Political culture and behavior

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Introduction

In 2016, South Korea found itself in a shambles when JTBC, a South Korean news media outlet, reported that then-President Park Geun-hye had colluded with her close confidante Choi Soon-sil to solicit bribes from South Korean conglomerates in exchange for policy favors. The reports later revealed that Choi also had access to sensitive government documents. Infuriated, South Koreans took to the streets, demanding the immediate impeachment of President Park.

On December 2, 2016, more than 2 million protestors, the most in South Korean history, gathered nationwide. With momentum and popular backing on their side, the three opposition parties introduced a joint impeachment motion six days later. The motion passed with 234 out of 300 voting in favor of impeachment. Even some of President Park’s closest supporters in her own party turned against her. Park’s presidential powers were officially suspended. On March 10, 2017, South Korea’s Constitutional Court unanimously ruled to remove President Park from office. History was made as South Korea’s first female president was impeached in disgrace.

Candlelight vigils and protests have long been forms of political activism in South Korea. Their development shows two sides of South Korean democracy. First, they call attention to the weakness of governance structures and the people’s lack of trust in government institutions. Rather than expressing their views through contacting elected officials and making use of institutional processes, South Koreans resort to protest. This may indicate that South Korea is still in the process of consolidation of democracy. However, at the same time, these protests show how South Koreans have become much more vigilant about their politics and political leaders. Whenever the government acts against democratic principles from democratic rule, South Koreans have been quick to address the issue. In that regard, along with the indicators of democratic development of a country such as the Freedom House ratings, South Korea certainly deserves the title of matured and consolidated democracy. This raises the question of what has contributed to this achievement.

This chapter will discuss South Korea’s political culture and democracy. I first present a brief theoretical overview of political culture with special attention to the South Korean case. The subsequent section elaborates on how a traditional political culture based on Confucianism has influenced both society and politics and how it has played a role in the development of South Korean democratic values. The fourth section traces how the
democratization movement in 1987 and the economic crisis in 1997 influenced the political culture in South Korea. The fifth section examines the impact of demographic changes on political culture by examining recent South Korean public opinion polls.

Culture in politics: a theoretical overview

What is political culture? As Reisinger (1995) noted, political culture can be defined in different ways including but not limited to values, attitudes, and ideologies. While there is no clear consensus on what political culture is, it generally refers to a shared value system rooted in a society and shared among citizens. To be specific, it includes consensus, attitudes, beliefs, and public opinions that form public orientations toward certain political issues or a political system.¹

An extensive body of literature exists on how political culture forms a country’s politics and the political behavior of its voters. The pioneers of the political culture theory are Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba. Their seminal book *The Civic Culture* elaborates on the elements of a political culture that are essential to the development of a solid democracy. Using the United States and Great Britain as examples of sound democracies, they emphasized the importance of having an attentive public that participates in politics and performs its democratic duties. They also argued that citizens’ political action stems from their basic trust in their political institutions and government (Almond and Verba 1963).

Eckstein (1988) emphasizes that culture “normatively regulates” social behavior (p. 803). He also asserts that the public’s institutional trust makes them more likely to be allegiant to the democratic system, which eventually leads to a legitimate democracy (Eckstein 1966, 1968, 1990). Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky explain that political culture is the values, beliefs, and preferences that people consider legitimate within their society (Thompson et al. 1990). Thus, students of the political culture school opine that a government which loses its people’s trust loses its legitimacy as a representative body and should cease to remain in power.²

Inglehart is another strong supporter of the political culture and its impact on political development. In *Renaissance of Political Culture and Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*, he asserts that economic growth alone cannot explain political development. In particular, he explores the transformation of political culture, noting the Western industrialized countries’ shifts from material to post-material societies. According to Inglehart (1977), the shift toward a post-material society brings revolutionary changes to the society as a whole, including its politics.

As much as the role of political culture and values in a democracy has been abundantly discussed, whether it hinders democratization has been debated as well (Almond and Verba 1963; Pye 1985; Huntington 1991; de Bary 1991; Chan 1999; Bell 2006; Kim 2010; Shin 2008). As prominent Western scholars such as Lucian Pye speculated nearly 60 years ago, there has been great skepticism about whether Asian countries could develop healthy and vibrant democracies. This skepticism originated from the fact that Confucian values prioritizing authority, collectivism, and harmony over diversity were prevalent throughout Asia (Pye 1985; Zakaria 1994; Bell 2006). Key Confucian tenets such as primacy of authority, community over individual, and factionalism may have hindered democratic changes in South Korea (Shin 2008; Heo and Hahm 2014).

However, it seems short-sighted to understand South Korean political culture only from a traditional Confucian perspective. South Korea has undergone profound political,
economic, and social changes through which many of the Confucian values have conspicuously declined, and modern and post-modern political culture has become more salient. Following the drastic democratic opening and transition in 1987 as well as the economic and social trauma that followed the financial crisis in 1997, the political culture in South Korea has evolved into a form often observed in advanced democratic societies. Moreover, demographic changes and generational replacements have further changed the political culture, making a lasting impact on political development.

