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Research on the Curriculum System and Cultural Dissemination Mechanism of Confucian Education in South Korean Universities – Take Seoul National University, Korea University and Sungkyunkwan University as Examples

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Abstract: Confucianism, as the core ideological foundation of the East Asian cultural sphere, has profoundly influenced educational philosophies and cultural traditions across the region since the 6th century BC. As one of the key inheritors of Confucian thought, South Korea has experienced a modern transformation and institutionalized the integration of Confucian principles within its higher education system. This paper focuses on Seoul National University, Korea University, and Sungkyunkwan University to systematically examine their Confucian education programs and teaching mechanisms. It explores the value orientation, curricular content, and dissemination strategies of Confucian culture in Korean universities. The findings reveal that Korean universities have successfully incorporated the classical Confucian spirit into contemporary educational philosophies through program development and institutional frameworks. Their core educational values emphasize moral cultivation, social responsibility, and cultural identity. From a curricular perspective, the study identifies an educational model that takes classical Confucian texts as its foundation while promoting multidisciplinary integration as a distinctive feature. In terms of cultural communication, Korean universities have established multi-level channels for Confucian education-within classrooms, through community engagement, and via international academic exchanges. This innovative approach to Confucian education in Korean higher education offers valuable insights for educational reform in China and for the global promotion of traditional Chinese culture.

Keywords: value orientation; course design; cultural dissemination; comparative study

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1. Introduction

Confucianism, as the central ideological foundation of traditional Chinese culture, has long served as the moral basis for public ethics and educational philosophy in East Asia since its establishment by Confucius. Rooted in the principles of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and sincerity, Confucianism has not only shaped Chinese values but has also exerted profound influence on the cultural and educational traditions of other East Asian nations such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Among these, Korea stands out as a society where Confucian thought has deeply permeated social governance, family ethics, and the education system, thereby forming a lasting cultural and intellectual heritage.

Since the Joseon Dynasty, South Korea has taken Confucianism as its core social ideology and achieved the institutionalization and academic development of Confucian thought through its education system. Entering the modern era, while advancing

educational modernization and internationalization, South Korea has continued to preserve the moral and philosophical essence of Confucianism. Through curriculum reform and innovation in cultural dissemination, Confucian principles have been maintained and transformed within modern educational contexts [1]. This balance between tradition and modernity makes South Korea a significant case for examining the contemporary embodiment of Confucian education.

In recent years, with the implementation of China's "Chinese Culture Going Global" initiative and the increasing diversity of global cultural exchanges, Confucianism-as a key representative of Chinese culture-has once again attracted academic attention. The question of how to achieve the contemporary interpretation and international communication of Confucianism has become a shared topic of interest in educational and cultural studies between China and South Korea. Korean universities have accumulated extensive experience in curriculum design, teaching practice, and cultural dissemination mechanisms for Confucian education, thereby offering practical models for the modernization and globalization of traditional culture.

Existing research primarily focuses on the historical evolution of Confucian thought, traditional education systems, and cultural philosophy in Korea. However, systematic studies of Confucian education within modern Korean higher education remain relatively limited, especially those examining its curriculum framework, value orientation, and cultural dissemination mechanisms from an integrated perspective. To address this gap, this paper selects three representative Korean universities — Seoul National University, Korea University, and Sungkyunkwan University-as case studies. Through literature review and comparative analysis, it systematically investigates their Confucian curriculum structures, educational practices, and dissemination models, aiming to reveal the value orientation, institutional characteristics, and communication pathways of Confucian education in Korean higher education. This exploration offers valuable insights and theoretical references for the modernization and international dissemination of traditional Chinese culture.

2. The Value Orientation of Confucianism

Confucian education in South Korea's higher education system serves not only as a means of knowledge transmission but also as a mechanism for moral cultivation and personality development. Its value orientation is reflected in three interconnected aspects across universities-ethical education, social responsibility, and cultural identity-through curriculum instruction, campus culture, and social practice. These elements collectively embody the spiritual core of Confucian education within South Korean higher education.

