**Going beyond Confucian relationships: The role of humour in South Korean organizations**

HeeSun Kim

Business School, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

Email: hee.kim@auckland.ac.nz


Dr. Barbara Plester

Business School, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

Email: b.plester@auckland.ac.nz

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**ABSTRACT:** *Humour is a universal phenomenon that is experienced by people of all cultures. Although humour is becoming an increasingly prevalent topic in organizational studies, most literature is based on the Western context, which limits the understanding of humour within the globalized business environment. This conceptual paper explores the role of humour in South Korean organizations, where Confucianism shapes the relationships between individuals. As the Western notion of workplace humour permeates in Korean organizations, humour challenges Confucian value of inequality (Deuchler, 1992) which can develop relationships beyond hierarchical differences in Western organizations (Cooper, 2008). Although using nunchi may help to save face and maintain interpersonal harmony when sharing humour, the influence of humour in the Confucian relationships needs further research.*

**Keywords**: International organizational behaviour, social perspectives, cross cultural management.

## INTRODUCTION

Organizations are becoming more globalized. It is now common to work with a diverse group of people, both within and between organizations. However, this can be difficult to achieve as individuals communication and behaviour is based on different cultural values. Humour is a universal phenomenon that may help individuals to understand or negotiate cultural differences (Berger, 1987). Although humour is enjoying more prevalence in organizational studies, most current research is limited to a Western context. In order to understand humour's influence in a globalized workplace, it is important to analyse the complex phenomenon of humour within different cultural contexts. This is because humour is not simply a light-hearted fun experience, but has some specific workplace functions and outcomes. Humour may be used within organizations to challenge management, push organizational boundaries, develop culture, and providing relief from tension and pressure (Plester & Orams, 2008). Yet, humour processes depend on the different cultural values of each communicating individual, as each person socially constructs the humour moment differently (Plester, 2015).

Humour as a social process can influence the quality of interpersonal relationships (Cooper, 2008) and

successful humour use can foster positive workplace relationships, and may enhance the working atmosphere.  However, the Western organizational emphasis in current research does not offer a global and inclusive understanding of organizational humour, as it neglects alternative perspectives from different geographical, ethnic, and racial groups.  Therefore, this conceptual paper extends the literature by examining humour in a non-Western context, and focuses upon Korean organizations. We examine humour as a social process which helps to develop interpersonal relationships within the Confucian philosophy embedded in South Korean (hereinafter Korea) society and organizations.

## CONFUCIANISM IN KOREA

### What is Confucianism?

Confucianism is a philosophy of relationships that work to construct a social system of moral values, which emphasize harmony and interdependence.  Originating from the works of Chinese scholar Confucius, the philosophy teaches around the concepts of humanism, faithfulness, propriety, and wisdom ('jen', 'I', 'li', and 'chih') (Yum, 1988).  Adopting these concepts in everyday activities, Confucianism create a perspective of civilization, where the people structure relationships and behaviour into a hierarchy through rites and rituals (Deuchler, 1992).  Under Confucian philosophy, these rites are intended to correct human nature under the belief that human beings are fundamentally good, but teaching and guidance can improve people (Shim, Kim, & Martin, 2008).

Korea is one of the East Asian countries where Confucianism is an embedded way of life. Confucianism was accepted and practiced in Korea at least before 372 AD in the 'Three Kingdoms' period (Yi, 1984).  Along with Buddhism, Shamanism, Shilhak, Taoism, Tonghak, and early Korean Christianity, Confucianism is one of the traditional religions or philosophies which influenced what is now generally known as the Korean culture (Park, 2002).  However, it is perhaps one of the most distinct philosophies to shape the relationships between Korean people, and modern Korean society incorporates Confucian rites and rituals in their daily lives (Chung, 1995).