**Debate about political culture and Asian values**

Democratic elements in political culture of advanced countries are often compared with those of developing countries. According to Almond, Verba, and Pye, developing countries lack civic, allegiant, and democratic political cultures, which ultimately hinders their democracies (Almond and Verba 1963; Pye and Verba 1965). They contend that people in developing countries maintain a “parochial culture” and tend to distance themselves from politics. In developing countries, people are likely to believe that matters related to politics and government belong to those located in the upper tier of society’s hierarchical pyramid. Ordinary citizens do not fully recognize their rights to participate in politics. That is, people in these countries tend to think that politics is the business of the elites. Indeed, a number of scholars agree that the public, not only in developing but also less democratic countries, are not appreciative of participatory political culture, which is necessary for any democratic society (Banfield 1958; Lerner 1958; Binder 1965).

However, history has shown that the argument proposed in *The Civic Culture* does not completely align in reality and has limits. First, Almond and Verba’s argument is based on the experience of a limited number of advanced democracies (Baker et al. 1981; McDonough et al. 1998). Contrary to their argument, the people of Western Europe and the United States, which served as examples of civic culture optimized for democracy, are in fact losing trust in their governments and some are even doubting democracy itself. Public distrust of government and the political system often leads to declining voter turnout. This, to some scholars, is regarded as the dismantlement of the root of representative democracy (Topf 1995; Norris 1999). Recently, the American public’s trust in its political establishment has hit its lowest point. According to a Pew Research study in 2017, only 20% of Americans answered that the government is doing the right thing always or most of the time. Only 34% of Americans said they have a favorable view of Congress, the ultimate representative body for the people. In addition, the voter turnouts in U.S. elections are notoriously low (Pew Research Center: Global Attitudes and Trends 2017).

According to the same study, people under authoritarian regimes also appreciate representative democracy. What makes them different from the people of advanced countries is how they perceive authoritarian systems. Even though there are some variations, their resistance to military rule does not seem as strong as that of those living in advanced democracies. The electorates of developing countries have a relatively high level of trust and confidence in their governments, which may explain how these authoritarian regimes maintain their rule. Furthermore, allegiance or trust in the government is not a necessary condition for democratic rule. In fact, the opposite is the case.

South Korea’s political culture is often described as being influenced by Confucianism. Confucian values such as emphasis on education and diligence are often used to explain the remarkable economic growth of East Asian countries. While education and a strong work ethic can complement the values advocated by Protestant ethics, seen as the essence of
capitalism and economic prosperity, other Confucian values often conflict with Western liberal democratic principles. For example, the emphasis on group interest over individual rights does not stand well with the values cherished in liberal democracies (Lee 1992).

Furthermore, Confucianism is said to have philosophical components such as “hierarchical culture, paternalistic meritocracy, communitarianism and familism” (Shin 2012, p. 320). Kim Untae asserts that Confucianism also has components of communitarianism, authoritarianism, and factionalism that considerably influence Korean political culture (Kim and Park 2003). Although scholars differ slightly in detail, they generally agree that Confucian values emphasize hierarchical order, authority, and communitarianism that translate into exclusiveness.

In this regard, Confucian values have been criticized for hindering the development of liberal democracy. In particular, Pye contends that the obstacles to the development of democracy in Asian countries relate to hierarchical and authoritarian political cultures, which result in deference to authority concerning governance. Asian culture inherently lacks the support for democratic institutions and principles necessary for a sound and full-fledged democracy (Pye 1968). The most outspoken scholar on the negative aspect of Confucianism on democracy is Huntington (1991), who argues that Confucianism is inherently antidemocratic and the two are, therefore, incompatible.

Nevertheless, there are different streams of thought on this subject. Some scholars state that Confucianism and liberal democracy share compatible elements and are not always at odds. De Bary (1998) and Tu (1996) assert that Confucianism does contain “democratic seeds” to serve the establishment of a democracy. For instance, Confucianism’s emphasis on political accountability, equality, and tolerance conforms with values that work in a democratic society. In particular, an accountable and virtuous Confucian leader is supposed to promote the rights and welfare that are essential in a democracy (Hu 1997). In addition, the emphasis on harmony in Confucian societies does not necessarily mean the removal of diverse views. Rather, it implies combining and balancing the various views to create a better result (Bell 2008).

Recently, a new perspective on the compatibility of Confucianism and democracy has gained support (Bai 2008; Kim 2007; Kim 2010). This new perspective argues that Confucianism’s emphasis on order, efficiency, cooperation, and trust provides a stable foundation for democracy. Furthermore, Confucianism’s humanitarian aspects and respect for others can complement liberal democratic values (de Bary 1991; Tu 2002). Thus, Confucian values that seem contradictory to democratic ones in fact help promote democracy in certain countries. South Korea is one of the most exemplary cases of this (Kim 2008).

