Confucianism and Mental Health in Korea*

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Introduction

Korean culture can’t be defined in a word, but there is no objection that it is generally based on Confucianism. Needless to say, Korean culture has Shamanism, Taoism, and Buddhism in the background and it has been mixed with Christianity as the modern era began in Korea. This is why we find it hard to draw the pure Confucianism out of Korean culture today. Moreover, it is more difficult to analyze and discuss Confucianism in connection with mental health.

In general, discussing religious culture, we have to keep it in mind that religious culture doesn’t always coincide with the originator’s primary doctrines, because the religious culture is transformed collectively in the process of accepting and acculturating original doctrines (Rhi 1979). The idea of predominance of men over women, for example, which has prevailed in Korean traditional society, is not true Confucian character, but is only a kind of common practice that has happened in all communities since human society became patriarchal.

Confucian views on man and woman used to seek the idealism of productive harmony in connection with the gender difference between them. Confucianism in itself refused to give men the way to the dominance and violence. Lee Hwang, a great Confucian scholar in the 16th century in Korea, advised his newly married grandson that a couple should respect each other like they treat guests (李滉).

We will pay attention to the original idea of Confucianism in considering the Confucian culture that has an effect on Korean mental health in the main subject. The truth is that it is not easy to tell the original doctrine of Korean Confucianism from its appearance. Without analyzing this matter first, we are likely to distort Korean mental geography. Today, we psychiatrists should politely listen to the reason why Confucian majors complain about their occasional papers concerned with Confucianism.

I would like to make a point clear before getting to the main subject: the definition of being mentally healthy. It is here defined in a rather narrow sense, meaning the state without any mental disorder as well as the relative maturity of personality.

I would like to discuss main subject as following order

• Confucian Communitarianism and Mental Health
• Confucian View on Gender and Sexuality
• Confucianism and Aggression
• Confucianism and Shame
• Confucianism and Oedipus Complex
• Conclusion

Confucian Communitarianism and Mental Health

Confucianism in Korea, even though there are some disagreements among scholars, has developed as the moral codex of mental life, following the cultural axis of Three Kingdoms and Koryo Dynasty, and the ruling ideology in Chosun Dynasty for 500 years (Rhi 2001). It has had a great effect on Korean way of thinking in many respects, since it was introduced to Korea from China roughly between BC 3 and AD 1. Confucian majors say that Confucianism in Korea was more improved than China, the native to the ideology. It would be true that Korea has preserved the Confucianism well in comparison with other East Asian countries affected by it.

The greatest influence that Confucianism has had on Korean way of living could be Communitarianism (金1996). It is an ontological concept that all things can not exist as an individual, but have to depend on and wait for one another for their existence: a husband can be a husband only because of his wife; a teacher can be a teacher...
only because of his students. Furthermore, “I” can exist because there are people around me, and I depend on them for my existence. “I” beyond the others is absolutely just a fantasy in imagination and not an actual reality. This is not confined to man, but true of all things in the world. Everything contributes to the other’s existence.

This communitarian way of thinking can be seen in a Korean word “our” which is used instead of the word “my”; for example, our house, not my house, and our lover, not my lover, in Korean daily life. Therefore, this “we consciousness” refuses the individualism of western countries, which is centered on individual freedom, independence and prosperity. Of course, it wouldn’t always work functional, and sometimes it works dysfunctional and could lead to the development of psychic conflicts.

Here we need to find one reason for Korean identity problem. Especially, communitarianism, which has been handed down for thousands of years, has now started being shaken from its root with the introduction of western individualism. We have lost communitarian ethics, morality, and standard of human relationships. We are now experiencing identity confusion and conflict as a result.

