

# **THE CONFUCIAN ETHIC: A SYSTEM OF IDEAS IN KOREA**

**GRADE LEVEL:** High School

**SUBJECT:** Social Studies, Religion

**TIME REQUIRED:** Two class periods

## **OBJECTIVES:**

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the basic codes of interpersonal behavior in the Confucian ethic.
2. Identify some of the behavioral norms within Korean society, noting similarities and differences between the Korean and American cultures.
3. Recognize the influence of the Confucian ethic on contemporary Korea.

## **MATERIALS REQUIRED:**

- Handout #1: Confucianism (attached)
- Handout #2: Confucianism: Four Modern Scenarios (attached)

## **PROCEDURE:**

1. Distribute Handout #1 (Confucianism) to students or assign it for homework the night before the class . When they have finished reading, discuss the basic tenets of Confucianism with the class.
2. Next, ask the entire class to brainstorm a list of probable social rules in Korea based on what they have learned about Confucianism. Leave this list on the board for reference as students complete the remainder of the activity.
3. Divide the class into four groups. Give each group one of the scenarios provided in Handout #2 (Confucianism: Four Modern Scenarios). (If groups are too large you can create more scenarios or have groups repeat scenarios.) Instruct each group to discuss the situation they have been given. Students should also respond to the accompanying questions. Designate or allow student groups to appoint recorders who will then present group responses to the class.
4. As students present their responses, use the following questions to guide the class discussion:
  - What Korean social norms (the "dos" and "don'ts") are based upon Confucianism?
  - What communication problems might arise in social interaction between a Korean following Confucian guidelines and someone from another culture who is unfamiliar with Confucianism?
  - What do you think a Korean teenager's lifestyle might be like based on Confucian values?
5. Using the list of social norms that they created earlier in this lesson, students can compare their responses. How accurate were their assumptions?
6. To close the lesson, ask students how important it might be for an American or European businessperson to be aware of and sensitive to traditional Confucian values in conducting business with their Korean counterparts? What reasons do students provide for their

hypotheses? Explain to students that, in general, Koreans are very committed to their work and take much pride in their jobs. They place a high value on status, prestige, lifetime security and loyalty between company management and employees.

## **HANDOUT #1: CONFUCIANISM**

Confucianism, an ancient Chinese way of thought which spread through much of East Asia, is often described as a religion. Perhaps a more accurate definition of Confucianism is that it is a detailed code of interpersonal behavior. In cultures where it is embraced, Confucianism is a practical political and social doctrine.

Kung Fu-tzu, known in Western countries as Confucius, lived in China around 500 BCE. He was a teacher who offered his students a system of order during a period when China was disrupted by warfare. One of Confucius' most important teachings was that there was a proper order to all things in the universe, including human society. Confucius taught that within and through this social order, peace and harmony could be achieved if every person knew his or her proper place in society and upheld the responsibilities of that place. In Confucianism, this idea is summarized as follows, "Let the ruler be ruler, the subject be subject, the father be father, and the son be son." Through the definition of five basic relationships, Confucianism provided a simple guide for ordering the family and society. The five moral disciplines to govern the five human relationships were the following:

1. Justice and righteousness should mark the relations between sovereign and subject.
2. There should be proper rapport between father and son.
3. Separation of function between husband and wife.
4. The younger should give precedence to the elder.
5. Faith and trust should reign over relationships between friends.

In all familial relations, respect of parents and grandparents, which is called filial piety, had supreme value. The elderly were considered superiors. As such, total obedience was given to them by the rest of the family. At least in theory, quarreling, loud talking, smoking and drinking alcohol were not permitted in their presence. In turn, the elders had to treat the younger generation with affection and discretion. They could be strict, but not cruel.

While the husband/father was supreme within the family he, in turn, was subservient to the emperor or national leader. All people had the responsibility of honoring and obeying their ruler. However, this responsibility worked two ways. The ruler also had responsibilities to his people. He had to protect them, insure their welfare and above all, set good examples for them through his own actions. Confucius thought that if a ruler was honest, his people would follow him in honest behavior. But if the ruler was corrupt, how could he expect anything different from his subjects? The ruler also had a responsibility to follow the laws of heaven. If the ruler failed in his obligations, natural and economic chaos might follow, and the people would have to overthrow the ruler. Confucius taught that if everyone upheld these five basic responsibilities and relationships, social and political order would prevail throughout the country.

