Confucianism in South Korea:
Modern Aspects of an Ancient Tradition

Juliana I. Kushner
Abstract

This thesis examines to what extent Confucianism is still apparent in modern Korea by comparing the 12th century work *Family Rituals* with the modern Korean drama *A Gentleman’s Dignity*. Korea has been modernizing rapidly in the past several decades and many scholars are of the opinion that traditional Confucianism and Western modernization are not compatible. Modern life surely presents many Koreans with apparent conflicts between traditional values and modern ones (especially as represented in free-market capitalism with its emphasis on the individual). In this thesis, however, it is argued that, although other factors may at times outweigh the need to act in an ethical fashion, Confucianism is still a major factor shaping modern life in Korea. Aspects of Geert Hofstede’s theories concerning power distance, individualism, and masculinity are used to support the arguments made. The human tendency to be swayed by money and romantic love is discussed in detail as it pertains to scenes from *A Gentleman’s Dignity*. 
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Introduction

In a discussion about modern Korean society, how relevant is the topic of Confucian ethics? With this thesis, I will attempt to provide explanations to help answer this question. By examining the South Korean television drama 신사의 품격 (Shinsa eui poomgyeok, “A Gentleman’s Dignity”), probably the most popular series aired in 2012, I intend to compare and contrast the social interactions seen on the screen with the Confucian values and traditions of pre-modern Korea. I will argue that, although many modern scholars and writers present modernization and maintaining Confucian ethics as mutually exclusive, South Korea has, despite its rapid modernization in recent history, maintained many inherently Confucian values, though this fact not necessarily consciously recognized by Korean people.

In the modern day, one needs to make a distinction between the formal study of Confucianism, such as takes place at official schools and institutions, and the study of values that have been integrated into Korean society without its people consciously realizing they are acting “Confucian.” This study will focus only on Confucian elements remaining in the thoughts and actions of the people.

Many scholars, Korean or otherwise, seem to question the place of Confucian-based education in a country that, in many areas, has come to subscribe to westernized standards of modernization. Some claim that these changes have been at the expense of Confucian ethical education. In 2012 the New York Times printed an article titled “To Combat Modern Ills, Korea Looks to the Past.” In this article, Sang-Hun Choe, a distinguished journalist, interviews the head of the oldest “complex of 11 Confucian lecture halls and dormitories
that first opened in 1543.” Although this master of the Confucian school seems to be convinced that today’s Korean education should change to lean in a more traditional direction again, Choe notes that some of the criticism the current education system is faced with—for example, excessive pressure on children that may sometimes even drive them to such radical measures as suicide—can, in fact, be traced back to Confucian institutions.

The general consensus, particularly among scholars examining Confucianism in terms of compatibility with the Western market systems, seems to be that many Confucian ethical teachings discourage a capitalistic approach and that the loss of humanity due to the sole focus on individual profit instead of collective well-being that capitalist nations face could be effectively diminished by Confucian-infused attitudes.

[A] striking feature of the economic success of Korea, no less than of other East Asian nations, has been the determined pursuit of learning and education that is characteristic of all East Asians influenced by Confucian culture – to such an extent that it could well be considered one of the most essential Confucian values. Against this, however, one might adduce the persistent charge that in those people influenced by Confucian culture – more often than not as an authoritarian system – this eagerness to learn manifests itself mainly in the form of assiduous rote learning, which can just as well lend itself to the routinization of education and assimilation of packaged culture in modern forms.

In this thesis I will be examining two very different cases of romantic man-woman relationships and one striking example of an older brother-younger sister relationship, as well as teacher-student interaction, and the influence of other factors, such as money and love, on the distribution of power. I will argue that despite the fact that some factors, such as monetary wealth and love, can be seen to trump Confucian values inherent in Korean culture, Confucianism is by no means irrelevant or extinct. The fact that other factors may at
times exert a stronger influence than Confucian values does not disprove the Confucian nature of Korean culture.

While many scholars take a social history approach to analyzing events and trends of the past, considering memoirs, family registers, and the like, this thesis will focus on the present through the lens of the past: I will analyze relationships as they are portrayed in *A Gentleman’s Dignity* through the comparison with Zhu Xi’s *Family Rituals*. The relevance of *Family Rituals* to Korean social development has been documented by scholars such as Martina Deuchler, who states that the “*Chia-li [Family Rituals]*⁴ became the blueprint of ritual behavior” in contemporary Korea.⁵

I. Confucianism

Confucius was a Chinese philosopher and scholar born in the state of Lu, China, around 551 BCE. Having many new ideas and convictions about social and political structure, he left his home in the attempt to find rulers who would institute his ideas. Yet there seems to have been very limited interest in Confucius’s morals at the time, and thus, he was reduced to making a living as a teacher.

About a century and a half later, a student known by the Latinized name Mencius made it his purpose to follow in the master’s footsteps and spread Confucius’s word throughout the region.⁶ The introduction of Confucianism to the Korean peninsula occurred gradually over a span of multiple centuries, partly through the Chinese-dominated northern

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⁴ Note that *Family Rituals* can be found Romanized as both *Chia-li* and *Jiali*, depending on which system of Romanization is being used.