Traditional political culture: contending perspectives on Confucianism in South Korea

History of Confucianism in South Korea

Confucianism originated in China and deeply infiltrated the Chosun dynasty, which lasted from 1392 until 1897. Confucianism was the political philosophy championed by the dynasty’s ruling class. However, it also penetrated and influenced the way of life of the commoners. The political elites believed that the philosophy would help propel Chosun into a civilized society and the common people followed their lead (Yoo 2004).

Confucianism as a ruling principle naturally dwindled after the fall of the Chosun dynasty, which was followed by Japan’s colonization of the Korean peninsula in 1910. Nonetheless,
the philosophy continued to influence the Korean society. Some Confucian elements actually strengthened and accommodated the imperial ruling principles of Japan. For instance, loyalty to the state and obligation to elders, all important characteristics of Confucianism, went along very well with the fascist elements of Imperial Japan. These select components of Confucianism continued to be emphasized in Japan’s colonial education (Lee and Lee 2007).

Interestingly, Korea is the only state among East Asian countries that has experienced lasting influences of Confucianism. In China, where the philosophy originated, Confucianism was abandoned under the communist regime, especially after the Cultural Revolution. In Japan, it was never established as a ruling philosophy in the first place. Even though it is no longer the ruling philosophy in modern-day Korea, it has maintained a strong presence in the society partly because of its success in infiltrating ordinary citizens’ lives and partly because it was utilized by the authoritarian regime following Korea’s independence from Japan.

**Confucianism as traditional political culture and its impact on political change**

One of the most important elements that distinguishes Confucianism from liberal democratic values is the concept of “self”. In the Confucian tradition, an individual is interconnected with others and must be understood through his or her relationships with them (Marsella, De Vos and Hsu 1985). An individual cannot exist without these relationships. For this reason, the community or society to which the individual belongs to becomes a very significant component of an individual’s life. For this particular reason, the interests of the community have often been regarded as more important than individual rights. Individuals in Confucian cultures are often taught to consider their interests in the context of the community to which they belong (Lee 1992). In this regard, the virtuous Confucian values come in conflict with Western liberal democratic values that stress individual rights above all.

One of the most important tenets of the Confucian tradition is rule by a virtuous leader and unity and harmony under this leader. The leader wields authority to rule and people are expected to comply, which in the end will lead to social harmony. Political pluralism in general equates to conflict in the Confucian perspective and impedes the advancement and harmony of a society. The role of the people is not to check and balance a leader, but to support his policies so that the leader could run the country without interference. This directly contradicts the values of American democracy. The Founding Fathers of the United States, for instance, acknowledged that all individuals are imperfect and weak. That is, human beings are susceptible to fallacy and do not always possess good intentions. Therefore, they established numerous mechanisms of checks-and-balances (Mayer 2010). While they did not support factionalism, the Founding Fathers also believed in and supported pluralism to a certain extent (Madison 1787).

Another important influence of Confucianism in South Korean society is the Korean concept of nation. Unlike many Western liberal democracies, South Korea has never experienced feudalism. Moreover, capitalism, which promoted the growth of liberalism in the West, never took root during the Chosun dynasty as Confucian social norms discouraged commercial activities. This does not mean that modernization was non-existent in Chosun’s history. However, most efforts to modernize faced strong resistance from the political elites and failed as a result (Haboush and Deuchler 2001; Kim 2007).

One important Confucian concept that outlived the Chosun dynasty and even the Japanese colonial period is the concept of *kukka* (family-state; Kim 2007). Simply put, Koreans
viewed the state as an extended family. This conceptual framework was embedded in people’s minds, even after the monarchy was replaced with a modern government system. A president, or even a military ruler, was viewed as a father (or mother) figure. Members of the older generation sometimes call the first lady *kukmo* ("mother of a country"). A leader’s role of running a country was often compared to running a family. This created an environment where authoritarianism was easily accepted. Since the president was viewed as a father (or mother) figure, it was not virtuous to stand up against him or her. Citizens were expected to follow the president under Confucian political ethics. Criticizing the political leader was considered not only unpatriotic, but immoral. Confucian values, therefore, prevented people from thinking democratically.

Park and Shin (2006) empirically examined whether Confucian values have hindered Koreans’ support of democratic rule. Their findings indicated that the relationship between Confucian values and support for democracy was complicated, but those who traditionally upheld Confucian values were more inclined to support authoritarianism than those who did not (Park and Shin 2006).

