



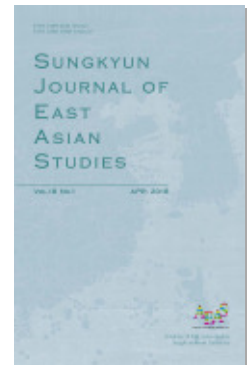
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Contemporary Korea

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Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies, Volume 18, Number 1, April
2018, pp. 59-84 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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Rebuilding the “Eastern Country of Ritual Propriety”: Decorum Camps, Sŏwŏn Stays, and the Confucian Revival in Contemporary Korea

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ABSTRACT

Amidst the widespread recent academic interest in the Confucian revival in contemporary China, it is easy to miss comparable developments taking place in neighboring South Korea. Through an analysis of official documentation and multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, this paper aims to introduce the current revitalization of ancient Confucian schools and rites, and the boom in children's decorum camps and other Confucian-related educational programs on the Korean peninsula. Examining some of the schedules and curriculums, the textbooks studied, modernized rituals, and the agendas of the Ministry of Culture, the Confucian Association, and the New Religious Movement that lead the reforms, I deliberate upon possible reasons for this trend taking place at this particular time, contemplate the attempts to rebrand Confucianism as culture for better marketing, and point out some of the curious tensions and ironies this resurgence entails.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, Contemporary Confucianism, Confucian schools (*hyanggyo*, *sŏwŏn*, *sŏdang*), Confucian education, Yurim (The Confucian Association), Kaengjŏng Yudo (The Rectified Confucian Way)

In 2014, two Korean hip-hop stars, Gaeko and Tafa, independently released two different songs with the same title, *Tongbang yeüijiguk* (東方禮儀之國), “Eastern Country of Ritual Propriety.” This title harks back to Confucius's seventh-generation grandson, Kong Bin, who is recorded in the *Book of Later Han* as saying that the barbarians to the east were honest, respectful of one another, shared their food, kept men and women separated, and that their land should thus be called the “Eastern Country of Paragons of Ritual Propriety” (*Tongbang yeüijigunjakuk*, 東方禮儀之君子國). This appellation has become both a source of pride and an ideal to be pursued in Korea, and numerous references to it are found in historical records. As they rap about the inebriated lustful nightlife and the money-driven society of contemporary Korea, caricaturizing the idea that it is, truly, a land of propriety, both Gaeko and Tafa seem to implicitly adhere to this same (lost) ideal. And they are not alone. Politicians, newspaper columnists, bloggers, and other public figures today similarly refer to this ancient epithet. An amusing blog called “Elementary School Students in the Eastern Country of Ritual Propriety” posts adorable pictures and videos of Korean children bowing kindly to truck drivers, robots, and foreign visitors.¹ A 2016 national tourism campaign called “K-smile” urges Koreans to show

some teeth and be kind to tourists, as befits the citizens of the “Eastern Country of Ritual Propriety.” Korea’s former president, Park Geun-hye, has also talked of the need to promote filial piety and sincerity in order to make Korea once again the “Eastern Country of Ritual Propriety” (Baker 2011).

Scholars tend to agree that while Confucian ethics continue to dominate Korean society and ancestral rites are still performed in private by most families, institutional public Confucianism had nearly disappeared from the peninsula in the twentieth century (Koh Byong-ik 1996; Baker 2011; Kim and Choi 2015). I argue here that this is no longer true. Attempting to live up to the ancient ideal of a country of propriety, organized Confucianism in Korea today is experiencing a resurgence, not unlike the one taking place in neighboring China.² In both countries, the twenty-first century is witnessing the rebuilding of Confucian schools and shrines, and the renewal of public Confucian rites and educational programs. For the first time since the fall of the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1897), evidence suggests that the number of registered members in the Confucian Assemblies (Yudohoe, 儒道會) throughout the country may be on the rise. Over a hundred new or renewed Confucian schools in Korea recently resumed the performance of ancient forgotten rites and began administering various educational programs. I estimate that approximately half of all Korean children today participate at least once in one of these new programs before finishing elementary school.³ Unlike in China, the curriculums are usually focused on behavioral codes and social decorum (*yejöl*, 禮節), rather than on a more philosophical reading of the classics. More importantly, while the Chinese revival has been to a large extent led by private organizations and individuals such as Jiang Qing, Tang Enjia, Yu Dan, Master Jingkong, and Wang Caigui, Korea’s revival has been a significantly more unified, systematized process, headed by the national Confucian Association, the Ministry of Culture, and an interesting New Religious Movement—The Revived

* Research on this project was supported by generous fellowships from the Kyujanggak Institute of Korean Studies and the Academy of Korean Studies. I am grateful to Boudewijn Walraven, Sem Vermeersch, Hahm Chaihark, Catherine Howard, and my anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and suggestions on previous drafts.

¹ <http://blog.naver.com/doorisai/50160714923>. Accessed in December 2017.

² The Confucian revival in China has garnered attention in a growing number of publications. Research has focused on the rebuilding of Chinese local shrines (Jing 1996), the creation of new Confucian-related educational facilities and programs (Bell 2008; Makeham 2008; Dutournier and Zhe 2009; Chen 2012; Anna Sun 2013; Billioud and Thoraval 2015), the renewal of Confucian rites (Billioud and Thoraval 2009; Kang 2012; Anna Sun 2012), and the overarching Confucian ideals of Jiang Qing (Fan 2011; Qing, Bell, Fan and Ryden 2012). Scholars have also noted the ambiguous stance evinced by the Chinese authorities regarding this revival, at times ignoring it, and at other occasions endorsing it and even providing local support (Yu Tianlong 2008; Payette 2016).

³ There are no official numbers. I gathered information from individual institutions and I base this estimation on the figure of approximately 100,000 children a year who participate in programs at Confucian schools (20,000 in Sungkyunkwan, 30,000 in the Sosu Confucian Academy, and 100–2,000 in almost a hundred other similar institutions), approximately 100,000 children in Blue Crane Village associated schools (100–10,000 a year in 56 institutions), and 70,000 students a year receiving decorum education in public schools by teachers sent by the Pagyakhoe Association. This comes to at least 250,000 children each year, and considering that there are 3.3 million elementary students in Korea, this means that approximately half will go through such a program once during their six years of elementary school.

Confucian Way (Kaengjǒng yudo, 更正儒道).

My central objective in this paper is thus to provide preliminary evidence for this current, little-known, multi-faceted, Korean Confucian revival, and to comment on some of the tensions and ironies underlying its development. I set the stage by contextualizing the present revival within the changing conceptions of Confucianism in twentieth-century Korea and greater East Asia. I then survey the new programs offered at the Confucian schools, the principal curriculums and textbooks used, and resuscitated and newly invented rituals, as well as the different agendas of the reformers. I try to paint a comprehensive picture of the reforms by presenting historical and institutional analysis along with ethnographic snippets depicting daily life at some of the schools.

