**A Passive Presence:**

**Confucianism in Modern East Asia and Its Relation to Democratization**

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**Introduction**

The relationship between Confucianism and democracy has received extensive attention in scholarship. It is commonly accepted that countries with prominent Confucian pasts must overcome barriers to democratize. However, it is not clear what role Confucianism has played in politics and society in recent years, and whether it impedes countries from democratizing in practice. The purpose of this paper is to trace the past of Confucianism in South Korea, Japan, and China, and understand how it has interacted with regime and societal change. This paper argues that the histories of China, Japan, and South Korea demonstrate that Confucianism is a passive player in the creation and support of democracy, and is generally only used instrumentally to justify rule. Furthermore, as time goes on, this paper predicts that the ideology’s relevance will only decrease. It starts with a literature review on Confucianism and democracy’s relationship, followed by examinations of late 19th, 20th and 21st century Confucianism in South Korea, Japan, and China.

**Literature Review**

The literature on Confucianism’s compatibility with democracy in modern international relations theory is extensive. This literature review will attempt to give a condensed overview on the discussion.

Samuel Huntington’s argument on the third wave of democracy started the discussion on Confucianism's compatibility with democracy. Huntington argued that Confucianism’s emphasis on the group over the individual makes it incompatible with democracy, and that Confucianism lacks mechanisms that emphasize individual rights and competition.[[1]](#footnote-1) He believed that in Japan, democracy was compatible with Confucianism only because “Confucian values were reinterpreted and merged with autochthonous cultural traditions.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Furthermore, Huntington argued that the “East Asian Model” of democracy is one where there is one dominant party, and that East Asian party-systems lack alternation in power.[[3]](#footnote-3) While he conceded Japan’s system does have the form of a democracy, Huntington concluded any dip in economic performance from the dominant party could lead to unhappiness and even overthrow of the government.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Building off of Huntington’s theory, Alfred Stepan introduced the notion of the “twin tolerations,” or that government is only given a certain amount of freedom by religion, and that correspondingly, religion is only given a certain amount of freedom by government.[[5]](#footnote-5) A successful state will balance the influence of the dominant religion, and make concessions to maintain a stable state. Stepan noted that when examining the relationship between religion and democracy, one should “beware of simple assertions about the actual existence of ‘separation of church and state’” and beware of the “fallacy of unique founding conditions,” when the conditions during the founding of a principle like a liberal democracy are confused to be the prerequisites for the making of any liberal democracy.[[6]](#footnote-6) On the topic of Confucianism and democracy, Stepan believed that although states like Taiwan and South Korea hold Confucian values that differentiate them from US democracy, these values do not make them anti-democratic, and that these states have in fact used Confucianism to strengthen the argument for democracy.[[7]](#footnote-7) Huntington was the main voice in arguing that Confucianism and democracy had incompatible features, while Stepan introduced the idea that governments had to make adjustments to the dominant ideology to make the two work in harmony.

Don Chull Shin provided a different conclusion from Huntington, arguing that Confucian political ethics support semi-authoritarian or semi-democratic regimes, rather than exclusively pro- or anti-democratic.[[8]](#footnote-8) Shin argues, based on evidence from empirical surveys, that Confucians are *less* attached to norms of familism and authoritarianism than non-Confucian Asians, and have greater variance in acceptance of authority, going against the arguments of what makes Confucianism incompatible with democracy.[[9]](#footnote-9)

He also offers an overview of Confucian tradition and why it is relevant to understanding how government and Confucianism interact. While Confucianism developed as a native tradition in China, it spread to Korea and Japan as an elite ideology before becoming more widespread.[[10]](#footnote-10) In Japan, Shin says that although other ideologies like Buddhism and Shintoism are popular, Confucianism is still influential in its culture.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, while noting these differences, he points out three main commonalities: hierarchical respect for the family, belief in the “developmental” state, and respect for schools.[[12]](#footnote-12) Despite noting the differences in development of cultures, Shin still believes that Confucian countries “share similar patterns of institutional performance...and citizen thinking and behavior.”[[13]](#footnote-13) He believes that while Confucianism is no longer a “system of social classes and political power, its norms still substantially affect the citizenry.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Shin argues, based on evidence from empirical surveys, Confucians are *less* attached to norms of familism and authoritarianism than non-Confucian Asians, and have greater variance in acceptance of authority, going against the arguments of what makes Confucianism incompatible with democracy. Thus, Shin demonstrates an understanding of the differences between the development of Confucianism between the three countries. However, he still argues that Confucianism has a lasting effect on these countries’ populations, and that the ideology is conducive to a certain type of government.