2.1. Deepening of Ethical Education

Moral education represents the most prominent expression of Confucianism in Korean higher education. Based on the five cardinal virtues, Confucianism emphasizes the interconnection between personal morality and social order, with ren (benevolence) serving as a key principle governing interpersonal relations and moral consciousness. In university education, Confucian ethics have been adapted to align with modern life, ensuring their relevance in both classroom teaching and extracurricular programs. Moral education in Korean universities thus aims not only to impart ethical knowledge but also to cultivate moral reasoning and critical awareness among students. Teachers act not merely as conveyors of knowledge but as moral exemplars whose conduct subtly shapes students' ethical values [2].

Furthermore, moral cultivation in Korean universities extends beyond formal instruction into what is often called the "hidden curriculum." Through behavioral norms, student organizations, and cultural activities, universities guide students toward self-discipline and moral self-improvement. The Confucian ideal of "self-reflection and self-

cultivation" is thus deeply embedded in campus life, enabling moral education to foster both individual virtue and a sense of social responsibility.

2.2. Cultivation of Social Responsibility

A second key dimension of Confucian education lies in nurturing social responsibility. Confucian philosophy advocates the ideal of "cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world," encouraging individuals to harmonize personal aspirations with collective welfare. This philosophy has been actively incorporated into South Korea's higher education policies, which integrate social responsibility into the talent development system and motivate students to embody Confucian ethical principles through volunteering, community service, and civic engagement [3].

Many universities link Confucian ideals of *ren* (benevolence) with contemporary initiatives promoting social accountability through practical education and charitable programs. For instance, Korea University offers a course titled "Social Service and Ethical Practice," which encourages students to reflect on how their actions can benefit society. These educational models not only instill moral awareness but also translate Confucian ideals into concrete actions applicable to modern social contexts. With institutional support and sustainable implementation, the Confucian educational concept of "cultivating virtue to transform others" has been successfully manifested in Korean higher education, fostering a culture of altruism and civic consciousness among students.

2.3. The Formation of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity represents another essential outcome of the Confucian educational value system in Korea. Confucianism functions not only as an ethical philosophy but also as a cultural symbol and a collective spiritual bond. Through classroom teaching, cultural activities, and international exchange programs, Korean universities transform Confucianism into an important medium for students to understand and connect with their national culture [4].

In curriculum design, universities place strong emphasis on combining Confucian thought with modern cultural and social studies. For example, Sungkyunkwan University offers parallel courses in Confucian classics and contemporary ethics within its "Confucianism and Oriental Studies" major, encouraging students to explore the relevance of traditional ideas in modern contexts. Moreover, universities strengthen students' cultural identity through various activities such as Confucius' birthday commemorations, classical recitation events, and academic forums dedicated to Confucian studies.

Simultaneously, Korean universities promote Confucian culture internationally through academic exchanges and cultural cooperation projects, making it an integral part of South Korea's cultural diplomacy. This educational and cultural framework not only enhances students' understanding of their own cultural heritage but also contributes to the nation's cultural influence on the global stage [5].

In summary, the cultivation of moral integrity, social responsibility, and cultural identity constitutes the fundamental value orientation of Confucian education in South Korean universities. This system preserves the traditional logic of Confucian "self-cultivation and virtue" while adapting it to the framework of modern education. The Korean experience demonstrates that traditional intellectual resources can play an active role in shaping values and cultural identity in the era of globalization when creatively integrated into contemporary institutional and social settings. It also provides meaningful theoretical and practical references for the modern dissemination of traditional Chinese culture.

3. Curriculum Design of Confucian Education

South Korean universities exhibit notable methodological diversity in the design of Confucian education programs. Seoul National University, Korea University, and Sungkyunkwan University each present distinctive features in curriculum structure, educational philosophy, and content design. While maintaining the traditional essence of Confucianism, they simultaneously adapt these ideas to align with modern educational paradigms. This hybrid model, combining classical scholarship with contemporary pedagogical methods, ensures that Confucian education in South Korea remains academically rigorous while maintaining practical relevance.

