

UDC 61:378:141.82(519.5)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.11603/m.2414-5998.2026.1.16040>

Tetiana Khvalyboha¹

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2160-4535>

Andra Zenčaka²

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6182-4762>

¹Ivan Horbachevsky Ternopil National Medical University of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine

²Riga Technical University

THE IMPACT OF CONFUCIAN VALUES ON MEDICAL EDUCATION AND PHYSICIAN TRAINING IN SOUTH KOREA

Тетяна Хвалибога¹, Андра Зенчака²

¹Тернопільський національний медичний університет імені І. Я. Горбачевського МОЗ України

²Ризький Технічний Університет

ВПЛИВ КОНФУЦІАНСЬКИХ ЦІННОСТЕЙ НА СИСТЕМУ МЕДИЧНОЇ ОСВІТИ ТА ПІДГОТОВКУ ЛІКАРІВ У ПІВДЕННІЙ КОРЕЇ

Abstract. The article examines the influence of Confucian values on the system of medical education and the process of physician training in South Korea. The study analyses the role of Confucianism as a cultural and philosophical foundation of the educational tradition, as well as its manifestations in the structure of medical education, the organization of the educational process, and the formation of the professional identity of future physicians. Particular attention is paid to such aspects as the hierarchical nature of educational relationships, the mentorship model, collectivism, academic discipline, and the ethical foundations of the medical profession.

The paper outlines the tension between traditional cultural values and contemporary educational approaches in the context of globalization, particularly with regard to the development of critical thinking, gender transformations, and the psycho-emotional well-being of medical students. It is demonstrated that contemporary medical education in South Korea is characterized by an aspiration toward the integration of Confucian heritage with Western educational models and a competency-based approach.

The study concludes that Confucian values not only preserve the cultural identity of Korean medical education but also function as a factor enhancing its effectiveness under conditions of global transformation. The findings may be useful for further research in the fields of comparative pedagogy and international medical education.

Key words: medical education, South Korea, Confucian values, physician training, medical ethics, mentorship, globalization of education, competency-based approach.

Анотація. У статті досліджується вплив конфуціанських цінностей на систему медичної освіти та процес підготовки лікарів у Південній Кореї. Проаналізовано роль конфуціанства як культурно-філософської основи освітньої традиції, а також його прояви у структурі медичної освіти, організації освітнього процесу та формуванні професійної ідентичності майбутніх лікарів. Особливу увагу приділено таким аспектам, як ієрархічність освітніх відносин, модель наставництва, колективізм, академічна дисципліна та етичні засади лікарської професії.

Окреслено напругу між традиційними культурними цінностями та сучасними освітніми підходами в умовах глобалізації, зокрема в контексті розвитку критичного мислення, гендерних трансформацій і психоемоційного благополуччя студентів-медиків. Показано, що сучасна медична освіта Південної Кореї характеризується прагненням до інтеграції конфуціанської спадщини із західними освітніми моделями та компетентнісним підходом.

Зроблено висновок, що конфуціанські цінності не лише зберігають культурну ідентичність корейської медичної освіти, а й виступають чинником підвищення її ефективності в умовах глобальних трансформацій. Отримані результати можуть бути корисними для подальших досліджень у галузі порівняльної педагогіки та міжнародної медичної освіти.

Ключові слова: медична освіта; Південна Корея; конфуціанські цінності; професійна підготовка лікарів; медична етика; наставництво, глобалізація освіти; компетентнісний підхід.

Introduction. Contemporary medical education is shaped not only by global educational standards, technological progress, and the requirements of evi-

dence-based medicine, but also by deep-rooted cultural traditions that define the value orientations of society. In this context, the system of physician train-

ing in South Korea is of particular scholarly interest, as it combines a high level of technological modernization with a strong cultural and philosophical foundation formed under the influence of Confucianism.

Confucian values – most notably respect for hierarchy, the authority of the teacher, collective responsibility, discipline, and moral self-cultivation – have historically played a central role in the development of Korea's educational institutions. In medical education, these principles are manifested in the organization of the educational process, the nature of student-teacher interactions, the structure of clinical mentorship, and the formation of the professional identity of the future physician. At the same time, contemporary reforms in higher medical education increasingly emphasize a competency-based approach, interdisciplinarity, the development of critical thinking, and the cultivation of communication skills.

