Confucian values and Hofstede's dimensions
their role in the Korean Sewol ferry accident
by Pauline Tang - Senior Consultant

Enough has been said about Confucianism being the reason for disasters in Korea. When Asiana Airlines crashed at the San Francisco airport last year, commentators rushed to say that it was cultural issues: that high ranking pilots discarded warnings from junior, and that the recent Sewol ferry tragedy that killed close to 300 passengers, mostly teachers and high school students, happened because passengers succumbed to Confucian values which commands obedience to authority.

Confucianism, the reason for disasters?

A look at Confucianism helps explain that claim. Not a religion, Confucianism is a philosophical system that focuses on ethics and humanity passed down since 551–479 BC in China. This teaching with emphasis on loyalty, filial piety, honesty, trustworthiness, propriety, righteousness, honesty, and shame, has been a way of life in most East Asian countries. South Korea tops Asian countries in practicing these values, complete with Confucian societies and culture research institutes, academic courses on the Confucian code of ethics, and large scale ceremonies commemorating Confucius.

The claim that Confucian teachings contribute to Korean disasters takes its root from the five orders or rites, each of them a hierarchical system:

- ruler to subject
- father to son
- husband to wife
- elder brother to younger brother
- friend to friend

Put these relationships in Hofstede's cultural dimension and there it is: with the exception of an equal relationship between friends, the first four orders openly display Power Distance between rank and age where ruler, father, husband, and elder brother hold supremacy over those younger and in low ranks. The husband/wife relationships where wives obey husbands take on the masculinity/femininity dimension, the former superior and authoritative. Given Confucian influence and conventional cross-cultural theories, it is convenient to say that obedience to authority accounts for Korean disasters, as in the cases of the air and sea disasters and others before these.

I was tempted to be bought into the claim. It would have been an easy conclusion. But I pressed on to see what was nagging at me.

Korea: as democratic as it is Confucian

South Korea is as democratic as it is Confucian. The 2012 Economic Intelligence Unit ranked South Korea #20 in the Democracy index, three points above Japan, making it the most democratic country in Asia.

Public demonstrations have become regular sights in central Seoul since the 1960's. Large scale protests that reflect popular will are well-organized, orderly and rather peaceful today. As recent as Feb 25, 2014, 40,000 protestors took to the streets with 25 demands ranging from scrapping a planned free-trade agreement with China to launching a special investigation into the late-2012 presidential election. Back in Dec. 28, 2013, 100,000 angry citizens and labor workers demonstrated against the government's election scandal, clampdown on labor groups, and moves for the nation's railway system. Earlier demonstrations included protests of anti-Japanese sentiments, university tuition increases, peasant rights, democratic movement, beef imports, employment… As I write, there is a protest in Korea over the inept handling of the Sewol ferry tragedy. These protests have shaped democracy so much that results are usually achieved with governments yielding to demands quickly in months, creating sweeping changes.

Do what you are supposed to do: play your part!

Some years ago, I came out of a subway station in Seoul to find a standoff between protestors and police. Given my colonial upbringing in Hong Kong where such a thing was inconceivable in my early days, I was intrigued. Citizens could actually do that? I told a friend about the incident. "It's very common", he laughed light-heartedly, stealing a glance at my naivety. "This happens all the time. The police and protestors each know what they are supposed to do and play their roles. Demands are put forth, citizens get to have a voice, police do their job, and it is done." That was interesting, to put it mildly. I did not think that citizens had a voice besides accepting what is handed them. I learned that the Korean government is open to opinions from the public, who in turn are free to put forth their demands, thus a democratic society. But how a democratic society breeds a nation of citizens blind with obedience to rank, age, and gender simply bewilders me. The many consequences on the corporate environment does it too.

Confucianism at work

Those in high ranking, powerful, and senior positions deserve respect, honor, and obedience from others lower in rank, age, and femininity bear the responsibility of safe-keeping and providing for their subjects or protégés. In the Sewol incident, Kim Han-sik, CEO of the maritime company was quick to appear in public, obviously shaken with remorse if not shame, with an apology for the tragedy. The President of Korea, Park Geun-hye, apologized two times: "*As a president, who has a duty to protect the nation…*" There, Confucian values practiced and evidenced. I certainly did not see many heads of states neither companies apologize for failure to protect the nation and the community in the American culture in the 2005 Hurricane Katrina, the British culture in the 2010 BP oil rig explosion, or Spanish culture in the 2013 massive train derailment. Confucian teaching, on the other hand, charges leaders with responsibility and duty for their subjects, one of the orders to earn respect and authority.

A striking example of collectivism

I caught another glimpse of Confucianism at work during the 1997 Asian financial crisis. South Korea was one of the last countries hit by the financial disaster which brought the country right into some of the most severe economic damages with a negative economic growth. But by the beginning of 1999 GDP growth had risen to 5.4%. At the end of the same year the then president declared the end of currency crisis. Economist attributed this to a dynamic and productive labor market who took on flexible wage rates and funding sources including a multi-billion loan from IMF. The nation came together, loyal and committed, placing the well-being of the nation front of their personal wages. It was collectivism at work. A Korean couple I know was both working in Hong Kong as bankers. They too sent all excess funds back to Korea to do their parts in getting the country back on track.

We, at Managing Worldwide, definitely strive to look beyond blanket statements, whether from Confucius, Hofstede or any other cultural model to decide if culture is the cause of one particular incident in a country, a team or any given project. There are simply many intricate layers of societal structures, geographical, language influences, history, government and… individual features to consider. That's what we want our customers to develop: intercultural intelligence and intercultural management skills. This does not hold into a couple of cultural dimensions.

Mini bio: Pauline Tang

Pauline Tang is a global executive and business coach who specializes in leadership development. Her extensive global business experience includes over 20 years professional positions in both North America and Asia, where she worked in cross-cultural business functional areas in American, British, and Chinese organizations.

Pauline previously managed the Executive MBA program of the Thunderbird School of Global Management in Asia and spent ten years in cross-cultural business arenas in Asia and the USA. She headed up Marketing & Sales, Customer Service, Operations, and Relationship Management in leading global financial institutions, and an international assignment services firm that provided cross-cultural orientation and destination services to global executives.

A Hong Kong native who lives and works between the USA and Hong Kong, Pauline has traveled extensively around the world. She speaks English, Putonghua, and Cantonese.