Thinking Confucianism, Fast and Slow: The Story World of Confucianism in Korean Studies

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Abstract

In Korean Studies, Confucianism often serves as a proxy for other sets of values perceived negatively, for example, through its association with patriarchy rather than feminism or with authoritarianism rather than freedom. Such binary stereotypes, repeated by many scholars, distort understandings of Confucianism and, by extension, produce a skewed image of Korea as a whole. This research aims to: (1) raise awareness of these binary stereotypes, (2) elucidate the underlying factors contributing to the stereotypical perception of Confucianism in Korean Studies, and (3) propose strategies for dismantling these stereotypes. To effectively deconstruct them, the first step provides an overview of how Confucianism has been portrayed in Korean Studies. To this end, we employ the online platform Voyant to analyse ten introductory texts on Confucianism in a Korean context. The findings from this analysis indicate that the essence of Confucianism is dynamic and that definitions of Confucianism are multivocal and often ambiguous. We argue that it is precisely this dynamic essence, multivocality and ambiguity that make Confucianism vulnerable to appropriation by stereotypes. At the same time, we contend that this very variability allows Korean Confucianism to adapt to new circumstances and thrive in an ever-changing world.

Keywords: *Confucian patriarchy*; *East Asia as exoticised other*; *theologocentrism*; *Neo-Confucianism*; *Zhu Xi*; *filial piety*; *The Analects*; *Confucian Classics*

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Introduction

About five months after the South Korean Sinologist Kim Kyŏngil published the bestseller *Only if Confucius Dies, Will Our Country Live* (K. *Kongja ka chugŏya, nara ka sanda*) in 1999, Ch'oe Pyŏngch'ŏl, also a trained Sinologist, critically engaged with the former's arguments in his book titled *Only if Confucius Lives, Will Our Country Live* (K. *Kongja ka saraya, nara ka sanda*). Both authors tend to generalise: the former associates Confucianism with everything evil, while the latter portrays it primarily as a positive source. In the same vein, Confucianism has been blamed for economic success (Lee 1995) as well as for failure—for instance, the financial crisis in 1997 (Eggert 2014: 130) and even tragic accidents like the 1997 Korean Air crash in Guam or the 2014 Sewol ferry sinking (Cawley 2022: 139; Choi 2018).

These examples illustrate the extent of stereotype surrounding Confucianism in South Korean public discourse. While it is no surprise to find stereotypes common in public debates conducted under time pressure, this article problematises the stereotyping of Confucianism within the academic discourse of Korean Studies—a realm ideally characterised by nuanced reflection and not commonly associated with essentialist reductionism. For instance, many scholars of modern and contemporary Korea explain the high rates of gender inequality in South Korea by explicitly referring to 'Confucian patriarchy' (An 2024: 185; Kim and Finch 2002; Sung 2003) or 'Confucian patriarchal social structures' (Nelson, Cho, and Seth 2016: 334). Additionally, hierarchy and authority are often associated with Confucianism (Buzo 2023: 13), without clarifying what is specifically 'Confucian' about hierarchy and authority. In Korean Studies, Confucianism is frequently employed as a stand-in for any values that are perceived negatively. For example, it is commonly associated with patriarchy rather than feminism, authoritarianism rather than freedom, hierarchy rather than equality, collectivism rather than individualism, conservatism rather than innovation and tradition rather than modernity. The persistent reiteration of such binary stereotypes across scholarship distorts understandings of Confucianism and, by extension, contributes to a skewed representation of Korea.

There are many rich scholarly discussions on the role of Confucianism in Korea,[1] not only in Korean (e.g., Kŭm Changt'ae)[2], but also in

English (e.g., Baker 2008; Chong 2024; De Bary and Kim Haboush 1985; Deuchler 1992; Elman, Duncan and Ooms 2002; Evon 2022; Tu 1996).[3] Numerous attempts have been made to debunk essentialist views of Confucianism. Studies by Eggert, Roetz and Yüksel challenge the widespread reductionist understanding of Confucianism by focusing on the complex role of dissent (Eggert 2019; Roetz 2016), subjectivity (Eggert 2018), forgiveness (Eggert and Roetz 2022), and the tension between moral duty and public service (Yüksel 2016) in scholarly discourses. These studies reveal the complex nature of Confucian concepts and ideas, which frequently contain internal contradictions and thus necessitate delicate ethical balancing acts by those engaged in such conflicts. The number and depth of the studies discussed above suggest that the general tendency in South Korean public discourse and in academic discourse in Korean Studies to essentialise Confucianism cannot be explained by a lack of information.

