

# Unveiling the True Nature of Confucian Humility in the Modern Context

## - A Methodological Proposal for Interdisciplinary Research Combining Cultural Psychology and East Asian Philosophy-

Doil Kim\*

### Abstract

Confucian humility (*qian xun* 謙遜) is a deeply rooted virtue in East Asian traditions and widely practiced among modern East Asians. Despite its significance, our modern understanding of it remains imperfect, partly due to a prevailing misunderstanding of its true nature under the label of “modesty-bias.” This bias is often cited as a representative trait of East Asian collectivism in social or cultural psychology, leading to a narrow focus on attitudes and behaviors associated with it, with little attention to whether it accurately reflects the historical roots of Confucian humility. This paper aims to highlight the notable differences between attitudes or behaviors related to modesty-bias and traditional Confucian humility, arguing that failing to make this distinction poses a significant obstacle to understanding Confucian humility as a virtue and its contemporary expression. Methodological suggestions are provided on how to conduct interdisciplinary research on Confucian humility, emphasizing the need to recognize and address the prejudice associated with modesty-bias. Such an interdisciplinary approach can also help discern modern attitudes or behaviors rooted in Confucian humility and shed new light on the continuing relevance of this traditional virtue in contemporary East Asian society.

**Keywords:** Confucian humility, modesty-bias, collectivism, individualism

\* Doil Kim is Associate Professor in the Department of Confucian Studies, Eastern Philosophy, and Korean Philosophy at Sungkyunkwan University. E-mail: [philosokim@gmail.com](mailto:philosokim@gmail.com)

\*\* This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2021S1A5C2A02089018).

\*\*\* The original version of this paper was presented at the conference “Contemporary Moral Psychology and Cross-cultural Moral Psychology,” held at Georgetown University on September 22–23, 2022. Further information can be found at the end of this paper.

## I. Introduction

Humility (or modesty) is a highly esteemed virtue in contemporary East Asian cultures, especially among Koreans who consider it a crucial aspect of excellent character.<sup>1</sup> However, some view it as a symbol of oppression, particularly towards women and individuals of lower status. This conflicting understanding underscores the complexities involved in comprehending humility as a vital virtue. Essential to grasping this virtuosity is a proper understanding of its historical roots. Nevertheless, it is no easy task to comprehend elements of the tradition that are still alive in the experience of contemporary East Asians.

One of the main difficulties is the possibility that modern people's understanding of attitudes or behaviors related to humility (or modesty) is distorted by prejudices. This paper highlights "modesty-bias," which has been the subject of recent research in social and cultural psychology, as a potential source of such prejudices. Modesty-bias is posited as a characteristic of collectivist cultures in East Asia that contrasts with the "self-serving bias" of individualist Western cultures. This paper calls into question whether modesty-bias accurately accounts for its historical roots and depicts the entirety of the contemporary East Asian experience. More specifically, this paper argues, first, that the attitudes or behaviors associated with modesty-bias, although widely used to comprehend modern East Asians, are actually unrelated to Confucian humility embedded in the East Asian tradition. Second, this paper contends that there is a significant likelihood that modesty-bias fails to fully reflect modern East Asian behavior due to its unsound conceptual basis, as it relies on an excessively stark dichotomy between the East and the West.

As such, the primary objective of this paper is to disentangle modesty-bias *not only* from Confucian humility, the bedrock of East Asian humility (or modesty), *but also* from the entirety of contemporary East Asian humility-related attitudes and behaviors. Why is this

---

<sup>1</sup> Note that in this paper, I will not dwell too much on the difference between humility and modesty.

endeavor significant? It is because many individuals nowadays tend to conflate attitudes and behaviors related to modesty-bias with the latter two. In this regard, the aforesaid disentanglement functions as a methodology to investigate tradition and the present in a clearer light. Scholars delving into traditional concepts are prone to distorting them through the prism of their own experiences and intuition, which are heavily influenced by contemporary concepts and frameworks of their time. Therefore, it is vital to ensure that modern researchers' experiences and intuition do not impede the study of the past.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the aforementioned disentanglement permits a more lucid understanding of modern individuals' experiences and behaviors, as well as the inherited elements of contemporary experiences from tradition. To sum up, by distinguishing between what pertains to the past and present, we can avoid distorting the notion of tradition and gain a better grasp of its impact on modern experiences.