Shaohua Hu provides another differing argument, that while Confucianism has similarities and differences to liberalism, it is ultimately a-democratic. Hu argues that Confucianism opposes despotism, defends the people’s rights and interests, and encourages active participation in government.[[15]](#footnote-15) He then notes the differences between Confucianism and liberalism, with Confucianism emphasizing family, “beautifying” the hierarchy, and lacking a check on despotism.[[16]](#footnote-16) Hu also notes that Confucianism, specifically in China, was not completely compatible with authoritarianism, and isn’t responsible for authoritarianism’s rise in China. Hu concludes that Confucianism doesn't obstruct or facilitate democratization but notes three parts of Confucian tradition in China that obstructs democratization. First, is the idea of harmony, which, he argued, suppresses conflict until it becomes disruptive.[[17]](#footnote-17) Second, the Confucian tradition defers to the ruler with the assumption that the ruler will be wise and benign, leading to a lack of appreciation for the rule of law. Third, the Confucian ethic doesn’t adequately address professional ethics, and Confucian officials are often inefficient and corrupt. However, Confucianism is not a significant obstacle to the democratization of Asian countries.

Most writing on Confucianism makes little distinction between the various types of Confucianism -- Huntington and Stepan make broad generalizations on the cultures, with Huntington arguing that East Asia should be considered as one, ignoring the distinctions between subcultures in Asia. Shin notes the differences between the three countries’ types of Confucianism, but ultimately argues that all Confucian countries are conducive to a certain type of government. While Hu looks specifically at Confucianism in China, his prescription is towards democratization of all Asian countries. This paper aims to trace the history of Confucianism in China, South Korea, and Japan in order to gain an understanding of how their histories differ, and if this created a lasting impact on how Confucianism interacted with democratic or authoritarian regimes. √

Furthermore, all of these authors make the argument that Confucianism has a significant impact on the psyche of East Asian populations; understanding how Confucianism has evolved over time will help to gain an understanding if Confucian ideology and values still affect these three countries. This paper attempts to gain a greater understanding of Confucianism’s role in the late 19th, 20th and 21st century in China, Korea, and Japan, and how it interacted with democracy and authoritarianism during this time. Based off this research, conclusions will be made on how much of a role Confucianism played in the past, and how much of a role it will play in the future.

**South Korea**

Choson Korea, which ruled Korea until 1910, had a unique Confucian dynamic. It was an “intellectual, aristocratic and academic ideology” of the political elite Yangban ruling class.[[18]](#footnote-18) The effects of this type of Confucianism created a strong sense of clanism, class differences, and respect for learning and morality.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, only the Yangban class, as the higher class, were able to enjoy the benefits of academia. Korean Confucianism was in essence an elitist ideology, and one that worked against the ideas of democracy.[[20]](#footnote-20) Korean Confucianism expected that the superior man ruled with the mandate of heaven, and utilized the scholar-gentry to rule, who in turn became a hereditary aristocracy.[[21]](#footnote-21) As a result, commoners were almost completely excluded from politics and government.

In 1910, Korea was made a colony of Imperial Japan. The period was marred with protest, brutal crackdowns from the Japanese towards any form of dissent, and education that justified Japanese imperialism.[[22]](#footnote-22) In a way, this prevented Korean Confucianism from affecting the start of industrialization; developments were partially encouraged by the Japanese, but only to enrich the Japanese and help fight their wars.[[23]](#footnote-23) After the events of World War II and the civil war, the Republic of Korea was hastily installed, with a constitution that claimed to be a democratic republic and held “general elections” for a National Assembly in 1948.[[24]](#footnote-24) With oversight from the United States, the constitution called for a president elected by a National Assembly and a judicial branch.