Korean way of living has been very dependent upon this communitarianism, and comes to have their own family value. They refuse to accept the individualism that parents or children consider themselves as separate individuals. They respect the sense of inter-connection of being between them, in whom family is thought to be the origin of being. In terms of mental health, this seems to have two sides, positive and negative. Family becomes the members’ mental home and their place for relax and rest beyond their fatigue from a competitive society as well as the base for their formation of character. These supportive and empathic relationships reinforce the self supportive system and provide them with psychosocial security. In addition, there are always parental surrogates in the family, who can provide children with diverse source of identification and influence the healthy development of personality as a result (Kim 1978). Contrary to general expectations, in many instances Korean family socializations seem to have contributed to strengthening of a sense of self and enhancement of a sense of autonomy (Rhi 1998).

However, this family-communitarianism could produce a communitarian idea that the individuals ought to be sacrificed for their family prosperity, if any. Also the “we” consciousness, sense of unity between parents and children, would allow parents to think and behave that they could control their children’s life on their own. As a result, development of separate sense of self and personal autonomy could be hindered. Hence, the truth indicates that the familialism in Confucian culture may cause the members’ mental disorders.

At the same time, we can also find a solution to the matter in Confucianism as well. In this point of view, we need to examine the reality of the family value in Confucianism more closely in the future.

Confucian View on Gender and Sexuality

Confucianism tries to understand everything and every phenomena of the world as an interaction of two opposite powers or temperaments. These two powers are contrary but not contradictory.

Niels Bohr, the founder of quantum physics says that “contrary” is “complimentary”. Confucians made the theory of Yin Yang, and understood the human relationship in a society in it. They imposed motion, light, strong, and front upon Yang, and still, dark, weak, and rear upon Yin. This also held true in their views of man and woman. Man is Yang, and woman is Yin. Even today, Koreans call husband “outdoor person” and wife “indoor person”, also from the view of Yin Yang. This view didn’t mean to justify the discrimination between man and woman in a metaphysical way by making those contradictory rules, but to seek harmony in a productive sense.

The view of man and woman based on the theory of Yin Yang seems to have played a very positive role in the establishment of sexual identity, because it makes clear in the sexual role between them. We need to review that Koreans have less sexual perversion than western people in this regard. As a scholar indicates, this is why Koreans have learned about the difference of gender basically since young (Kim 1974). The idea that man and woman are different by nature refuses their sexually pervasive attitude. Of course, Korean’s excessive consciousness of discriminating man and woman comes to restrict the life of women in a modern society with the equality of man and woman. Koreans’ deep-rooted way of thinking that women have only to do house works well has had women’s social life restricted. We need to examine carefully how such conflict has affected Korean women’s mental health.

One insists that homosexual love and incest happened
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less in Korea than in America in 1970s with their strict discrimination of men and women when they were young according to Confucian tradition (Han 1970). The Confucian teaching in So Hak, “a boy and a girl should not sit or eat together after they have reached the age of seven” (朱熹), doesn’t have any room for the incest. Besides, the strict hierarchy in the same sex of a family, a large family system and a taboo restraining homosexual expressions can be the another reason (Rhi 1998).

Now, let us examine the Confucian view on sexual drive. Confucians thought the sexual drive to be part of human nature like appetite for food, but advised that it could lower a sense of morality. Therefore it would be something to be suppressed and looked out for the cultivation of the morality if possible. The Confucian society forbade women the sexual drive in the name of ‘chastity’ to women. Chastity was thought to be essential to preserve the identity of family.

Today, people don’t consider it being virtue any more in a society where they are anxious for the gratification followed by the liberalization of desire. The matter of a family identity is already beyond something to worry about with the constant scientific development of various contraception and abortion technology. In addition, women insist that chastity should not belong to them in the equality of men and women, thinking it unfair and inhumane.

At present, one of major conflicts between a couple in Korea derives from the fact. Wives resist husband who try to keep their vested rights, symbolic of Confucian culture, on the basis of a new idea. For instance, interpersonal conflict causing female hysteric has now changed from direct conflict between daughter-in law and mother-in law to marital discontent between couple. In the past, one of the reasons for women’s high frequency of hysteria was due to their oppressed sexual drive. Now, as they gradually set free from such oppression, hysteric with classical hysterical convulsion or paralysis decrease in number, while psychosomatic symptoms like pain or autonomic nervous dysfunction increase (Kim and Kim 1974; Kim 1978; Lee 1978). This report indicates that the issue of sexual conflict moves to new clinical aspects with changes in the understanding of sex.