Recently, Sungmoon Kim (2014) proposed a new perspective on how to look at the relations between the Confucian value of *uri* ("us" or "community") and the political and social activities of South Koreans. Kim argued that the unique concept of *jeong* (magnanimous, unselfish giving) and *uri* indeed promoted democratic movements at the grassroots level. Western perspectives on Confucianism have often highlighted the dismissal of an autonomous and independent "self". Yet, according to Kim, this communal concept of *uri* enabled South Koreans to share society’s responsibilities. It sometimes takes the appearance of group primacy, but other times works as a collective responsibility (Kim 2014). One exemplary case is the "gold collection campaign" that took place in South Korea in the immediate aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis. Although South Koreans blamed the government for the crisis, they voluntarily mobilized to collect gold to help pay back the country’s debt. The movement was not simply an act of patriotism but stemmed from a collective sense of familial responsibility. This may have originated from the belief that the nation should come before personal interests because no citizen can survive without a nation. Although Kim’s study sheds a positive light on Confucian values by applying these values to a grassroots movement, it still recognizes that a nation comes before an individual.

In sum, Confucianism penetrated Korean society deeply and helped formulate a distinct Korean political culture. This was partly because the country did not go through severe transformations caused by capitalism and class struggles, which encouraged citizens to fight for their individual rights. The absence of a major war throughout the 300 years of the Chosun dynasty also meant fewer chances for Koreans to develop a nation-state spirit like the Western democracies did during this period (Kim 2007). It was not until the early nineteenth century that the people of Chosun started to demand their rights and voice their desire to transition into a modern state. Unfortunately, their wishes never came true as Chosun became a colony of Imperial Japan in 1910. However, as Koreans resisted Japan’s colonial rule, they started to formulate a distinct Korean national identity (Shin 2006).

After liberation from Japan in 1948, South Koreans held onto some of the authoritarian characteristics even as they began to formulate a new national identity. South Korea experienced 15 years of flawed democracy from 1948 to 1963 before the country fell into the hands of a military government that focused its efforts on economic development while oppressing civic and democratic movements. Driven by the Confucian ethics of diligence and self-sacrifice, South Koreans worked tirelessly and eventually created an economic miracle that no one thought was possible. Ironically, it is this economic growth that paved the
way for democracy. As the economy grew, people became exposed to the outside world and began to have contact with advanced Western democracies. Western values, democracy in particular, infiltrated Korean society. College students, who received both intellectual training and teachings on civic values, realized the gap between reality and what they had learned. They led the democratic movement in 1987 with massive cooperation from the middle class, which recognized the gap even though they were enjoying a better quality of life.

In that regard, Dalton and Shin’s (2006) assertion that civic culture and democracy are not exogenously but endogenously related gains support. Democracy breeds civic cultures that conform to the democratic system. In fact, it is noticeable that South Korean political culture underwent a huge transformation through democratization and globalization. Old concepts of nation (kukka) and “self”, for instance, have weakened as generational changes have taken place. Political and economic incidents influenced how people view the nation’s role and responsibilities. Park and Shin also pay close attention to the rapidly changing social norms in Korea caused by generational replacement. The younger generations more freely express citizen’s rights than older ones. This can be attributed largely to their exposure to a healthy liberal democracy.

**Political culture in transformation: democratization in 1987 and the 1997 Asian financial crisis**

**Democratization in 1987 and its impact on political culture**

Roughly 30 years ago, South Korea was a developing country ruled by a military dictator. Now, it is considered one of the major advanced economies with a consolidated democracy. How was this transformation possible? Inglehart and Welzel’s theory that socioeconomic development stimulates democracy may provide an explanation for South Korea’s democratization in 1987. Their theory states that citizens with economic prosperity will begin to recognize and demand their individual rights. As more citizens want their voices heard, it is inevitable that they will soon want a democratic system.

Under the authoritarian regime, South Korea experienced exponential economic growth from the 1960s to the late 1980s. During this timeframe, it rose from the second-poorest country in the world to the world’s 34th largest economy. The literacy rate surpassed 90% in the 1980s and the proportion of the population with secondary education was 65.3% according to an OECD report (KDI 2012). As Inglehart and Welzel indicate, economic growth and higher education create an environment which then produces democratic citizens.

An export-led economic plan not only made South Korea’s remarkable economic growth possible but naturally exposed its people to the outside world and introduced them to Western democratic values. As their eyes opened, South Koreans realized the incongruence between what they desired politically and what was actually given to them. Yearning for higher education also played a significant role because students were introduced to and taught universal civic values. The Seoul Olympic Games in 1988 was a catalyst that sparked South Korea’s recognition of democracy. Millions of foreigners were scheduled to visit South Korea at this time and the authoritarian regime was forced to meet various Western civic standards in order to host the Olympics. It opened the society to the outside world and, as a result, imported democratic civic values to South Koreans. The Olympics was supposed to be a political victory to appease a revolting public that had been demanding
democratization. Nonetheless, it functioned differently from what the authoritarian ruler had planned. In 1987, millions poured into the streets, and Chun Do-hwan was forced to accept the idea of a democratic presidential election, which took place four months later.