From National Shame to Cultural Pride

Only a century ago, Confucianism was the main scapegoat denounced by intellectuals in Japan, Korea, and China for its role in the region’s alleged backwardness and military humiliation in the face of onslaughts from the West. Many of the diatribes against Confucianism in Korea and China in the early twentieth century were influenced by the slightly earlier expositions of Japanese Meiji reformers. The prolific Korean writer, Yi Kwang-su (1892–1950), for example, drew from the works of Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901) as he attacked Confucianism for its notions of class, its neglect of science and the military arts, its extreme filial piety (which he believed forced children into slavery), its formalism, sexism, and impracticality, and the impediments it posed to both the happiness of the individual and the development of the nation (Han 1996, 111–72). In Korea, Confucianism was additionally condemned for endorsing a subservient attitude of “serving the great” (*sadaejuui*, 事大主義) towards China, thus allegedly corroding a unique Korean national identity (Robinson 1984). Much of this critique continued to resonate throughout the twentieth century.

The most renowned response to such attacks came from the Kongjiao (孔教) movement promoted by Kang Youwei (1858–1927), who attempted to modernize and reform Confucianism into a full-fledged religion on par with Christianity. Less well known is the cooperation between Kang and several Korean Confucian modernizers. At least four Kongjiao churches were established in Korea in the 1910s with the support of the colonial Japanese governor-general (Kang Wi Jo 1987, 66–7; Chiyōk palchōn wiwōnhoe 2013). One of the Korean reformers, Song Ki-sik, argued in his 1925 “Treatise on a Confucian Reformation” (*Yugyo yusillon*, 儒教維新論) that Confucianism was losing favor because it was regarded as a philosophy, and that in order for it to gain respect it must be categorized as a religion, equipped with churches, Sunday schools for children of both sexes, and vernacular liturgies and study material (Kim Sun-sōk 2013). Using the new category recently imported from the West, these early twentieth-century reformers believed that in order to survive, Confucianism had to become a modern “religion” modeled on Christianity.

By the mid-twentieth century, Chinese Kongjiao activists were pushed out of communist China and established their base in Hong Kong, whereas the Korean movement died out completely, mainly because it was criticized by conservative

Confucians for its imitation of the West and its Japanese patronage. During the remainder of the century, Confucianism in Korea went through a gradual decline and retreat from the public sphere. The Confucian civil exams and the class system had already been abolished by the 1894 Kabo reforms, and, in 1918, the Japanese oversaw the transformation of all primary school curriculums in Korea, replacing readings of Confucian primers with studies of modern subjects (Kŭm Chang-t'ae 2003, 56–7). Shin Gi-wook (2006, 121–31) presents a statistical analysis of textbook and magazine content from that period, illustrating how traditional moralistic material gradually lost its centrality. The colonial “Rites Regulations” (*Girei Junsoku*, 儀禮準則) of 1935 shortened and simplified the elaborate Confucian-influenced funerary and memorial rituals that were still practiced in Korea at the time (Yi 2011). Not long after independence, Korea’s first president, Syngman Rhee, removed the head of the National Confucian Academy, Sungkyunkwan (Sŏnggyun’gwan), from office, and installed one of his party supporters instead. This caused a factional split within the Confucian Association, ultimately bringing about the loss of the last power base of public Confucianism, Sungkyunkwan, which became a secular university in 1964 (Kŭm Chang-t'ae 2003, 136–47, Ch’oe Yŏng-sŏng 2006).⁴ The Confucian Association bragged about having what is perhaps an exaggerated number of five million members in 1964, but the subsequent decline in its numbers has been steep. National surveys show that the overall number of self-identified Confucians in the country decreased from 483,366 in 1985, to 210,921 in 1995, and a mere 104,525 in 2005.

By the 1990s, observers noted that Confucianism was barely visible in the Korean public sphere. Not a word referred to it in the constitution or in the school curricula, most ancient Confucian schools were practically deserted, and it persisted only in (simplified) family memorials, maintaining genealogies, and social ethics (Koh Byong-ik 1996). It is true that over 75% of Koreans still practiced some form of Confucian ancestor rites, and that values such as filial piety, collectivism, patriarchy, age-based hierarchies, and an emphasis on education and decorum were still dominant, but these too have been shown to gradually decline at the end of the last millennium. Gallup surveys show significant decreases between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s in the percentages of Koreans agreeing on the importance of

⁴ Ch’oe (2006, 609–48) recounts the modern history of the Confucian Association. He explains that after independence there were over 36 local Confucian assemblies in the country, and in 1946 2,500 delegates from these groups assembled in Seoul, vowed to purge themselves of Japanese influence by re-establishing Sŏnggyun’gwan, and elected nationalist activist Kim Ch’ang-suk (1879–1962) as their leader and head of the university. They also decided to return to conducting the annual rituals according to the lunar calendar and to add sacrificial tablets of Korean sages to their shrines. Ch’oe explains that factional strife within the Confucian Association, widespread monetary corruption, and actual factional gang fights that erupted in the 1950s during the annual Sungkyunkwan rituals (necessitating the involvement of the riot police), prompted the faculty of the university to break loose from its Confucian management in the 1960s. Kim Ch’ang-suk himself resigned in 1956, and it was only in 1970 that a national Confucian Assembly reunited again under the leadership of Yonsei professor, Yi Ka-wŏn (1917–2001). In 1994 Ch’oe Kŭn-dŏk was elected as their leader, created a constitution for the Association, and made attempts to make the group more “religious” in character (for example he attempted to change its name to the more religious-sounding Yūgyohoe 儒教會). Aside from organizing rituals and educational programs, the Confucian Assembly regularly publishes Confucian-related textbooks and translations of the classics, as well as what is probably the only Confucian newspaper in the world, the *Yūgyo sinmun*.

male family leadership, gender role difference, and even filial piety. For instance, nearly half of all Koreans in the 1980s thought that one should follow the will of one's parents throughout one's life, yet only 35% agreed to that statement in 2004 (Baker 2011).