The integration of traditional Confucian principles with Western models of medical education creates a unique educational environment in which cultural factors are not only preserved but also transformed in response to the challenges of a globalized world. For this reason, an analysis of the influence of Confucian values on the system of medical education and the training of physicians in South Korea is essential for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which professional competencies, ethical orientations, and behavioural models of physicians are formed in contemporary society.

The **aim** of the article is to analyse the influence of Confucian values on the formation and functioning of the medical education system in South Korea, as well as to clarify their role in the training of future physicians, particularly in the context of the organization of the educational process, clinical mentorship, professional socialization, and the development of ethical and communicative competencies.

Theoretical framework. Confucianism represents one of the defining cultural and philosophical traditions that for centuries have shaped the worldview foundations of Korean society and, consequently, the educational system of South Korea. Unlike religious doctrines in the Western sense, Confucianism functions primarily as an ethical and social philosophy aimed at regulating interpersonal relations, social hierarchy, and the moral responsibility of the individual. It is precisely this orientation toward moral self-cultivation through education that has determined the special place of learning in traditional Korean culture, where the acquisition of knowledge has been understood not merely as an intellectual activity, but as a path toward the formation of a virtuous personality (Badanta et al., 2022).

Key concepts of Confucian ethics include In (humaneness, benevolence), Ye (ritual, proper conduct), Ji (wisdom), I (righteousness), and Hyo (filial

piety). All these categories were directly integrated into the educational context and shaped the nature of the interaction between teacher and student. Respect for elders and for the authority of the mentor was considered a prerequisite for successful learning, whereas violating the hierarchy or publicly challenging the teacher's position was perceived less as an intellectual disagreement than as a moral transgression. In the contemporary educational system of South Korea, these principles have been transformed but not eliminated, continuing to influence academic culture, teaching styles, and behavioural expectations of students (Pettid, 2023).

The concept of Ye plays a particularly important role in shaping educational discipline, as it encompasses not only formal rituals but also established patterns of behaviour, speech, and mutual respect. In the educational environment, this is manifested through clearly regulated forms of communication, adherence to hierarchy, the use of polite language forms, and strict observance of academic rules. Even in modern universities, where Western pedagogical approaches are actively implemented, the Confucian understanding of discipline remains a significant component of the learning process (Śleziak, 2013).

Equally important is the concept of In, which in the educational context is interpreted as the teacher's moral responsibility for the student's personal development. In traditional Korean culture, the instructor serves as a moral exemplar rather than merely a transmitter of knowledge. This idea is deeply rooted in contemporary medical education, where the mentor is responsible not only for teaching clinical skills but also for fostering professional ethics, empathy, and a sense of responsibility toward patients and society.

The historical influence of Confucianism on the formation of Korean educational institutions is particularly evident during the Joseon Dynasty, when Confucianism was proclaimed the state ideology. The educational system of this period focused on preparing government officials through the complex Gwageo examination system, which required extensive knowledge of Confucian canons, classical texts, and moral principles. Successful completion of the exams ensured social mobility and high societal status, reinforcing in the Korean consciousness the view of education as a key mechanism for social advancement (Śleziak, 2013).

During this period, institutional models of learning such as Sodang (elementary schools), Hyanggyo (state schools), and Seowon (private Confucian academies) were established, serving both educational and moral cultivation functions. They became prototypes of modern educational institutions, including universities, combining academic training, moral education, and youth socialization. Even after the decline of the traditional Confucian system due to

the colonial period and subsequent modernization, its value foundations were not entirely displaced but rather adapted to new historical conditions (Pettid, 2023).

In the twentieth century, with the active adoption of Western educational models, Confucian principles underwent reinterpretation but were preserved in the form of a strong respect for education, academic achievement, and the role of the teacher. In South Korea, education became one of the key factors in national development, and academic success emerged as a socially sanctioned norm. This cultural continuity explains why the contemporary Korean education system, including medical education, is characterized by a combination of rigorous academic requirements, high student motivation, and a significant moral responsibility for professional choices (Lew et al., 2011).

Confucian values are clearly reflected in the structure of contemporary medical education in South Korea, shaping not only formal organizational models of learning but also the informal norms governing interactions among participants in the educational process. Despite the active implementation of Western pedagogical approaches, the system of physician training in Korean medical schools retains characteristic features of hierarchy, collectivism, and mentorship, which represent a direct continuation of the Confucian educational tradition.