During this process of political turmoil and eventual democratization, how did culture play a role? This is an important question because a conservative Confucian culture had become the philosophy which influenced the daily decisions of most South Koreans. Confucianism was not just a religion but an ethical way of living for them. How did these two seemingly incompatible values—democratic and Confucian—evolve into a new relationship? The democratization movement in 1987 stirred political changes in South Korea. Continuous protests and demand for democracy finally upturned the authoritarian regime and led to a direct presidential election. Confucian values such as order, hierarchy, education and strong work ethic contributed to South Korea’s democratization. Developmental authoritarian regimes somehow led to national prosperity and resulted in economic growth. As a number of scholars assert, economic prosperity helps to establish and consolidate democracy (Lipset 1959; Diamond 1992; Burkhart and Lewis-Beck 1994). The role of the South Korean middle class is especially worth noting. Continuous economic growth brought prosperity to South Koreans and expanded the number of the middle class (Lee 2002). The newly empowered middle class, traditionally known to be risk-averse and to prefer stability in general, also participated in the democratization movement with student groups.

Despite its flaws, a democratic system started to take root in South Korea in 1987. The voter turnout for the presidential election was 89.2%, which remains the highest ever. This figure demonstrates just how strongly people yearned for democracy. Although South Koreans had elected their first president, South Korea was far from a “democratized” country. At the time, it was still a transition democracy under which undemocratic behaviors were overlooked. To become a consolidated democracy, the country had to wait several decades. Nevertheless, the experience of the 1987 democratization movement created and strengthened a new civic culture of political participation.

**Asian financial crisis and changing political culture**

What truly transformed the traditional Korean society was the financial crisis in 1997. A tragic lesson Koreans learned through the crisis was that there was no “father-state”. The crisis dismantled existing social norms that had dominated the Korean society. Fathers, who were sole providers of their families and who were once guaranteed lifetime careers at their companies, were let go to guarantee company survival. Women were encouraged to work to provide for the family if necessary. South Koreans expected the state to intervene, but the state was helpless. The family-state that the people believed would protect them in times of hardship proved to be powerless during the crisis. For the first time, South Koreans experienced capitalism at its very core—every man for himself. The state, that was once considered to be the provider, now became dependent on its own people. During this period, neoliberalism uprooted the traditional norms of Confucianism.

With harsh and brutal implementation of neoliberal economic policies, South Korea was able to overcome the economic crisis in a short period of time. However, the policies created serious inequality throughout society. A number of companies as well as families went bankrupt. Unfortunately, they barely recovered as the state was not well-equipped to provide a social safety net. The state was no longer viewed as the “father”, and the concept of a “family-nation” faded and was replaced by a new political culture.
Having achieved economic growth after an intense financial crisis, Korean society began to follow the same trajectory that many advanced countries had gone through. However, outcry for changes in social norms did not come to the fore even after the country achieved unprecedented economic growth and successful democratization. While values such as emphasis on education eventually promoted the democratic spirit of citizens, Confucian and traditional values such as respect for authority and hierarchical culture had survived democratization. The latter values were struck down by the financial crisis, which introduced neoliberal principles and values and replaced the traditional Confucian value system. Korean society became more liberal and was exposed to a diversity of values. This transition was expedited by generational changes that had been taking place concurrently.

**Demographic changes and the cohort effect: new dimensions of political culture**

*Generational change and the rise of civic identity*

The most salient political, economic, and social incidents tend to imprint a peculiar memory onto each generation. Thereby, each generation shares its own philosophy. In the case of South Korea, the gap between generations has been very large. How different are Korean youth from the older generation when it comes to values? One of the most noticeable changes can be seen in their views on “self” and “group”. As previously mentioned, group or community is often more important than self in Confucian culture, and sacrifices of individual rights are justified when it is for the communal good.

In order to answer the values question, I used the opinion surveys conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in 2016 and 2017. Figure 3.1 represents how the South Korean public views individual sacrifice for the sake of communal interests. The respondents were asked whether or not they agree that individual freedom can be sacrificed for the sake of the communal good.

![Figure 3.1 Public opinion on individual freedom vs. public interest](image-url)

*Source: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies’ Annual Survey (2016)*
public interest. Nearly 44.75% of respondents did not agree, while 55.3% answered that individual freedom can be sacrificed for public interest. The results may indicate that South Koreans still value the group over the individual. However, a breakdown by age cohorts shows a much different story.