⁵ “Neo-Confucianism in Early Yi Korea” 15

⁶ Bell 1
parts of the area, and partly by Korean scholars returning home from T'ang China, after extensive study in which Confucian texts played a prominent role.\textsuperscript{7}

Before the introduction of Confucianism to Korea, the state religion of the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392 CE) was Buddhism.\textsuperscript{8} With the change of dynasty from Goryeo to Yi, there was also a redistribution of land and the power associated with it. Land, which in agrarian Korea had been synonymous with wealth during the previous dynasty, was now allotted to a select few. “Redistribution of wealth therefore had to go hand in hand with social legislation”—provided by Neo-Confucianism.\textsuperscript{9} One of the problems Korean society had faced is that the social system was arranged by birth right rather than by merit. The introduction of a Confucian examination system in 788, through which men other than the highest aristocracy were able to find a voice, provided an effective solution.\textsuperscript{10}

The branch of Confucianism that will be discussed in this paper, Neo-Confucianism, made its way to Korea first through the intermarriage of members of the Mongol imperial house and the Goryeo royal family. One Korean scholar, An Hyang, followed the king from Kaeseong (in Korea) to Beijing (then part of the Mongol empire) and there was introduced to the “works of Master Chu” (Zhu Xi), which were “newly circulating in Peking” (Beijing). Upon returning to Korea he took charge of the Confucian Academy, turning it into a highly successful institution.\textsuperscript{11} In 1392, with the founding of the last dynastic regime of Korea, Neo-Confucianism was adopted as state ideology, which it remained for the following 500 years.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{7} The Confucian Transformation of Korea 14
\textsuperscript{8} “Neo-Confucianism in Early Yi Korea” 12
\textsuperscript{9} “Neo-Confucianism in Early Yi Korea” 13
\textsuperscript{10} The Confucian Transformation of Korea 15
\textsuperscript{11} The Confucian Transformation of Korea 16-17
\textsuperscript{12} Chang 221
Neo-Confucianism, developing through the influence of scholars such as Zhu Xi, whose work will be used in this thesis to compare and contrast modern traditions with ancient ones, was widely practiced throughout the entire region until the 17th century. One reason Neo-Confucianism enjoyed such popularity is that the previous state ideology, Buddhism, had led to the weakening of state and society. Thus the arrival of a new school of thought, in many ways so different from Buddhism, was a welcome change. The basis of Confucian thought as a set of rules for human interaction is “the four cardinal principles of human conduct: humanity, righteousness, propriety, and knowledge,” as they pertain to wu lun, the “five basic relationships: ruler-subject, father-son, older brother-younger brother, husband-wife, and senior friend-junior friend.”

Geert Hofstede’s book *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* will serve as one of the main secondary sources for this thesis. In this book Hofstede, a highly influential scholar in the field of organizational culture, describes and analyzes various cultural attributes based on statistics provided by multinational companies (such as IBM). Given the fact that the employees of such companies, regardless of which country they reside in, have the same job description, Hofstede has been able to narrow down cultural aspects that employees of one country or region have in common when compared to those of other countries or regions. The cultural aspects he has studied include power distance (measured using the PDI, or Power Distance Index), masculinity (and femininity), and collectivity (or individualism), all of which will prove highly interesting for examining the influence of Confucianism on modern Korea.

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13 Noh 88
14 “Neo-Confucianism in Early Yi Korea” 13
15 Chang 236
16 Hofstede 80
The Power Distance Index gives information about dependence relationships within a certain region.\textsuperscript{17} A large power distance leaves subordinates often afraid of and dependent on superiors, while a low power distance results in subordinates’ feeling relatively independent and close to superiors. Hofstede set up the PDI to range from 0 to 100 (with 100 representing a very large power distance). According to the PDI, South Korea ties with Greece for rank 41-42 at an index of 60.\textsuperscript{18} Surprisingly, this leaves Korea ranking fairly low for Confucian-influenced countries, which tend to be around mid-70 to 80, and quite central considering all represented countries. Hofstede traces the modern rankings back to Confucius’s five basic relationships.

He argues that, although Confucianism has existed for thousands of years, it is still very much an active part of the modern-day Korean mindset and culture. However, many contemporary scholars argue that Confucianism is no longer compatible with modern-day Korea, since “Confucianism is a system of belief and social practices that sustains [...] choosing people on the basis of who they are rather than what they can do”—a practice not generally appreciated in democratic countries.\textsuperscript{19}

Yet others are alarmed by what they perceive to be a decrease in the role of Confucian ethics in the modern Korean society. One article in the Korea Times blames the decline in Confucian ethics on the Western influence, and the fact that “offspring are viewed as equal partners rather than children in need of education.” The article points out that Koreans with enough money often send their children abroad primarily to English-speaking

\textsuperscript{17} Hofstede 61
\textsuperscript{18} Hofstede 58
\textsuperscript{19} Rozman 12
countries, during which time the children are westernized; they then import the newly appropriated ideas back to Korea.\textsuperscript{20}

It is interesting to take note of the fact that Confucianism, although—as will be explained in more detail later—considered by many modern Koreans to be outdated, has made its way into the newspapers. This contradicts the claim that Confucianism no longer actively pertains to the modern Korean person’s life. The East Asia scholar Chris Baumann maintains that, despite what he perceives to be a decline in Confucian ethics, many such values remain hidden within Korean society; he uses Hofstede’s onion analogy to describe how “key beliefs such as the basic virtues promoted by Confucius reside in the core of the onion in contrast to the outer layers that represent conspicuous cultural [changes].”\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{II. Zhu Xi and A Gentleman’s Dignity}

\textbf{A. The Influence of Money}

\textbf{1. A Question of Gender—Husband and Wife}

Despite the fact that Korea places fairly centrally on Hofstede’s Power Distance Index, we are able to observe certain characteristics of large-power-distance countries perfectly preserved within the drama \textit{A Gentleman’s Dignity}. In a table presenting the key differences between small- and large-power-distance societies, focusing on differences in the areas of politics and ideas, Hofstede suggests that in large-power-distance societies “[m]ight prevails over right: whoever holds the power is right or good.”\textsuperscript{22} Money can certainly act as one manifestation of such might.

\begin{flushleft} \textsuperscript{20} Baumann \\
\textsuperscript{21} Baumann \\
\textsuperscript{22} Hofstede 83 \end{flushleft}
In fact, *A Gentleman’s Dignity* provides two very pertinent examples of such behavior: the marriage between Lee Jeongrok and Park Minsook, and the struggle between teacher Seo Yisoo and the parent of one of her students. Both instances are ultimately related to Park Minsook’s status.

