roles. I mean an **ontological relationality**—a structure of being-with others that precedes and underlies any particular hierarchy, role, or virtue. The pre-subjective we names the fact that subjectivity is always already plural: individuals find themselves implicated in one another's lives prior to reflective choice, prior to moral cultivation, and even prior to the assignment of social roles. This primordial co-belonging is what surfaces in moments when strangers in the street suddenly experience themselves as acting together, when "I" becomes inseparable from "we" in the face of shared danger or shared hope.

Seen from this perspective, Confucian relationality and the pre-subjective we **overlap** but are not identical. Confucian role-ethics articulates one historically and culturally specific way of organizing and cultivating relational life. It presupposes that persons can be shaped by hierarchy, ritual, and virtue-oriented institutions—something that is only possible because human existence is already structured as being-with. The pre-subjective we, by contrast, names this more basic condition: the ontological exposure to others that makes any form of moral education, familial hierarchy, or civic cultivation possible. In

other words, Confucianism describes *how* relational selves should be formed; the pre-subjective we describes *that* selves are originally and irreducibly relational.

Confucian relationality helps explain important aspects of Korean political culture, but it is insufficient to account for the horizontal, role-suspending forms of collective agency that emerge in moments of democratic rupture. When citizens occupy public squares night after night, caring for strangers' children, sharing food, mourning the dead, and facing police lines together, they enact a relationality that is not organized by Confucian hierarchies or perfectionist state projects. These practices are not simply extensions of filial piety to the political sphere; they are expressions of a horizontal being-with that can authorize resistance against authoritarian "fathers of the nation." The pre-subjective we captures this non-hierarchical dimension of solidarity: the way in which people find themselves already bound to others in a shared vulnerability and responsibility that can, when necessary, override inherited role obligations.

In this sense, the pre-subjective we does not replace Confucian political theory; it **supplements and radicalizes** it. Kim and Chan show that Confucianism can support a democracy grounded in role-based relationality and civic virtue (Kim 2014, 2018; Chan 2014). The concept of the pre-subjective we pushes one step further: it reveals a layer of relationality prior to roles, hierarchy, or moral cultivation, a layer that becomes visible in Korea's democratic uprisings and in the everyday practices of grassroots nationalism discussed above. Confucian relationality explains how Koreans understand social roles and moral duties; the pre-subjective we explains how, in critical moments, citizens can act collectively against paternalistic authority in the name of a deeper, horizontal solidarity that is not reducible to role obligations.

By putting contemporary Confucian political philosophy into conversation with the pre-subjective we, this paper therefore does not reject Confucian relationality. It seeks instead to reposition it within a layered account of subjectivity: Confucian role-based ethics as a historically specific normative articulation of relational personhood, and the pre-subjective We as the ontological ground from which both ethical personhood and democratic community arise.

IV. We as Self: From Exclusive We to Pre-subjective Relation

In South Korea, there has been a noticeable shift away from strong, state-driven ethno-nationalism towards more everyday, grassroots forms of nationalism. This shift is often described as a move from a collective, family-like identity to a more individualistic orientation. Historically, Korean society has been built on the foundation of a collective identity that imagined "our nation" as one large family. As Korea has consolidated itself as a modern nation-state, however, this image of a unified family has increasingly given way to an individualized sense of national belonging, shaped by consumer culture, global mobility, and liberal notions of selfhood. Grassroots nationalism is frequently celebrated as a way to transcend the exclusivism of ethno-nationalism, yet both remain bound to the logic of the nation-state: they delineate insiders and outsiders, and they continue to rest on a boundary that separates "our" people from others, even when the internal grammar shifts from collectivist to individualist (Han 2023, 189–93).

From the standpoint of democratic theory, this poses a structural problem. Whether it begins from authoritarian Confucian familism or evolves into a more individualistic grassroots movement, nationalism as such continues to rely on a principle of distinction between nations, and therefore risks reproducing conflictual logics in the international arena. Even in societies with advanced democratic institutions, there is a persistent tendency to prioritize "our" prosperity over others', even when dealing with global issues that fundamentally exceed national boundaries. Conversations about democracy and justice are thus typically confined within the frame of separate nation-states, and democratization continues to be imagined as a process that unfolds *within* rather than *beyond* those boundaries.