If making Confucianism into a full-fledged religion did not turn out to be a very effective survival strategy in early twentieth-century Korea, I believe that packaging it as “culture” today is proving to be a real success. Confucianism, to be sure, is a comprehensive, multi-semantic system that encapsulates various, sometimes conflicting, categorical possibilities of social meanings and practical manifestations. It was recently illustrated, for instance, how Confucianism was at times conceived in the history of Japan as representing the literature and the arts, and at other times connoting science and technology; at times symbolizing collective fascism, and at other times suggesting liberalism and even ultra-individualism (Paramore 2016). Newly published textbooks for use in Korean Confucian schools today emphasize that their aim is not only to promote morality and decorum but also to raise the cultural pride of citizens (Sönggyun'gwan 2009). In fact, *culturizing Confucianism* has become explicit government policy on the peninsula when in 2002 a research foundation operating under the Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism clarified that it was:

... trying to find ways to give birth again to the Confucian schools [*hyanggyo* 鄉校, and *sōwōn* 書院], which stand at the heart of Confucian culture, as modern cultural centers, transform and revitalize their educational functions, and apply their resources in experimental programs. (Han'guk munhwa chōngch'aek kaebarwōn 2001, 2)

Culture is somewhat of a friendly category. It is not as strict or demanding as religion or philosophy, not as specialized as science or literature, and it is certainly not as sensitive as race or ethnicity. It allows casual participation by large numbers of people and does not claim exclusive commitment.⁵ Rebranding Confucianism as culture can be both politically unifying and highly lucrative in the age of mass tourism. As culture, Confucianism can also be openly promoted by secular governments, which are not expected to sponsor religious organizations. This cultural rhetoric has been internalized to such an extent that almost everyone in Korea today seems to agree that Confucianism is, in fact, *just culture*, and this also seems to be the stance of many of the members of the Korean Confucian Association (which is, ironically, still registered as a religious organization). Confucianism has been repeatedly attacked when it was still a religion or a philosophy, but now that it is culture, it is displayed as a source of national pride.

Rebuilding Confucian Shrine-Schools

The current institutional revival of Confucianism in Korea builds on a long-standing infrastructure of shrine-schools that has been developed since the

⁵ To be sure, there are examples of both exclusivist and non-exclusivist Confucians in East Asian history.

twelfth century. In 1127 King Injong (r. 1122–1146) ordered the establishment of public provincial schools (*hyanggyo*, 鄉校), and these were supplemented by numerous private academies (*sōwŏn*, 書院) beginning in the sixteenth century. The curriculums of these schools were based on the Confucian classics and each institution had a small shrine for rituals. Out of the 360 *hyanggyo* and over 700 *sōwŏn* that existed in the seventeenth century, only 216 *hyanggyo* and twenty-seven *sōwŏn* survived the modernization and wars of the twentieth century (Ch'oe Yŏng-ho 1999; Sŏnggyun'gwan 2015). After decades of considerable solitary decrepitude, a number of regional communities began to renovate and sometimes rebuild from scratch their local schools in the 1980s and 90s (Sŏnggyun'gwan 2015). One survey found that at least fifty of these revived institutions were running new educational programs by the year 2000 (Han'guk munhwa chŏngch'aek kaebawŏn 2001). The majority of these programs were short decorum courses catering to children, the rest being more advanced adult classes on the classics or in the traditional arts. Among the first schools to re-open their doors were the Chŏnju *hyanggyo*, which operated Sunday classes focusing on the *Four-Character Elementary Learning* (*Saja sohak*, 四字小學, more on this text later) since 1983, and the Kangnŭng *hyanggyo*, which began offering special Confucian ethics programs for groups of soldiers, policemen, and government officials in the early 1990s. A more substantial resurgence, however, took place only in the 2000s, as this initial grassroots movement was gradually enhanced by centralized planning and resource allocation.

An analysis of several semi-scholarly reports subsidized by the Korean Ministry of Culture between the years 2002 and 2015 demonstrates a general agreement on the need to promote the creation of additional Confucian decorum classes, develop welfare agendas, host folk festivals, and establish libraries, archives, and exhibitions in the various *hyanggyo* (Munhwa ch'eyuk kwan'gwangbu 2009; Kim 2009). Much of this is already taking place. All of the two dozen Confucian schools I visited in 2015 and 2016 have either established new educational programs in the last decade or exhibited significant increase in course variation and student numbers. To cite just one example—Andong *hyanggyo*, long regarded as a central hub of Confucianism in Korea—has had both its number of courses and students doubled since it was re-built in 1997, finally replacing the old school which was burned down during the Korean War. Three of the *hyanggyo* I surveyed set up soup kitchens and distributed free lunches, three operated annual classical texts chanting festivals, and two added meditation to their programs and health classes for the elderly. Several others ran special weekend courses for socializing foreign spouses, whose number greatly increased in recent years in the Korean countryside, in Korean (Confucian) decorum.

The crown programs of the revival, by far more popular than any of the other educational agendas offered at the Confucian schools, are the “decorum education” (*yejŏl kyoyuk*, 禮節教育) courses for children. The majority of the revived *hyanggyo* offer at least day-long decorum programs for visiting elementary school students from the vicinity, and some operate longer two-to-six-day decorum camps. There is some variety in the contents of such programs, but in general most



Figure 1. Learning Proper Bowing during the Two-day Decorum Camp at P'iram Sŏwŏn, 2015.

focus on learning how to bow correctly in family rituals and in daily life (see Figure 1), how to behave correctly in *hyanggyo*, and more general exhortations to be filial, organized, and study hard. Some involve traditional tea ceremonies, traditional games and crafts, folk stories, writing grateful letters to one's parents, and the study of propriety from the *Four-Character Elementary Learning*. Touristic folk villages have also recently begun to administer such Confucian decorum summer and winter camps for children. The beautiful Village of Confucian Scholars (Sŏnbich'ŏn) near Yŏngju, for example, has had 30,000 children a year coming in for one-to-three day camps focusing on decorum and the *Four-Character Elementary Learning* since 2014. I participated in some of these programs and found it quite impressive that after just a few hours of bowing and repeating moral adages from the texts, the kids seemed to sit straighter and behave more quietly and maturely all on their own.

The revival shifted gears following the return of the conservative party to power in 2008, with the legislation of a new state law and the creation of two nationally organized and funded Confucian school programs. The 2010 Humane Education Promotion Law (*Insŏng kyoyuk chinhŭngbŏp*) officially legalized ritual propriety and filial piety as central values to be promoted in the public education system.⁶ Soon after, in 2013, the Ministry of Culture appropriated 800,000 USD

⁶ To be sure, Confucian filial piety has implicitly continued to influence Korean law even after the end of the Chosŏn dynasty. One example of this is the fact that Korea is the only country in East Asia that still maintains the ancient law that disallows offspring to lodge criminal complaints against their ascendants (Kim 2015).

for the creation of a network of Confucian Academies (*Yugyo akademi*) in select *hyanggyo* throughout the country (Munhwa ch'eyuk kwan'gwangbu 2015). These offer free semester-long lectures on Confucian history, poetry, and classical texts, taught by university professors. By early 2016 these academies were housed in thirty-one different *hyanggyo*. Furthermore, in 2014 the Ministry appropriated 1.2 million USD for another novel project with the poetic title, "Drawing Breath into Confucian Schools" (*Sara sum swinŏn hyanggyo sŏwŏn*). Individual institutions were invited to apply for funding based on the development of original educational, cultural, musical, or ritual agendas, and thirty-eight were selected. The following year 2.1 million USD were allocated to seventy-one institutions (Munhwajaech'ŏng 2015). Half of these institutions offered two-to-three-day decorum camps for children, others developed various new courses on Confucian texts (some using the historical Confucian degree-titles for these course, i.e. *chinsa*, 進士 or *saengwŏn* 生員 classes), and still others created various weekend programs, shows, and exhibitions ranging from traditional woodwork, paper making, painting, and dancing, to martial arts and meditation courses, and even Korean language classes for foreigners, offered for free at Cheju *hyanggyo*.