This study does not seek to intervene in debates on Confucianism from the standpoint of an expert in Korean religions or philosophies. Rather, it approaches the issue from the perspective of narrative studies, asking not who is right or wrong, but—as Liu (1995) formulates in *Translingual Practice*—why authors interpret in certain ways and what new meanings are produced in the process (89). Against this backdrop, the research pursues three goals: (1) to raise awareness of binary stereotypes, (2) to examine the factors shaping stereotypical perceptions of Confucianism in Korean Studies and (3) to propose strategies for dismantling them. To this end, we use the online platform Voyant to analyse ten introductory texts on Confucianism in a Korean context.

Specifically, the first section of this article explores the multivocality and ambiguity inherent in the Confucian Classics[4] and considers how these characteristics have contributed to the formation of stereotypes and misappropriations. The second section draws on Kahneman's bestseller *Thinking, Fast and Slow* to explain why the ubiquity of stereotypes in public discourse is hardly surprising. At the same time, we problematise the stereotyping of Confucianism within the academic discourse of Korean Studies, a field that should ideally engage in nuanced reflection rather than essentialist simplifications. The third section provides an overview of Confucianism by engaging with ten introductory texts on Korean Confucianism, while the fourth section analyses these texts with the help of Voyant to examine which

key elements (figures, places, texts, concepts, practices, characteristics) they activate to define Korean Confucianism. The findings suggest that Korean Confucianism is dynamic, multivocal, and often ambiguous. We argue that these very qualities make it vulnerable to appropriation through stereotypes yet also enable Korean Confucianism to adapt to new circumstances and remain resilient in an ever-changing world.

Multivocality and Ambiguity in the Confucian Classics

This section demonstrates how the Confucian Classics themselves embody the multivocality and ambiguity of Confucianism and how this polyphony provides fertile ground for diverse interpretations as well as misappropriations. A prominent example is the 'right to rebel' (Indraccolo 2022) as described in the *Works of Mencius* (*K. Maengja*), one of the core Confucian Classics. When King Xuan of Qi asked if a minister may put his sovereign to death, Mencius explained that if a sovereign neglects to perform benevolence and righteousness, the sovereign is no longer qualified to be called a sovereign and can be put to death (Legge 1933: 493–494).[5] This example shows that obedience and authority go hand in hand with the option, or even duty, to rebel and to dissent, making them as much a part of Confucianism as the former: as long as a sovereign effectively fulfils their responsibilities, the people are expected to remain compliant; however, if the sovereign fails to perform their duties and ceases to act as a benevolent protector, it becomes the obligation of the people to engage in rebellion. In this passage, the *Works of Mencius,* however, offer no explicit guideline, instead entrusting the people to judge their sovereign and act in accordance with their judgment. Some may interpret Mencius' words as a call for obedience, while others may see them as a call for revolt.

Another prominent passage that has been understood in different ways is found in *The Analects*, another Confucian Classic. 'The Master said, "If a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge, so as continually to be acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others"' (Legge 1933: 18).[6] Although Kim Kyŏngil, for example, understands this passage as evidence that Confucianism leads to a 'backward culture' (*twidorabogi munhwa*, Kim 2024: 151), Ch'oe Pyŏngch'ŏl argues that this passage shows the exact opposite. According to him, Confucianism emphasises the importance of the future, employing the past merely as a mirror or foundation to construct a better one (Ch'oe 2014: 29).[7]

It is not surprising that the same passage can yield different interpretations. As the philosopher Roman Ingarden wrote in 1960, every work of art only provides 'cones of light which illuminate parts' (Ingarden 1960: 230). This also rings true for works of literature or philosophy. It is our task as readers to connect the illuminated parts of information in a meaningful way (Wall 2016: 100). In *The Act of Reading* (G. *Der Akt des Lesens*), Iser further emphasises the agency of the reader, arguing that the reader needs to concretise the author's text to give it meaning (Iser 1984: 38). However, what readers find meaningful depends on their own knowledge, personality, and experience, and maybe also on their agenda (Brinker 1980: 203).

If we follow this line of thought, we can assume that the divergence between Kim Kyŏngil's and Ch'oe Pyŏngch'ŏl's interpretations of the same passage from *The Analects* has to do with their distinct personal agendas, knowledge and experiences. Different readings do not necessarily imply that one is right and the other is wrong; rather, they simply reflect different ways of connecting the illuminated nodes. Still, it is important to note that the fact that a text does not communicate fixed information does not mean it takes on just any meaning (Culler 1986: 138). The literary historian Damrosch explains that every text contains 'suggestive gaps' (Damrosch 2003: 292) that the reader must fill in. These gaps initiate and regulate the dialogue between text and reader.