To further ensure harmony and unity, Confucianism stresses that several concepts are valued above all else in social situations. They are benevolence (perfect virtue), righteousness (justice), propriety (decorum), wisdom and sincerity (fidelity). Confucius taught that age brought wisdom. The older a person was, the more honored his or her place in ancestor worship: Confucius preached that people should always look to the past and the ways of their ancestors as the example for solving contemporary problems. People should learn the accumulated experience of their previous generations. Confucius taught, "By reviewing the old, we can learn the new."

Confucius lived in the age of civil wars. He longed for the harmonious and orderly life of prehistoric China before the Shang Dynasty (the era of the legendary kings Yao and Sun). Therefore, his argument to return to the past must be interpreted as yearning for utopia rather than yearning for the older days.

Finally, Confucius taught that one's search for the truth transcends all other human endeavors. A famous Confucian analect (writing) says, "He who fully realizes the truth in the morning may die without regrets in the evening." Another well-known Confucian analect says, "Gain control over yourself, and then you can manage your family, rule the nation, and bring peace to the world." To do so, Confucius said, one must know the truth.

By the truth, he did not mean the commonly accepted scientific and objective truth, which is a product of scientific theories and experiments. To find the truth, he admonished, one must learn to perfect oneself. Only then will one find the truth "in the abyss of human existence."

Therefore, it is not surprising that Confucian cultures placed great emphasis on scholarship and education. Only through persistent study could one find truth. Thus, scholars were highly respected in Confucian societies. Scholarship of aesthetic cultivation was regarded as the prerequisite for those in leadership or in official positions.

For centuries in Korea, Confucianism meant a system of education, ceremony and civil administration as first expressed by Confucius in his writings. Confucian concepts of social harmony and moral precepts permeated the intellectual life of East Asia and played a pivotal role in molding the Korean culture as we know it today.

In Korea, Confucianism was accepted so eagerly and in so strict a form that the Chinese themselves regarded the Korean adherents as more virtuous than themselves. They called Korea "the country of Eastern decorum," referring to the punctiliousness with which the Koreans observed all phases of the doctrinal ritual.

Confucian teachings eventually disappeared as a basis for government and administration. After so many centuries of indoctrination in these tenets, however, Koreans can hardly be said to have discarded the customs, habits and thought patterns derived from the system.

In particular, kinship organization, ideology, ritual and associated behavior have represented crucial, perhaps dominant, themes in Korean culture, particularly among the elite. Fundamental ideas about morality and the proper ordering of human relationships are closely associated with kinship values that are derived mainly from the Confucian concept of filial piety. The pervasive, highly elaborated system of lineages and branch lineages provided the basic structural principle on which most groups in traditional society were organized. Kinship loyalties and obligations have generally taken precedence over other claims and commitments, both ideally and in terms of actual behavior.

As part of the modernization process, profound changes have been taking place in the kinship system, particularly in the rapidly growing urban areas. There has been considerable erosion of the dominance of family concerns. Nevertheless, ideals of family cohesion and solidarity retain influence and the individual's emotional dependence on close kin is still very great.

## **HANDOUT #2: CONFUCIANISM: FOUR MODERN SCENARIOS**

### **SCENARIO #1**

For the past several years, a young woman has worked in a Seoul factory that is a considerable distance from her family's home. The factory provides her with dormitory housing with other young women. Lately, she has had to work overtime and has been unable to visit her parents in the countryside for several months. She does not enjoy her job and misses her family very much. What should she do?

How might Confucian values influence this woman's decision and her family's decision about what she should do?

### **SCENARIO #2**

A young couple lives in a small apartment in Pusan, the second largest city in the Republic of Korea. They have been married for a few months. The couple is now faced with caring for the young man's father, who has just had a heart attack and must leave his own home.

How will Confucian ethics guide their decision about proper care? What actions might they take?

### **SCENARIO #3**

The Chang family owns and operates a small textile factory in Taegu. Their textiles are of the highest quality and very much in demand by many foreign companies. Recently the Chang family has experienced difficulties in keeping up with the demand for their textiles. The factory is six months behind in fulfilling orders. An American company became exasperated with this situation and sent a representative to determine the cause of the problem. In the meeting that followed, the Chang family stated that there were no major problems. Furthermore, any trivial problems could be handled adequately by the family.

How might the Confucian ethic be a part of the textile company's organization and management?

### **SCENARIO #4**

Mr. Kim, a 27-year-old teacher at Seoul High School, recently received his master's degree. The head of his department, who is considerably older than Mr. Kim, was trained in educational methods while Korea was under Japanese colonial rule. Mr. Kim is anxious to try some of the new teaching methods he learned in graduate school with his high school students.

As a young teacher, what does the Confucian ethic require Mr. Kim to do? How should he deal with this situation?