3.1. Confucian Curriculum Design at Seoul National University

As shown in Table 1, the Confucian curriculum at Seoul National University emphasizes historical and philosophical dimensions, focusing on the development of Confucian thought and its role in society through the lenses of intellectual history and cultural philosophy. The courses demonstrate an interdisciplinary and methodological character that bridges the humanities and social sciences.

Table 1. Confucian Courses at Seoul National University.

Major Name	Course Name
History and Philosophy Major	Confucian Thought in Korean History
Asian History Major	The Formation of the Scholar Class and Neo-Confucianism The Establishment of the Four-Class Society and Neo-Confucianism
Philosophy Major	Special Topics in Neo-Confucian Philosophy Song-Ming Neo-Confucian Dynasties Introduction to Confucianism
Religious Studies Major	Confucianism in Korea Brief Introduction to Confucianism Korean Confucian Religion
Moral Education Major	Ethical Thought of Neo-Confucianism

Data source: Seoul National University official website.

For instance, the lecture "Confucian Thought in Korean History" in the History and Philosophy program explores the role of Confucianism in Korea's sociocultural evolution. Courses such as "The Formation of the Scholar Class and Neo-Confucianism" and "The Establishment of the Four-Class Society and Neo-Confucianism" in the Asian History Studies program analyze the interactions between Confucian thought and the formation of social hierarchies. Philosophy and Religious Studies courses-including "Special Topics in Neo-Confucian Philosophy," "Introduction to Confucianism," and "Confucianism in Korea"-delve into the ethical and philosophical foundations of Confucianism.

Moreover, the course "Ethical Thought of Neo-Confucianism" in the Moral Education program discusses how Confucian ethics can be applied to modern education and social life. Seoul National University thus builds its Confucian curriculum around the history of ideas and moral leadership, cultivating in students both an understanding of traditional philosophy and a sense of moral and cultural awareness applicable to contemporary contexts.

The curriculum framework at Seoul National University integrates historical and theoretical perspectives, emphasizing the study of Confucianism's social significance from both philosophical and ethical standpoints. Its educational goals extend beyond the transmission of knowledge to encourage students to embody Confucian principles in moral reasoning and social engagement.

3.2. Confucian Curriculum Design s at Korea University

As shown in Table 2, Korea University's Confucian Studies program combines interdisciplinary breadth with applied learning. Its courses span philosophy, history, literature, education, and political science, forming a comprehensive liberal education model.

Table 2. Confucian Courses at Korea University.

Major Name	Course Name
Philosophy Major	Introduction to Confucian Thought
	Topics in Modern Confucianism
	Studies in Confucian Ethics
History Major	History of Ancient Chinese Thought
	Confucianism and Chinese Culture
Education Major	Confucian Educational Thought and Practice
	Traditional Culture and Education
Literature Major	Chinese Classical Literature and Confucianism
	Confucianism and Poetry Appreciation
Political Science Major	Confucianism and Political Philosophy
	Studies on Confucian Thought and Contemporary Society

Data source: Korea University official website

Philosophy majors take courses such as "Introduction to Confucian Thought," "Topics in Modern Confucianism," and "Studies in Confucian Ethics," which provide systematic training in the ethical and philosophical dimensions of Confucianism. History majors study "History of Ancient Chinese Thought" and "Confucianism and Chinese Culture," broadening their understanding of cultural history and the transnational influence of Confucian ideas between China and Korea. Literature students engage in "Chinese Classical Literature and Confucianism" and "Confucianism and Poetry Appreciation," integrating Confucian ethics into literary interpretation and aesthetic education.

In the Education program, "Confucian Educational Thought and Practice" and "Traditional Culture and Education" examine how traditional educational concepts can inform modern pedagogy. In Political Science, "Confucianism and Political Philosophy" and "Studies on Confucian Thought and Contemporary Society" explore the relevance of Confucian ethics in political and social governance.