One of the most prominent manifestations of Confucian values in medical education is the pronounced hierarchy and the special role of the teacher. In Korean medical schools, a professor or a clinical instructor is perceived not only as a specialist in a particular medical field but also as a bearer of professional authority and a moral exemplar. This status establishes an asymmetrical nature of interaction with students, in which respect for the teacher is a mandatory norm, while critical reflection on the teacher's position often occurs in an indirect or mediated form. In the clinical environment, this is manifested in the strict adherence to the chain of command among professors, residents, and interns, ensuring clarity in decision-making and discipline, particularly under conditions of high responsibility for patient lives (Levent & Pehlivan, 2017).

At the same time, this hierarchical model has its limitations. Research by Korean and international scholars indicates that excessive distance between teacher and student can inhibit open academic dialogue, initiative, and the willingness to ask questions. However, in the Korean context, hierarchy is often perceived not as a form of repression but as a mechanism for maintaining order, transmitting experience, and ensuring responsibility – an aspect particularly important in the medical profession.

Collectivism is another key feature that defines the training of medical students in South Korea. The

educational process is oriented not only toward individual achievements but also toward the performance of the group, the cohort, or the institution as a whole. Group responsibility for success, active engagement in collaborative learning projects, and high inter-university competition create an environment in which academic discipline and self-regulation acquire particular significance. Long study hours, intensive exam preparation, and strict adherence to academic schedules are regarded as normative and, at times, even as a moral obligation of the future physician (Levent & Pehlivan, 2017).

In South Korean medical schools, discipline carries not only an administrative but also a cultural dimension. It is linked to the Confucian notion of self-cultivation through diligence and restraint. Students hold themselves to high standards of performance and expect mutual support and adherence to shared rules from their peers. This approach fosters responsibility and resilience, but it can also lead to overwork and psychological pressure, which in recent years has become a topic of active discussion within the Korean academic community (Lee, 2002).

A particularly important feature of the medical education structure is the mentor-mentee model, one of the most enduring forms of Confucian pedagogy. In clinical training, this model is implemented through the direct engagement of students, interns, and residents under the supervision of experienced physicians. Learning occurs not only through formal instruction but also through observation of the mentor's professional activities, gradual participation in clinical practice, and imitation of behavioural models. This process transmits not only technical skills but also tacit knowledge, clinical reasoning, professional ethics, and communication strategies (Levent & Pehlivan, 2017).

A defining characteristic of this model is the longevity and depth of the mentor-mentee relationship. The mentor bears responsibility for the professional development of the junior colleague, while the mentee demonstrates loyalty, diligence, and a willingness to make personal sacrifices for the sake of professional growth. This approach contributes to the formation of a strong professional identity and a sense of belonging to the medical community, a hallmark of Korean medical culture.

At the same time, contemporary reforms in South Korean medical education aim to adapt the traditional mentorship model to the requirements of a competency-based approach. The introduction of structured clinical training programs, simulation centres, and standardized assessment methods seeks to reduce the dependence of training quality on the individual mentor. Nevertheless, even under these conditions, the Confucian idea of mentorship remains a vital component of educational culture, ensuring the continuity of professional values and standards.

Confucian values play a key role in shaping the professional identity of future physicians in South Korea, determining not only the set of professional competencies but also moral orientation, behavioural style, and the model of interaction with patients and colleagues. In the Korean context, the physician is traditionally regarded as a socially significant figure entrusted with high moral responsibility, directly linked to the Confucian notion of serving the common good and maintaining social harmony (Han et al, 2016).

The ethical foundations of the medical profession in Korea are formed at the intersection of universal principles of medical ethics and Confucian moral philosophy. The principle of In (humaneness) takes on particular significance, as it encompasses not only compassion toward the patient but also active concern for their well-being within the broader social and familial context. In clinical practice, this is manifested in the physician's effort to consider not only the individual needs of the patient but also the position of the family, which traditionally plays an important role in medical decision-making. This approach differs from the Western model, which primarily emphasizes patient autonomy, and reflects the Confucian understanding of the individual as part of a collective (Gim et al, 2025).