However, the Republic of Korea was led by authoritarian rulers for decades, and initially maintained a traditional and Confucian nature. The first elected president, Syngman Rhee, held a Princeton education, but still chose to adopt Confucian symbols while in office. For example, he wore Yi Dynasty Confucian gentleman apparel when taking his oath of office, and his Austrian wife often wore traditional Korean garb in public.[[25]](#footnote-25) In the mass media, he was referred to as the “father of the nation,” and asked the nation to “follow [him]”. This follows the idea of a ruler that operated with the mandate of heaven, and his public use of traditional clothing is a clear callback to antiquity, despite the regime’s supposed democratic beginnings. Rhee ruled like a dictator; he arrested National assemblymen to force through a constitutional amendment, and frequently used war powers.[[26]](#footnote-26) He removed presidential tenure limits in 1954 and rigged elections in his favor in 1960. This proved to be the turning point for Rhee, who was overthrown after the “April Revolution,” when college students mass-protested Rhee’s actions. This action demonstrated a loss of Rhee’s “mandate of heaven”, and Rhee was replaced, leading to a military coup by Major General Park Chung Hee.

Park’s military regime saw the implementation of outward orientation and export expansion, creating impressive economic growth.[[27]](#footnote-27) From 1962 to 1979, Korea’s real gross national product (GNP) and exports grew at annual rates of 9.3 and 33.7% annually.[[28]](#footnote-28) The role of Confucianism in this growth is debated. Some academics argue that the “Confucian ethic” played a part in Korea’s success. Seok-Choon Lew, Woo-Young Choi, and Hye Suk Wang cited the emphasis on filial piety as motivating economic competitiveness -- they said wealth is a measure of how well ancestors are represented, and Koreans see economic success as a responsibility for remembering these ancestors.[[29]](#footnote-29) However, this argument has too many flaws to be considered significant enough to attribute Korea’s economic success to or to show as evidence of Confucianism’s presence in Korea. Korean Confucian hierarchy traditionally had businessmen at a lower social class than most of the population; and yet, Korea’s success was in part due to a surge of entrepreneurial enterprise.[[30]](#footnote-30) South Korea’s success should be seen for what it truly is; a product of a strategic shift towards export-oriented capitalism at the correct time and well-thought out policy-making from Korean government officials.

Part of South Korea’s success came from a unique market structure called *chaebol* groups (a type of conglomerate), that are family run and dominate the domestic economy.[[31]](#footnote-31) The sales of the largest five chaebol (Hyundai, LG, Daewoo, Samsung and SK) in 1998 accounted for one half of South Korea’s GDP.[[32]](#footnote-32) Here, Confucianism did play a part in the modernization of Korea. Family members played an important part in chaebols, where the head of the corporation is usually the father figure of a family, and sons work in high executive positions within the company. For example, Hyundai’s founder, Ju Yung Chung, had all seven of his sons work in top executive positions, and Samsung’s founder was succeeded by his son as chairman after his death.[[33]](#footnote-33) This structure stems from Confucian understandings of familial relations and business.

However, these Confucian-style chaebols also brought along a myriad of issues. There was too much of a gap between these mega-corporations and smaller businesses, and they often propped up unprofitable businesses, creating inefficient resource usage.[[34]](#footnote-34) In 1998, they accounted for 20% of all outstanding debt, and are widely thought to have played a large part in the creation of the South Korean financial crisis in 1997.[[35]](#footnote-35) As a result, these companies were forced to implement Western neoliberal reform. An IMF loan that bailed chaebols out had a number of requirements, including reforming the management of these companies. The improvements included a “five-plus-three” principle, which consisted of greater transparency, better accounting and reporting, greater accountability towards high level managers/owners, abolition of mutual guarantees among chaebol affiliates, and streamlining of operations.[[36]](#footnote-36) This eliminated the Confucian nature of Korean companies, creating corporations that more adhered towards Western standards. Thus, these concrete reminders of Confucian legacies in a capitalist Korea lost many of their Confucian values.

In 1987, the “June Struggle” occurred after then-President Chun Doo Hwan suspended debate on constitutional reform. Mass disapproval from the South Korean public created momentum for student protests, which were backed up and joined by a growing South Korean middle class.[[37]](#footnote-37) The discontent led to a democratization proposal that was approved by President Chun, and ultimately led to the greater democratization of South Korea. This amendment started the election of a president by direct popular vote and called for a single five-year term.[[38]](#footnote-38) The legislature gained an increase in power and gained checks to balance the president, and individual rights were further protected. This amendment marked South Korea’s true transition into a democracy, and further weakened Confucian culture in the South Korean government and economy.