As a matter of fact, texts can be suggestive to varying degrees. Some literary works are more 'freely variable' (Damrosch 2003: 293) than others. Damrosch identifies the variability of a work of world literature as one of its 'constitutive features' (Damrosch 2003: 5). Variability can be 'one of its greatest strengths' (Damrosch 2023: 6), since it permits a text to adapt to various circumstances. At the same time, he calls variability the 'greatest vulnerability when [a text] is mishandled or misappropriated by its newfound foreign friends' (Damrosch 2023: 6). This also rings true for Confucianism as a world philosophy. On the one hand, Confucianism thrives around the globe because of its adaptability to various contexts. On the other hand, its variability makes Confucianism vulnerable to misappropriation by stereotypes.[8]

The historian John Duncan (2006) demonstrates this variability of instrumentalisation in a section titled 'The Plasticity of Confucianism' (Duncan 2006: 33) by describing the rhetoric of

anti- and pro-Confucianism in Korea in the 19th and 20th centuries (Duncan 2006: 34–38). To avoid misappropriation, Duncan reminds us that before we decide to call an idea or practice 'Confucian', we first need to demonstrate what is specifically 'Confucian' about the idea or practice (Duncan 2006: 37–38; see also Sancho 2020: 7). Calling universal concepts or practices—such as patriarchy, democracy, authoritarianism, or harmony—'Confucian' merely because the context is Korean or 'East Asian', suggests an orientalist approach that essentialises East Asia as an exoticised other.

Thinking Confucianism, Fast and Slow

It is not my intention to demonise stereotypes per se. In his bestseller *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, the psychologist Kahneman reminds us that 'stereotyping is a bad word in our culture', but that, still, 'stereotypes, both correct and false, are how we think of categories', when we think 'fast' (Kahnemann 2011: 168–169). Kahnemann explains that we generally rely on 'fast thinking' since our energy resources are limited, and we thus depend on the 'law of least effort'. 'Slow thinking' that supports differentiated reflections requires more energy and can only protect the most important activities (Kahnemann 2011: 35). Kahnemann therefore describes stereotyping as a 'puzzling limitation of our mind' (Kahnemann 2011: 13).

The journalist Choi (2018) condemns stereotypes surrounding Confucianism in her article 'Stop Attributing Everything to Confucianism' arguing that 'no learned person would try to explain a certain country or region by invoking just one word or define an intellectual tradition going back centuries with a few descriptives'. Nevertheless, what Rodinson termed theologocentrism (Rodison 2009: 104), the belief that all observable phenomena in a specific region can be explained by reference to a single religion or system of thought—remains ubiquitous in public discourses worldwide, discourses we tend to associate with 'fast thinking'. What we seek to problematise, however, is the use of such stereotypes within the academic discourse of Korean Studies—a field not typically associated with essentialist reductionism or stereotyping, but rather with 'slow thinking'.

As mentioned above, many scholars of modern and contemporary Korea explain the high rates of gender inequality in South Korea by explicitly referring to 'Confucian patriarchy' (An 2024: 185; Kim and

Finch 2002; Sung 2003) or 'Confucian patriarchal social structures' (Nelson, Cho, and Seth 2016: 334). Notably, these examples usually do not originate from authors with an expertise in philosophy, religion, or Confucianism, but rather from specialists of contemporary Korea with expertise often in popular culture, politics, gender studies, or education.

While patriarchal social structures do in fact dominate contemporary South Korean society, what is specifically 'Confucian' about patriarchy in Korea needs investigation. To begin, consider a different place on the globe. According to *Statistics Denmark*, 'the female population [in Denmark] earned an average of 12.4 per cent less than the male population'[9] in 2023. In 2024, November 14 was labelled 'Kvindernes sidste arbejdsdag' [Women's last day of work] in Denmark, since according to the wage gap women basically work for free for the rest of the year (DM 2024). The statistics suggest that women face discrimination in a country like Denmark that ranks relatively high on the Gender Equality Index. If 'Confucian patriarchy' were responsible for the gender inequality in South Korea, would 'Christian patriarchy' then be responsible for gender inequality in Denmark? What is gained by adding 'Confucian' or 'Christian' as a descriptor to patriarchy or inequality? Would the emphasis on *Confucian* patriarchy or *Christian* patriarchy imply the assumption that without Confucianism or Christianity there would not be inequality? Eggert criticises this kind of theologocentrism and explains that it is as meaningless to attribute all social phenomena in East Asia to Confucianism as it is to attribute all social phenomena in Europe to Christianity (Eggert 2014: 131). In a time where the 'invisibility' (Perez 2019) of women still dominates the world, explaining gender inequality in Korea by referring to Confucianism seems to exhibit a restrictive viewpoint. What Confucianism specifically contributes to Korean patriarchy must be articulated (Duncan 2006: 38) to justify adding 'Confucian' as a descriptor.