Within this national frame, there are broadly two dominant ways of conceiving community and individuality in democratic society. On the one hand, the Confucian family-model, as described above, is rooted in notions of kinship, blood, and hierarchical roles; it is top-down, inherited, and tied to the ethno-national idea of one people as one extended family. On the other hand, the modern nation-state operates

through a bottom-up logic of possessive individualism: individuals are proprietors of their own capacities and rights, and the political whole emerges through their voluntary association (Macpherson 1962, 3; cited in Han 2023, 193). Amid this opposition between hierarchical family and atomistic individual, a third perspective is needed—one that rethinks the notion of self and community at a more fundamental level.

A. Pre-subjectivity: Self as We

As a third option, I propose an understanding of the self as *we* in a pre-subjective relation. Instead of beginning with the isolated individual or with a closed collective, this perspective starts from a fundamental-ontological interconnectedness prior to both. The point is not to posit yet another group-based identity, but to emphasize a universal condition of relatedness that precedes and underlies any particular community.

Certain linguistic phenomena in Korean help illuminate this point. A well-known example is the habitual use of the possessive pronoun *uri* ("our") where many other languages would use "my": one speaks of "our husband," "our wife," "our mother," even "our country" or "our home," rather than "my . . .". This everyday linguistic practice is often read as evidence of a collectivist ethos; it certainly manifests a strong sense of communal embeddedness. Yet it can also be interpreted more radically: as a sign that selfhood is experienced from the outset in a *we*-register, not as an isolated I. The phrase "our husband" can be read as pointing to a *pre-subjective self as we* (Kim 2021, ch. 5). In this sense, the "we" is not simply many I's aggregated, nor a substantivist group-subject; it names the relational field within which any "I" first emerges.

I call this level **pre-subjective** because it exists prior to reflective self-awareness and intentional action. Pre-subjective selfhood refers to a fundamental-ontological condition of being-in-relation—a *web of relation* that is already there before the subject thematizes itself as an individual (Kim 2021, ch. 5). One can be aware of being in relation without first thematizing oneself as a separate subject; the awareness of relation can precede the articulated sense of "I am I and you are you." The metaphysical distinction between self and other is real and

irreducible, yet it is not necessarily primary in lived awareness. What is primary, phenomenologically, is often the experience of *being with* others: comfort, dependence, attunement, resonance.

This is not to claim that individuals are dissolved into an undifferentiated whole. Even in the intimate relation between fetus and mother, there is no simple fusion; there is a primary relation that is neither a pure unity nor a fully articulated duality. This primordial relationality underlies all subsequent experiences of selfhood and otherness. The idea of a *web of relation* expresses this: before we understand ourselves as distinct individuals, we are always already entangled in relations—familial, linguistic, historical, cultural—that we did not choose but that shape us from the beginning (Kim 2021, ch. 5). The subjective individual is therefore not the sole foundation for understanding the self; it is a later articulation within a prior field of pre-subjective relatedness.

Importantly, acknowledging pre-subjectivity does not negate the existence or importance of the subjective self. The self encompasses both subjective and pre-subjective aspects simultaneously: the reflective "I" that acts and takes responsibility, and the deeper "we" that constitutes its very possibility. The relation between the two is not competitive but layered: the subjective self emerges *within* and *from* the pre-subjective relational field.

The pre-subjective we should not be confused with the constitutional or juridical "we" invoked in democratic contracts or constitutional preambles such as "We the People." Whereas the latter presupposes a politically self-identifying collective capable of representation and legal authorship, the pre-subjective we names an ontological condition of being-with that precedes political self-ascription, collective intention, and institutional articulation.

B. Korean *Uri* Beyond Familism

Building on the Korean linguistic phenomenon of *uri*, we can now draw a sharper distinction between exclusive we and **pre-subjective we.** The exclusive we appears in ethno-nationalist discourses of "our nation," "our blood," and in Confucian familism's extension of the family model

to the state: "the ideal society is like a family" (Helgesen 1998, 122). Here, *uri* functions to mark insiders and outsiders: "our" people versus others, "our" family versus strangers. As noted earlier, this grammar can underpin both authoritarian nationalism and more individualistic forms of grassroots nationalism, which nonetheless remain bounded by the nation-state (Han 2023, 189–93).