Confucianism and Aggression

Confucians insist that we need to suppress instinctual impulses as possible as we can, considering it as important moral principle of self-cultivation. Aggression is something to be suppressed to the utmost like expression of sexual desire. The ethics, which Confucians thought significant, was originated from the fact that the propensity of self-satisfaction in all instinctual drives like sexual and aggressive impulses doesn’t concern others and denies moral manners originally.

The communitarianism stated above also may have a share in preventing and relieving aggression. Family, a prototype of communitarianism in Korea emphasizes love and harmony among brothers and sisters, regarding their competition or conflicts as vice. This custom could suppress their aggression and anti-social tendency very effectively. But, the excessive stress on mere fraternity and harmony turns out to be denial of the productive sides that conflict and struggle take. One points out that Korean traditional society showed rare anti-social personality by comparison with western society, marked by anti-criminal conduct and individualized one instead of group action (Kim 1974). It seems to have a close relationship with the communitarian cultural tradition focusing on harmony, not allowing their aggression or anger expressions. The reason that Korean society had less anti-social personality would be the result that their emotional complement was made well in the traditional value and a large family (Kim 1974).

However, the excessive suppression of aggression and anger may contribute to the development of psychic conflict. As for Korean people, this tendency seems to have helped to form the neuroticism, where the suppression of aggression has considered being virtue especially in women. Actually, many Korean psychiatrists (Lee 1977; Min et al 1986; Min 1989; Min et al 1990) analysed what has brought about women’s Hwa Byung (a mental disorder caused by one’s pent-up resentment), a culture-related syndrome in this point of view. Traditionally, Korean women’s virtue was to lower their voice and suppress their anger for harmony in family. They are inclined to conceal and internalize their conflict with their husbands or mothers-in-law without facing and solving the matter directly.

However, if the reason for women’s Hwa Byung has to do with the culture that they are required to suppress their aggression or anger, this symptom doesn’t seem to exist only in the Confucian culture. Because “If a hen cries, the family dies out”. a Korean proverb made to suppress women appears in the other cultures in the same way.
Man dominating culture, it is true, has suppressed women. And I wonder how women have coped with their aggression and anger in each culture, and what kind of ailments they have had. We need to examine such questions in a comparative cultural view with care.

**Cofucianism and Shame**

Benedict (1946), a cultural anthropologist called Japanese culture “shame culture”, different from western guilt culture. According to her in shame culture action of people depends on how other people perceive it. For instance, in case an act is done against one’s conscience, Western people will internalize the problem and suffer from guilty feeling and irrespective of whether someone is looking or not, he will react in the same way. But eastern people would externalize it and will act differently when someone is seeing him or he is alone, because he will pay more attention on how other people sees him.

You may understand that the word “shame” is not moral sense, but “feeling” that happens when you are exposed or insulted. If it is true, I would like to indicate that this doesn’t belong to the true nature of Confucianism at all, becaues the shame appears when your thought and conduct doesn’t agree with the heaven’s will and your conscience prior to considering the relationship with others. Let’s read following famous Confucian phrase, “even when you sleep alone, you should not disgrace your blanket, and even when you go alone, you should not disgrace your shade”. In this point of view, the further examination of the shame in orient shows no difference from western guilt in a sense of self-reproach that they can’t reach their conscience or ego ideal.

Confucian scholars on the base of feeling of shame made social norms, that is, devised etiquette or courtesy and tried to live up to that. Because, they expected that the shame feeling would create a certain desirable action in human relationships. For instance, several etiquettes based on the spirit of gender difference were contrived from this kind of thinking.

These thoughts were also the standard of action for government’s high ranking officials. They made it a standard when entering and leaving their public career. They reviewed if they could carry out their position by their ideal and philosophy with no shame when a king offered them certain positions.