Professional ethics for physicians in South Korea are also closely linked to the concept of Ye (propriety or proper conduct), which regulates not only formal rules but also everyday professional practice. Physicians are expected to demonstrate restraint, correctness in communication, adherence to hierarchical norms, and maintenance of professional dignity even in stressful situations. These standards are actively transmitted through mentorship, rather than solely through formal medical ethics courses, which reinforces their influence on the formation of professional identity.

The Confucian tradition also shapes a distinctive approach to professional responsibility. Self-discipline, perseverance, and a commitment to continuous self-improvement are regarded as integral components of professionalism. In the training of future physicians, significant attention is paid not only to academic knowledge but also to the cultivation of intrinsic motivation for lifelong learning. High standards of professional conduct are often supported by cultural expectations that encourage endurance and self-control, even under the demanding conditions of clinical practice (Dittrich & Neuhaus, 2023).

Moral self-cultivation, a central idea in Confucianism, is reflected in the professional development of physicians as a lifelong process. A physician is regarded not merely as a practitioner of professional functions but as an individual continually striving to improve moral qualities. This approach fosters a high level of responsibility and dedication to the profes-

sion, but it can also lead to excessive self-pressure and feelings of guilt in cases of professional errors, an issue that remains salient in contemporary Korean medical culture (Dang & Yeh, 2025).

The characteristics of physician communication with patients and colleagues are also largely shaped by Confucian values. The communicative model typically assumes a hierarchical structure, in which the physician serves as an authoritative figure responsible for decision-making. Patients often expect clear recommendations and confident guidance, reinforcing a paternalistic interaction model. At the same time, modern medical education increasingly emphasizes the development of patient-centred communication skills, seeking to reconcile traditional notions of physician authority with the need for empathy and open dialogue (Khvalyboha, 2025).

In interactions among colleagues, Confucian norms are expressed through strict adherence to hierarchy, respect for seniority in rank or experience, and avoidance of open conflict. Junior physicians typically refrain from directly criticizing the decisions of senior colleagues, which helps preserve professional harmony but can hinder discussion of clinical errors or alternative treatment approaches. In response to these challenges, Korean medical institutions are gradually introducing elements of team-based medicine and interdisciplinary communication, promoting more horizontal forms of interaction.

Despite the deep integration of Confucian values into South Korea's medical education system, their coexistence with modern educational approaches is accompanied by tensions and contradictions. Processes of globalization, the internationalization of higher education, and the implementation of competency-based learning models have highlighted the need to reconsider traditional cultural norms, particularly in the context of developing critical thinking, student autonomy, and the psychological well-being of future physicians.

One of the key challenges is reconciling the Confucian hierarchy with the demands of modern medical education for the development of critical thinking and professional autonomy. The traditional model of instruction entails considerable distance between teacher and student, which can hinder open discussion, question-asking, and scrutiny of authoritative sources. At the same time, contemporary clinical practice requires physicians to make independent decisions, analyse alternative approaches, and act responsibly under conditions of uncertainty. In response, Korean medical schools are gradually implementing active learning methods, such as problem-based learning, simulation training, and team-based exercises, which encourage students' participation in clinical decision-making. However, the effectiveness of these methods often depends on the willingness of both

instructors and students to reconsider traditional hierarchical roles (Gim et al., 2025).

Gender aspects represent another area of tension between cultural tradition and contemporary educational values. Although the proportion of women in South Korean medical schools has steadily increased, Confucian conceptions of gender roles continue to influence physicians' professional trajectories. Women are more frequently concentrated in "less prestigious" or more flexible specialties that allow for balancing professional responsibilities with family obligations, whereas leadership positions in medical institutions are still predominantly held by men. In response to these challenges, government policies and university programs have increasingly emphasized gender equality, yet cultural stereotypes remain a significant factor shaping educational and career choices (Levent & Pehlivan, 2017).

Particular attention must be given to the issue of psycho-emotional stress associated with a culture of academic endurance, deeply rooted in Korean educational tradition. Confucian ethics encourage diligence, self-sacrifice, and the willingness to endure hardships to achieve goals. In medical education, this manifests in long hours of study, high expectations for academic success, and substantial social pressure. While such a culture fosters disciplined and professionally prepared physicians, it simultaneously increases the risk of emotional burnout, anxiety disorders, and depression among students and junior doctors.