While women are very much active participants in the rites described by Zhu Xi in *Family Rituals*, it quickly becomes clear that everything is arranged according to the “eldest main-line son” and “lesser-line” relations through a patriarchal line. Zhu maintains that “men are in charge of all affairs on the outside; the women manage the inside affairs.” He explicitly states that each household should have a specific budget designated by the head of the family (probably the oldest main-line male), who needs to be consulted and grant permission to dependent members of the household before they engage in any activities they have not specifically been ordered to carry out.

Women Studies’ scholar Connie Chung argues in her paper “Korean Society and Women: Focusing on the Family” that even in modern times the general consensus in Korean society has been that a woman should “follow her husband,” and Hofstede argues that gender roles within most countries differ for men and women, with the men tending to be responsible for success outside the home and the women responsible for taking care of matters inside the home. Contrary to the order dictated by Zhu Xi, however, it appears that in Yi Korea women “controlled the domestic purse strings” in order to free their

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23 Zhu 8  
24 Zhu 29  
25 Zhu actually uses the term “younger members of the family,” but I think it is safe to generalize to “dependent members” since there is no section of *Family Rituals* that explicitly deals with the relationship of an older wife to a younger husband. In fact, married women tended to be categorized by their husbands’ age rather than their own (Zhu 14).  
26 Zhu 25  
27 Chung 3  
28 Hofstede 138
husbands for the pursuit of scholarly study. In Confucian terms scholarly success is an important source of status. Therefore, the fact that women in Yi Korea were responsible for a family’s finances with the goal of taking that burden off the husband—who, in turn, was free to pursue studies—does not contradict Confucian values. It does, however, presuppose that the husband actually engaged in such scholarly pursuit, which, in our example, Lee Jeongrok does not.

Countries, such as Korea, that score closer to the feminine end of the masculinity scale (masculine being tougher and less tender than feminine), according to Hofstede, have a smaller gap between the scores of men and women than countries scoring higher on the masculine end of the scale. This means that if the overall score of a country is lower (more feminine), men’s scores and women’s scores lie closer together than in a country whose overall score is higher. Therefore, since Korea scores 39 out of 110 on the scale of masculinity—thus on the more feminine end—while other Confucian countries such as China and Japan (at 66 and 95 out of 110, respectively) score much closer to the masculinity extreme of the spectrum, we can assume that the men and women in Korea will act much more similarly to each other than those in Japan. This theory is especially interesting as concerns the example of couple Lee Jeongrok and Park Minsook, given that their financial situations may be considered to reflect Hofstede's claim.

"A Gentleman’s Dignity" provides us with a couple who display quite the opposite of so-called traditional male-female gender roles: 이정록 (Lee Jeongrok), married to wealthy landlady 박민숙 (Park Minsook), is a playboy and shamelessly flirts with any attractive girl who crosses his path. Despite being younger than his wife, according to Confucian values he

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29 Ko 156
30 Hofstede 148
should be the head of his household. Nevertheless his wife clearly wears the pants in this relationship and regularly checks up on him by blackmailing his three best friends (they are a four-man clique, all age forty).

The friends, in turn, do not enjoy being disloyal to Jeongrok, but they are faced with a serious problem: Minsook is the owner of the buildings in which they have their offices. Thus, they are confronted on a daily basis with the power that she, thanks to her money, holds over them.

A good example of how Minsook dominates her husband can be found in episode three. Jeongrok is working in the cafe that he owns when his wife comes in—clearly in a bad mood. She orders an Earl Gray, “Cold!” and thrusts her credit card in his face. At first he seems reluctant to accept payment from his wife, but he does so when she growls, “Take it.” When the screen requests her signature, she pens in, “Why is your phone off[?]” and when Jeongrok nervously asks her please to sign her signature she writes, “Where did you sleep[?]” It is fair to say that most women would enjoy receiving favors from their husbands, even small favors such as free tea. Yet Minsook clearly demonstrates her dominant will and her financially superior position by forcing her husband to accept her payment.

This is only one of many examples of how Minsook incessantly checks up on her husband, at times even positioning spies in his immediate environment whose job it is to report back to her. Throughout the show, she regularly keeps tabs on him by tracking him down through his friends and following him secretly. She kicks him out of the house for weeks on end and makes him swallow his wedding ring after she finds it in his pocket.

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31 A Gentleman’s Dignity Ep. 3, 9'
32 A Gentleman’s Dignity Ep. 3, 10'
Finally she realizes that she cannot stand this life of constantly suspecting and mistrusting him and gets a divorce. Ironically, it is then that Jeongrok realizes he loves her and decides he will no longer live as a playboy.

Here it is important to remember that Minsook and Jeongrok are in some ways caricatures mirroring aspects that can be seen in society. It would be interesting to have an opportunity to observe how Minsook acted before Jeongrok started cheating, because it would give additional information as to whether the constant mistrust is part of Minsook’s nature or rather something she adopted as a result of Jeongrok’s actions. While scandals of a romantic nature are certainly present in any country at any time, it seems as if Minsook may have taken on a role she did not intend: if Jeongrok had never cheated she might not have felt as insecure and perhaps would not have needed to use her money as a source of power over him and his friends.

2. A Question of Status—Teacher and Parent

In episode ten of “A Gentleman’s Dignity” we are introduced to the supporting character 유성재 (Yoo SeongJae), who is a student in Seo Yisoo’s ethics class. While other students make mistakes such as sleeping in class, SeongJae gets caught doing his math homework during the ethics class. As the teacher, Seo Yisoo scolds him and forbids him to do homework for other classes during her period. The student is outraged and follows Seo Yisoo outside the classroom, asking whether she will take responsibility for the situation if he fails to get into university because of her irrational behavior; he then threatens to bring in his mother. In its irony this situation perfectly depicts the paradox laid out by the

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33 A Gentleman’s Dignity Ep. 10
Confucian influence: because of the drive for education instilled in many East Asian cultures by a Confucian history, the student fails to respect his teacher.