Today, South Korea is a democratic country. According to the 2019 Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index, South Korea is the 23rd most democratic country in the world, the highest rank among Asian countries at the border between a “flawed” and “full” democracy. For reference, the United States is 25th in the world. South Korea has transitioned into a capitalist, developed country, and alongside it, the values of the country have changed. In a 2018 study, South Korean participants actually showed higher individualistic values than Canadian and American participants.[[39]](#footnote-39) Another study demonstrates that while filial piety is recognized as a part of Korean culture, its practice in Korea is deteriorating quickly, with people deviating from traditional norms and exhibiting a “bystander” attitude towards caring for parents.[[40]](#footnote-40)

While measures of cultural individuality are difficult to convey in a survey, these results demonstrate that Korean culture has undergone significant change in the 20th and 21st century. Choson Korean ideas of a ruling aristocracy have already been replaced by democracy; several protests by the greater Korean citizenry have made it clear that authoritarian understandings of politics are not to be tolerated. Familial structures like the *chaebol* have been reformed by Western forces. As generations go by, the Korean population demonstrates more individualistic characteristics.

**Japan**

The Meiji Restoration saw rapid change in Japan that inevitably changed how Confucianism was perceived. At first, Japanese Confucianism was criticized; Confucianism was an artifact of feudal times, and unconstructive towards gaining knowledge from the West. In 1872, Confucian ethics were no longer taught in schools and replaced by Western authors.[[41]](#footnote-41) These ethics would eventually return, especially loyalty and filial piety, but ultimately these ideas were utilized only to increase national solidarity.[[42]](#footnote-42) Eventually, Confucianism was institutionalized in some documents of the state, but scholarship in the area was still lacking.

Simultaneously, Confucianism was being used to promote Western capitalism and trade to great effect. Shibusawa Eiichi, the “father of Japanese Capitalism”, grew up a scholar of Chinese Confucianism, and promoted the combination of morality and economics.[[43]](#footnote-43) He founded the Tokyo Chamber of Commerce in 1878 and was on the Board of Directors for over thirty Japanese companies, establishing the foundations for a liberal Japanese economy. After his retirement, Eiichi criticized deference to Japanese officials while also encouraging respect for elders. Eichii’s example points to how Confucianism could be used to promote different ideals; while the ideology was being used to promote nationalist rhetoric, it just as easily proved to be a key factor in justifying liberal economic practices.

After the events of World War I, the influence of European civilization deteriorated significantly. This created a new role for Confucianism; it became a medium through which the failures of European civilization were rationalized, and a nationalist rhetoric to justify war and colonization.[[44]](#footnote-44) This form of conservative Confucianism had little application to regular life in Japan, and was merely linked to other forms of imperial rhetoric. By the 1930s, Confucianism was used to paint Japan as an upholder of Asian and Confucian tradition, and therefore give grounds for colonizing China and Korea. In the context of World War II, Confucianism (and East Asian culture) was something to be defended; Doihara Kenji, a Japanese general during World War II said, “to lose this war will mean the eternal defeat and subjugation of the Orient to Western civilization.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

Post WWII, Japan drafted a democratic constitution based on the British parliamentary system. Measures like a clause that encouraged filial piety were struck down.[[46]](#footnote-46) Confucianism almost completely lost relevancy. Because of its connection to imperialism, the ideology was associated with the shame of World War II and was rarely used. US occupation led to Confucian ethics being completely phased out in favor of Western ethics in school teaching, and discussion of Confucianism was limited to elite academia. According to Mushima Yukio, a prominent Confucian writer who killed himself after a failed effort at a fascistic military coup, Confucianism’s “basic merit as a philosophy inspiring practical action [had] been completely lost.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Even nationalist politicians like Nakasone Yasuhiro, prime minister of Japan from 1982-1987, avoided mentioning Confucianism.[[48]](#footnote-48) While bureaucrats initially were “Confucian” elites in that they came from prestigious families and high educations, high-level bureaucrats were implicated in several corruption scandals in the late 1980s and 1990s, and tarnished even this remnant of Confucian elitism.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Like Korea, Japan experienced an economic miracle after WWII. From 1945 to 1956, Japan’s per-capita GDP rose at an annual rate of 7.1%, and by 1973, its per-capita GDP was 95% of Britain’s and 69% of the United States’.[[50]](#footnote-50) Japan’s growth was the result of a number of factors, including the *keiretsu*, large business groups with extensive intra group trade and large amounts of corporate borrowing, and a well-educated workforce.[[51]](#footnote-51) Similar to Korea, some argue that Japan’s economic success was the result of a Confucian ethic, but again, these arguments lack a strong basis, and should not be used to indicate the presence of Confucianism in Japan.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Confucianism is now mostly restricted to academic scholarship; the only significant Confucian civil society organization, the Shibukani, is assumed to only have interaction with 125,000 Japanese, with the overwhelming majority being the elderly.[[53]](#footnote-53) On the EIU Democracy Index, Japan is right behind South Korea with a 7.99 score, good for 24th in the world.[[54]](#footnote-54) In measures of individuality, Japan subverts the common perception that it is a collectivist nation. A 2018 review of 35 empirical studies comparing individualism between Japanese people and Americans found that the 30 of the 35 studies reported that Japanese people were either more individualistic than Americans or found no difference between the two. Of the 5 that supported the conventional wisdom, 3 had questionable validity.[[55]](#footnote-55) In this vein, Professor James S. Uleman of New York University questions the idea of individuality in the first place, motivated by Western stereotypes and biases on Asian cultures.[[56]](#footnote-56)