As seen above, everyday uses of *uri*—as in "our husband" or "our wife"—need not be read solely through Confucian hierarchy or ethno-national closure. They can also be understood as traces of a deeper relational ontology, signaling that identity is always co-constituted within networks of relation rather than privately owned (Author 2021). Yet the same linguistic structure can support exclusion and violence: the ethno-nationalist "our nation" has been used to vilify North Korea while asserting shared bloodline, and grassroots nationalism often overlooks marginalized groups such as people with disabilities, undocumented workers, or migrants. The Confucian-familist *we* thus sustains both solidarity and discrimination. The task, then, is to distinguish an exclusive, hierarchical we tied to blood and nation from a more fundamental, inclusive we grounded in pre-subjective relationality.

If we reinterpret the Korean "we" as pointing to a pre-subjective relatedness that is not exhausted by kinship or national belonging, then *uri* can be rethought as a linguistic invitation toward a broader, more open sense of community. The question "who counts as 'our'?" need not be answered by reference to ethnicity, citizenship, or strict family boundaries. The concept of pre-subjective we suggests that, at the deepest ontological level, everyone is already part of a web of relation that cannot be neatly confined within the borders of a nation-state or a bloodline. The challenge is to translate this ontological insight into political and ethical practice.

C. How the Pre-Subjective We Exceeds Both Confucian Relationality and Liberal Individualism

The pre-subjective we thus allows us to move beyond the opposition between Confucian familism and liberal individualism that structures

much of the debate about Korean democracy.

First, the pre-subjective we is **ontological, not normative.** Confucian political theory, as developed by Sungmoon Kim and Joseph Chan, articulates a *normative* conception of relational personhood: individuals ought to cultivate virtues appropriate to their roles within hierarchical yet democratizable structures (Kim 2014; Chan 2014). The focus is on how persons *should* be formed—through ritual, education, and civic virtue—to sustain a morally robust democratic community. The pre-subjective we, by contrast, does not prescribe how we ought to relate; it describes *that* we are always already in relation. It is a claim about the structure of being: before any moral cultivation, before any role-taking, selfhood is constituted in and through a web of relations. This ontological layer underlies and enables both Confucian and liberal normative projects..

Second, the pre-subjective we is **horizontal, not hierarchical.** Confucian relationality, even in its most democratic reinterpretations, remains rooted in asymmetrical roles: parent/child, ruler/subject, elder/younger. Authority and care flow along these vertical lines, even when tempered by reciprocity and civic equality. Liberal individualism, conversely, flattens relations into contractual ties among formally equal individuals, but in practice often ignores the deeper bonds of dependency and vulnerability. The pre-subjective we cuts across this opposition by naming a horizontal being-with in which all persons are equally implicated. It refers to the shared exposure and mutual influence that precede any assignment of rank or contract. In this horizontal field, no one occupies the position of a sovereign "father of the nation"; instead, everyone stands as co-exposed, co-responsible, and co-vulnerable.

This horizontal structure is precisely what becomes visible in Korean democratic uprisings. During the Gwangju Uprising, the June 1987 movement, the Candlelight Revolution, and the 2024 protests against martial law, citizens did not act primarily as filial subjects within a Confucian family-state, nor as isolated bearers of individual rights. They acted as a we formed in the streets: practices of commensality, intergenerational care, collective mourning among non-related individuals, and organizing medical care and security. These

practices instantiate a horizontal pre-subjective we that cannot be fully captured either by Confucian role-ethics or by liberal social contract theory.

Third, the pre-subjective we **explains pluralistic solidarity** in a way neither Confucian familism nor liberal individualism can. Confucian familism tends toward homogeneity: the nation as one family, bound by shared ancestry and culture. Liberal individualism tends toward fragmentation: a plurality of private interests coordinated by institutions but lacking a deep sense of shared fate. The pre-subjective we, by contrast, offers a framework for understanding how solidarity can arise *across* differences—generational, ideological, ethnic, and social.

In the Candlelight Revolution, participants included families with small children, high school and university students, workers, religious groups, feminist organizations, and unaffiliated citizens. They did not all share the same values, class positions, or life projects. What united them was not a single Confucian hierarchy or a convergence of private interests, but a shared sense of exposure to injustice and a shared responsibility for "our democracy" (Han 2023, 187–93). The same pattern appeared in the 2024 protests against martial law, where citizens mobilized rapidly against an attempt to roll back democratic gains. These events reveal what I call *pluralistic solidarity*: a solidarity grounded not in sameness of blood or culture, nor in the aggregation of self-interests, but in a recognition of co-belonging within a common world.