According to Hofstede, it is true that in large-power-distance countries teachers should be respected at all times—within the classroom as well as outside—but he also states that such countries tend to focus their educational policies more on the university level.\textsuperscript{34} This puts Seongjae’s attitude into perspective. It seems that the perceived importance of the acquisition of mathematics and English in middle and high school has to a large extent risen beyond that of ethics in Korea, and thus the conflict we see in this episode can be seen as characteristic of the current educational policy struggles Korea is facing.\textsuperscript{35} 

While Seongjae is undoubtedly one of the stronger students in the class intellectually, he is not particularly physically strong. For this reason, he finds himself bullied into copying out entire books by hand—extra work another student (김동협 Kim Donghyub) has been assigned by Seo Yisoo. When Seongjae’s mother discovers what has been going on, she comes into the classroom and slaps Kim Donghyub in front of the entire class. As one might expect from an ethics teacher, Seo Yisoo tries to reason with the mother; but she does not seem willing to listen.

From the mother’s clothing and makeup, as well as her rather extravagant jewelry, one can deduce that she is fairly wealthy. Her attitude matches that of her son (whose conflict with Yisoo is discussed above): she is loud and threatening. Even when confronted by a teacher, someone who should be considered a figure of respect, she remains quite

\textsuperscript{34} Hofstede 72
\textsuperscript{35} Choe 2
vocal and shouts, while being guided out of the classroom by another teacher, “This isn’t over! And that goes for you [Seo Yisoo] too!” 36

Although most viewers would agree that the person acting unjustly in the above situation is Seongjae’s mother, we need to remind ourselves that the larger the power distance, the more “might prevails over right.” 37 Therefore, we can deduce that the wealthy mother of a student holds more power than a mere teacher of ethics.

Since wealth seems to be a societal aspect that potentially trumps the importance of traditional ethics, I would like to pursue the example of Seongjae’s mother. In episode fifteen Seo Yisoo drags Kim Donghyub to Seongjae’s house in order to have him apologize formally and, in turn, to receive an apology from the mother for having been hit. Seo Yisoo rings the doorbell and says, when the mother answers the intercom, “Donghyub also came with me. Please accept his apology.”

Seongjae’s mother responds angrily, saying, “Do you really have nothing else to do?! How often do I have to tell you, I have nothing else to say on this matter!” 38 It does not look as if Seo Yisoo stands the slightest chance of convincing the mother to come outside and have a reasonable discussion. In fact, not only does the mother rebuff Yisoo’s attempt to resolve the matter, she also drops all formality in speech toward Yisoo, thus clearly demonstrating her perceived superiority.

The Korean language has many different registers of speech, which means that one divulges in almost any utterance what one’s relative standing is toward the listener as well as toward the subject of conversation (should that happen to be a person)—something that

36 A Gentleman’s Dignity Ep. 14, 55’
37 Hofstede 83
38 A Gentleman’s Dignity Ep. 15, 35’
can be traced back to the five types of relationships defined by Confucius. Put simply, we can consider three possible versions of the following sentence: “I have nothing to say.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Register</th>
<th>Casual—used with close friends or people under one’s own status/age</th>
<th>Formal—used with people of similar status/age with whom one is not close</th>
<th>Deferential—used with people of higher status/age, contains honorifics.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>내가 할 말이 없어.</td>
<td>내가 할 말이 없어요.</td>
<td>제가 드릴 말씀 없습니다.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanization</td>
<td>Naega hal mari eobseo</td>
<td>Naega hal mari eobseoyo</td>
<td>Jega deuril malsseum oebseubnida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect</td>
<td>The use of “nae” for “I” in combination with the informal ending of the verb “eobseo” makes for a casual tone. This register, when used incorrectly, sounds very rude.</td>
<td>The use of “nae” for “I” shows one is not on a lower level than the listener, yet the “yo”-ending of the verb portrays respect and/or lack of familiarity.</td>
<td>The use of “je” for “I” portrays the speaker as humble. “Deuril” comes from “deurida” = hon. “to give,” and “malsseum” is the honorific version of “mal” = “word, speech.” In addition, “-bnida” forms are considered deferential speech.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While this is not the precise wording used by Seongjae’s mother, I have chosen to simplify the example for the purpose of optimal clarity. Generally, we would expect someone speaking to another woman around the same age to use either the formal or the deferential register of speech, depending on how much politeness the situation requires (Seo Yisoo addresses Seongjae’s mother deferentially throughout). What we find, instead, is that the mother uses mostly the casual register: “내가 지금 할 말이 없다고 몇번 말해?” Naega
jigeum hal mari eobdago myeotbeon malhae?, which means, “How often must I tell [you] I have nothing to say?”

At that moment Park Minsook steps out of her car and overhears the two women fighting over the intercom. Earlier, there had been a misunderstanding during which Minsook falsely accused Yisoo of having an affair with her husband. Wanting to make up for that faux pas, Minsook steps to the intercom, announces her arrival, and in a polite but firm manner commands SeongJae’s mother to come down. It very quickly becomes clear that Minsook enjoys the highest rank of the group, for SeongJae’s mother—quite reluctantly—comes outside, accepts Donghyub’s apology, and even gives in far enough to say, “I have come to regret.”  

She then excuses herself and goes back inside.