After the events of World War II, the ideology of Confucianism was negatively associated with antiquity. Now, its presence in Japan is negligible. After WWII, Confucianism was actively avoided for its association with fascism, and hasn’t been taught in schools. While vestiges of Confucian beliefs may pass down through familial ties, there are now several generations that haven’t been taught Confucian beliefs and see it as a backwards ideology. Confucian beliefs will only fade as time progresses, and at this point in time, any sort of Confucian effect on modern day society and political decision-making should be questioned.

**China**

Modern day Confucianism declined as influence came from the West. The Qing Dynasty strongly promoted Confucianism, but the Opium War (1840-1842) made China confront the Western world, and Confucian scholars had to fight for Confucian culture against Western science and technology.[[57]](#footnote-57) Confucianism’s role was doubted; a “Modern New Confucian Learning” rose as a counter to anti-traditional sentiment.[[58]](#footnote-58) Two differing interpretations were created, Modern New Idealists and Modern New Rationalists. Modern New Idealists maintained that Confucian ideals had to be adopted to revive Chinese culture, while Rationalists argued that Western practices could be used to criticize and restructure Confucianism. Even before the start of the 20th century, then, the Confucianism’s role was in jeopardy, and Confucian academia had to consider how Confucianism would adjust to change.

The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) governed all or part of China from 1928 to 1949, with Sun Yat-Sen as an ideological leader of the party until his death in 1925.[[59]](#footnote-59) The KMT was founded on a basis of democracy and nationalism, and Sun Yat-Sen found value in the integration of democracy and traditional Confucianism. The KMT leader often used Confucian expressions when talking of his own ideology, saying that Confucianism was the foundation of his own ideological thought process.[[60]](#footnote-60) Like many other East Asian leaders, Sun Yat-Sen’s primary goal was to simply use the ideology as a justification for his own thought, and to make his ideas more appealing to Chinese tradition,[[61]](#footnote-61) but his example demonstrates that even within China’s own history, Confucian ideas could be easily adapted to a democratic movement.

Chiang Kai-Shek’s appointment as the leader of the KMT, and his subsequent leadership of a mostly reunified China under the KMT saw Confucianism in a different way. While Chiang originally claimed to adopt Sun Yat-Sen’s principles, in 1928 he created for himself a centrist role that allowed him to take reestablish leadership of the Kuomintang.[[62]](#footnote-62) Chiang adopted several different ideological values, adopting militarism and a government model that blended Sun Yat-Sen’s government structure with a Leninist model.[[63]](#footnote-63) In the 1934, Chiang launched the New Life Movement, a use of Confucian values meant to spread fascist ideology and go against Communism.[[64]](#footnote-64) The New Life Movement was an attempt to combine modernization with traditional values, to promote hygienic and behavioral improvement while creating a political “awakening” of the citizenry in favor of the KMT.[[65]](#footnote-65)

Like many 20th century attempts to invoke Confucianism, the movement was selective when choosing which native values should be revived and which Western values should be adopted. For example, the movement had drastically different understandings of political relations; while Confucianism stated that legitimacy for the state came from a ruler’s morality, the KMT and the New Life Movement believed that following the national interest and the KMT was the sole distinguisher between the moral and the immoral.[[66]](#footnote-66) The movement was contradictory and ultimately a massive failure, but it does illustrate another point where rulers picked and chose Confucian ideas and tried to reinsert them into national rhetoric.