When analyzed by age, the older generation (50 and over) believe that communal security comes first, even at the expense of individual freedom. Nearly 78.5% of those older than 60 stated that individual freedom can be restricted if it serves the public interest. Similar results were found among those in their 50s (70.6%). However, an overwhelming number of the younger generation (those in their 20s to 40s) emphasized individual freedom over group interests. Only 31.9% of those in their 20s believed that individual freedom can be restricted for the public interest, while 68.1% disagreed. These results do not necessarily mean that the South Korean youth does not care about the public interest. Rather, it is indicative of how the value system has dramatically changed over the past 30 years. The data also indicate that the values of liberal democracy are now gaining ground in South Korea.

Another indicator that shows the change in the South Korean value system is how much people care for maintaining ethnic unity and a closed society. One of the most important features of Korean Confucianism is that it sees the state as an extended family. Thus, people tend to have strong ethnic nationalism that divides “us” from “them” based on their origin of birth, bloodline, and locality. In this regard, how strongly people want to maintain ethnic unity can be a measure for how influential Confucianism is among the Korean public. In order to examine this, the survey asked South Koreans how they felt about their children marrying a foreigner. According to the Asan Institute’s annual survey in 2016, 40.6% answered they do not mind their children marrying a foreigner, while only 18.1% said the opposite (see Figure 3.2).

Once again, breakdown by age groups shows a large value gap between younger and older generations. Nationality was not much of an issue for those in their 20s, as 52.5% stated they would not mind if their future children marry foreigners. Only 4.9% of those in

![Figure 3.2 Willingness to accept child’s marriage to a foreigner](Source: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies’ Annual Survey (2016))
their 20s were not supportive of their child marrying a foreigner. However, among the older generation, only 32.9% answered that they would support their children marrying a foreigner and 33.1% answered they would object. Nearly the same number of the elderly were not ready for such a social change of international marriage.

It should be noted that the generational differences and the young generation’s openness toward certain values indicate a new trend. For example, in 2010, approximately 37.2% of South Korean youth stated they would support their child marrying a foreigner. The numbers were nearly the same as those among the older generation. Around 34% of those older than 60 answered the same, leaving only a 3-percentage-point margin between the two groups. The different results during the span of just six years indeed demonstrate that Korean society is constantly and rapidly transforming.

The concept of national identity is also changing among the younger generation. Currently, the long-held belief in ethnic homogeneity of the Korean people being challenged. The number of foreigners coming into South Korea has increased in recent years. As of 2016, foreign nationals living in South Korea exceeded 2 million, comprising approximately 3.9% of the entire population (Korean Statistical Information Service 2017). Of course, this is still a small number compared to that in Western democracies, but the rate has been increasing consistently and is expected to continue to increase. According to a projection, the number of foreign-born residents is expected to reach as high as 10% by 2030 (Presidential Committee for National Cohesion 2015).

In addition, international marriage is becoming one of the primary forms of migration into South Korea. International marriages comprised 7.7% of all marriages in South Korea in 2016 (Korean Statistical Information Service 2016). Naturally, the growing number of international marriages has also created more multicultural families in South Korea. The number of children from multicultural and multiethnic families has steadily increased, reaching approximately 200,000 in 2016 (Ministry of Security and Public Administration 2013). Some scholars even project that 49% of all children in rural areas will come from multicultural families by 2020 (Kang and Lee 2011). These numbers show that South Korea’s ethnic homogeneity is undergoing a transformation. The next question that must be asked is whether or not the definition of “Koreanness” is also shifting. Previously, only those who share the Korean bloodline and have Korean parents were considered fully Korean. As such, recent trends suggest that a significant change in the Korean identity is inevitable. The children of multicultural families will generate a new concept of “Koreanness” which will be based on civic rather than ethnic identity.

Anthony Smith classified national identity into two components: “ethnic” and “civic” (Smith 1991). Within a given territory, all citizens enjoy the same rights and responsibilities under the common law. Civic identity relates to how well a person conforms to the norms and rules of the society and is transmitted by education and formed via socialization processes. In contrast, ethnic identity is determined by whether or not a person shares the same ancestry, pre-historic myths, and memories. Although civic and ethnic components are not mutually exclusive, one component may overshadow the other in some countries (Jones and Smith 2001).

Confucian tradition, the extended family of minjok,7 and Imperial Japanese rule are associated with strong Korean ethnic nationalism. Although we cannot disregard the importance of civic identity, it has been commonly believed that the ethnic component has traditionally featured strongly in the South Korean identity. However, due to changing demographics, this belief is changing as well. Won-Taek Kang and Nae-Young Lee’s edited volume in 2011, Understanding Korean Identity: Through the Lens of Opinion Surveys, provides a starting
point for this discussion. Kang asserts that Korean nationalism has been sustained by an ethnic myth but predicts that it will soon be challenged (Kang and Lee 2011).