In this drama, however, not every character is influenced by the power of what money can buy. For example, Kim Dojin, the main male character of the show and a hopeless womanizer, repeatedly gives Seo Yisoo gifts, all of which she returns. He insists on paying for her taxi rides, but she later reimburses him. In episode six he buys her expensive-looking shoes and places them before her, saying, “When you come to me, come wearing these.” Later in the drama she consents to being in a relationship with him and does in fact wear the shoes he gave her. However, they face problems in the relationship and to even out the debt (in a figurative sense), Seo Yisoo proceeds to buy expensive-looking tailored men’s shoes and presents them to Kim Dojin with the line, “When you come to me, come wearing these shoes.” This way she has repaid him financially and emotionally and they are on the same level.

39 A Gentleman’s Dignity Ep. 15, 38’
40 A Gentleman’s Dignity Ep. 7, 51’
41 A Gentleman’s Dignity Ep. 6, 54’
42 A Gentleman’s Dignity Ep. 17, 5’
By analyzing scenes involving confrontations between people of different socioeconomic status within the drama *A Gentleman’s Dignity*—specifically concerning the relationships between Lee Jeongrok and Park Minsook, and among Seo Yisoo, Yoo Seonjae’s mother, and Park Minsook—we have been able to determine that in Korean society as portrayed through (and in some ways caricatured in) the drama *A Gentleman’s Dignity*, the power and influence that monetary wealth yields can clearly surpass the moral imperative to “do the right thing” simply for the sake of acting in an ethical manner. In addition, the example of Kim Dojin and Seo Yisoo serves to highlight the fact that Seo Yisoo seems to be the only character who consistently acts morally for the sake of the principle involved rather than for potential material gain.

Though it can be useful to remind ourselves that this is a story created primarily for entertainment purposes, using this highly popular series to analyze societal standards is certainly a worthwhile pursuit because the series enjoys a large fan base and therefore gives pertinent insights into current societal views on the matters discussed in this thesis.

**B. The Role of Love**

As is the case in every episode, episode 16 starts out with a flashback of a certain event in the four men’s lives. This one is a sad event: the death of Yoon’s wife JeongAh.

Upon hearing the news, the other three friends drop all other activities and join Yoon at the hospital funeral hall. They find Yoon sitting on a bench, completely in shock and unable to comprehend anything. A hospital staff member brings appropriate mourning clothes, and the three friends help Yoon get dressed for the funeral rituals: those close to

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43 In Korea, large hospitals generally have their own funeral halls attached. I was able to observe this during my own stay in Seoul.
Kushner 20

the deceased wear white arm bands on their left arms—close friends with one black stripe, and closest family with two black stripes. There are elaborate flower arrangements framing a picture of JeongAh and a low table bearing incense, surrounded by candles. Everyone is clad in black.44

Korean funeral rites are the product of a mixture of influences. Although modern Korea is no doubt a heavily Christian-influenced society, it seems that funeral rites remain in large part Confucian-influenced.45 According to Chang-Won Park, rather than competing for practitioners, Confucian and Christian death rites have merged to form an amalgamation of practices.46 Again, it proves interesting to return to Zhu Xi’s *Family Rituals* and compare the funeral rites set out as “proper” by him with the funeral rites performed in *A Gentleman’s Dignity*.

According to Zhu Xi, there must be different classifications of mourning. In the chapter “Funerals,” he describes in detail the robes to be worn and procedures to be followed in the case of a funeral.47 There is a so-called “presiding mourner” and various other ranks, depending on one’s age and relationship to the deceased.48 “The sons who owe the deceased three years’ mourning sit below [the presiding mourner] on straw mats.”49 It is the duty of the attending members to mourn and wail, family as well as close friends.50

In Korean tradition, the soul is believed to be immortal and merely parts from the deceased body rather than dying itself.51 Thus, it is customary to create the “soul seat” for

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44 *A Gentleman’s Dignity* Ep. 16, 4’
45 Kang 8
46 Park 91
47 Zhu 87
48 Zhu 71
49 Zhu 76
50 Zhu 80
51 Kang 3
the departed—a sort of altar, bearing, among other things, incense, wine, and fruit.\textsuperscript{52}

Although Zhu specifically states that Buddhist services are not to be performed, we nevertheless find traces of Buddhism, as well as Shamanism, remaining in services today.\textsuperscript{53} Cremation, as was planned for JeongAh’s body in \textit{A Gentleman’s Dignity}, is a common practice in Korea. According to Park, this practice goes back as far as the Bronze Age and thus existed long before Confucianism became the state religion in Korea (as discussed in the “Confucianism” section above, Buddhism constituted the dominant set of beliefs before Confucianism became the state religion). After the Confucian ban on cremation had spread throughout the country and the practice had become nearly extinct, the Japanese colonial period reintroduced it in modern form.\textsuperscript{54}

Examining the funeral scene in \textit{A Gentleman’s Dignity}, we find that many of the aspects described by Zhu have been carried over into the modern day. As described above, there are still different “ranks” of mourners, denoted by the different arm bands (or complete lack thereof). It would appear that the vast array of mourning robes described in \textit{Family Rituals} has been reduced to the very Western-influenced black clothing in combination with the arm bands.

The straw mats are no longer specific to a certain rank of mourner. There are two different straw mats placed in the room for the funeral. One small mat is on the right side of the room and is occupied by Jeongrok, Dojin, and Taesan.\textsuperscript{55} The second mat is larger and placed centrally in front of the altar-like table. It serves as a sort of padding for those

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Zhu 78
\item \textsuperscript{53} Kang 6
\item \textsuperscript{54} Park 96
\item \textsuperscript{55} Their role in the ritual is not entirely clear, but were I to compare it to the roles set out by Zhu, it seems as if the three friends might be occupying the seat of presiding mourner, since they appear to be bowing in turn to everyone who has come to mourn the passing of JeongAh.
\end{itemize}
coming to pay their respects to the deceased. The aspect probably closest to Zhu's prescribed rituals is the “soul seat.” As described above, there is a small table facing JeongAh’s picture, decked in incense and with various other items that are not clearly identifiable. While Zhu does not specifically mention offering meals to those attending the funeral, it seems to be customary in Korea to do so.