The Communist Party of China (CCP) established its rule over mainland China in 1949 and created a new era under Chairman Mao Zedong’s cult of personality. The Maoist era saw a strong push against Confucian tradition, both explicit and implicit. Mao’s vision was extremely ideologically rigid. The ideological fervor that Mao demanded took priority over Confucian ideals, and the idea of the commune took precedence over the family. During the Cultural Revolution, families were split apart due to ideology, and children were often expected to publicly criticize and denounce their own parents or grandparents for capitalist or anti-party actions.[[67]](#footnote-67) These pro-party, anti-family actions broke down the ideas of filial piety that are emphasized in Confucianism, where Mao’s cult of personality was more important than family, the most important entity in Confucianism.

At the tail end of Mao’s reign, the communist party launched the Anti-Confucian Campaign that ran from the end of 1973 through 1975.[[68]](#footnote-68) Two different analyses have come out of this event. One comes from Merle Goldman, who believes that the campaign was meant to be an attack by Zhou Enlai against Lin Biao and military leaders, and a push for a more moderate, practical policy.[[69]](#footnote-69) The Anti-Confucianism movement was meant to “act as an ideological buttress” to rebuild Party institutions, downplay the military, and push for economic reform.[[70]](#footnote-70) While Mao had referenced Confucianism positively as recently as 1972, the party’s stance changed to push for their own party goals at the time. When referring to Qin Shi Huang’s rule, the party said that Confucians actively acted against the emperor and spread rumors to impede his progress. The Campaign said Confucians had “subverted ‘newly established institutions’” in the past,[[71]](#footnote-71) and “wanted everything as it ‘was in ancient times.’”[[72]](#footnote-72) This propaganda was meant to draw parallels to Lin Biao, who had made efforts to preserve ideas from the Cultural Revolution. Another part of the campaign claimed that Confucians were against science.

The other analyses comes from A. James Gregor and Maria Hsia Chang, who argue that the Anti-Confucian campaign was ideologically based, and that Confucianism’s emphasis on collective harmony went against Maoist thought and the idea of perpetual class struggle.[[73]](#footnote-73) While leaders like Hou Wailu and Liu Shaoqi had previously referred to Confucius policy positively, by the time of the Lin Biao affair, the Communist party was firmly against the ideas of the Confucius. Gregor and Chang assert that Confucianism was too moderate, with its advocacy for social harmony.[[74]](#footnote-74) Mao, who was an advocate of constant class struggle and revolutionary tactics, was ideologically opposed to this. Furthermore, Mao’s ideology required that there was always an ideological enemy; Confucianism, which said that all Chinese shared a common goal, contradicted that.[[75]](#footnote-75)

After Deng Xiaoping took Mao’s place in the CCP, Confucianism assumed a moderate presence. Education in China was westernized, teaching “modern” subjects like science and technology.[[76]](#footnote-76) China’s latest generation has also seen a growth in individualism. Chinese youth have fully embraced the internet and social media, and along with it came an adoption of individualistic and consumerist values that are vastly different from previous generations.[[77]](#footnote-77) Chinese citizens value self-fulfillment much more, and put less emphasis on the collective.[[78]](#footnote-78) Professor Xinzhong Yao of Renmin University in Beijing commented that Confucianism has been overtaken by the importance of politics and modern industry, and many have come to believe that Confucianism is simply a ‘historical monument’.[[79]](#footnote-79) This follows trends in Korea and Japan; Confucianism has become less relevant in education, and generations have grown increasingly individualistic, with less value towards the collective.

Unlike Japan and Korea, however, Confucianism has had more of a presence in politics. Hu Jintao spoke of the need for “harmonious socialist society” and put a statue of Confucius up near Tiananmen Square in 2011.[[80]](#footnote-80) Xi Jinping has paid special attention to the ideology in an effort to build nationalism and introduce a differing ideology. Xi has revived the teaching of Confucianism, ordering officials to attend lectures of Confucianism and reintroducing the ideology into textbooks, in an effort to instill “Chinese national moral thinking”.[[81]](#footnote-81) However, Xi “[cherry-picks] elements that suit his needs,” indicating that this is most likely an effort to increase pride in ancestry and Chinese history.[[82]](#footnote-82)