Besides patriarchy, hierarchy and authority are two other concepts often associated with Confucianism. In *The Making of Modern Korea*, Buzo, for example, mentions that Neo-Confucianism still serves as the source for 'rigorous' hierarchical thinking (Buzo 2023: 13). Still, Buzo provides no explanation on what about this hierarchical thinking makes it Confucian. Is Confucianism really the obvious choice to understand hierarchical thinking in South Korea? In her

seminal work *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, Moon demonstrates the impact of militarisation on social hierarchies in South Korea. While she emphasises that she does not 'intend to reduce the complex phenomenon of South Korean modernity to militarization' (Moon 2005: 7), she makes very clear the degree to which militarisation has shaped social relations in Korea; at the same time, militaries all over the world celebrate hierarchical thinking. Given the ubiquitous visibility of the military in South Korean society to this day, it is surprising that authors still attribute hierarchical thinking to Confucianism and not to military culture. Often authors cannot provide any explanation of what actually is Confucian about the hierarchy they describe.

Academic databases and search engines provide us many more examples of academic studies that essentialise Korean Confucianism to explain certain phenomena in contemporary Korea or behaviour of Koreans today.[10] In the next section we will attempt to discuss what Korean Confucianism 'really' is.

Approaching the 'Story World' of Korean Confucianism

It is very difficult to provide a distinct definition of religions or systems of thought such as Christianity, Islam, or Confucianism, in large part because of their variability and 'plasticity'. As noted in the previous section, stereotyping Confucianism in the academic discourse of Korean Studies usually does not originate from scholars with expertise in philosophy, religion, or Confucianism itself but rather from specialists in contemporary Korea whose expertise often lie in popular culture, politics, gender studies, or education. Because of disciplinary interests and boundaries, the rich body of scholarship on Confucianism in Korea produced by scholars of religion and philosophy often goes unnoticed by scholars outside of those fields. To better understand Korean Confucianism from a non-specialist's perspective, this section therefore approaches the subject not as an expert in Confucianism, but as a student with a general interest who seeks a quick overview of its key figures, texts, concepts, and practices. For this purpose, we have selected ten introductory texts.

1. The article summary of an entry in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* by Michael Kalton titled 'Korean Confucian Philosophy' (1998)

2. A dictionary entry on Confucianism in *Korea: A Historical and Culture Dictionary* by Keith Pratt and Richard Rutt (1999)
3. Sections titled 'Das Geistesleben der Koryŏ-Zeit [The intellectual life during the Koryŏ period] and 'Die Errichtung eines neo-konfuzianischen Staats' [The establishment of a Neo-Confucian state] in *Kleine Geschichte Koreas* [Short history of Korea] by Marion Eggert and Jörg Plassen (2005)
4. A presentation paper by Isabelle Sancho titled 'Does Confucianism matter in the study of Korea?' (2015)
5. A chapter by Michael Seth titled 'A Confucian Society' from his book *Korea: A Very Short Introduction* (2020)
6. An entry in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* by Kevin Cawley titled 'Korean Confucianism' (2021)
7. An entry in the online encyclopedia *Tusan paekkwa* on 'Han'guk yugyo' [Korean Confucianism] (Tup'idia 2025)
8. An answer by ChatGPT to the question 'What is Korean Confucianism? What are the key figures, texts, places, concepts, practices and characteristics?' (OpenAI 2025)
9. An answer by DeepSeek to the question above (DeepSeek 2025)
10. An answer by Copilot to the same question (Bing 2025)

This selection is in no way comprehensive and, to some extent, random, given the aim of this study is not a complete overview of Korean Confucianism. Rather, we chose texts that a student at a European university might stumble upon when looking for information on Korean Confucianism. Some students might search in dictionaries or encyclopaedias online (Cawley 2021; Tup'idia 2025) or offline (Kalton 1998; Pratt and Rutt 1999). Others might revisit introductory textbooks of Korean Studies (Eggert and Plassen 2005; Seth 2020) or a presentation paper on the topic (Sancho 2015). More recently, we expect that students will turn to AI models, such as ChatGPT, DeepSeek, or Copilot.

While some of the ten texts are written by experts of Korean Confucianism, others are not even written by human beings and have never undergone peer-review. We want to emphasise that the primary selection criteria for the ten texts is not academic quality, but the accessibility or attractiveness for students looking for a basic overview of Korean Confucianism. We must remember that AI models are trained on a large dataset of text, and their answers

are outputs of an algorithm. Still, despite their different academic quality, all ten texts have in common that they define the integral elements of Korean Confucianism, although they do it in different ways.