In episode four Choi Yoon’s mother-in-law reveals to the viewer that her daughter—Yoon’s late wife—has already been dead for four years. The mother-in-law has been trying for some time to convince Yoon to look for someone new, but he remains devoted to his wife’s memory. Traditionally, according to Zhu Xi’s Family Rituals, a husband is supposed to mourn his deceased wife; however, the mourning is much less extensive than the mourning specified for a widow. A wife must mourn her husband, wearing the first and highest grade of mourning garments, for three years, while a husband mourning his wife wears the second grade of mourning garments and mourns for one year only. In fact, it is mentioned in a footnote that “Chu Hsi [Zhu Xi] refuted the argument of some authorities that husbands should mourn their wives for three years,” thereby giving more importance to a wife’s mourning for her husband than to a husband’s mourning for his wife.

Repeatedly, Zhu Xi uses the phrase “sons and daughters-in-law” in describing various rituals, thereby making it impossible for the reader to forget that under normal circumstances women married into their husband’s family, not vice versa. Given this norm, it is somewhat surprising even today to find that Yoon seems to have married into his wife’s

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56 A Gentleman’s Dignity Ep. 4, 36
57 Zhu 87
58 Zhu 91
family and still lives with his mother-in-law even after his wife’s death.\textsuperscript{59} The mother-in-law, however, can no longer sit by and watch Yoon waste what, to her, is his youth, and so she conspires with the three other friends to have them move all his belongings into Taesan’s house.

To evaluate this situation, the counter-example of a woman still devoted to her late husband’s family would prove very interesting; but such a situation does not appear in this drama. One can only assume that Yoon’s mother-in-law, a member of the older, more traditional generation, feels uncomfortable monopolizing the efforts and favors of a man with whom she shares no blood. She tries to reason with Yoon, saying, “At the age of forty, you’re at a man’s peak [age]...”\textsuperscript{60}

Her use of this argument is especially interesting in connection with the following situation: two episodes prior to this, Kim Dojin reveals his thoughts about the four friends’ age. He says, “Confucius said, once you reach the age of forty, wherever in this world, it is an age at which you will not be tempted.”\textsuperscript{61} Instead of the literal word “forty” (\textsuperscript{\textit{마흔}} maheun), he uses the word 불혹 (\textsuperscript{\textit{bulhok}}) which literally means non-vacillation (不惑). It seems that this word has come to be synonymous with the period of life starting at age forty, which actually supports Yoon’s mother-in-law’s argument.

The fact that \textit{bulhok} is widely accepted to be synonymous with the age of forty lets us imagine that for previous generations of Koreans it was indeed a time of settling down

\textsuperscript{59} It would be interesting to know what happened to Yoon’s parents. He mentions during JeongAh’s funeral that his three friends would be the ones to wear the family arm bands if it were his funeral—implying they are his closest relations in this world.

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{A Gentleman’s Dignity} Ep. 4, 36’

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{A Gentleman’s Dignity} Ep. 2, 0’
and lack of temptation. Whether Yoon’s mother-in-law actually believes that he is in the prime of life, or whether the other excuse she uses—finding it too tiresome to prepare food for her son-in-law at her advanced age—sounds too selfish to stand on its own, it is clear from the situation in the second episode described above that Kim Dojin would tend to agree with the more liberal view. His closing comment concerning Confucius’s quote is, “Confucius was wrong.”

Looking at the above statement of Kim Dojin’s in another light, it gives a good idea of what the general attitude toward Confucianism in modern Korea looks like. Not only are some scholars concerned there might be a decline in Confucian elements in modern Korea, scholars such as Rozman believe that many Koreans fail to realize that their behavior is in fact based on Confucian values: “Koreans, who accept Confucianism in daily life [...] balk at it in national discourse.”

Dojin’s above quote is in the context of a brunch with the other three friends. He starts his speech on Confucianism and bulhok, but the others fall silent and stare out the window. Dojin turns to see a long-legged young woman in a very short red dress outside on the street. The girl bends down to pick up something she has dropped, and the four men in unison drop down to try and see under her skirt. When this happens, Dojin comes to the realization that “Confucius was wrong.” (공자가 틀렸다 Kongja ga teullyeotda). The four men have not settled down, and they certainly have not stopped being attracted to pretty women.

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62 In fact, when I recounted this story to a Korean friend of mine, she assured me that Dojin was the one whose opinion was rare and that bulhok is still very much a current phenomenon in Korea.
63 A Gentleman’s Dignity Ep. 2, 1’
64 Rozman 26
65 A Gentleman’s Dignity Ep. 2, 1’
In the Korean language there are many particles one can use to change the nuance of a phrase ever so slightly—differences that in English are usually expressed through intonation and accentuation of certain words within a phrase. While attempting to peer under the girl’s skirt, Dojin muses, “Confucius was wrong.” In context, this statement obviously refers to the idea of not being tempted by worldly desires after the age of forty, but the assessment is a very general one—thereby leaving the listener with the aftertaste of Confucius being wrong, rather than his being wrong about this issue.

Returning to Choi Yoon, however, we find him in conflict with himself throughout most of the show. Although he does hold some affection for Im Taesan’s sister, 임메아리 (Im Meari)—who is seventeen years younger than he is and hopelessly in love with him—Yoon spends almost the entire show trying to deny his feelings and rebuffs her at least once per episode.

Taesan, who is responsible for Meari financially as well as every other way, now that she has returned to Korea from her studies abroad, is strongly against his sister’s obvious attempts to seduce his friend. This causes stress between Taesan and Meari, who have a relationship more typical of father and daughter than of siblings (probably in part due to the large age difference between them), as well as between the two friends. In episode seventeen the pot boils over and Taesan decides to send his sister back to continue her studies in the U.S., so as to put an end to her girlish fantasies once and for all.