Attempts have also been made to develop a "Sŏwŏn Stay," modeled on the successful Buddhist "Temple Stay" program (Kaplan 2010). The plan was to allow visitors to experience the lives of *sŏwŏn* students from the Chosŏn Dynasty for a day or two, studying passages from the classics, practicing their calligraphy, meditating, and focusing on social decorum (Munhwa chaech'ŏng 2010). In addition, the Seoul Metropolitan Government decided to initiate an intriguing, free-of-charge, Confucian Sunday-school experiment in twenty-six of its public libraries. The project, which began in 2015, proved to be quite successful and classes filled up quickly. The participating kids changed into traditional scholars' clothes and hats before class, and each meeting was dedicated to reading, copying, and explaining one passage taken from the *Analects*, *The Mencius*, *The Great Learning*, or the *Four-Character Elementary Learning* (see Figure 2).

The offices of the Central Confucian Assembly and the national shrine are still housed in the vicinity of the now secularized Sungkyunkwan University. *Hyanggyo* heads (*chŏn'gyo*, 典校) are nominally appointed by the Assembly for three-year terms, and according to the newly enacted "Hyanggyo Property Law" (*Hyanggyo chaesanbŏp* 2008), 10% of the *hyanggyo* income should be remitted to these central offices. This reproduction of the centralized historical system is endorsed by the Ministry of Culture, which endows several hundred-thousand USD a year to the Confucian Assembly for training teachers and developing textbooks and videotapes to be used in the new *hyanggyo* programs (Han'guk munhwa chŏngch'aek kaebawŏn 2001, 45–6). We have seen the sharp decrease in self-identified Confucians at the end of the twentieth century, but if we are to believe the numbers provided by the central offices, membership in the various local Confucian Assemblies increased threefold to reach approximately 300,000 as of early 2016. The new head of the national Confucian Assembly elected in 2014, Sŏ Chŏng-gi, promised more vigorous propagation of Confucianism, and striving for a re-connection of Sungkyunkwan University to its historical Confucian roots (Chŏn



Figure 2. Elementary School Children Studying the *Great Learning* in the Kangnam Public Library, Seoul, 2015.

Yong-wŏn 2014).

Reinstating Rites

Aside from educational programs, Confucian public rituals have also been restored, modernized, and popularized in recent years. Confucian schools have historically served both textual learning and ritualistic functions, and shrines (called Halls of Great Accomplishment, *Taesŏngjŏn*, 大成殿) have been erected within their walls. After independence, in 1946 these halls went through a nationalistic reconstruction, in which many of the enshrined Chinese masters were replaced by Korean scholars. Today they commonly house spirit-tablets for Confucius, nineteen Chinese, and eighteen Korean Confucian sages (Kŭm Chang-t'ae 2003, 194).⁷ These shrines are ordered in an interesting way—having the tablet of Confucius sit at the front as the main teacher, while the other tablets are placed on chairs behind desks in a classroom-like structure, well-befitting the Confucian emphasis on learning (see Figure 3).

⁷ Sacrificial tablets of additional scholars were first enshrined in Confucian shrines alongside that of Confucius in seventh-century China, and by the twentieth century there were 171 enshrined masters in Chinese Confucian halls (the Four Sages, Twelve Savants, Seventy-nine Worthies, and Seventy-six Scholars) (Koh Khee Heong 2007). Only the Four Sages, Twelve Savants and six out of the Seventy-nine (Chinese) Worthies remain in Korean halls today, supplemented by eighteen well-known local Confucian scholars. Ch'oe Yŏng-sŏng (2006, 610-3) notes that this nationalistic transformation of the shrines met strong resistance by more traditionalist Confucians at first, and it was not until 1949 that all *hyanggyo* enshrined Korean sages. In addition, evidence suggests that as early as the seventeenth century tablets of five Korean scholars were enshrined alongside those of the Chinese sages in the Sŏnggyun'gwan Hall of Great Accomplishment (Deuchler 1980).



Figure 3. The Classroom-like Shrine for the Confucian Sages at Chinju Hyanggyo

In addition to the large semiannual sacrifices in honor of Confucius (*Sökchönje*, 釋奠祭), which have been continuously performed both at the central shrine in the capital and at some of the *hyanggyo* throughout the twentieth century, many of the local schools today have also reinstated the twice-monthly memorial services (*Sangmangje*, 朔望祭). For the most part these still draw a rather small number of elderly participants, but in some of the more active *hyanggyo* (Chinju, Hoedök, etc.) over a hundred people participate regularly, sometimes joined by visiting public school classrooms from the vicinity. Some institutions have also re-instated annual elders' banquets (*Kiroyön*, 耆老宴) and "district drinking ceremonies" (*Hyangümjurye*, 鄉飲酒禮), catering to the registered members of the local assembly. The *Book of Rites* explains, rather bombastically, that these ceremonies should be performed in order to maintain the synchronization of the entire cosmic world (Ing 2012, 7 and 25), but nowadays they seem to function mainly as opportunities for local members of the assembly to have a drink and socialize.

More significantly, many of the *hyanggyo* today attempt to creatively reinvent and popularize some of the ancient Confucian rites-of-passage. Although Confucianism is understood by many as a rigid system that mandates strict adherence to ancient ritual proceedings, Michael Ing (2012, 48–53, 92–3) pointed out that the *Book of Rites* explicitly allows rituals to "change and follow the times" (變而從時), and delineated episodes where Confucius himself allowed deviation from the rites of Zhou according to varying circumstances. Hence, in order to preserve the core of the capping tradition (*kwallye*, 冠禮) in an age where most

men cut their hair short and do not wear hats, some of the *hyanggyo* recently began to re-formulate these ancient rites into new Adulthood Ceremonies (*Sŏngnyŏnsik*, 成年式), performed for both sexes either at the *hyanggyo* or in public high schools and military bases.⁸ These ceremonies certainly deviate from the ancient liturgy, yet, they do maintain some of the central themes delineated in the old manuals—ritualistically changing into adult clothes, prostrating and offering wine, receiving an adult name, and officially assuming adult responsibilities (Ebrey 1991, 35–45; Hardy 1993). In addition, many of the *hyanggyo* are now offering their services as wedding halls, reviving the ceremonies, to some extent, according to the Confucian style found in Zhu Xi’s *Family Rituals*.