The pre-subjective we provides the ontological condition for such solidarity. Because selfhood is from the outset constituted in relation, it is always in principle open to being extended beyond existing circles of belonging. The web of relation can be *re-knotted* to include those formerly excluded: migrants, precarious workers, people with disabilities, residents of marginalized regions. When movements like the Candlelight Revolution explicitly welcome diverse participants and frame their struggle in universalistic terms of justice and democracy, they enact this extension of the we. The pre-subjective we thus underwrites a conception of "we" that can move from exclusive nationalism toward an open, pluralistic community.

By introducing the concept of the pre-subjective we into dialogue with Confucian political theory and the Korean case, this paper offers a layered account of relationality. Confucian role-ethics elucidates a historically specific, normatively charged form of relational personhood. Liberal individualism clarifies the importance of rights, autonomy, and institutional constraints on power. The pre-subjective we shows that beneath both lies an ontological being-with that is horizontal, inclusive, and capable of grounding pluralistic solidarity. It is this pre-subjective relationality that becomes most visible when Korean citizens gather in squares with candles or confront tanks and tear gas together: not simply a family defending its patriarch, nor a collection of self-interested individuals, but a we that is the very condition of democratic life.

V. Layering Relationalities: Confucian Roles and the Pre-Subjective We

The analyses above suggest that Korean democratic life cannot be understood through a single conception of relationality. Instead, Korean political experience is shaped by **two different but intertwined layers of relational being.** Their interaction—and often their tension—helps explain both the persistence of hierarchical political forms and the emergence of powerful democratic solidarities. This layered account constitutes the core contribution of the paper.

A. Layer 1: Confucian Relationality

Confucian relationality is **role-based, hierarchical, and normatively structured.** Within this framework, individuals acquire identity through their place in a network of differentiated roles. These roles are asymmetrical but morally reciprocal, sustained through ritual practice and lifelong moral cultivation. As Sungmoon Kim and Joseph Chan argue, such relationality generates a thick moral psychology grounded in obligation, propriety, and civic virtue.

This layer helps explain several features of modern Korean political culture:

a) **Nationalism** understood as an extended family, the *gukga* (nation) as a moral community linked by shared ancestry and filial loyalty.
b) **Familism** as a pervasive metaphor structuring political rhetoric and social expectations.
c) **Paternalistic leadership**, especially during the developmental dictatorship era, justified through Confucian idioms of benevolent authority and filial obedience.
d) **Hierarchical civic behavior**, including deference toward elders and state institutions.

Confucian relationality thus provides a powerful interpretive lens for understanding Korea's inherited social structures and normative expectations. But as Section II showed, it cannot fully explain the horizontal, pluralistic, and anti-authoritarian forms of collective agency that repeatedly surface in Korea's democratization.

B. Layer 2: Pre-Subjective Relationality

Beneath Confucian role-ethics lies a more fundamental form of relationality: **pre-subjective, ontological, and horizontal.** This layer precedes any social role, any hierarchical order, and any ethical cultivation. It describes the relational field within which subjectivity itself emerges—the we-structure of existence that makes roles, obligations, and even moral development possible.

Unlike Confucian relationality:

a) It is **ontological**, not normative.
b) It is **horizontal**, not hierarchical.
c) It does not rely on shared blood, ancestry, or prescribed duties.
d) It enables solidarity across differences rather than within closed familial boundaries

This pre-subjective relationality is what surfaces in moments of democratic uprising: Gwangju, June 1987, the Candlelight Revolution, and even the 2024 protests. In these events, people do not act primarily

as children of a national family or as self-contained liberal individuals. They act as a we formed through shared vulnerability, exposure, and mutual care—a we that emerges spontaneously in streets, squares, and crisis situations.

This horizontal relationality explains:

a) **Pluralistic solidarity** among diverse participants with no pre-existing hierarchical ties
b) **Resistance to paternalism**, even when articulated in Confucian moral language
c) **Embodied collective agency,** visible in the everyday organization of protest life—feeding strangers, protecting the vulnerable, sharing grief

It is precisely this pre-subjective we that allows Korean citizens to mobilize democratically *against* paternalistic leadership grounded in Confucian roles.

C. A Dynamic Tension Shaping Korean Democracy

Korean democracy is therefore shaped by the ongoing tension between these two layers:

a) **Confucian relationality** supplies the inherited grammar of hierarchy, obligation, nationalism, and leadership
b) **Pre-subjective relationality** makes possible the horizontal solidarities that repeatedly challenge authoritarianism and expand democratic life.