In response to the growing recognition of these challenges, South Korea has recently placed greater emphasis on the mental health of medical trainees. Medical schools have introduced psychological support programs, limits on working hours for interns and residents, as well as courses on stress management and emotional resilience. At the same time, cultural norms that link endurance with professional virtue may hinder help-seeking behaviours, as acknowledging psychological difficulties is sometimes perceived as a sign of weakness (Badanta et al, 2022).

Globalization of medical education has substantially influenced the transformation of Confucian values in South Korea, creating an environment in which traditional cultural norms coexist with Western educational models. The integration of international practices into the Korean medical training system is complex and multifaceted, requiring a re-evaluation of the instructor's role, student-teacher interaction styles, and competency assessment methods, while preserving the profession's moral and ethical core shaped by Confucian tradition.

The incorporation of Western educational models is evident in the active adoption of competency-based education, problem-based learning (PBL), simulation training, and interdisciplinary team-based

approaches. These methods foster the development of critical thinking, autonomy, and practical skills – areas traditionally not emphasized in the Confucian educational model. At the same time, Korean medical schools strive to integrate these approaches without undermining cultural norms, maintaining respect for instructors, mentorship structures, and collectivist values, which continue to shape academic discipline and the moral responsibility of students (Śleziak, 2013).

The adaptation of traditional values to a competency-based approach occurs through their transformation from ritualized behavioural norms into more flexible guidelines for professional development. For instance, the Confucian concept of self-cultivation (in and moral virtue) is integrated with the demands of continual improvement in clinical competence, while mentorship serves as the foundation for the structured development of clinical skills. This approach enables students to simultaneously cultivate technical competencies, ethical qualities, and social skills essential for modern medical practice, in alignment with international accreditation standards.

The Korean experience in transforming medical education also holds significance for the international community. It demonstrates how deeply rooted cultural traditions can be harmonized with global educational practices, creating a model that simultaneously upholds moral responsibility, academic discipline, and critical thinking. For other countries seeking to implement competency-based and intercultural educational approaches, the Korean model serves as an example of adaptation without loss of cultural identity. The integration of mentorship, collectivism, and hierarchical structures into contemporary medical education offers particularly valuable insights for Asian countries and regions with similar cultural traditions.

Conclusions. As evident, the globalization of medical education in South Korea has facilitated the transformation of Confucian values into a dynamic, flexible, and practice-oriented educational context. At the same time, these values remain a foundational element, shaping ethical standards, mentorship styles, and collective culture in medical schools. The Korean experience demonstrates that traditional values and international standards are not mutually exclusive; rather, they can form a synergistic approach to physician training in a globalized world, combining cultural heritage with contemporary educational practices.

The analysis of the influence of Confucian values on medical education in South Korea demonstrates that this cultural and philosophical heritage plays a crucial role in shaping the professional identity of future physicians. Principles such as humaneness, ethical responsibility, mentorship,

and collectivism guide both the educational process and the moral compass of the medical profession, fostering a high level of professional and social accountability.

At the same time, globalization and the introduction of modern pedagogical approaches present a range of challenges, including tensions between traditional hierarchy and the development of critical thinking, gender equality, and the psycho-emotional well-being of students. The Korean experience illustrates the potential for a productive integration of Confucian values with Western educational models and competency-based approaches, supporting the holistic professional and personal development of future physicians.

The significance of this experience extends beyond the national context, as it demonstrates the effective integration of global medical education standards while preserving cultural identity and the ethical foundations of the profession. Prospects for further research include comparative analyses of the

role of traditional values in medical education across different countries, as well as investigations into their impact on students' psycho-emotional well-being, the effectiveness of mentorship, and innovative educational practices in a globalized environment.

Funding. None.

Conflict of Interest. Author Tetiana Khvalyboha is a member of the editorial board of the journal. Tetiana Khvalyboha had no involvement in the peer-review process or in the editorial decision-making regarding this manuscript. The manuscript was handled by an independent editor in accordance with the journal's standard peer-review procedures.

Author Contributions. Tetiana Khvalyboha – Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft, Project Administration.

Andra Zenčaka – Data Curation, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision.

Authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Електронна адреса для листування: gorpinich@tdmu.edu.ua

Дата першого надходження статті до видання: 17.12.2025
 Дата прийняття статті до друку після рецензування: 30.01.2026
 Дата публікації (оприлюднення) статті: 26.03.2026



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