The Ch’ŏngju Confucian School

Now that the general characteristics of the institutional revival of public educational and ritual Confucianism in contemporary Korea have been delineated, it is time to take a closer look at the activities of one of the schools. The beautiful Ch’ŏngju *hyanggyo* serves as an illustrative example of a pioneering institution going through intensive reforms. Its old structures were massively reconstructed in the 1980s, augmented by a new cafeteria and lecture hall in 1996, an office building in 2001, and a dormitory capable of housing 170 visitors in 2009. The lovely setting is perfect for the “traditional” Confucian weddings which now take place there almost every weekend. It is one of the few *hyanggyo* in Korea that runs its own affiliated kindergarten. A pledge to the Confucian ideals of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, *zhi* and *xin* (仁義禮智信) is hung at the entrance, and the teachers emphasize that they pay particular attention to decorum. Next to the kindergarten, young couples visit the new “ritual-counseling office” and receive instructions on the correct (Confucian) procedures for conducting funerary and memorial rites for their parents. Free lunch is provided to the mostly-elderly neighborhood community by young female volunteers and part-timers. Other volunteers show the occasional tourist around, and explain correct behavioral decorum in the *hyanggyo*. After all, tourists, too, should respect the sacredness of the site: step in from the right gate, step out from the left, and bow respectfully in front of the main shrine.

Twice a month, the parking lot fills with cars and the grounds bustle with commotion as at least half of the 200 members of the local Confucian Assembly gather in front of the Hall of Great Accomplishment for the *Sangmang* memorials. The biannual *Sŏkchŏn* rites here attract larger crowds numbering over 300. Until recently all participants were elderly male descendants of elite lineages of the Chosŏn period (in other words, *yangban*), but these days men of all backgrounds are welcomed, and a number of women could be spotted as well (there are seventeen registered female members in the local assembly). Classrooms of students from nearby public schools are habitually brought in to sit in the back and hesitantly join the bowing. The head of this *hyanggyo* explains that they are trying to get the youth as involved in the rites as possible, and since the late 1990s they have also begun organizing Adulthood Ceremonies once a year in local high school

⁸ Similar developments have reportedly been taking place in China as well (Anna Sun 2013, 158).

auditoriums. A new ritual scenario was created for this event based on the old capping rite, in which five nineteen-year-old-boys and five nineteen-year-old-girls are selected to perform a complicated ritual that involves symbolically changing into adult clothes, bowing, receiving adult names, and drinking a cup of *soju* (boys) or tea (girls) ceremoniously in front of their peers.

The *Sangmangje* is a simple, short ritual. Straw mats are laid on the ground in front of the hall and participants take their seats. A dozen officiators change into traditional garb and enter the hall to uncover the tablets, bow down, light incense, and chant a prayer praising Confucius. Those sitting outside then rise and bow several times in a distinctive circular manner, and the rite ends with the singing of a formal announcement (*koyumun*, 告由文), which basically recounts to the spirits of the sages important community updates and asks for their blessings. These procedures last for about thirty minutes, and afterwards all are invited to join a public lecture on Confucianism given by a visiting scholar.

During one of my visits, the lecture was replaced by the inauguration ceremony for the new head of the local Confucian Assembly. In an interesting speech, the new leader revealed that he previously attended Christian churches and Buddhist temples but did not really “feel it,” and finally, only upon coming to the *hyanggyo* and immersing himself in Confucian culture, he felt that his mind turned calm and joyful. Although labeling it in inclusive terms as traditional culture, most registered Confucians seem to similarly sport an exclusivist perspective towards other religions, and typically shun visiting Buddhist temples and Christian churches and refrain from participating in their rituals. In fact, in January 2016, the local Confucian Assembly of Ch’önan *hyanggyo* staged public protests against the construction of a Christian church right in front of their institution.

As in other similar establishments, educational activity at Ch’öngju *hyanggyo* increased significantly in the 2000s. Calligraphy and Chinese-character classes were supplemented in 2012 with a “Confucian University” offering yearly courses in the Confucian classics. Taking advantage of governmental funding, the school also offers a variety of free children’s decorum programs. The most popular are the two-day camps called “Confucian Scholar Cultural Experience” (*Sönbi munhwa ch’ehöm*), which now cater to 2,000 kids each year. They begin with a tour of the *hyanggyo*, in which the children gather in front of the main hall and chant together a short “prayer,” worth quoting here in its entirety:

We pledge today to engrave deep in our hearts and firmly put into practice, in accord with the realities of the day, the teachings of humanity, justice, decorum, wisdom [仁義禮智], the Three Guiding Principles [三綱]⁹ and Five Relationships [五倫],¹⁰ which were bequeathed to us by the sages. Moreover, [we wish to] push back the strong waves of industrialization and globalization, and continuously pass down and develop our unique

⁹ The Three Guiding Principles were originally taught by Han Feizi. They are: the ruler serves as guiding principle to the subject, the father to the son, and the husband to the wife.

¹⁰ The Five Relationships were originally taught by Mencius. They are: having intimacy between father and son, righteousness between ruler and subject, distinction between husband and wife, priority between the old and the young, and trust between friends.

beautiful virtues in order to re-establish the Eastern Country of Ritual Propriety, which is based on humanism and the search for a proper life. Let us create a warm country overflowing with love, a reliable country led by justice, a country to be grateful for, in which pain is shared.

This distinct cocktail of Confucian ideals, nationalism, and moral regeneration, baring unmistakable similarities to the kind of Confucian cultural nationalism that is allegedly emerging in contemporary China, is, thus, explicitly propagated to Korean children today via some of the decorum programs. The full schedule of this particular decorum camp is depicted in Table 1. Other children’s decorum programs follow very similar timetables.