What we are interested in is thus not a 'one and only definition' of Confucianism but rather the overlap and divergence of the definitions in the ten selected texts. How do the texts connect the illuminated nodes of information? What kinds of narratives do they construct? Which elements play a core role and which a peripheral role? Methodologically, we will use the online platform Voyant to analyse and visualise statistical information from the ten selected texts. In narrative studies, the integral elements of stories are called 'actants', mainly characters, objects and places (Tangherlini 2017: 2). The first step to understanding the 'story world' of Korean Confucianism will therefore be to define its integral elements or actants. It is, of course, not the aim of this study to define the exact number of elements affiliated with Korean Confucianism. The selection of integral elements here is based on the ten selected texts mentioned above, and it addresses the elements (characters, places, objects) that are used to describe and define Confucianism. After comparing all ten texts, we selected 86 integral elements that recur in the ten texts in various combinations. 'Recur' here means that an element has to appear in at least two of the selected texts to be included in what we call the 'pool of integral elements' of Korean Confucianism. In the next step, we explore how the ten texts select and recombine these 86 integral elements.[11]

The 86 integral elements include 24 characters or key figures, 4 key places, 16 key texts and 42 key concepts, practices and characteristics. To examine how the integral elements are combined in the variations, we will first use the 'pool of integral elements' (Table 1) as a filter to count how many and which of the elements are activated in each of the 10 introductory texts. The pool is divided into the four categories mentioned above. While the ten introductory texts usually provide Chinese characters for figures, places and texts, the fourth category 'key concepts, practices and characteristics' often relies on non-Korean terms without adding Chinese characters. That is the reason why some of the elements in the fourth category are presented without Chinese characters in the table.

In the second step, we feed Voyant this information. That means we do not feed Voyant with the whole ten texts, but only with the integral elements that appear in the texts. For example, if one of the key figures appears in eight of the introductory texts, the name of this key figure will be added to the corpus eight times. Voyant then creates word clouds and tables based on the corpus. These visualizations give us an idea of which elements constitute Korean Confucianism based on the ten selected texts. How many elements overlap or diverge? Which elements play a core role and which a peripheral role? The resulting visualizations of data will help us explore how Korean Confucianism is presented in the ten texts.

Key figures
An Hyang 安珦 (1243-1306)
Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032-1085)
Cheng Yi 程頤(1033-1107)
Chŏng Mongju 鄭夢周 (1337-1392)
Chŏng Tojŏn 鄭道傳 (1342-1398)
Chŏng Yagyong 丁若鏞 (1762–1836)
Confucius 孔子 (551-479 BCE)
Ki Taesŭng 奇大升 (1527–1572)
Kwŏn Kŭn 權近 (1352-1409)
Mencius 孟子 (372–289 BCE)
Paek Ijŏng 白頤正 (1249-1323)
Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk 徐敬德 (1489-1546)
Sŏng Hon 成渾 (1536-1596)
yangban 兩班 (hereditary elite)
Yi Chehyŏn 李齊賢
Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501-1570)
Yi I 李珥 (1536-1584)
Yi Ik 李瀷 (1681–1763)
Yi Saek 李穡 (1328-1396)
Yi Sungin 李崇仁 (1347-1392)
Yurim 儒林 (Confucian community)
Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-1077)

Key figures
Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017-1072)
Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200)

Key places
Chongmyo 宗廟(Royal Shrine)
Munmyo 文廟 (Temple of Confucius)
Sŏnggyun-gwan 成均館 (National Academy)
Sŏwŏn 書院(Confucian academies)

Key texts
Confucian Classics 經典
Great Learning 大學
Five Classics 五經
Four Books 四書
Iphak tosŏl 入學圖說 (Diagrammatic Treatises for the Commencement of Learning)
Kyŏngguk taejŏn 經國大典
Book of Rites 禮記
The Analects 論語
Works of Mencius (C. Mengzi) 孟子
Pulssi chappyŏn 佛氏雜辨
Book of Songs 詩經
Sŏnghak chipyo 聖學輯要 (Essentials of the Learning of the Sages)
Sŏnghak sipto 聖學十圖 (The Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning)
Taiji-tu 太極圖
Book of Changes 易經 (Classic of Changes)
Zhongyong 中庸

Key concepts, practices, characteristics
anti-modern
ancestral rites 祭祀
chŏng 情 (feeling, emotion)

Key concepts, practices, characteristics
diagrams 圖
patriarchy, discrimination of women
education
elitism
ethics
examination system
factionalism
family, familism
Four-Seven Debate
governing
harmony
hierarchical thinking
Horak Debate
village covenant 鄕約 (*hyangyak*)
filial piety 孝
principle 理
in 仁 (humanity)
intolerance
ki 氣 (material force)
kyŏng 敬 (seriousness, mindfulness)
learning
loyalty
moral values
five human relationships 五倫
rites 禮, rituals, ritual propriety
role-ethics
sage 聖人
three bonds, five relationships 三綱五倫
self-cultivation 修己

Key concepts, practices, characteristics
sim 心 (mind, heart)
sirhak 實學 (practical learning)
state ideology
tradition
UNESCO
ŭi 義 (righteousness)
virtue
school of principle 理學
Neo-Confucianism
sŏngnihak 性理學 (learning of human nature and principle)

Table 1: Pool of integral elements of Korean Confucianism divided into four categories. Source: Authors.

