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Workplace culture in South Korea: Traditions and Tensions

Like elsewhere in East Asia, in South Korea, cohesive and diligent work practices aligned with Confucianism have long shared credit for national economic success, especially in conglomerates like LG. A new study** of employee experiences in smaller companies, though, exposes inter-generational cracks and contradictions.

Confucianism values harmony, collectivism, hierarchy and interdependence, pairing deference to superiors with paternalist duties of care. Korean twists include a legacy of authoritarian rule, globalisation, and today's hyper-modern consumer culture. Moreover, Korean-language "honorifics" and terms of address force speakers to vocalise their perceived relative status.

One native-speaking researcher spent a month each observing three small (30-60 workers) companies: a metal recycler with a comparatively Confucian culture, a relatively Westernised online gaming firm, and a harder-to-pigeonhole IT company. Like Korean firms generally, all were male-dominated. Forty-six interviews were conducted, largely with 20 to 40-year-olds.

Three themes emerged, revealing complex undercurrents. First, organisational culture both showed and shaped workplace relationships. Most respondents, especially the over-forties, supported respecting elders and superiors. The somewhat Westernised gaming company let subordinates call superiors by informal terms, yet a 25-year-old barely demurred at her vice-CEO's unsolicited advice that she should break up with her boyfriend, resignedly calling it a sign he cared. Superiors at the IT company expected formal terms of address. Gold bars and overseas trips routinely awarded for long tenure at the strongly Confucian recycler were received as "considerate gifts from superiors" rather than entitlements.

A second theme was organisational inculcation of Confucian values, sometimes implicitly overriding what job contracts said. The IT company's culture reportedly required that "no-one complain" when, against assurances, managers assigned frequent, last-minute overseas

tasks. Even the gaming company exceeded contractual bounds without overt criticism by quietly delaying pay when financially strapped. At the recycler, turning up uncomplainingly after 3am finishes from company drinking events - Korean work functions are often compulsory and involve alcohol - was just "how we do things here". An onsite dormitory facilitated both this and (unpaid) overtime, suggesting Confucianism was a motivational success. Meanwhile, showing the IT company's ambiguous position, its older staff presented compulsory "mind-sharing" and empathy trainings as progressive, whereas juniors saw the company's whole collectivist as controlling and patriarchal.

A third theme concerned effects on stress and performance. Aggressive enforcement (through a kick in the shins) of hierarchy on a new IT company junior at a drinking night backfired, leaving him less motivated. Another manager there took it as signifying loyalty and "collective identity" that juniors stayed late whenever he did, whereas they were really playing on their phones. By contrast, a young worker at the gaming company, which ran on unmonitored flexitime, felt productive by working late only when she chose.

Overall, with globalisation widening generation gaps, older workers tended more towards Confucianism, and younger ones towards individualism, though companies differed. The researchers conclude Confucian values still strategically foster commitment in some firms, but can erode it among younger workers.

** The full study results are available in an article authored by HeeSun Kim and Natasha Hamilton-Hart: "Negotiating and contesting workplace culture in South Korea". *Asian Studies Review* <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2021.1992346>