Table 1. The Schedule of Ch’ongju *Hyanggyo*’s Two-Day Children’s Decorum Camp:

FIRST DAY	SUBJECT	SECOND DAY	SUBJECT
–13:00	Settling in and lunch	7:00	Washing up
13:00	Tour of the <i>hyanggyo</i>	8:00	Breakfast
14:00	Decorum (yejŏl, 禮節) lecture	9:00	Tea Ceremony
15:00	Bowing practice	10:00	<i>The Four-Character Elementary Learning</i>
16:00	<i>The Four-Character Elementary Learning</i>	11:00	Completion Ceremony
17:00	Traditional music	12:00	Lunch
18:00	Dinner	13:00	End
19:00	Decorum video		
20:00	Writing a filial letter to one’s parents		
21:00	Meditation		
22:00	Sleep		

ConfucianLand

Negative attitudes toward Confucianism, reflecting the early twentieth-century critique, still remain to some extent in Korea, and contemporary reformers, thus, often stress the need to transform the image of Confucianism into a friendlier, positive object of pride (Hwang and Ch’oe 2014). For that reason, most children programs supplement more stern Confucian content with fun traditional games and crafts, and *hyanggyo* occasionally organize entertaining concerts and festivals. Between the years 2010 and 2014 large sums of money were relegated by the Ministry of Culture to create pleasurable folk villages, museums, and parks with Confucian themes, and an experimental “Confucian food” festival was celebrated in South Kyŏngsang Province (Han 2014). Other interesting proposals for making Confucianism “fun” are a national children Confucian quiz show, a “Confucian Bus” Tour, and the promotion of a “healthy Confucian ritual food” brand (Munhwa ch’eyuk kwan’gwangbu 2009).¹¹ The most ambitious of these plans, however, seems to have been the 2013, 43 million USD project, of ConfucianLand (*Yugyo Raendŭ*), in the vicinity of Andong.

ConfucianLand is a rather futuristic and exciting theme park, where

¹¹ Julia Murray (2015) similarly discussed a recent, well-funded, Confucian cartoon production, promoted with the objective of fostering positive images of Confucianism among Chinese youth.



Figure 4. Taking the Confucian Civil Exams at ConfucianLand, 2015.

children can experience Confucianism in a Disneyland-style environment. Visitors learn about the Confucian tradition, its classical texts, history, key figures, rituals, and values, through numerous fun rides (horses, boats), video games, movies, and exhibitions. The park features computers that allow one to input the names of one's family members and receive long genealogical charts; electronic Confucian books, which instead of reading one puts into a machine to receive an illustrated digest; a sort of dancing quiz game, in which you have to step on the right color quickly to answer questions on basic Confucian values; and a plethora of animated movies telling the stories of major Confucian scholars and folk tales emphasizing filial piety. My personal favorite attraction was the civil examinations at the end of the trail, where one sits on a mat in front of a small computer screen and answers questions about the Confucian tradition, according to what one has learned during the visit (see Figure 4). ConfucianLand has only been open for two years, but 120,000 school children have already been taken there, typically on school trips. The kids I talked to when I was there seemed to enjoy it at least as much as I did, and they are likely to grow up with more positive images of their (modernized) Confucian tradition.

The “Rectified Confucian Way” (Kaengjŏng Yudo, 更正儒道) Movement

While the central government mainly sponsors Confucianism today with the objective of promoting regional development, tourism, and cultural pride; and the Confucian associations are primarily interested in safeguarding traditional Confucian ritual propriety; the New Religious Movement, the “Rectified Confucian Way,” promotes Confucian moral education with an underlying religious utopian aspiration. The group was established with “Eastern Learning” (*Tonghak*) influences in the 1920s by Kang Tae-sŏng (1890–1954), who is believed to have received the “great task” of instigating the “Confucian Era” (*Yudo sidae*, 儒道時代)

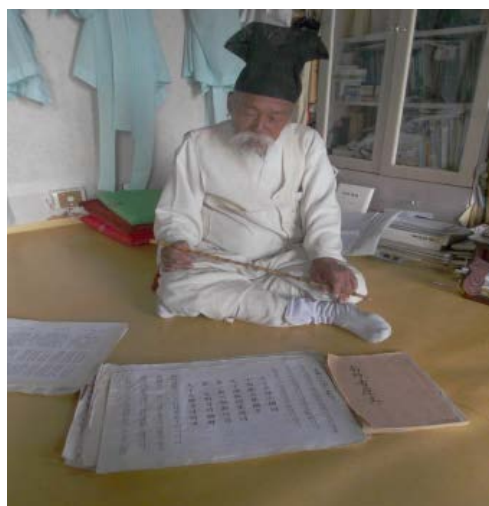


Figure 5.

A “Rectified Confucian Way” elder teaching me that Chosŏn (Korea) is the center of all nations. Blue Crane Village, 2015.

from the supreme god *Sangje* (上帝) himself (Han 2007, 2014). This “Confucian Era” was expected to arrive forty-four centuries after the time of the semi-mythical founder of Korea, Tan’gun, and according to the group’s calculations it has in fact already begun, on December 1, 1983. Members of the movement wear Chosŏn Dynasty garb, tie their never-trimmed long hair in top-knots under tall hats (see Figure 5), and spend their youth memorizing passages from the classics in their Confucian school (*sŏdang*, 書堂). They are often associated in Korea with the Blue Crane Village (*Ch’ŏnghaktong*, 靑鶴洞) of Chiri Mountain, but in fact small communities are spread out throughout the southwest of the peninsula.¹² They see themselves as the pioneers of the “Confucian Era,” in which gradually the entire world will come to accept Confucian morality, wear their hair in top-knots, and perhaps even speak Korean. Some make it their business to bring forth this utopia by teaching basic Confucian morality to the public.

In the 1990s, a few entrepreneurial “Rectified Confucian Way” members established the first Confucian School summer camps in the vicinity of Blue Crane Village for children coming in from the cities. These turned out to be a success, and in the 2000s numerous others were established all over the country. There are now fifteen such institutions surrounding the little village, and forty in other parts of the country, all headed by “Rectified Confucian Way” instructors (*hunjang*, 訓長). In fact, running such schools has become the main economic activity of this small group, and most of the eighty households, which form the core of the movement, are involved. Since 2013, the group has also begun dispatching teachers to public schools to teach daily decorum programs. A similar New Religious Movement based in Taiwan, the Yiguandao, has been known to contribute to the recent Chinese Confucian revival, and it is interesting to note that both groups

¹² I am currently working on a more comprehensive ethnography of this fascinating, little-known movement. Although rather small numerically, the group is increasingly visible in Korea, and its creed involves sophisticated doctrines, scriptures, and rituals.

downplay their religious visions, and present themselves simply as representatives of traditional culture.¹³ Although most Koreans today have heard of the long-haired Confucians of Blue Crane Village (one of them, Kim Pong-gon *hunjang*, has recently become a TV celebrity), very few are aware that they belong to a utopian religion. Teachers make it a point not to propagate their religious vision at these schools, and as in the new *hyanggyo* programs discussed above, center their curricula on Confucian decorum and on the *Four-Character Elementary Learning*.

Many of the schools operated by “Rectified Confucian Way” members (*sōdang*) are quite impressive. They often resemble country pension houses, with attractive gardens, dining halls, large dorm facilities, lotus ponds, and I even witnessed one with a swimming pool. Nevertheless, the instructors are known to be quite strict, and children are constantly scolded for not bowing appropriately, not keeping their shoes and other belongings tidy, not speaking clearly, and not using the correct honorifics. In most schools cellphones and computer games are prohibited. Some of the institutions serve as full-time boarding houses, housing several dozen students who attend regular public schools in the mornings and study Confucian texts in the evenings. Many of the kids sent to these boarding schools have had social difficulties, health issues, addiction to computer games, low grades, or behavioral problems such as stealing or lying, and most report improvement after several months of Confucian education, and a healthy, though stern, lifestyle.