A Voyage with Voyant to the Essence of Korean Confucianism Based on Ten Introductory Texts

We start this experiment with a focus on the key figures as they appear in the ten introductory texts. The pool of integral elements of the story world of Korean Confucianism includes 24 key figures. Graph 1 is a word cloud generated by Voyant (Cirrus) that visualises these key figures. The most frequently occurring figures are placed at the centre and displayed in larger sizes. The most prominent figure in this word cloud is Zhu Xi the preeminent master of Neo-Confucianism from Song China (960-1279). He is the only key figure that appears in all ten texts. Nine of the texts mention Yi Hwang, eight texts name Yi I. Both appear today on banknotes in South Korea and are widely known as Neo-Confucian scholars from Chosŏn Korea (1392-1910). While six texts still mention Chŏng Tojŏn, a scholar-official who served during the Koryŏ period (918-1392) and the beginning of the Chosŏn period, all other key figures listed in Table 1 appear in only four or fewer of the ten texts. This means that Zhu Xi belongs to the absolute core of the story world of Korean Confucianism, three other key figures are relatively close to the core, and 20 play a somewhat peripheral role. This rather small overlap of key figures among the ten introductory texts suggests

a relatively high degree of variability among the ten introductory texts we are studying. This means that there is not a wide consensus about which figures are 'key', but it rather seems to depend on the preferences of the author.[12]

Graph 1. Key Figures of the Story World of Korean Confucianism (Sinclair and Rockwell 2025, accessed September 22, 2025, from https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=16b07fed962d82ff8800a72c4b1298ab&view=Cirrus)

In contrast to its many key figures, the pool of integral elements of the story world of Korean Confucianism includes only four key places. Graph 2 suggests a general disagreement on the key places in the ten introductory texts. While 'Sŏnggyun-gwan' (National Academy) and 'Sŏwŏn' (Confucian academies) still appear in six of the introductory texts, the low number of places in the pool of integral elements suggests that places generally do not seem to play a crucial role when defining Korean Confucianism.

Graph 2. Key Places of the Story World of Korean Confucianism (Sinclair and Rockwell 2025, accessed September 22, 2025, from https://voyant-tools.org/?view=Cirrus&visible=25&corpus=f2ea8751821006854846a2400373a777)

As for the sixteen key texts in the pool of integral elements of Korean Confucianism, we can divide them into three categories: (1) specific titles of Confucian Classics (*The Analects*, *Works of Mencius*, etc.), (2) generic titles for certain groups of Confucian Classics (Four Books, Five Classics, etc.), and (3) titles of texts written or compiled in Korea or China. Among the 16 key texts, *The Analects*, one of the so-called *Four Books*, is most prominent, appearing in six out of the ten introductory texts. Mentions of *The Analects* are followed by mentions of the generic title 'Confucian Classics' that is referenced in five of the introductory texts. All other key texts appear in fewer than half of the ten introductory texts. The number of key texts in the pool of integral elements of Korean Confucianism suggests that key texts generally play a more important role than, for example, key places. Still, we can again observe a certain randomness when 14 of the 16 key texts are mentioned in fewer than half of the ten introductory texts. This means that the selection of key texts the authors mention depends on their preferences rather than on a clearly defined and widely agreed upon set of crucial key texts. Moreover, the relative popularity of the generic title 'Confucian Classics' in the ten introductory texts implies a certain vagueness that is shared by the titles 'Five Classics' or 'Four Books'. While such generic titles may suggest the importance of certain classics, the absence of specific titles can signal to the reader that these works are distant and not easily approachable. From a practical point of view, a specific title, such as *The Analects*, makes it much easier to find a book in the university library than a generic title, such as *Five Classics*. But let us come back to this question of vagueness and ambiguity later.[13]

Graph 3. Key Texts of the Story World of Korean Confucianism (Sinclair and Rockwell 2025, accessed September 22, 2025, https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=45e39a08b31f680f70fefb2eed64d79&view=Cirrus)

The category of key concepts, practices and characteristics is the richest category among the four categories and includes 42 elements in the pool of integral elements. The most popular element in the ten introductory texts is 'filial piety', mentioned in eight of the ten texts. Ancestral rites, rites in general, *sirhak* (practical learning), education, and Neo-Confucianism are mentioned in six of the ten introductory texts. All other types of elements are mentioned in only half of the introductory texts or fewer. We can assume that this discrepancy depends on the perspective of the texts' authors. All of them introduce Korean Confucianism without explicitly pointing to certain preferences, but the differences suggest that what they portray is Korean Confucianism from their perspective. In other words, definitions of the key concepts of Korean Confucianism tend to vary.[14]

Graph 4. Key concepts, practices and characteristics of the Story World of Korean Confucianism (Sinclair and Rockwell 2025, accessed September 22, 2025, https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=5c2b08b190a99ab28628f59e84238999&view=Cirrus)

Lastly, Graph 5 merges the four corpora above and relativises the significance of elements from the four categories of key figures (pink), places (purple), texts (green) and key concepts, practices and characteristics (black). Pink and black dominate the centre of the word cloud, which suggests that key characters, as well as key concepts, practices and characteristics play an important role when defining Korean Confucianism. This final word cloud shows that 73 of the 86 elements appear in only half or fewer of the ten introductory texts.[15] Again, while we can observe a certain overlap among the ten introductory texts, which elements authors choose to define Korean Confucianism varies to a high degree.