First, Section II provides an overview of Confucian humility's historical roots. Sections III and IV critically review recent discussions of modesty-bias, arguing that it may not accurately reflect the entirety of modern East Asian attitudes or behaviors. Section V addresses whether modesty-bias and Confucian humility are aligned and concludes they are unrelated. Section VI emphasizes the importance of an interdisciplinary study of East Asian philosophy and psychology to gain a deeper understanding of contemporary Korean experiences of humility and its historical roots. In this final section, two psychological studies conducted by the author are introduced to demonstrate that interpreting Korean humility solely through the lens of modesty-bias may result in confirmation bias and perpetuate incorrect preconceptions about modern Koreans.

---

<sup>2</sup> The problem of distortion arises because the philosopher's experience may not be transcendental, nor may it transcend cultures. See Nichols (2004). This paper argues that the analytic philosophical work of characterizing various folk concepts in our daily lives based on the philosopher's intuition is being challenged by psychological discoveries including cross-cultural empirical data.

## II. The Reconstructed Concept of Confucian Humility

In this section, a concise overview of the author's previous research on *qian xun* 謙遜, Confucian humility, is provided. Previously, the examination of (1) the original form of Confucian humility in early Chinese thought, and (2) the conceptual development of Confucian humility in medieval times was conducted (Kim 2020; Kim forthcoming). Through these studies, the development of relevant original ideas scattered throughout early Chinese texts and how they were developed by Neo-Confucians in a way that relates them more coherently to the core values of the Confucian system of thought were traced. These core values include harmony (*he* 和), broad-mindedness, righteousness (*yi* 義), the attitude of letting go in the pursuit of one's goal, and no-self (*wu wo* 無我).

The original version of Confucian humility in ancient China is known as *qian* 謙, and its important characteristics are well captured by the medieval Confucian Zhu Xi's expression: "lowering oneself and respecting others."<sup>3</sup> This phrase originates in the early Chinese text *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites) and is still adopted in many modern Korean and Chinese dictionaries. This definition of *qian* reflects its key features: it is a relational virtue required in social interactions, guiding individuals to respect others in a unique way that involves lowering oneself relative to the other person. This unique way of respecting others involves a certain manner of attentional shift, namely shifting one's focus from oneself to the other.

In the author's previous work, the attentional shift is elaborated by defining a *qian* person as someone who does not cast themselves in a better light than the other person and, instead, treats the other as better by highlighting some aspect of the other. Thus understood, Confucian humility has two aspects: inwardly, it guides one not to highlight one's own achievements, merits or self-worth, and to be wary of being viewed as the better person relative to the other in interaction; Outwardly, it guides one to focus on the other person's achievements or strengths, thereby treating and casting the other as better.

---

<sup>3</sup> “謙者，自卑而尊人。” See Zhu Xi's *Zhouyi benyi* 周易本義 (vol. 8, 7).

For example, *qian* was adopted in an interaction between a minister with excellent political ability and a relatively incompetent feudal lord with higher social status in the pre-modern hierarchical system. For a feudal lord to run his country well, it was essential to select and employ someone with the most outstanding capacity. To avoid losing such talents to other countries and being defeated by powerful neighboring countries during the Warring States Period, it was always necessary to maintain good human relationships. Thus, a feudal lord should not be arrogant and should interact with competent subjects by focusing on their capacities rather than their lower social status. On the other hand, a talented person should not be arrogant, even if better in terms of political competence, and should always behave in a way that shows respect to the feudal lord in higher social status.

