

Country Report: Teaching Philosophy/Ethics in South Korea

Minkyung Kim, Technical University of Chemnitz, minkyung.kim@zlb.tu-chemnitz.de

General information about South Korea and its educational system

The school system in Korea is structured as follows: every Child in South Korea has to attend elementary school for 6 years and middle school for 3 years. After these 9 obligatory years of education, Korean pupils might attend high school for 3 more years. Most elementary and middle schools are public schools. High schools, however, tend to be more often private than public. As of yet, Korea isn't a multicultural society like Germany even though more foreigners came to Korea in the last decade (in 2015, registered foreigners living in Korea were just 2% of the general population). According to National Statistical Office in Korea, in 2015, about 42% of Korean are religious, estimated 16% are Buddhists, 20% protestants, 8% Catholics, 0,2% Confucians. Nevertheless, despite the fact, that most Koreans aren't Confucians by religion, the values of Confucianism perpetuate daily life in Korea as well as the curricula in school.

Compared to Germany, the school system is much more competitive among pupils due to the reputation of a few elite universities in South Korea. Being admitted to one of these universities is crucial in order to succeed professionally either in the corporate, governmental or academic sector. Thus, every November, a daylong exam takes place, determining which university pupils may attend after finishing high-school. There are also alternative ways to get access to university, for example, the total rating of the three years in high school and an interview at the university can replace the examination. But most pupils access the university through the final exam. Because of the importance and prestige of attending a good university in Korean society, a huge private school market has been established, which prepare pupils for the final exam. In contrast to Germany, the aim of most private schools is not to merely support underachieving students. Instead, most of the pupils in Korea attend private schools, where they often learn the material for the next years in advance. The educational system in Korea is centralized and so is the curriculum. While the curriculum of a subject like philosophy/ethics in Germany varies from state to state, there is just one standardized curriculum for ethics (in Korea: Morality) for all schools in Korea.

Current situation of philosophy at school in South Korea

While in Korea, there is no religious instruction in public schools, ethics is being taught from third class onwards in elementary school. Even in the first class, there is a combined subject, which includes ethical contents which is being called the morally right life, wise life and pleasant life. As the title of the subject indicates, ethics education is mostly perceived through the lens of character education. Accordingly, character education is considered as a central aim on every educational level (primary, secondary, upper secondary). Furthermore, unlike in Germany, from elementary school on, ethics is a mandatory subject, which every pupil has to attend.

More precisely put, the Korean approach in ethics education can be described as follows: its central aim is to foster a virtuous character. The central idea is to help pupils to internalize what might be conceived as the four core values of a good character. These are sincerity/faithfulness, consideration, justice, and responsibility. Moreover, fostering autonomy and accountability are also considered as prerequisites in order to lead a moral life. Each of the four core values are divided into four areas: relationship with myself, relationship with others, relationship with the community and society, relationship with nature. The underlying character model stems from the Confucian and Buddhist tradition. For instance, the concept of sincerity is based on the Confucian tradition and also has its origins in Buddhism, which stresses the inseparable relationship between oneself and others. One specific feature of the Korean curriculum of ethics is that it puts a large emphasis on the development of good manners (in Korean: ye-sul). Again, this emphasis on manners, also traces back to the Confucian tradition. For example, pupils learn that they should take something with both hands if they receive something from older people. Furthermore, the thankfulness for having a family and the good relationship between membership of own family are highlighted. Relevant values like family or piety for one's parents are conceived as the important in Confucianism. In contrast to that, great Western thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle or Kant only occur in the upper secondary level. Here, the ethics education also incorporates controversial topics from applied ethics, such as abortion rights or euthanasia.

With regards to the didactical approach, teachers are assumed to make use of a wide range of methods. Whereas in the Korean school system, ex cathedra teaching is still the default, in ethics, group work, open discussions, the writing of short essays, discussing short stories or role-plays are common methods of teaching. Also noteworthy, comparative philosophy is a common didactical method in ethics education. For example, pupils will learn how the Western and Eastern greats tackle philosophical problems differently. At last, it might be worth pointing out, that ethical problems stemming from the digital sphere, such as cyber mobbing or online addiction, play a large role in the Korean curriculum.

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KESS (Korean Education Statistics Service): <https://kess.kedi.re.kr/index>

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