A similar survey relating to “civic” and “ethnic” national identity was conducted by the Asan Institute in 2013. A set of seven questions were classified into two categories of the respondent’s attitude toward ethnic and civic identities. Three questions asked about ethnic identity and four questions asked for respondents’ opinion on civic identity. For ethnic identity, the survey asked respondents what factors they consider important in determining Koreanness: (1) being born in Korea, (2) having the Korean bloodline, and (3) living in Korea for most of one’s life. To measure civic identity, four factors were asked: (1) holding Korean nationality, (2) being able to speak and write Korean, (3) obeying the Korean political and legal system, and (4) recognizing Korean traditions.

Table 3.1 presents the results by generations; there are stark differences across different age groups. Overall, South Korean youth stressed civic identity more than ethnic identity. For instance, only 55.4% of those in their 20s thought that being born in Korea was important to being a Korean, which directly contradicted what many of those in their 60s believed: 82% of those belonging to the older generation regarded place of birth as an important component. Bloodline was also not an important quality for those in their 20s; only 55.5% answered that it was important. On the other hand, 81.5% of those in the older generation thought that “Koreanness” was determined by having the Korean bloodline. Regarding Korean civic identity, there were no noticeable differences across generations. All age groups agreed that civic identity was necessary to become a Korean. In particular, following and abiding by the Korean political and legal system appeared to be important to Korean youth. The survey results show that Korean young people view complying with the Korean system and culture as a more important factor than having a Korean bloodline.

Modern and post-modern political culture in South Korea

Last but not least, it is also notable that new and various issue dimensions have emerged within Korean society. This reflects Inglehart’s idea that post-modern values emerge after traditional ideological cleavages lose their influence. What is notable in the South Korean case is that Inglehart’s post-material value cleavage and the classic economic and class cleavages began to divide the people at the same time. Inglehart’s post-modern or post-material values appear in advanced Western democracies where classical economic and class divisions are developed (Inglehart 1990; 1995; 1997). In South Korea, the two cleavages have emerged together.

Since the 2007 presidential election, South Korean electorates have shown much more interest in economic policies. The conservative party advocates growth through economic policies that are “big business friendly” and believe that the overall pie needs to be increased first and distributed later. On the other hand, progressives tend to argue that the overall pie is already big enough and emphasize the redistribution of wealth while strengthening social welfare. Analysis by age groups show that the elderly, who previously experienced exponential growth through “big business friendly” policies, still believe that the overall pie can grow. On the contrary, Korean youth believe that the economy is big enough for distribution of wealth (see Table 3.2). Almost 70% of those in their 20s favor distribution of wealth, while only 31.2% of the elderly supported the idea. On the other hand, 68.6% of the elderly thought that the wealth of the nation should come first before distribution, but only 30.4% of youth agreed.

Social issues are not a significant part of politics yet, but they are clearly coming to the fore. For instance, during the 2017 presidential debate, Mr. Hong Jun-pyo, candidate for the
conservative Liberty Korea Party, abruptly raised the issue of same-sex marriage. He asked Mr. Moon Jae-in, the candidate of the Minjoo Party (Democratic Party of Korea), if he supported the legalization of same-sex marriages. Although it was not a significant enough issue to sway the election results, its appearance in the presidential election debate showed that certain post-modern values are growing in importance in Korea. This issue also demonstrates a stark

Table 3.1 Ethnic and civic national identity: by generations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic component</th>
<th>Important (%)</th>
<th>Not important (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being born in Korea</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s (186)</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s (206)</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s (221)</td>
<td>65.7</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s (188)</td>
<td>78.4</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 or over (199)</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s (186)</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>42.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s (206)</td>
<td>62.6</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a Korean bloodline</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s (221)</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s (188)</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 or over (199)</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s (186)</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s (206)</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in Korea for most of one’s life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s (221)</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s (188)</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 or over (199)</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Civic component

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Important (%)</th>
<th>Not important (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining Korean nationality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s (186)</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s (206)</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s (221)</td>
<td>87.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s (188)</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 or over (199)</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s (186)</td>
<td>91.3</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s (206)</td>
<td>94.4</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to speak and write Korean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s (221)</td>
<td>89.1</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s (188)</td>
<td>92.7</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 or over (199)</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s (186)</td>
<td>94.3</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s (206)</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abiding by Korean political and legal systems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s (221)</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s (188)</td>
<td>93.8</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 or over (199)</td>
<td>90.4</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s (186)</td>
<td>88.1</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s (206)</td>
<td>93.7</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Korean traditions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s (221)</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s (188)</td>
<td>96.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 or over (199)</td>
<td>93.4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies’ Special Survey (2013)
divide across generations. To many of those in their 60s, same-sex marriage is unacceptable. Culturally, same-sex marriages have not been accepted in traditional Korean society. However, Korean youth are much more open to the issue and ready to accept change. Nearly 57.8% of South Koreans in their 20s stated that they support the legalization of same-sex marriage, whereas only 5.1% of those aged 60 and above approved (see Table 3.3).