Of course, such idea of shame seems to have faced much refraction in the life of ordinary people compared with Confucianists or Confucian scholars. Today, many scholars point out as one of Korean cultural characteristic, face saving culture, which has negative nuance. This seems to indicate that people’s conduct depend on how others perceive it rather than how he himself perceives it. If we see it from a different view, it implies dissonance between inner mind and outer behavior.

Confucianists already realized that people tended to just observe the behavioral norms ignoring their basic spirit. The reason that Confucianists fiercely sought their cultivation of mind might come from their early awareness of that tendencies of human being. Even so, common people tied up with a daily life couldn’t have found such profound philosophy, just seeking their satisfaction in observing matters regardless of inner spirit.

That is, they would think that they only have to save face in public merely by keeping the given rules or etiquettes, indifferent to their true emotion. Lee (2002) describes this phenomenon as “the ritualization of emotional expression”.

The replacement of feeling with ritual prevents people from having natural and diverse feelings in life, ending up with double personality. They only try to observe their artificial norms covering their natural emotional expressions. This is not the original picture of confucianism, but these abuses can be seen easily in routine life. Today, Korean people are excessively conscious of others and very much concerned with face saving. That might be the result of such cultural tradition.

In spite of many clinical problems to be raised in connection with the shame feeling, the matters with shame haven’t almost been handled, while studies on the guilty feeling of depressed patients have been done many times. Lee (2002) said that they would try to avoid facing their own shame matters.

Kim (1977) said that though Korean depressed patients expressed their shame feeling instead of guilty feeling, and their objects and expressions were different from those of guilty feeling, they could be understood in the same context.

In other word, they express their guilty feeling by saying that they are losing their face about their family or friends, not about God. This seems to be closely concerned with Korean Confucian rules of living, where the family tie, filial piety, and the public relationship, etc are stressed,
instead of the faith in God (Kim 1977). However, we need to describe how this tendency changes in today’s young generation in Korea.

A study shows that the shame consciousness was so excessive in Confucianism of Chosun Dynasty that the shame feeling was isolated, ritualized, and contributed to forming face-saving culture today in Korea (Lee 2002). In addition, the poisonous shame, which causes problems in individuals’ mental and social function, leads to various defensive character traits, social phobia, xenophobia, avoidant personality, and addictive phenomena, etc., suggesting the direction of psychotherapy to handle the guilt or shame issues. Hereby, the brisk studies on the shame will be needed in the future.

**Confucianism and Oedipus Complex**

The spirit of Confucianism, in which the suppression of sexual and aggressive drive is important virtue for the cultivation of personality, seems to have worked as essential mechanism to cope with the Oedipal drives. Their Xhiao or filial piety could be psychosocial mechanism that brought about the suppression of such Oedipal wishes and kept them on the right track through sublimation.

Xhiao or filial piety in Confucianism regulates the relationship between parents and children, who take an opportunity to do their filial duty to parents for their blessed life from parents. And, this is not unilateral, but bilateral. Parents are obliged to do their duty to their children. Confucians call it father-benevolence and son-filial piety (禮記).

One explains that when we work on the filial piety seen in Korean legends or myths in cultural psychiatric aspects, we find the incest or patricidal desire suppressed strongly in Korean traditional culture, and the filial piety results from transformation of such desires in the reasonable direction by way of symbolization and displacement instead of making such desires conscious plainly (Cha 1978). One says that by comparison with part of myths or legends in Europe, they don’t express the subject of Oedipal conflict or incest directly, but displace it to the other objects or sublimate it to filial piety (Kim 1978).