“Confucian Institutes” have started to pop up, not only in China, but also around the world. At the end of 2018, there were 548 Confucius Institutes globally, and China wants 1000 by the end of 2020 as a part of a “Confucius revolution”.[[83]](#footnote-83) However, Confucian Institutes’ main focus is in Chinese language learning in foreign areas, not disseminating Confucian ideals.[[84]](#footnote-84) These institutes claim to promote educational exchanges in culture and language; they are less likely an indicator of Confucianism’s growth and more likely being used instrumentally to increase China’s soft power. Human Rights Watch called CI’s “extensions of the Chinese government that censors certain topics and perspectives in course materials on political grounds,”[[85]](#footnote-85) and Chinese officials saw CIs as “an important part of China’s overseas propaganda apparatus.”[[86]](#footnote-86)

**Discussion**

The experiences of Korea and Japan in the 20th century demonstrate how easily democracy and values attached to democracy can overrule the presence of Confucianism. Both countries entered the 1900s with Confucian values that had a strong presence in politics and society. Choson Korea was a stratified, hierarchical society, while post-Meiji Restoration Japan was an imperialist country that embraced Confucianism as a part of its nationalist rhetoric. However, after a century, both countries are developed democracies. Despite the presence of Confucianism early on, these countries adapted their government to have rule of law and electoral procedures.

In Japan’s case, the trigger was a traumatic World War II loss that resulted in a Western intervention changing the form of government. Huntington predicted that an economic shock would result in Japan’s citizenry turning on democracy, but, despite a 1991 bank crisis that resulted in the “Lost Decade” where nominal GDP fell from 5.4 trillion to 4.5 trillion from 1995 to 2007,[[87]](#footnote-87) Japan has maintained its democracy. Admittedly, Japan may be a special case, but not for the reasons past literature has cited; it is especially hospitable to democracy not because of how Japanese Confucianism has accommodated Western ideas, but instead because it was shunned as an ideology post WWII. When examining only Japan, it is possible to think that Japan adopted democracy so well simply because Confucianism lost public acceptance. However, Korea’s case refutes this possibility.

South Korea’s political state went through several different changes, at first acting as a colony of Japan, then as an authoritarian state after WWII, and finally a democracy in the 1980s. South Korea went through a similar economic change as Japan, but Confucianism was never a legacy to be ashamed of; instead, it simply phased out. While leaders used Confucian symbols and propaganda during the authoritarian era, and chaebols were prominent structures with Confucian characteristics, Confucianism eventually lost its effect. South Korea became democratic, and chaebols went under reform that Westernized its structures and operations. In either case, Confucianism (or Confucian characteristics) never prevented these two countries from becoming democracies; while Confucianism may have had some effect on government or corporate structures during economic development, they eventually conformed to Western ideas of democracy and economy.

China’s Confucian history holds some similarities to Japan and South Korea’s. Like the latter two, Confucianism’s influence became less powerful as time went on, generations became older, and regimes changed. Mao became vehemently opposed to the presence of Confucianism. While the reasoning for his opposition is disputed, either case demonstrates a backlash against traditional values in favor of a more “modern” vision. In the process of modernization, traditional Confucian norms became less popular overtime, with students learning less about traditional Confucianism, and losing values like collectivism and gaining values like individuality. However, Chinese Confucianism’s path is undoubtedly different; despite Confucianism being attacked during the Mao era, it has seen a resurgence in the 21st century, and is currently being promoted by Xi Jinping. While newer Chinese generations are more individualistic, and put less emphasis on the collective, Confucianism is resurfacing as a legitimate ideology. Given China’s authoritarian nature, one could argue that this prove Confucianism’s compatibility with authoritarianism, and that Xi Jinping sees it as a way to embed the population with a pro-authoritarian mindset.

The histories of Japan, South Korea, and China dispute this claim. Across all three countries, Confucianism has shown to be easily brought forward or pushed back to favor the preferred ideology of those in power. In the case of Japan, it was first adapted to imperialist and capitalist ideology, and then shunned after the war. In South Korea, Confucian symbols have been used to promote authoritarian leaders, only for it to fall out of favor and for democracy to rise. In China, Sun Yat-Sen saw Confucianism as fitting his democratic vision and Chiang Kai-Shek included it in a juxtaposition of modernity and conservatism. Mao Zedong either saw it as a threat to his own Communist ideology or ran his anti-Confucian campaign in an effort to purge Lin Biao. In either circumstance, Mao saw that the attitude towards Confucianism and its values could be changed to fit his own goals. Mao’s efforts were largely effective, putting it in the back of the cultural consciousness, until recent leaders have co-opted it and used it to run a soft-power campaign in the 21st century.