The curriculum design at Korea University highlights the flexibility and social relevance of Confucian studies, encouraging interdisciplinary thinking and practical application. By bridging traditional philosophy with modern disciplines, the university underscores the contemporary significance and openness of Confucian education.

3.3. Confucian Curriculum Design at Sungkyunkwan University

As shown in Table 3, Sungkyunkwan University serves as a symbolic center of Confucian education in South Korea and offers the most systematic and comprehensive curriculum. The Department of Confucianism and Oriental Studies provides an extensive range of courses based on classical Confucian texts such as *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Analects*, *The Mencius*, *The Book of Songs*, and *The Book of Documents*. Courses like "Comprehending Confucian Classics" and "Engaging with Chinese Philosophical Texts" cultivate students' skills in textual interpretation and philosophical analysis.

Table 3. Confucian Courses at Sungkyunkwan University.

Major Name	Course Name
Oriental Studies Major	The Analects
	The Mencius
	The Book of Songs
Oriental Studies Major	Confucianism and Modern Society
Management Major	Confucianism and Future Management
Psychology Major	Confucianism and Psychology
Philosophy Major	Introduction to East Asian Philosophy
	Eastern and Western Philosophy via an Applied Ethics Lens

Data source: Sungkyunkwan University official website.

To promote the contemporary relevance of **Confucianism**, the university offers innovative courses such as "Confucianism and Modern Society," "Confucianism and Future Management," and "Confucianism and Psychology," which integrate Confucian values into fields like social governance, management, and psychological development. Furthermore, courses such as "Introduction to East Asian Philosophy" and "Eastern and Western Philosophy via an Applied Ethics Lens" encourage comparative and cross-cultural perspectives, helping students appreciate the global value of Confucian thought.

Sungkyunkwan University's curriculum integrates classical scholarship with modern applications, forming a multilayered educational structure that unites tradition and innovation, theory and practice. This model ensures that Confucian education retains intellectual depth while addressing the needs of modern society.

3.4. Comparison and Analysis

A comparative analysis of these three universities reveals that South Korean higher education commonly adopts a pedagogical model characterized by "classical study-interdisciplinary integration-real-world application." This framework achieves a systematic and modernized expression of Confucian education. Among the three institutions, Sungkyunkwan University presents the most comprehensive and traditional structure that blends classical study with modern learning. Korea University's curriculum exhibits strong cross-disciplinary and intercultural features, reflecting the openness and adaptability of Confucianism. Seoul National University, by contrast, emphasizes the relationship between historical development and ethical practice, integrating philosophical inquiry with social application.

Across all three universities, Confucian classics serve as the foundation of instruction, while continuous curriculum innovation ensures that traditional thought remains relevant to modern educational and social needs. These curriculum models broaden students' horizons in the humanities and philosophy while reinforcing the cultural transmission role of Confucian education. The collective experience of Korean universities demonstrates that the modern vitality of Confucian education lies in its ability to integrate traditional thought into institutional frameworks-simultaneously supporting academic research and responding to the practical demands of social development. This provides valuable insights for traditional cultural education in East Asia and around the world.

4. Ways to Spread Confucian Culture

Confucianism has long served as the indigenous intellectual foundation of East Asian civilization, exerting a profound influence on Korea's educational, social, and cultural development. In the process of South Korea's educational modernization and internationalization, the country has formed a distinctive dissemination model that integrates the inheritance of Confucian traditions with modern educational innovation.

Overall, the dissemination of Confucian culture in Korea takes place through three main channels: academic and educational dissemination, social practice, and international communication. Together, these create a multi-layered and dynamic system for the transmission of Confucian values.

4.1. Academic and Educational Dissemination

Academic inquiry and educational instruction constitute the core pathways for the spread of Confucianism in Korea. Through curriculum collaboration among universities and the publication of classical research, Korean higher education institutions have transformed Confucianism from a field of theoretical exploration into a structured and institutionalized academic discipline. Confucian studies have become integral components of the humanities, particularly at Seoul National University, Korea University, and Sungkyunkwan University. The curricula of these institutions demonstrate the comprehensive framework and innovative direction of Confucian education in contemporary Korea.