Also, Korean traditional culture contains wisdom of sublimating Oedipus complex into fine characters (Kim 1969; Kim 1978): The emphasis on the image of patriarchal, but warm and responsible fathers relieves the conflict between father and son, and helps to overcome Oedipus complex with his identification with his father more easily in the end. Besides, the extended family system that disperses the incestuous desire or hostility against parents, the mothers’ mediating role at home, the home education about distinction between men and women that helps to establish the sexual identity, and the communitarian way of living that respects harmony and mutual dependence, are the primary factors to reduce the hostility against parents or the sibling rivalry among brothers or sisters, and to weaken the conflict from oedipal triangular relationship. All these are factors of Confucian culture. In this communitarian way of living, father owns his son’s success as his familial prosperity and success not as threat to his authority naturally (Cha 1978; Kim 1978).

In developmental point of view, the filial piety is a psychosocial mechanism enough to lead Oedipus complex to the culturally desirable direction and enough to resolve the oedipal conflict during the period. And its great significance lies in a method of performing the developmental task (Hong and Park 1991).

However, the Confucian tradition mentioned above faces a lot of changes in a modern society. Korea has made rapid changes from the agricultural society to the industrial one since 1970s, and now to the intelligence and information-oriented society. The communitarianism is replaced with the individualism, and the extended family system with the nuclear one, the conservatism of gender role with freedom of gender, and mutual dependence with mutual competition. The role and function of husband and wife in a family is breaking its border gradually, and the idea of filial piety is replaced with the conflict between generations.

The nuclear family system produces lack of parental surrogate, and the Oedipal triangular relationship between parents and children will become reinforced. Furthermore, the limit of contact time with parents due to an increase of two-pay check couples, the ambiguous role and function of parents, and the conflict between both generations from the lack of filial piety will delay one’s ambivalence to parents all the more. In the end, one’s identification with parents will be more difficult. These elements keep children from solving Oedipal conflict successfully and growing into healthy personality (Kim 1976).

Kim (1976) asserts that recently most of the patient’s problems result from Oedipal conflict more seriously than before. According to this assertion, such conflict is directly expressed especially in neurotics, psychopath, borderline
personality disorders, and rarely psychotics, indicating that the pattern of Oedipal conflict changes with the times.

**Conclusion**

We have studied how Confucianism and Confucian culture have influenced Korean mental health in terms of several subjects. I can’t avoid raising an important, but difficult question from the beginning. We can explain the view of human and the philosophy of life of Confucianism in purely conceptional and theoretical aspects, but wonder if they can be confirmed and verified in clinical situation. Because, today we Korean people live under the influence of many religions besides Confucianism, and find it impossible to draw a model spirit or life of Confucianism. In fact, we Korean have lived in a different environment for about 100 years since the early 19th century. Thirty six years’ Japanese annexation prevented Korean from reviewing the value of Confucian spirit, and drove us into a plane survival field. We have been affected by random American culture since liberated from Japanese colonial rule. The result is our consciousness and culture in chaos. The Confucian communitarianism works in our unconsciousness, while on the surface of consciousness individualism in western countries seems to lead our life. We come across such confused consciousness and behavior patterns in a daily life, but are likely to mistake all those things for the products of Confucian culture. We could make such mistakes in treating the conflict between a couple or mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

Hereby, we come to take over some assignments. We have to explore Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shamanism, etc living in Korean unconsciousness, and reveal the reality of western culture, which has affected our life, to analyze socio-cultural factors concerned with Korean mental disorders and find the appropriate way of psychotherapeutic approaches. All of these works of course will require cross-cultural and interdisciplinary efforts.

**Key Words**: Korean Culture · Confucianism · Mental Health · Communitarianism.

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한국에서 유교사상과 정신건강
황익근·김기현

한국 문화를 한마디로 정의하기는 쉬운 일이 아니다. 그러나 조선조 500여년간 한국인들의 의식세계를 지배하여 온 유교이념이 한국문화의 기초를 이루고 있음을 무언가치 따르는 사실이다.

저자들은 본 논문에서 한국인의 정신건강에 영향을 미치고 있는 핵심적 유교사상들 유교 원론적 입장에서 고찰하여 보고 이것이 한국인의 정신건강에 미친 영향들을 살펴 보았다. 그 목적이 정신내적 갈등을 다루는데 있어서 문화적 요인이 중요한 역할을 하기 때문에 이에 대한 적절한 지식을 제공함으로써 한국인의 정신분석 또는 정신치료에 임접을 하고자 함에 있다.