Under Confucian philosophy, people need to know their *place* in society, and understand the nature of their relationships with others.  The nature of these relationships are formulated by the Five Relations: king (leader) and subject; father and son; husband and wife; elder and the younger; and friends (Kalton, 1979).  These relations illustrate social status, where it is socially correct for the person with higher status to be considered to have the leader role ('superior') and exert power over those other below him (i.e. 'subordinate').  Family is the central part of the Confucian relationship structure, and individuals are considered to be a continuation of their parents (Deuchler, 1992).  Parents (especially the father) have an important role in protecting and guiding the family, meaning that they also have the power to make decisions for the group.  Korean families in modern society still reflect a sense of belongingness and reliance towards parental decisions, and an individual's decision making process is influenced by parents even in adulthood (Shim et al., 2008).  A similar perspective to power and authority is given to the elderly within the society. This enables elders to lead by moral example while others follow with respect—creating social order to relieve violence and aggression in the community (Clark, 2000).  Inequality is one of the beliefs which supports the hierarchy and authority necessary for peace.  For example, age is one of the determinants of hierarchy, where an elder would be prioritized over a younger person in most circumstances.  Furthermore, as reflected in the Five Relations (Kalton, 1979), the social position of women is limited under Confucianism. Gender role is distinct- women are expected to nurture the household and be loyal to their husbands, while men have dominant role within their own family and wider society (Deuchler, 2003).

**Communicating Confucianism**

Confucianism is a culture of rites and rituals.  Confucian values shape the lives of the Korean people, not only through books and literature, but physical gestures and verbal components are also significant.  Although some rituals have changed over time, many remain as a part of people's daily lives- regardless of whether people still believe in the meanings behind these rituals or even if they are performed in a distorted manner from traditional enactments (Kang, 1995).  For example, in everyday practices such as greeting, hierarchical relationships between individuals are communicated through

physical actions such as bowing, shaking hands, or waving hands (Cho & Yoon, 2001). Cultural values of the Korean people reflect the embedded concepts of Confucianism- which emphasize family interdependence, status-consciousness, hierarchy, conformity, and in-group and out-group distinction. These relationships are maintained through facework (shim et al., 2008). Facework is the effort to maintain a certain social identity or public self-image towards the self, in order to regulate an individual's position within relationships and wider society (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Therefore, communication is carefully structured to reflect one's identity within Confucianism.

Language and other communication methods also support these Confucian values. Honorifics signal the relational social position of an individual to another- reinforcing their status within conversations (McBrian, 1978). People are addressed using words that represent the social relationship between the individuals (Hwang, 1991). For example, a young female may address an older female differently according to the context. In a relatively personal relationship, the older female is addressed as 'unni' (directly translated as older sister), but in a formal context, the word 'nim' (meaning sir or madam) is used after the full name of the person. When the relationship is linked to any formal or educational institution, then 'sunbae', meaning senior, is used instead. Therefore, a hierarchical relationship is maintained through honorifics, which are traditionally structured in order to preserve harmony between people, and reinforce social positions.

*Nunchi* is a communication skill that assists individuals to maintain good relationships. *Nunchi* is defined as mind-reading (Kim, 2003) or discovering another person's hidden agenda in communication in order to read between the lines (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2014). It can also be considered as having a sense of the situation, which is especially useful for those positioned at a relationally lower social hierarchy (Kim, 1977). By identifying the socially acceptable boundaries between individuals, *nunchi* allows effective communication to be achieved and limit potential mistakes an individual may make in Confucian relationships. While the basic idea of *nunchi* is common across all societies, it is particularly more important within the Korean context. In Confucian relationships, *nunchi* is more than simply having an awareness of the situation, or being polite. Using *nunchi* grasps the situation in a holistic manner, where a successful *nunchi* incorporates

complex processes of executing and deciphering nonverbal messages from one party to another (Samovar et al., 2014).  Usually the role which an individual take in the process of *nunchi* depends on their social status.  The individual positioned at the higher end of the relationship often executes a nonverbal message towards the individual positioned at the lower level- and this often creates responses of 'words which differ from the meaning the Korean wishes to convey' (Oak, 2000, p. 33).  For example, a 'superior' may yawn or sigh with a tired expression to signal that s/he wants coffee.  A 'subordinate' using *nunchi,* would decipher this message quickly to provide coffee to the 'superior', although no verbal communication was exchanged between the individuals.  This process would enable individuals to maintain a positive Confucian relationship by saving the face, or reputation, of the 'superior' (Samovar et al., 2014) and reinforce hierarchical differences.