As discussed above, Yoon’s wife JeongAh has been dead for several years. Her remains are kept in an urn in a funeral house. Meari cannot stand the pain of constant rejection by Yoon anymore and is upset that everyone seems to be so set against a relationship between the two of them. She goes to the funeral house on what she thinks is the day after the anniversary of JeongAh’s death, intending to ask JeongAh for her approval.
to love Yoon and have him love her too. But it turns out that she has misremembered the date, and so she ends up going on the actual anniversary of JeongAh’s death—which means Yoon and the other three are there as well and witness Meari’s plea to JeongAh.

While Dojin and Jeongrok do not seem to know what the best course of action would be, Yoon is motionless, watching Meari with an expression of sadness and pity in his face, and Taesan—his body language clearly signaling that he does not want to interact with either Meari or Yoon—stands frozen in place, shocked.

The viewer is left with a clear feeling that this situation needs to be resolved in some way. Im Taesan has decided it is time to send Meari back to the U.S. He begins their talk by scolding her for not being able to pay her bills on time, but she argues that when the money from her part-time job comes in, she will be able to pay. Evidently, the bills are not in fact the issue at hand, and eventually Taesan decides to stop beating around the bush. After revealing to Meari that he saw her at the funeral house on the anniversary of JeongAh’s death, he takes out the plane tickets he has already purchased for her and lays them on the table. It is clear from his manner that she has no choice in the matter.

Yoon’s case seems to be more complicated than a simple matter of devotion to his wife. While he undoubtedly loved JeongAh and is devoted to his elderly mother-in-law, the only woman he currently has feelings for is his best friend’s younger sister. Regardless of culture, I think most men who feel protective of their younger sister would not be happy to see their best friend, whom they have seen with other women, in a relationship with her. In addition, however, Taesan is Korean—meaning he belongs to a society where age plays a large role in any social interaction, and seventeen years is an age gap that might seem impossible to bridge even in a Western society.

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66 *A Gentleman’s Dignity* Ep. 16, 61’
Yoon is all too aware of this extra hindrance to the liaison with Meari, which is likely another reason he takes so long to admit his affection for her. In episode 17, Kim Dojin tells Yoon he has finally decided to make the relationship with his girlfriend (Seo Yisoo) work out for good and asks whether Yoon doesn’t think he needs Meari to be happy. Yoon wittily replies, “That’s impossible... the mountain is too steep... the mountain of Im Tae.”  

Filial piety is a value that is often strongly instilled in members of societies that tend toward the collectivist end of the spectrum (such societies tend to have a large power distance), and it is an important virtue that is mentioned throughout *Family Rituals*. This goes hand in hand with Hofstede’s Individualism Index, on which South Korea scores 18 on a scale of 0-100 (with the U.S. topping the chart at 91—the most individualist country). As measured by Hofstede, South Korea is among the least individualist, or rather most collectivist, societies.

Thus, it is not surprising to find Im Taesan greatly upset not only by the fact that his younger sister is in love with his friend, but especially by the fact that she continuously disobeys his orders. Taesan tries often to reason with his sister and convince her to desist from pursuing Yoon, the course of action that Zhu recommends taking with subordinate family members: “Should their son or daughter-in-law not be respectful or filial, the parents should try not to take an immediate dislike. Instead they should teach him or her [...]. If [...] he or she still cannot behave properly, then they should expel their son or have their

67 *A Gentleman’s Dignity* Ep. 17, 11’
68 This is a play on words. 산 (san), the last syllable of Im Taesan’s name, is the same pronunciation as the meaning for “mountain” (산). Yoon is saying that Taesan is too large a barrier to overcome for him and Meari to be together.
69 Hofstede 100-103
70 Hofstede 97
daughter-in-law divorced." It is only after a long struggle that Taesan gives up and decides to send his sister away again.

At the end of episode 17, Yoon finally realizes that Meari really will be sent back to the United States and that he probably will never see her again if he does not take action to keep her from leaving. So he has no choice but to admit how much he really cares for her. Having admitted his feelings for Meari, he decides to go to the airport and stop her from boarding the plane. Meari, distraught as she is about having to leave Yoon and Korea behind, does not have enough power on her own to disregard her brother’s orders. It is only because Yoon arrives at the airport, grabs her by the arm, and leads her back out that she does not board the flight—although this is naturally what she had (not so) secretly been hoping would happen. The reason she was not able to disobey her brother is the strong sense of filial piety.

So strong is this value that she calls the brother who has decided to send her away and tells him, "Next time when we see each other at the airport, let’s see each other smiling, OK?" This also can be likened to a passage in Zhu’s *Family Rituals*, where he, describing the filial son, prescribes that “[s]hould his parents get so angry that they whip him until he bleeds, he must not bear a grudge but be more respectful and filial.” While Taesan does not physically punish Meari, the rebuke of sending her half a world away to a different continent can be considered the modern-day parallel form of punishment.

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71 Zhu 29
72 *A Gentleman’s Dignity* Ep. 17, 65’
73 While this term may often imply a parent-child relationship, Meari’s parents do not appear in this drama, and her brother is significantly older, making it necessary for her to obey him as she would her parents or someone of the older generation.
74 *A Gentleman’s Dignity* Ep. 17, 63’
75 Zhu 28
Conclusion

Although many scholars have expressed their concern at the perceived incompatibility between Confucian values and modernization, many have also argued that Korea remains the most Confucian country. This gap can be bridged by the explanation that Koreans, who often act according to Confucian ethics, do not realize this is a large part of their culture. As Rozman states: “The masses of East Asia are largely ignorant of the Confucian nature of their behaviour.”

This study of Confucianism apparent in current Korean society has examined the television drama 신사의 품격 (shinsa eui poomgyeok A Gentleman’s Dignity) and compared and contrasted specific relationships and situations with the way they are depicted in Zhu Xi’s Family Rituals. In the process, I have come to the conclusion that modern-day South Korea remains a society strongly influenced by Confucian values.