A generational gap is visible in almost all issues. Of course, the “aging effect” is not a surprise and it is common to observe that youth tend to be relatively more liberal compared to other age groups. In the case of South Korea, however, this phenomenon cannot be dismissed as simply being caused by the “aging effect”. Instead, it should be understood that the Korean society as a whole is heading into a different realm. The young generation has been at the center of this change. This generation has been taught democratic norms since their birth. It was not surprising to see so many young people taking to the streets in 2016 to protest against former President Park Geun-hye. Currently, the most imminent post-modern cleavage arising in South Korean society is gender. Feminism and women’s rights movements have been inflamed by the notorious murder of a 23-year-old woman in Gangnam, one of the busiest districts in Seoul. The killer, a 34-year-old man, told the police he committed the crime because he had been mistreated by women in the past. Feminism conflicts with the traditional Confucian system that considers women subordinates of men (Ko, Haboush and Piggott 2003). This change shows that post-modernism, in which women’s rights are emphasized, has finally arrived in South Korea and proves that the country is on its way to becoming a more advanced democracy.

Table 3.2 Public opinion on favored economic policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Distribution of Wealth (%)</th>
<th>Economic Growth (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s</td>
<td>70.3</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60s or over</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>68.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies’ Annual Survey (2016)

Table 3.3 Public opinion on same-sex marriage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Approve (%)</th>
<th>Disapprove (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>71.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>42.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>54.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>71.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>84.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60s or over</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>94.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies’ Annual Survey (2016)
Conclusion

Almond and Verba’s *Civic Culture* predicted that Asian culture would prevent South Korea from developing a true democracy. Huntington asserted that Confucianism was inherently antidemocratic. However, contrary to their predictions and assertions, the country with a deeply rooted Confucian tradition has today become a mature democracy. The unprecedented economic growth the country experienced since the 1960s laid the groundwork. Economic prosperity created the middle class, whose members participated in the democratization movement in 1987. Those who went to college were not only equipped with intellectual competence but also possessed a democratic mindset. They understood the incongruence between what they wanted and what was actually given to them under autocratic rule. This shared feeling facilitated the democratization movement and eventually resulted in the 1987 uprising.

Confucianism was part of this development. First of all, its strong work ethic was a driving engine for economic growth. The emphasis on higher education under Confucianism stimulated South Korean parents to provide the best possible education for their children. The combination of exponential economic growth along with the growing number of highly educated citizens led to a growing desire for political reform.

Political reform, however, did not bring instant changes in social norms. The Confucian culture persisted throughout the society until 1997, when the financial crisis hit and people began to realize that the mythical father-state no longer was there to protect them. Korean society experienced tremendous changes during this period. The government introduced aggressive neoliberal economic policies, and the South Korean value system shifted from championing traditional Confucian values to liberal and democratic values. As a result, young South Koreans today who are more influenced by Western culture are quite different from older Koreans who are still under the influence of Confucianism. This young generation cherishes individual rights more than group interests. They do not have any nostalgic feelings about authoritarian culture like the older generation. They are not constrained by ethnic identity and have considerable interest in post-modern issues.

The major protests throughout South Korea’s recent history demonstrate how the public are using their rights to express their political opinions. South Koreans are also much more critical of their leaders and raise their voices whenever the government goes against the people’s will. Contrary to Pye’s prediction about Asian countries with hierarchical cultures, South Koreans understand the principles of democracy and are more than willing to use the power vested in them. They have started to raise their voices for individual rights and to embrace post-modern values. The country’s journey toward a more mature democracy in the post-modern era is much anticipated.

Notes

1 Intellectual discussion on political culture goes as far back as Tocqueville and Montesquieu, but modern discourse began with Almond’s article “Comparative Political Systems”, which was published in 1956. The discourse of political culture is well described in Formisano’s 2001 article “The Concept of Political Culture”.

2 Some scholars have raised questions about the explanatory power of the influence of culture in forming democracy. In this view, because it is subjective and hard to measure, the concept of “culture” is not suitable for research since it leave too much unexplained space (Elkins and Simeon 1979).

3 Banfield (1958) uses the example of the village of Montenegro in Southern Italy to illustrate the lack of capability to achieve democratic institutions and economic growth. At the same time, he stresses the culture factor in forming democracy and that non-Western countries except for Japan should be able to employ some Western organizational qualities to achieve these two goals.
4 In a recent Pew Research Center (2017) survey, only 23% of South Koreans had trust in their government. The low number should be taken cautiously, however, because the survey was conducted in Spring 2017 when South Korea was going through the impeachment and subsequent presidential election.

5 Turnouts in American elections is usually below 50% in the midterms. When there is a presidential election, it increases to over 50%, but the number is still lower than that of other advanced countries.

6 True democratization in South Korea probably became firmly rooted in 1992, when Kim Young-sam, the first civilian president, was elected.

7 *Minjok* means Korean people in the context of Korean ethnic nationalism.

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