Graph 5: All actants of the story world of Korean Confucianism (Sinclair and Rockwell 2025, accessed September 22, 2025: https://voyant-tools.org/?categories=af55949a9c898c1e54d9072601fcc1cc&corpus=7e65479229429527fcef4b3757c6e8cb&view=Cirrus)

Conclusion

Korean Confucianism, as described and defined in the ten selected introductory texts, exhibits considerable variability. Depending on which text a student consults, their understanding of Korean Confucianism may differ substantially. Some core elements appear more frequently in some texts than others, but the 'core' or 'essence' of Korean Confucianism is relative and dynamic, shifting with each text included in the analysis. To borrow Damrosch's words again, this variability may be one of Confucianism's greatest strengths as a world philosophy, enabling it to adapt to different contexts and thrive globally. At the same time, Damrosch (2023: 6) also calls attention to variability as a vulnerability, and in this sense, misappropriation refers to a loss of 'authenticity' or 'essence'.

Stereotyping Confucianism provides a prime example of such misappropriation, since those who stereotype ignore the authentic meaning of Confucianism and instead use 'Confucian' as a shorthand descriptor. To be fair, identifying the authentic meaning or essence of Confucianism is difficult, as the Voyant experiment has shown. The ten introductory texts do not present a complete picture of

Korean Confucianism, but they do offer insight into the diverse narratives that shape its story world. They show that, while some elements appear relatively fixed (for example, Zhu Xi as a key figure), there is no clear or consistent scheme by which authors select most elements. Rather, Korean Confucianism seems to be constructed through different combinations of elements. While some appear more prominently than others, the combinations vary across texts. This does not mean that Korean Confucianism lacks an essence altogether, but not everything can be randomly ascribed to Korean Confucianism. Maybe it helps to imagine the essence of Korean Confucianism not as something fixed but rather dynamic. And grasping this dynamic essence requires slow thinking.

Another aspect of these introductory texts that invites stereotyping is the vagueness and ambiguity of titles and names. As noted above, generic terms such as 'Confucian Classics', 'Four Books', or 'Five Classics' may convey a mystical aura that discourages readers from engaging with specific primary texts. The same is true for certain concepts that are difficult to grasp. For instance, the concept *ki* 氣 (Chinese *qi*) is notoriously difficult to describe and even harder to translate. Renderings include 'material force' (Cawley 2021) and 'Äther' [ether] (Eggert and Plassen 2005: 73), while in practices such as Qigong, *ki* is often understood as a form of 'energy'. Such vagueness and ambiguity open Confucianism to multiple interpretations: the more imprecise the concept, the more freedom readers have to adapt it to their own contexts. Yet this flexibility also carries the risk of arbitrary interpretations and essentialization.

Now that we have acknowledged the variability of Korean Confucianism and explored some reasons for stereotyping, the question arises: what can be done to stop the stereotyping of Confucianism? The most straightforward solution would be to ask scholars to consult the classic Confucian texts and verify their generalisations against primary sources. But from a practical point of view, this is impossible. Even if the canon is reduced to a few core works, the fact remains that the classics are written in Literary Sinitic (Classical Chinese) and therefore inaccessible to many scholars in Korean Studies. Furthermore, existing translations inevitably create new narratives shaped by the translator's background.

A more realistic step might be to strengthen communication across disciplinary boundaries within Korean Studies—particularly between what is often referred to as 'premodern' and 'modern' Korean

Studies—fostering dialogue between experts in philosophy and religion, and specialists in popular culture, politics, gender studies or education. For doing this, we need to leave the bubble of Korean Confucianism or philosophy. We know that *homo narrans* ('storytelling human') is less driven by pure observation or rational consideration than by stories and narrative logic (Koschorke 2013: 9). How we perceive Confucianism—especially if our brain is on 'fast thinking' mode—is thus not based on objective data or on knowledge of the Classics, but rather on popular narratives circulating in our disciplinary bubbles. 'Objective truth is less important than familiarity: we tend to believe falsehoods when they are repeated sufficiently often' (Lewandowsky et al. 2020). In other words, even though we might not know what specifically is 'Confucian' about it, we might still write about 'Confucian patriarchy', if others in our disciplinary bubble do so. Thus, leaving our disciplinary comfort zones may help uncover stereotypes.