Confucianism is not anti-democratic, or pro semi-authoritarian, as Huntington or Shin may suggest. The results of the research provide a similar answer to Shaohua Hu and Stepan in saying that ultimately, it can easily support democracy. This paper adds the distinction that Confucianism is a passive ideology that can be easily interpreted in different ways and can be used to promote or obstruct democracy. Confucianism does not dictate political action; instead, leaders use it instrumentally to promote their own goals. When Imperial Japan, Chiang Kai-Shek, Xi Jinping, or Syngman Rhee promote Confucian values, it is not because Confucianism is inherently non-democratic, but instead because it gives off nationalist imagery that invokes ideas of heritage. As an explicit ideology, then, Confucianism itself does not affect whether a country is democratic or not, but it can be used to justify rule. In all three countries, preaching Confucian values would most likely be a veiled populist attempt to hark back to and provide a revisionist description of previous regimes.

But what about a less concrete version of Confucian values, where the population, despite not learning Confucianism, holds values that adhere to ideas like harmony, deference to the ruler, and filial piety? Even in the 20th century, these values are most likely overestimated in terms of cultural effect. South Korea held several different protests on its way to a regime change, demonstrating that harmony and respect for the ruler clearly did not prevent them from asking for liberal democracy. In Japan, none of these values prevented its rise to becoming a respectable democracy. In China, the Tiananmen Square protests were calls for democracy. Subconscious Confucian values did little to prevent angry citizens from challenging authoritarian rule or adopting democratic values. These values should not be considered when arguing if a country will be able to democratize.

Furthermore, the generations that were exposed to Confucianism in politics and education are growing older and being replaced by younger generations exposed to liberal economies, competitive private job markets, and globalized media. Recent research demonstrates that younger generations in these countries are just as, if not more, individualistic than American people of similar age, and have less respect for elders than previous generations. Given that most East Asian countries have embraced technology and the globalization of media consumption, the number of people who hold Confucian values will only shrink as time goes on.

Thus, Confucianism is not a significant factor when considering a country’s ability to democratize. Past precedent and the state of Confucianism today demonstrate that not only was Confucianism a passive presence when countries were undergoing democratic transitions, its presence in East Asian countries today is negligible, and will only continue to diminish in relevance. When considering East Asian countries that haven’t started or completed the democratic transition, like China, Singapore, or Vietnam, evidence from the past experience of Japan, South Korea, and China demonstrate that Confucianism will not play a factor in whether or not these countries democratize. It is possible that political figures will use Confucian rhetoric to justify rule (authoritarian or democratic) in the future, and in China, this sort of resurgence has already occurred. In the end, however, the pasts of China, Japan, and Korea show that these symbols are, in all likelihood, simply being used instrumentally as propaganda, and should not be interpreted as Confucian values playing a vital role in democratization.

The research also demonstrates the need for a reevaluation of how Confucianism and its values are discussed in international relations theory. When discussing the relationship between Confucianism and democracy, values like filial piety and respect for authority are applied to East Asian populations as a whole. However, recent events demonstrate that many East Asians are not demonstrating these values, and instead show levels of individuality equal to Western counterparts. The evaluation of East Asia’s compatibility with democracy is based on a stereotype of Asian values that do not seem to match the current attitudes of the people there.

**Conclusion**

The history of Confucianism in South Korea, Japan, and China in the 19th and 20th century demonstrates that while Confucian ideology was sometimes used to build nationalism or justify rule, it was never a deciding factor in determining whether countries became democratic or not. Furthermore, the current state of Confucianism in these three countries is relatively weak; thus, Confucianism and its values should not be applied to a country’s population when determining if it is pro or anti-democratic. In the case of the two democratic countries, South Korea and Japan, despite having a strong Confucian past, Confucianism was a bystander as economies liberalized and democratic institutions were established. While China is an authoritarian country, Confucianism was originally used to justify democracy, then shunned during the Cultural Revolution, before finally seeing a moderate resurgence as Xi Jinping tries to build up Chinese nationalism and soft power. However, the pasts of all three countries demonstrate that this rejuvenation of Confucian education most likely will not be a deciding factor in whether China can democratize.

Further work could provide insight on other countries with Confucian pasts that have not democratized, like Singapore or Vietnam. While Confucianism may not be a deciding factor on whether these countries could adopt a democratic government, it would be valuable to see if Confucian pasts could be utilized to promote nationalist or pro-regime rhetoric.

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