The group’s shorter decorum camps, running from two days to a month,

Table 2. A Sample Schedule of a Blue Crane Village Weekly Decorum Camp

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
6:50		Cleaning Rooms				
7:30		Formally Greeting the Teachers				
8:00		Breakfast				
9:00		Organizing the Classroom				
9:20		Rhythmical Recitation and Inscription of the <i>Four-Character Elementary Learning</i> (<i>Saja-sohak</i> , 四字小學)				
12:30		Lunch				
14:00	Opening Ceremony	Bowing Practice	Traditional Games	Making Rice cakes	Traditional Crafts	Closing Ceremony
17:00	Regulations	The (Confucian) Three Guiding Principles (<i>Samgang</i> , 三綱) and Five Relationships (<i>Oryun</i> , 五倫)				
18:00	Dinner					
19:20	Self-Introductions	Music (Traditional Instruments and Poetry)				
20:10	Basic Decorum	Writing Filial Letters to Parents				
21:10	Confucian values	Meditation				
22:00	Writing a Diary					
22:30	Bedtime					

¹³ On the Yiguandao movement and its propagation of Chinese Confucian culture today see Song (2010) and Chae (2016). One of the anonymous reviewers noted interestingly that the group has a Korean branch, which actually presents itself as Buddhist-related, having a picture of a Buddha image on its main webpage.

have become quite popular, and some of the schools host up to ten thousand students each year. Their curriculums consist of decorum education, meditation, and traditional arts and crafts, but special emphasis is given to studying, chanting (with rhythmical movements of the body from side to side), writing, and memorizing the *Four-Character Elementary Learning*. I have met people in Seoul who have participated in a similar program years earlier but could still chant from memory large portions from this text. I present a sample curriculum of a Blue Crane Village weekly camp in Table 2, and in the following section I introduce the *Four-Character Elementary Learning* and other textbooks used at the new Confucian programs.

Elementary Learning

As we have seen, the *Four-Character Elementary Learning* stands at the center of the Blue Crane Village curricula and many of the *hyanggyo* programs. The book is basically a summary of proper behavior for children, similar to the *Dizi gui* (弟子規), often used in Confucian programs in contemporary China. It is just over 1,250 characters long, and as it is studied in its original Classical Chinese, it facilitates both the acquisition of proper decorum as well as basic Chinese-character reading proficiency. Although the title associates the text with Zhu Xi’s *Elementary Learning*, much of the material is extracted directly from the ancient *Book of Rites* (*Liji*, 禮記) (Yi Mi-suk 2012). The contents are structured according to specific social relationships—behaviors to parents, teachers, elders, guests, and between husband and wife, brothers, and friends. I provide a full translation of the *Four-Character Elementary Learning* elsewhere (Kaplan 2016), and a short summary of its contents will suffice here.

The text begins with a paraphrase from the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*, 詩經):¹⁴

My father produced my body,
My mother nurtured my body.
In her womb she carried me,
With her breast milk she fed me,
With clothing she kept me warm,
With food she kept me full.
Her benevolence as high as Heaven,
Her virtue thick like the Earth.
Those who become children,
How can they not be filial?

It then continues with a long list of filial behaviors expected of children wishing to “repay such parental virtues.” To name a few, children should wake up early in the morning to greet one’s parents when they get up, keep them warm, bow

¹⁴ This is a paraphrase of a poem from the Lesser Court Hymns 小雅 (Liao E 蓼莪 4.1), which reads: 父兮生我 母兮鞠我 拊我畜我 長我育我 顧我複我 出入腹我. In free translation: ‘My father gave me life! My mother nurtured me! She patted me, fed me, raised me, educated me, looked after me, always returned to me, and carried me inside and outside of her belly.’

respectfully when they instruct and always follow their wishes quickly, clean the house, refrain from lying down or laughing freely in front of them, refrain from staring at their faces, refrain from climbing high trees or diving into deep waters as to not injure the body received from them, and, of course, study hard and obtain a good position so that their reputation will extend to their parents. To be sure, some Korean youngsters today do not leave this unchallenged, and I have witnessed children inquiring why they should behave this way if they did not choose to be born in the first place. Nevertheless, most children seem to take this quite seriously and are reported to have changed their attitudes, at least for a little while, upon returning home from one of the programs. After all, they are taught passages from this text via solemn chanting, writing, and memorizing—a style of learning, which undoubtedly perfumes the phrases with a certain authority and sanctity.

The next section is rather short but retains Confucian sexist attitudes, which are taught to young children in decorum camps today:

The way of the husband lies in harmony and justice,
The virtues of the wife are softness and obedience,
The husband calls and the wife follows,
And the way of the family is accomplished.

A longer section on harmonious brotherly relationships comes next, followed by admonitions to respect teachers as though they were parents. Subsequently, reverence for elders, hospitality to guests, and the importance of choosing virtuous friends are highlighted. The text ends with a collection of Confucian schemata; listing the Three Guiding Principles (*Samgang*, 三綱), Five Relationships (*Oryun*, 五倫), Nine Body Appearances (*Kuyong*, 九容),¹⁵ and Nine Things to Keep in Mind (*Kusa*, 九思),¹⁶ as well as a few more general exhortations for thrift, loyalty, kindness, faithfulness, and compassion.

Some of the passages in the *Four-Character Elementary Learning* seem quite archaic, and so in order to update the material, the Central Confucian Assembly compiled a new textbook in 2012 entitled *The Decorum Youngsters Should Know* (Sönggyun'gwan 2012). This textbook makes for a fascinating attempt to modernize Confucian ritual propriety, and it is already in use in some of the *hyanggyo* programs. In its introduction, it reminds the readers that Korea has been called the “Eastern Country of Ritual Propriety” in antiquity, and encourages them to live up to this ideal and proudly preserve their Confucian heritage. The first chapter then begins with the usual exposition of filial piety, reiterating some of the

¹⁵ The Nine Body Appearances were extracted from the *Book of Rites* and systematized by Yulgok Yi I (1536–1584) in his *Kyöngmong yogyöl* (擊蒙要訣). The nine are: feet must appear firm, hands respectful, eyes straight, mouth restrained, voice gentle, head upright, breathing solemn, standing posture virtuous, and body dignified.