Rather than choosing between a "Confucian collectivism" and a "liberal individualism," Korean democratic subjectivity emerges **between** these relational layers. It is in this interstitial space—where normative hierarchies meet ontological co-belonging—that Korea's distinctive democratic movements arise.

This layered account is the central philosophical claim of the paper. It explains why Korea can simultaneously exhibit strong patterns of familism and paternalism and yet generate some of the most vibrant democratic mobilizations in the world. The interplay between

Confucian roles and pre-subjective relation is not a contradiction to be resolved, but the generative tension at the heart of Korean democratic life.

VI. Conclusion: Relational Subjectivity, Democracy, and the Question of Humanity

This paper has argued that Korean democratic life can be understood only through a layered conception of relationality. Confucian relationality—role-based, hierarchical, and grounded in moral cultivation—remains a powerful cultural grammar shaping nationalism, familism, and expectations of paternalistic leadership. However, the history of Korean democratization reveals a second, deeper layer: a pre-subjective, ontological relationality that surfaces in moments of collective resistance and embodies a horizontal, co-constituted *we*. It is the tension and interplay between these layers that enables both Korea's democratic fragility and its extraordinary democratic resilience.

A. Subjectivity and Democracy

Modern democratic theory is built on the recognition of the subjective individual, endowed with existential dignity and the rights that flow from it. Subjectivity—understood through the language of freedom, self-determination, and autonomy—has been central to Western philosophy since early modernity. Yet this philosophical anthropology has always carried political stakes: who counts as the authentic bearer of subjectivity? Who represents "the human"? In this framework, non-Western societies have often been portrayed as insufficiently individualistic or as lacking a mature conception of freedom. The portrayal of "Confucian Asia" as collectivist or authoritarian is one such manifestation of the politics of subjectivity.

This paper challenges that presupposition. The phenomenon of pre-subjective relationality is not culturally specific; it is a fundamental structure of human existence. As MacIntyre notes, individuals are always already located within webs of kinship, village, and communal

ties, and these affiliations are not superficial constraints to be shed in pursuit of an abstract individualism—they are constitutive of who one is (MacIntyre 2007, 33). Human beings inherit social places, languages, histories, and responsibilities; without these, they risk marginalization and alienation. Neisser's distinction between the ecological self and interpersonal self reinforces this point: our self-understanding is inseparable from our relation to others and to the world (Neisser 1988, 46).

The pre-subjective self-in-relation thus names the unity and distinction between self and other that precedes reflective subjectivity. It affirms individuality but denies that individuality arises in isolation. The democratic subject, on this view, is not simply a sovereign "I" but a self already embedded within a relational field—one that can become the ground for democratic solidarity, responsibility, and action.

B. Democracy as Layered Relationality

Korean democratic movements—from April 19 to Gwangju, from June 1987 to the Candlelight Revolution and the 2024 protests—demonstrate how ordinary citizens mobilize not as isolated rights-bearing individuals but as participants in a horizontal, pre-subjective we. This relational solidarity emerges most visibly when hierarchical Confucian roles collapse under the pressure of injustice, revealing a deeper relational ontology that precedes cultural norms. The democratic "we" that appears in the plazas is therefore neither the Confucian family-state nor the liberal aggregation of private wills. It is the manifestation of a more fundamental structure of being-with, one capable of generating pluralistic, inclusive solidarity.

This layered account of relationality offers a new way of understanding Korean democracy and, more broadly, the relationship between subjectivity and democratic life. Confucian relationality provides one historically sedimented grammar of social existence; pre-subjective relationality provides the ontological ground upon which both subjectivity and community emerge. Recognizing this deeper layer does not diminish the individual; it situates the individual within a web of relations that both constrain and enable democratic agency.

In the end, the question is not whether Korea has achieved the "proper" form of Western individualist subjectivity. The question is whether democratic theory can acknowledge the plurality of ways in which subjectivity—and thus democracy—can be lived. The Korean case shows that democracy does not require the erasure of relationality but its reimagining. The pre-subjective self-in-relation offers a conceptual path toward a democratic humanity that affirms both individuality and interconnectedness, both selfhood and shared world. It invites us to envision a democracy grounded not only in the rights of the subject but in the relational conditions that make subjectivity and community possible at all.

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