이를 위해서 저자들은 유교적 공동체주의(Confucian Communitarianism)가 한국 사회에서 가장 중요한 영향을 끼치고 있는 유교적 이념으로 가정하고 이를 중심으로 하여 유교사상과 정신건강과의 관계를 문헌고찰을 통하여 살펴 보았다.

그 결과 다음과 같은 결론을 내릴 수 있었다.
1) 존재의 개체주의적 사고를 부정하고 연쇄성을 핵심으로 하고 있는 유교의 공동체주의가 한국인의 삶중에 존재하며 이는 한국인의 정신건강과 밀접한 관계가 있는 것으로 보인다. 긍정적으로는 이는 한국인의 정체성의 핵심이 되고 있으며 정서적 안정감과 유대감을 제공하고 있으나 부정적으로는 가족 공동체의 영향이 개인을 압도하여 개인의 자율성과 독자성의 발달을 저해할 수 있는 가능성이 있는 것으로 보인다.
2) 세계의 모든 사물과 현상을 음과 양이라는 두개의 상반적이며 상호 보완적인 힘의 상호작용으로 파악하는 유교사상은 한국인의 성별 정체성과 성적 주체성의 형성에 긍정적 역할을 한 것으로 보인다. 이는 한국인의 경우 사형에 의하여 성직환중, 동성애, 근질간, 또는 성도착증이 적은 것과 관련이 있을 것으로 추측된다.
3) 우애와 평화와는 강조하고 경쟁과 갈등관리를 피하려 하는 유교사상은 공동체의 역할에 있어서 중요한 역할을 한 것으로 보인다. 이는 한국인의 경우 반사회적 인격장애와 관련된 문제들이 서양에 비하여 적은 것과 관련이 있을 것으로 추측된다. 그러나 우애와 평화와 대한 지나친 강조는 갈등과 투쟁의 생성적인 측면을 부정할 뿐 아니라 분노적 욕위과 공동체의 감정에 지나치게 억압함으로써 정신내적 갈등요인으로 작용할 수 있을 것으로 보인다. 특히 여성의 경우 전통적으로 남성에 비하여 더 많은 분노의 역할이 요구됨으로써 소외 한국의 문화관련 중후군이 할 수 있는 화병과도 밀접한 관계가 있을 것으로 추정된다.
4) 유교의 부끄러움의식은 남들과의 관계 이전에 자신의 생각 및 행동이 타인에 어긋난 때 일어나는 인간의 자연스러운 감정의 발로이다. 이런 관점에서 보면 동양의 부끄러움의식은 양심 또는 자아상의 요구에 미치지 못한 대로 자기관련 점에서 남들과는 느끼는 최악의식과 큰 차이가 없는 것으로 보인다. 다만 인간관계를 중시하는 공동체주의적 사고 때문에 한국인 우울증환자의 경우 최악의식보다는 “부끄럽다” “편목하다” “상사하다” 등의 표현을 많이 쓰는 것 같다.
5) 유교적 전통에서 본래의 의도와 다르게 예의범절 즉 의식이 지나치게 강조됨으로써 자연스럽게 야기되는 정상이 억압되어 내면의 정신과 외면의 행동사이에 피리가 있어 남으로써 부정적인 의의의 체면 문화가 형성된 것으로 보인다.
6) 유교에서 인식 수양의 중요한 덕목으로 삼는 효 사상은 성장과정에서 이성의 부모에 대한 근본적 목구와 동성의 부모에 대한 공적 목구를 처리하는 데 매우 중요한 역할을 한 것으로 보인다. 유교의 대가족제도는 조부모 등 부모대인이 제공함으로써 외다프스적 삼각관계에 있어서는 무포와 자식간의 과도한 긴장을 완화하는 완충역활을 한 것으로 보인다.

중심 단어: 한국문화・유교・정신건강・공동체주의.