The main purpose of *nunchi* is to save face (Shim et al., 2008).  Saving face is an important part of maintaining the Confucian relationships, where face represents one's social position within the wider group (Brown & Levinson, 1978).  Although the concept of face concerns a sense of self-respect (Chang & Holt, 1994), within the Confucian ideal of interpersonal relationships, face is inter-related and shared by members of the in-group or social group (Shim et al., 2008).  This means that damaging the face of an individual also damages the face of other members within the same social group.  Externally, the person who exerted the damage would be considered an enemy of the whole group, while internally, the individual who received the damage (failing to save face) may be isolated by the group for damaging the group's reputation.  Saving face emphasizes the nature of interpersonal relationships under Confucianism, and by using *nunchi*, individuals are able to maintain interpersonal harmony by protecting the reputation of different hierarchical groups.


**Confucianism in organizations**

Confucian relationships are even more obvious in Korean organizational settings, as the organizational hierarchy also reinforces the status differences of individuals.  This means that the Confucian values of hierarchical relationships are emphasized at two levels- first from the family and

wider society, and secondly, from the organizational structure which divides individuals into different vertical levels. The use of honorifics and organizational position to address each other constantly reinforce the hierarchical position, and create a boundary in developing interpersonal relationships (Yum, 1988).

Workplaces construct another set of expectations towards organizational relationships, along with the relational hierarchy suggested by the Five Relations (Kalton, 1979). Individuals that have a higher organizational position or job title (within organizational hierarchy) are considered as 'superiors'. This means that the CEO of a company would be considered to be the most 'superior' individual within the workplace, while the vice-CEO has only one 'superior'- the CEO. These 'superiors' are considered to be have a similar role to a parent within the organizational context, while 'subordinates' or other members of the organization that have a lower hierarchical position are considered to be similar to a 'child' of the their 'superior'. Work colleagues, or members belonging to the same hierarchical level, such as a group of junior managers, and thus are considered to be siblings. Therefore, the Korean workplace replicates a family-like structure, where the relationships between the individuals display an extension of the family. This helps to create interpersonal bonds and a sense of belongingness beyond what is described as 'work colleague' in Western organizations (Kee, 2008). However, such definitions in organizational relationships also create an environment of control, as paternalistic leadership is created through this structure (Kee, 2008). Interestingly, this patriarchy is accepted as a part of the Confucian culture, where inequality is necessary to achieve interpersonal harmony. This limits the extent of the relationships that an individual can develop with another member of the organization, especially for those at different vertical levels.


## HUMOUR: WESTERN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Humour is a universal phenomenon which occurs in all cultures and societies (Berger, 1987). While humour plays various roles in different contexts, and organizational humour fulfils a variety of functions that include challenging managers and organizational boundaries, offers relief from tension,

and creating and developing organizational culture (Plester & Orams, 2008). It is important to investigate humour as a social process, because humour can act as a medium of connection between individuals by creating a positive feeling between different people, and thus develops workplace relationships (Cooper, 2008).