Of the instances examined, we can say the aspect most frequently diverging from expectations based on Confucian traditional ethics is that of the individuals’ relationship toward monetary wealth. Though the power and allure connected to monetary wealth seems to be a stronger motivator for most characters in the show than “acting good” for the sake of acting good, we have the pertinent counter-example of Seo Yisoo, who is not intimidated or tempted by money. The fact that this series addresses the question of money versus ethics speaks for the argument that the debate is still ever so relevant in Korean society. We clearly see the struggle modern Koreans face when it comes to choosing between a capitalist, materialistic alternative and a traditionally ethical one. It is interesting to note that the only character who consistently leads an ethical life is, in fact, an ethics

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76 Rozman 12
77 Rozman 26
78 Rozman 26
teacher. This could possibly be interpreted as criticism toward society and the fact that many fail to realize how rewarding it can be to act ethically. Yet the fact that in many instances the influence of money prevails over ethical behavior does not contradict the argument that modern Korea maintains a deeply rooted Confucian nature. As discussed by Hofstede, it is in the nature of large-power-distance societies that many individuals will believe “might prevails over right.” With Confucian ethics encouraging a large power distance, it is only natural that precisely such a trumping factor would be present.

The value of filial piety seems to be the one value that is most consistently inherent within the drama. Despite the fact that Im Taesan and Im Meari present something of a counter-example to perfect filial piety, it becomes clear through the hurt and outrage caused by Meari’s disobeying Taesan’s explicit orders how much emphasis and value is still laid on filial piety and how large a transgression Meari’s actions in fact are.

Finally, love seems to be the strongest motivator for individuals to walk a path other than that prescribed for them by Confucianism. The example of Yoon’s late wife shows that, while Zhu Xi’s *Family Rituals* clearly states that a wife is not to be mourned for as long as a husband, and therefore a widower should move on, Yoon’s love and devotion to his late wife prevent him from discontinuing rituals for her and leaving her aging mother. In addition, the fact that Meari and Yoon, despite the large age gap, manage to overcome all their obstacles (such as the necessary transgression of filial piety) and become a couple speaks clearly enough for the victory of love over ethics.

It is certain that Confucianism is by no means a topic to be ignored in modern Korea. There are few, if any, simple answers to the open questions concerning the role of Confucianism in today’s Korea. What place does Confucianism, perceived consciously or not,
currently hold? What will its role be in the future? While some, such as Kim, propose to use Confucianism as a tool for humanity and humaneness, others are wary since, as Choe points out, it is also known to foster “Korean parents’ famed zeal for educating their children — an obsession both praised as the source of the country’s rapid economic development and criticized for the ills associated with high-pressure school life.”

Finally, in terms of the scope of this research, it is important to note that there may be significant differences between large cities in Korea, such as Seoul (where this drama is set), and more rural, less westernized areas. For future research I think it would prove interesting to examine other genres of drama (such as historical dramas, portraying real historical events in modern terms) and even to conduct field research in person to investigate instances of Confucianism or lack thereof.

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80 Choe
Appendix

List of Characters from *A Gentleman’s Dignity*

Note that names appear in the format Family Name, Given Name—as is usual in the Korean language.

▷ 김도진 *Kim Dojin*, an architect and the main male character of the show, is a hopeless womanizer and proud of it, until one day he realizes that within the past year the three women he has wanted to ask for their numbers were one and the same—서이수 (Seo Yisoo).

▷ 임태산 *Im Taesan*, who shares Kim Dojin’s architectural office, is a down-to-earth man and in a relationship with a golfer past her peak, 홍세라 (Hong Sera). He urges her time and again to settle down, get married, and start having children—mainly to appease his parents—but she vehemently rejects him. At the end of the show she discovers she is pregnant and insists on having the child first without getting married. The series ends without them having had a wedding, but with the promise that they will get married a few years down the line.

▷ 이정록 *Lee Jeongrok*, married to wealthy landlady 박민숙 (Park Minsook), is a playboy and shamelessly flirts with any attractive girl who crosses his path. Despite being younger than his wife, according to Confucian values he should be the head of his household. Nevertheless his wife clearly wears the pants in this relationship and regularly checks up on him by blackmailing the other three friends (she owns the buildings in which they have their offices).

▷ 최윤 *Choi Yoon*, the last of the four friends, works as a lawyer. His wife died some years before but he remains loyal to her memory, performing rituals every year on the
day she died, and caring for her old mother. Although he has some affection for Im Taesan’s sister, 임메아리 (Im Meari)—who is seventeen years younger and hopelessly in love with him—he tries to deny it and rebuffs her at least once per episode.

✧ 서이수 Seo Yisoo, an ethics teacher at a Seoul high school, is concerned with the morality of things rather than their appearance. She starts out the series being in love with Im Taesan, but quickly has her heart conquered by Kim Dojin instead. She shares a house with Taesan’s girlfriend Hong Sera.

✧ 박민숙 Park Minsook is married to Lee Jeongrok and is a wealthy landlady. She responds to her husband’s infidelity by being overbearing and controlling—even going so far as to blackmail his friends. Knowing exactly how much power her money gives her, she often uses it to her advantage.

✧ 임메아리 Im Meari, Im Taesan’s sister, is 17 years younger than he is. She has been hopelessly in love with her brother’s friend Yoon for as long as she can remember. Having recently come back from the U.S., where she was sent to study abroad, she pursues Yoon relentlessly—thereby completely ignoring her brother’s orders to leave Yoon alone.

✧ 유성재 Yoo Seonjae is a student in Seo Yisoo’s ethics class. He comes from a wealthy family and does not see why he should be studying ethics while he could be cramming mathematics and English for college entrance exams.
Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Kushner 35