This classroom-based transmission ensures that the core values of Confucianism are passed down through generations in a systematic and scholarly manner. Korean academic institutions also place strong emphasis on expanding the international influence of Confucian studies. Organizations such as the Korean Academy of Confucian Studies and the Academy of Confucian Studies at Sungkyunkwan University regularly host international conferences, inviting scholars from China, Japan, Europe, and the Americas to discuss the ethical significance, cultural value, and educational role of Confucianism in modern society. These gatherings have become important platforms for dialogue between Korean and international scholars, promoting the modern reinterpretation and global dissemination of Confucian thought.

In addition, Korean scholars actively engage in the compilation, translation, and publication of Confucian classics. By producing annotated translations and critical studies, they introduce Confucian texts to global audiences in multiple languages. Some research institutions have also developed online databases supported by digital technologies, offering open access to annotated Confucian texts and academic resources. These initiatives enable Confucian knowledge to transcend geographical and temporal boundaries, establishing Korea as a vital center for Confucian studies in East Asia and beyond [6].

4.2. Social Practice and Dissemination

Social practice represents another major channel through which Confucianism is integrated into everyday Korean culture and life. It enables the transition of Confucianism from academic theory to ethical practice through the education system, community activities, and cultural festivals.

First, South Korea's education system emphasizes embedding Confucian ethics within moral education across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. This approach allows students to internalize the virtues of benevolence, righteousness, and respect for elders throughout their educational journey. Higher education ethics programs also highlight the contemporary relevance of Confucianism by linking its moral principles to modern social issues such as environmental preservation and social justice, inspiring students to embody Confucian virtues in daily life [7].

Second, Confucianism continues to thrive through diverse cultural events. Throughout the country, ceremonies celebrating Confucius's birthday, classical literature recitations, and traditional art performances demonstrate the enduring vitality of Confucian culture in modern Korean society. Communities, schools, and local organizations also host activities such as "moral education seminars" and "traditional culture exhibitions," encouraging citizens to experience and participate in Confucian

practices. Through such engagement, Confucianism becomes a living culture that continuously reinforces social cohesion and moral consciousness.

Finally, the use of modern media technologies has expanded the avenues for Confucian dissemination. Educational and cultural institutions have developed online courses and mobile applications featuring classical texts, moral stories, and philosophical insights. By leveraging the interactivity and accessibility of digital platforms, these initiatives make Confucian learning more appealing to younger generations. As a result, Confucianism has transcended the traditional boundaries of classrooms and textbooks, reaching a broader audience and gaining renewed vitality in contemporary society.

4.3. International Communication

With the deepening of globalization, South Korea has taken proactive measures to promote Confucianism internationally through academic collaboration, cultural diplomacy, and digital communication. This has led to the establishment of a cross-cultural framework for global Confucian dissemination. The South Korean government and major universities actively support international cooperation in Confucian studies. Institutions such as Sungkyunkwan University and the Academy of Korean Studies have established long-term partnerships with universities in China, Japan, Europe, and the Americas. They jointly organize academic forums and cultural exhibitions that connect Confucian ethics to global themes such as sustainable development, social responsibility, and leadership cultivation, thereby extending the contemporary influence of Confucian philosophy.

Furthermore, South Korea employs digital technology and online platforms to enhance the global reach of Confucian studies. Educational institutions provide multilingual online courses and digital textbooks, while academic organizations create "Digital Confucian Libraries" offering open access to global audiences. The use of AI-assisted translation and interactive learning tools has significantly lowered language barriers, making Confucian ideas more accessible and engaging worldwide.