Modern research investigates the use of humour in groups and throughout multiple workplace relationships (see Cooper, 2008; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008; Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006). Cooper's (2008) relational process model suggests that humour is a social process which influences the quality of relationships between individuals, and this occurs in conjunction with the individual-level mechanisms evident in humour. Humour allows individuals to focus on their commonality and the enjoyment of the experience, while blurring or mitigating other differences (such as organizational hierarchy). Humour may improve workplace relationships through four interrelated processes of *affect-reinforcement, perceived similarity, self-disclosure*, and *hierarchical salience*. Sharing humour creates an enjoyable experience, where the positive emotions created in this process can lead to affection towards the person engaged in the humour (*affect-reinforcement*). Individuals are attracted by the fact that they are laughing at the same event- feeling similar to one another (*perceived similarity*). Nevertheless, sharing humour reveals personal information and signals openness, to create a feeling of intimacy (*self-disclosure*), which can be achieved in both horizontal and vertical relationships within the organization, and this can decrease the perceived social distance between organizational members (*hierarchical salience*).

Individuals build their own unique set of cultural expectations based on their past experiences (such as their perception of power distance), and these expectations are dynamic and socially constructed. Therefore, humour is interpreted according to the different sets of expectations of the communicating individuals and may affect the quality of interpersonal relationships either positively or negatively. Cooper's relational process model (2008) shows the effect of humour between organizational members in general- but its impact in a non-Western context such as a Confucian society is limited, and so we examine the notion of workplace humour in a Confucian context.

**Western humour and Confucian organization**

While humour in Western organizational contexts has been researched across extensive topics such as creativity, leadership, relationships, and much more, (refer to Lang & Lee, 2010; Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999; Cooper, 2008), the concept of humour is less approachable in Confucian organizations. While humour is generally viewed as a beneficial phenomenon in Western organizations, humour in a Confucian organizational context may be considered dangerous, because it risks damaging interpersonal harmony between organizational members. This is because conceptually, humour is in conflict with the Confucian philosophy of inequality, in levelling the relationships between 'superiors' and 'subordinates' through laughter.

As humour can influence the quality of interpersonal relationships, and allow organizational members to develop relationships both vertically and horizontally (see Cooper, 2008), this process may be more complicated in a Confucian society. Firstly, workplace humour is not used freely within Korean organizations. Confucian philosophy emphasizes rites and rituals to create a sense of formality, and organizational communication tends to be formally structured and even silence is perceived as a good style of communication (Lim, 1999). Speech is devalued especially in 'superior' and 'subordinate' communication, as the Confucian value of hierarchy suggest that 'subordinates' should follow the decisions of the 'superiors' rather than providing their own opinion about a matter (Song & Meek, 1998). Thus humour may be seen as an unnecessary verbal communication, and communication skills such as *nunchi* are more useful in creating good organizational relationships. Secondly, humour is ambiguous, and individuals can interpret humour differently. This means that the consequences for failed humour are greater than simply having an awkward moment, or negatively influencing the quality of an interpersonal relationship. A joke may violate the communication norms of the group and affect interpersonal harmony (Meyer, 2000)- and this violation may deeply upset a Confucian group as harmony is highly valued. Similarly, the idea of establishing a relationship with a 'superior' in a Confucian organization, violates the notion of superiority. Through Western humour, a joker may attempt to establish an equal relationship (momentarily) with a 'superior'- and again, this violates

Confucian norms reliant on unequal, hierarchical relationships to create interpersonal harmony. Therefore, Confucianism in Korean organizations limits the use of humour between members of different hierarchical status. However, external influences such as the Western culture are starting to change the way organizational members think and behave (Zhang, Lin, Nonaka, & Beom, 2005).

**Expanding Confucian boundaries**

Confucianism in Korean organizations is changing, as globalization introduce alternative values from Western cultures (Zhang & Harwood, 2004). In particular, the younger generation are influenced by Western culture, which can promote different social values and create conflict and confusion in organizations. Research by Ingelhart (1997) suggests that Korea has a significant 'generation gap' when understanding cultural values. However, work culture and interpersonal relationships are still influenced greatly by the Confucian values (Kee, 2008), and the hierarchical relationships and interdependence (a sense of 'we' or collectivity) are still predominant amongst the younger generation (Zhang et al., 2005). This suggests while Confucianism in Korean organizations is relatively stagnant, the workers' values are changing to potentially create a conflict between the different perspectives.