This display of mutual respect remains useful even in modern society, in which social hierarchy no longer works as it previously did. This manner of respecting each other in interactions can still be practiced in consideration of what can be called the “comparative effect,” which can emerge in terms of different strengths and varied characteristics through which one can gain higher self-worth, even in the modern context.

The inward and outward aspects are further developed by Neo-Confucians in medieval times. They introduced new ideas such as “*you er buju*” 有而不居 (“having something without dwelling in it”) and “*roushun*” 柔順 (“being gently adaptive”) to solidify the concept of humility within the Confucian system of thought.<sup>4</sup> A detailed explanation of this development is omitted in this section, but it needs to be emphasized that the characteristics of the original form in early China are reinforced through the two ideas just mentioned. This conceptual enhancement of the medieval form can be summarized as follows: Confucian humility goes beyond one of the features of its original form, one’s not highlighting one’s own merits, achievements,

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Zhu Xi defines *qian* in terms of the meaning of *you er buju*. “謙者，有而不居之義。” See his *Zhouyi benyi* 周易本義 (vol.1, 15). On the other, *qian* is sometimes understood in connection with *roushun*. See the following commentaries on *Zhouyi* by another Neo-Confucian thinker, Cheng Yichuan 程伊川: “以柔順處謙，又居一卦之下，爲自處卑下之至，謙而又謙也。故曰謙謙。” See his *Yichuan yizhuan* 伊川易傳 (vol. 2, 3).

or relatively high social status, in that it further involves not giving any thought to those aspects of one's own. Moreover, it also goes beyond another feature of its earlier form, one's respecting the other person in interactions by paying attention to what makes the other the better person, as it further aims to embrace other people and achieve *he* 和 ("harmony") in relationships with them while pursuing core Confucian values such as *yi* 義 ("righteousness") or *li* 禮 ("the Confucian formal rules of conduct") in a timely manner (*shi* 時).

By examining the aforementioned cluster of ideas, we can gain a deeper understanding of the function of Confucian humility and its normative traits. In particular, for now, we need to pay special attention to the connection between Confucian humility and *yi*, which has been evident since long before Zhu Xi's time. For instance, in the Tai Bo 泰伯 chapter of *Lunyu* 論語 (The Analects), Yan Hui, Confucius's best disciple, is described using various expressions, including one very similar to *you er buju*, called *you ruo wu* 有若無 ("having, as though he had not").<sup>5</sup> Based on these attitudes and behaviors, he was already considered a humble person (*qian*) in the Confucian sense.<sup>6</sup> According to Zhu Xi, Yan Hui was able to cultivate this kind of attitude and behavior because his mind was focused solely on the boundless core values of Confucianism, such as *yi*.<sup>7</sup>

One significant implication of the connection between Confucian humility and *yi* is that it sheds light on the normative character pursued through Confucian humility. It can be interpreted as a unique way of achieving *yi*. In Confucian texts, *yi* 義 ("righteousness") carries the connotation of appropriateness (*yi* 宜), which means that each being acquires its proper position through appropriate distribution based on social distinctions (*ge de qi yi* 各得其宜). Therefore, Confucian humility is believed to help achieve an ideal state in which every individual occupies their appropriate social position and receives their due.

<sup>5</sup> "以能問於不能, 以多問於寡, 有若無, 實若虛, 犯而不校." See Zhu Xi's *Lunyu jizhu* 論語集注 (vol. 4, 12).

<sup>6</sup> "此章稱顏淵之德行也. . . 言其好學持謙, 見侵犯而不報也." See Xing Bing's *Lunyu zhushu* 論語注疏 (vol. 8, 5).

<sup>7</sup> "顏子之心, 惟知義理之無窮, 不見物我之有間." See Zhu Xi's *Lunyu jizhu* 論語集注 (vol. 4, 12).

From what we have discussed so far, two key characteristics of traditional humility stand out. Firstly, it involves an attitude of respect for others by focusing on their strengths through a shift in attention. Second, this respect ultimately seeks an ideal state where all people, including oneself, are treated properly.