¹⁶ The Nine Things to Keep in Mind were extracted from the *Analec*s (chapter 16). They are: keeping your mind clear in observing, attentive in listening, warm when it comes to your body, respectful when it comes to your demeanor, sincere in speaking, honorable in working, questioning if doubting, remembering possible complications in anger, and staying just when seeing an opportunity for gain.

instructions found in the *Four-Character Elementary Learning*, but also adding new admonitions, such as refraining from excessive computer gaming. It ends with a list of nice things one should say to one’s parents, such as “thank you for raising me,” and “it’s all thanks to you.”

More remarkably, the chapter on correct bowing is supplemented by an explanation of proper (Confucian) handshakes—younger people and women should extend their hands first and hands should be shaken gently. Likewise, the sections on speech and eating decorum are accompanied by new schoolyard decorum (no touching between the sexes, silence in the library, etc.), as well as novel internet and cellphone etiquette (clean language, no talking while walking, etc.). Further detailed decorum rules for modern settings such as theatres and concert halls, karaoke parlors, hospitals, public bathrooms, and amusement parks are systematized for the first time in this novel textbook. The last part of the book introduces “international decorum,” and includes amusing admonitions to refrain from eating “smelly” ramen in foreign hotel rooms and from leaving Korean graffiti at tourist attractions abroad.

The Ambiguities of Confucian Cultural Nationalism

Gilbert Rozman has been one of the first observers to point out a budding Confucian revival. He argued that since the 1980s both Chinese and Japanese leaders have been calling for some sort of a return to Confucian virtues in the face of an alleged loss of values among the youth (Rozman 1991, 197). Such a moralistic rhetoric certainly does play a major role in the renewed interest in Confucianism in East Asia, but I believe that there are other, less explicit reasons for the revival taking place at this particular time. To be sure, great economic betterment since the 1980s allowed larger portions of the population the necessary free time and resources for extracurricular Confucian activities. In fact, many of the Confucian school activists I have been talking to during my fieldwork pointed out that people were simply too busy working in the 1960s and 70s and had no time to participate in *hyanggyo* programs. With economic growth came renewed pride in one’s cultural heritage, a pride that was further rekindled by the wave of appreciation for Confucianism in Western academia.¹⁷

Additionally, the Confucian revival has received an unexpected boost by the rapid aging of society. The percentage of Koreans above the age of sixty-five has risen from 4% in the 1980s to approximately 13% in 2015, and local Confucian Assemblies often function partially as community centers for the elderly, catering for new retirees with time on their hands. In other words, rather than “dying out” along with the older generation, more than a few *hyanggyo* have been able to accommodate themselves to the needs of the local communities, and provide healthcare courses, communal support, and a free lunch for the growing number of elderly pensioners in the Korean countryside. As I chatted with younger family

¹⁷ Michael Nylan (2001, 334–6) went as far as to argue that most modern Chinese were not interested in Confucianism before the West was. He further reported that in the 1980s Singapore had to invite Western university-trained scholars to teach Confucianism in the country.

members of Confucian Assembly associates at a *hyanggyo* event, they assured me that although they did not participate much in Confucian activities today due to other responsibilities, they were certainly planning to do so after their retirement.

While the elderly dominate the *hyanggyo* revival from above, the growing educational competitiveness among the Korean youth fuels it from below. Parents who send their kids to a decorum camp often do so with no particular Confucian moralistic objective in mind. Rather, they more often simply hope that their young would learn some Chinese characters and supplement their CVs with yet another pedagogical experience in preparation for their future university entrance assessments.

The 1980s brought an end to Mao's economic experiments and Korea's dictatorships and opened these two countries to greater touristic, economic, and cultural contacts with the world. Accordingly, the Confucian revival in both nations goes hand in hand with economic motivations related to the development of heritage tourism, and more significantly, it seems related to attempts to deal with the anxieties of globalization by re-discovering regional identities via the exaggeration of cultural uniqueness.¹⁸ To be sure, globalization in Korea, as it is perhaps elsewhere, is not an end in itself but rather a means for nationalist objectives (Alford 1999, Shin 2006). In other words, the Korean discourse of globalization is often less concerned with participation in a shared world than with the global propagation of unique national Korean material and cultural products. Globalizing and nationalist goals merge as Confucianism is tamed and reframed to form a robust national cultural force that can proudly represent the Korean nation on the global stage. Kiri Paramore (2015) warned that such Confucian cultural nationalism, often shared by both Asian Confucians and the scholars who study them, could easily lead into imperialistic rhetoric. There seems to be little risk of Korea turning its Confucian agendas into outright militaristic imperialism, yet, it certainly does use it for better positioning and competitiveness in the contemporary global media and tourist markets.

The liaison between Confucianism and identity politics brings to light curious tensions and ambiguity. For one thing, Confucianism, which has been attacked in Korea for its foreignness not long ago, is now becoming a symbol of indigenous national culture. Even more ironic is the fact that it is propagated as the unique national culture in two (or more) different national states simultaneously. A common approach to try and deal with this tension in Korea is by emphasizing its distinctiveness as the most thoroughly Confucianized country in the region. After all, it has been called the "Country of Ritual Propriety" since ancient times, and managed to preserve the teachings of the sages continuously, whereas China was often governed by foreign rulers whose Confucian credentials might be questioned (Chi Tu-hwan 2009). Scholars have noted similar efforts to "localize" Confucianism in Taiwan as well. President Ma, for example, has been quoted

¹⁸ Scholars tend to attribute such struggles for cultural identity in Korea to the so-called "*minjung* movement." However, as there seems to be no agreement on what exactly this movement is, on when it occurred, and on who was part of it, this explanation more often obfuscates rather than clarifies an argument. On the problems of defining the *minjung* movement see Wells (1995).

saying that Confucian rites on the island signify “Chinese culture with Taiwanese characteristics” (Billioud and Thoraval 2015, 269).

Another intriguing ambivalence lies in the fact that reformers advance a traditionalist Confucian critique of modernity on the one hand, while attempting to modernize Confucianism on the other. Much of the rhetoric centers on promoting Confucianism as an antidote to materialism, individualism (often understood as selfish egotism), and other so-called modern pathologies, while at the same time considerable efforts are devoted to updating standards of decorum, creating modern rituals, and providing new functions to old Confucian institutions. Invoking a well-known phrase from the *Analects* stating that teachers must be “warm to the old yet acknowledge the new” (溫故而知新, *Analects* 2.11) (Kwön 2004; To 2008), reformers often attempt to deal with this tension by searching for just the right compromise; creating a version of Confucianism that could mold traditional and modern Koreanness into one unique cultural identity that would proudly represent the nation in today’s multi-cultural globalism. We may recall at this point that Confucius himself seems to have had similar dilemmas—at times protesting against new customs and sticking to the rites of old, and at other times accepting contemporary changes (see for example *Analects* 3.17 in contrast to *Analects* 9.3). Traditions, after all, neither stick to the past nor to the present, but act as channels located somewhere in between, constantly negotiating what can change, and what must stay the same.

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