Humour is perhaps a phenomenon creating this conflict between the members of Korean organization. From the traditional perspective, humour does not belong in a Confucian organization. It is perceived to be an inferior form of communication, where a humorous individual is considered to not take work seriously (Yue, 2014). However, the Western organizational influences are changing the values of Korean organizations (especially the younger generation), and this includes the method in which individuals communicate. Perceptions towards workplace humour can be part of this change, where the formality between members of different hierarchical position may be diminished through humour, and collegial relationships may be established, similar to that of Western organizational context. This would suggest that humour extends the notion of Confucian relationships, and blur hierarchical boundaries. However, Korean organizations and organizational member still emphasize the

importance of hierarchical relationship and interpersonal harmony (Zhang et al., 2005), meaning that using humour may clash with the general philosophy in Korean organizations.

Using communication skills such as *nunchi* may contribute towards diminishing this conflict. By reading the context and analysing what is acceptable- organizational members can limit how the humour is to be played, and keep it safe (Butler, 2015). Humour may be used to emphasize the collectiveness of the communicators, and correct any potential challenges made towards the 'superior' in the process through *nunchi*. Therefore, the face of the communicators can be saved, and preserve interpersonal harmony as social status of the 'superior' is not directly challenged. This suggests that skills such as *nunchi* may help with the introduction of humour in Korean organizational relationships, and also a change in Confucianism within Korean organizations. However, how humour influences Confucian relationships in Korean organizations is still uncertain, thus further investigation is required.

## CONCLUSION

Humour is a universal phenomenon that can be observed in all societies, and it can be an important part of organizational life- influencing the quality of interpersonal relationships between organizational members (Cooper, 2008). While the study of humour has been gaining interest in organizational contexts, there are still gaps in the literature in understandings organizational humour in different cultural contexts. This conceptual paper attempts to bridge this gap by examining humour as a social process in non-Western, Korean organizational settings, where relationships between individuals are based on the standards of Confucianism. The Western concept of humour can influence of the quality of interpersonal relationships by adopting Cooper's relational process model (2008). However, this is a complex process in Korean organizations, as Confucian philosophy (also in the larger Korean society) is embedded in the daily lives of the Korean workers, and this is in contrast with the Western conceptions of workplace humour.

The Confucian values of hierarchy defines the organizational relationships vertically, supported by the use of honorifics in language, and identifying each individual according to the organizational position, based on the family-like hierarchical system which structures a group (McBrian, 1978; Shim et al., 2008). Humour used in this Confucian organizational setting can be dangerous, as Confucianism is a culture of rituals, where formality is emphasized and behaviour is restricted according to the individual's social and organizational position (Deuchler, 1992). Therefore, workplace humour is a relatively new concept in Korean organizational life, where it is often considered inappropriate in a professional organizational setting (Song, Hale, & Rao, 2005). However, globalization and Western influences are changing the perceptions of Korean organizational members- creating a wide generational gap in cultural values (Ingelhart, 1997) and potential conflicts within the traditional Confucian relationships.

Unlike Western contexts, Confucian principles within Korean organizational contexts emphasize inequality- suggesting that those in a 'subordinate' position do not have the liberty of instigating humour with a 'superior'. That is, humour is not used to mitigate hierarchical differences and create extended collegiality. Using humour in organizational contexts goes beyond the formality expected in highly hierarchical Confucian relationships. However, Korean organizations are becoming more subject to Western organizational influences and modes of communication. Although humour may be attempted in conjunction with the communication skill of *nunchi*, enabling the communicating parties to save face in the process, whether humour can successfully blur the hierarchical boundaries in Confucian relationships is uncertain. Thus, humour usage such as that shared between Western colleagues may clash dramatically with current Korean ethos. This is an emerging aspect of workplace humour and that predicates the call for further cross-cultural humour research.

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