

## CONFUCIAN SOCIETY: A MIXED BLESSING

**GRADES:** 6-8

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**SUBJECT:** Philosophy, Social Studies, English

**TIME REQUIRED:** 3 class periods

### OBJECTIVES:

1. Gain an understanding of Confucianism
2. Explain the relationship between group vs. individual; heredity vs. environment; and loyalty vs. honesty as they are expressed in everyday life
3. Apply open-ended format of questioning to Confucian philosophy and how it is used in everyday life

### MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- Prepared handout of essay questions

### BACKGROUND:

Confucius (551-479 BCE) lived in China during a time of great chaos and feudal rivalry known as the Warring States period. Confucius emphasized devotion to parents and family, loyalty to friends, harmony, moral education and humanitarianism. He also emphasized respect and deference to those in positions of authority.

His ideas led to the system of civil service and entrance examinations, where one gained position through ability and merit rather than from noble birth and connections.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact date at which Confucianism was introduced to Korea, since it was so early in its history. The Three Kingdoms, Koguryo (37 BCE-668 CE), Paekche (18 BCE-660 CE) and Silla (57 BCE-935 CE), all left records that indicate the early existence of Confucian influence. In Koguryo, there was a central Confucian university functioning by the fourth century CE, and the provinces had private Confucian academies called *Kyongdang*. Confucianism was adopted as governing ideals of the Choson dynasty (1392-1910) in Korea. This combined the sage's original ethical and political ideas with an emphasis on the practice of ancestral veneration and the idea of the eldest male as head of the family. The Choson dynasty established a state governed by Confucian teachings.

Although many people in Korea have converted to Christianity since its introduction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Confucianism lives on as a kind of ethical bedrock: its basic values and premises still dominate the lives of Koreans. South Korea is frequently described as the most Confucian Society in the world, and much of South Korean behavior confirms it.

Showing Confucian deference for age, respect for those generationally superior and responsibility toward the family are all well-practiced ideals that have been modified during the modernization and westernization of the past 50 years.

Korea is fundamentally not an egalitarian culture. It is hierarchical. Confucianism is a system based on the five hierarchical relationships:

1. Righteousness between sovereign and minister
2. Proper rapport between father and son
3. Separation of function between husband and wife
4. Deference for elder siblings
5. Faith and trust between friends

In modern day Korean society, many social obligations have been reduced, but still there are some which remain. Ancestor veneration continues to be practiced in a modified way: ancestor ceremonies that used to go back as far as five generations have been cut down to two or three generations or simply to the parent's generation. Showing deference for age, respect for elders and superiors and responsibility toward family continue to remain social ideals.

Nevertheless, Confucianism as it is today sits somewhat uncomfortably in the modern Korean psyche. It is admired because it is the basis for a long tradition that gives Koreans their identity. At the same time, its precepts are felt to stifle genuine innovative thought in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is a philosophy, lifestyle and institution that has a history of over 500 years and its remnants can be found even in contemporary Korean society.

**PROCEDURE:**

1. Distribute the handout of essay questions and explain the open-ended questions with questions that offer an opportunity for the students to ponder and reflect, without being able to come to a "correct" answer.
2. Demonstrate the use of graphic organizers such as: KWL, pros and cons T-graph, Venn diagram.
3. Have students complete essay questions using graphic organizers and open-ended question format.
4. Once essays have been completed, students can discuss how they might alter their viewpoints.

**EVALUATION:**

- Assess students' understanding of Confucian thought in everyday life via discussion after they have written their essays.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. The relationship of the two speakers in Korean Confucian society is clearly defined via communication. Younger people speaking with older people using "imnida" at the end of a sentence is in the honorific form. On the other hand, the elder people use the plain form of the ending of the sentence when speaking to younger children. How does this compare with our conventions, and what does it say about Confucian hierarchy?
2. The Koreans have different words for elder brother, younger brother, elder sister, and younger sister. The words are different because the roles are different. Explain how this is different from our society and elaborate on its pros and cons.
3. North and South Korea are both strong believers in Confucian ethics but they are at extreme ends of poverty and wealth. What role does Confucius say South Korea should take in aiding North Korea with its famine?
4. In traditional Korean society, women were required, from childhood, to learn the Confucian virtues of subordination and endurance in order to prepare for their future roles as wife and mother. Further, women's lives were confined to the domestic sphere and thus were denied opportunities to participate in activities outside the home. Their role was limited to the management of the large extended family and the production of a male heir so that the family line might continue unbroken. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, following the women's liberation movement for expanded rights, women in modern Korean society have the constitutional right to equal education, job opportunity and are able to participate in public life. What possible conflicts or issues may arise due to this change in women's roles?