Stereotypes are psychologically 'sticky'. Repeated over time, they become deeply ingrained in our minds, making them difficult to overcome. A modest but concrete step forward might therefore be to refrain from using 'Confucian' as a descriptor unless it is made clear what specifically is 'Confucian' about ostensibly universal phenomena such as patriarchy, hierarchy, or harmony.

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NOTES

1 These discussions often span broad historical periods and are not confined to the era following Korea's division into North and South. Where relevant, we will specify whether the context pertains to South or North Korea. Otherwise, we will use 'Korea' in a more general sense.

2 A search on RISS (Research Information Sharing Service) for monographs in Korean on Korean Confucianism ('Han'guk yugyo' 한국유교) provides 6508 publications between 1901 and 2024. The most prolific author according to this search is Kŭm Changt'ae with 118 monographs. https://www.riss.kr/index.do (last accessed Jan 26, 2025)

3 The sources given here are, of course, selective and only point to some milestones over the years. Recent publications on Korean Confucianism in German and French also include Lee (2022) and Sancho (2025). For the relationship between women and Confucianism, see Kim and Pettid (2011) and Ko, Kim Haboush and Piggott (2003). For critical discussions on the role of Confucianism in contemporary South Korea see Baker (2019) and Duncan (1997).

3 The Confucian Classics usually refer to the traditional Confucian canon consisting of the Four Books 四書 (*Great Learning* 大學, *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸, *Confucian Analects* 論語, *Works of Mencius* 孟子) and the Five Classics 五經 (*Classic of Poetry* 詩經, *Book of Documents* 書經, *Book of Rites* 禮記, *Book of Changes* 易經, *Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋).

3 *Mengzi*, Liang Hui Wang B 梁惠王下: [齊宣王]曰：「臣弑其君可乎？」曰：「賊仁者謂之賊，賊義者謂之殘，殘賊之人謂之一夫。聞誅一夫紂矣，未聞弑君也。」

6 子曰：「溫故而知新，可以為師矣。

7 Reinterpretation and appropriation of Confucianism is of course not limited to Korea but has played an important role in China as well, especially during the crisis of China's positioning in the modern world (Liu 1995: 40). A case in point is the controversy about the relationship between individualism and Confucianism. Liu explains that in 1914 the thinker Du Yaquan (1873-1933) was convinced that individualism was compatible with Confucianism, while later individualism tended to be understood as the 'polar opposite' of Confucianism (Liu 1995: 88). For an overview of the discussion on the role of Confucianism in China see *Chinesisches Denken der Gegenwart*, translated by Daniel Leese and Shi Ming (2023).

8 Variability and 'plasticity' are of course characteristics that are not limited to Confucianism, but seem to apply to all religions or philosophies that circulate globally. Kristian Leth explains, for example, that Christianity has been everything for everyone ('Kristendommen

har …været *alle ting for alle mennesker*.' Leth 2024: 13). Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen reminds us that Muhammed has served as 'protector of the poor and the preserver of the rich, as a model of male dominance and of female capability, as both suffering and victorious, as a warlord and as a prince of peace' ('Han har været set som de fattiges beskytter og som de riges bevarer, som model for mandsdominans og for kvindekamp, som lidende og som sejrende, som krigsherre og som fredsfyrste.' Skovgaard-Petersen 2020: 8).

9 Statistics Danmark, https://www.dst.dk/en/Statistik/temaer/ligestilling (last accessed Jan 8, 2025).

10 See, for example, Kim 2018, Kim and Finch 2002, Lee 1995 or Sung 2003.

11 Compare to Wall (2024: 20).

12 The link below the caption of Graph 1 leads directly to the word cloud on Voyant. When you hover over a word, a box will appear that shows the frequency count for that term. The following link gives access to the corpus for key figures: https://voyant-toolsorg/?panels=cirrus%2Creader%2Ctrends%2Csummary%2Ccontexts&corpus=16b07fed962d82ff8800a72c4b1298ab . If you click on 'Terms' to the right of 'Cirrus' in the top corner to the left, a table appears that shows the term frequencies in the entire corpus.

13 Link to the corpus for key texts: https://voyant-toolsorg/?corpus=45e39a08b31f68b0f70fefb2eed64d79&panels=cirrus,reader,trends,summary,contexts

14 Link to the corpus for key concepts, practices and characteristics: https://voyant-toolsorg/?corpus=5c2b08b190a99ab28628f59e84238999&panels=cirrus,reader,trends,summary,contexts

15 Link to the corpus for all four categories: https://voyant-toolsorg/?categories=af55949a9c898c1e54d9072601fcc1cc&panels=cirrus%2Creader%2Ctrends%2Csummary%2Ccontexts&corpus=7e65479229429527fcef4b3757c6e8cb.

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