Popular culture and new media also play an increasingly important role in this international dissemination. South Korean historical dramas often integrate Confucian moral themes, using visual storytelling to convey traditional East Asian values to global audiences. Platforms such as YouTube and social media host short videos and live lectures that present Confucian ideas through concise and relatable narratives, helping international viewers grasp their contemporary relevance. This "cultural productization" model has effectively transformed Confucianism from an academic subject into a globally recognizable cultural phenomenon, blending tradition with modern communication technologies.

In conclusion, South Korea's dissemination model for Confucian culture exhibits multidimensional characteristics of academicization, socialization, and internationalization. By strengthening academic research, institutionalizing education, standardizing social practices, and utilizing digital technology, South Korea has transformed Confucianism from a historical heritage into a vibrant modern educational and cultural resource. The Korean experience demonstrates that traditional ideological systems can achieve sustainable vitality only when they align with modern social structures, technological innovations, and global cultural contexts. For China, South Korea's approach offers valuable insights into how Confucianism and traditional Chinese culture can be effectively modernized and globally communicated through systematic education, public engagement, and international collaboration [8].

5. Conclusion

A systematic analysis of the Confucian studies curricula and dissemination activities at Seoul National University, Korea University, and Sungkyunkwan University reveals that Confucianism, as the ideological foundation of East Asian civilization, has not only

continued and evolved in China but has also undergone a modern reinterpretation and institutionalized transformation within South Korea's university system. Collectively, Confucian education in Korean universities-through its diverse forms and practices-serves as a comprehensive case study demonstrating how traditional philosophical thought can be integrated into modern educational frameworks and cultural practices.

First, from a value-oriented perspective, Korean universities emphasize three core elements in Confucian education: moral cultivation, social responsibility, and cultural identity. The fundamental virtues of Confucianism-benevolence (ren), propriety (li), and the doctrine of the mean (zhongyong)-have been revisited and recontextualized within higher education. In doing so, Confucian education extends beyond the mere transmission of knowledge to encompass character formation and socio-ethical development. This value-based approach nurtures well-rounded modern citizens who possess cultural literacy and civic awareness, providing a meaningful example of how education can return to its humanistic essence.

Second, at the programmatic level, South Korean universities have institutionalized a Confucian learning paradigm that combines classical text study as the foundation, interdisciplinary learning as the method, and practical application as the goal. Seoul National University emphasizes the integration of history and ethics, Korea University promotes interdisciplinary and cross-cultural engagement, and Sungkyunkwan University stands out for its representative Confucian studies program and its modernized applications. These three models collectively demonstrate the vitality, adaptability, and scholarly innovation of Confucian education within contemporary academic environments.

Third, in terms of dissemination pathways, South Korea has developed a multidimensional framework for spreading Confucianism through academic, social, and international channels. It institutionalizes dissemination through university curricula and academic conferences, integrates Confucian values into everyday social life via festivals, education, and digital communication, and extends global outreach through cultural exchange and inter-university collaboration. This multi-tiered mechanism enables Confucianism to evolve from campus learning to societal values, and from local heritage to global culture-representing a contemporary renewal and creative adaptation of traditional Chinese thought.

In summary, Confucian educational practices in South Korean universities offer valuable insights for those engaged in the modern presentation and global communication of Confucian culture. On one hand, South Korea's experience demonstrates that the modernization of traditional intellectual resources depends on institutionalized curricula and socially integrated dissemination systems. On the other hand, the sustainable development of Confucian education requires the incorporation of modern pedagogical concepts and innovative communication technologies to ensure its vitality and relevance. For China, it is essential to further advance the integration of Confucian studies into higher education, foster local innovation, and enhance international dissemination within the context of globalization, thereby strengthening the global influence and cultural confidence of Chinese civilization.

Admittedly, this study has certain limitations. As it focuses on three representative universities, it does not encompass the full diversity of South Korea's higher education landscape. Future research could expand the sample scope and explore the dissemination effectiveness and adaptation mechanisms of Confucian education in different cultural contexts from a cross-national comparative perspective. Such research would contribute broader theoretical and practical insights into the modernization and sustainable development of traditional cultures in East Asia and beyond.

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