### **III. Two Individualistic Forms of Modesty-Bias: A Link to Cultural Dissonance?**

The contrast between collectivism and individualism has been a fundamental conceptual framework in comparative studies of Eastern and Western cultures since the 1980s (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Cho 1996). “Modesty-bias” has been proposed as a representative feature of collectivism. This bias is associated with different levels, such as self-view, motivation, and attribution. In individualist cultures, the dominant self-construal pattern is independent, while the interdependent self is typical of collectivist cultures. This difference in self-view leads to variations in motives, with individualists valuing high self-esteem and collectivists prioritizing group harmony over self-desires. Accordingly, individualists tend to attribute their success to their own abilities, while collectivists are inclined to credit external factors such as luck or other people’s help. Cultural psychology has accumulated considerable empirical findings in this field over the last decade, which shed light on contemporary East Asians to a considerable extent, albeit with questions about their legitimacy.

It is worth noting that many scholars in the field have pointed out that the definition of “collective” can vary.<sup>8</sup> It is divided into two types: the first focuses on the group as a whole, with modesty-bias explained as a mode of sacrificing individual needs for the greater good of the group. The second form of collectivism emphasizes interpersonal rela-

---

<sup>8</sup> Many scholars in cultural psychology have pointed out that the conceptual framework of collectivism and individualism alone cannot fully capture different variations of collectivism. For this reason, such distinctions between vertical and horizontal collectivism or hierarchical and relational collectivism have been adopted in the literature. For a related discussion, see Brewer and Chen (2007, 135).

tionships, where modesty-bias is based on the desire to elevate others while prioritizing the relationship over individuals.

Irrespective of how we define the “collective,” we can comprehend modesty-bias in four different ways based on its relationship with positive self-regard. The first type is *a semi-individualistic perspective* on modesty-bias: In this approach, a modest person, similar to an individualist, is fundamentally motivated to attain high self-esteem and has a self-enhancing bias. He has inherent inclinations to pursue his own desires and successes, and to evaluate himself highly. However, these tendencies are restrained by modesty-bias under social pressure, which demands relinquishing self-needs for the sake of group needs (Kurman 2003, 501). Moreover, to preserve “social face,” a person may become modest.<sup>9</sup> For him, how others evaluate him is important, and he has a concern for receiving positive evaluations. This type of person has a possible conflict between the collectivist self that seeks to maintain social face and the repressed individualistic self.<sup>10</sup>

The second type is *an individualistic perspective* of modesty-bias: This type of person practices modest behavior to ultimately manage his high individualist self-esteem. For instance, he sacrifices his needs in favor of the group not because of other-regarding considerations, but because doing so earns his positive self-regard, such as a positive feeling about himself in being the kind of person he wants to be (Kim 2001). This type of person may be too self-centered, if not selfish. Thus, this modesty-bias is ultimately self-serving. For this type of person, maintaining social face may be a way to increase self-esteem by gaining social recognition. In this sense, modesty is a kind of social impression management strategy.

The topic of modesty-bias has been widely explored in the field, with many scholars relying on the aforementioned two individualistic perspectives to explain it. As I see it, however, these perspectives are

---

<sup>9</sup> For a summary of the related discussions, see Heine et al. (1999, 787).

<sup>10</sup> There are quite many studies that assume that such an internal conflict is a characteristic of East Asians in relation to a need for face. Yang Kuo-shu one of the forerunners of Chinese modern cultural and indigenous psychology, presented this kind of understanding earlier on. Yang describes the conflict as that between “public self” and “private self.” See Yang (2004, ch. 3).



utilized primarily to grapple with the challenge of reconciling the self-deprecating nature of modesty-bias with the individualistic framework, which posits that the preservation of one's self-esteem is a fundamental human derive.

The aforementioned stances ostensibly align with individualistic construals of collectivist tendencies. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen how effective such an explication truly is in characterizing contemporary East Asians. In the interim, extant empirical evidence could shed light on its explanatory efficacy. Be that as it may, we must bear in mind that the depictions of East Asians above may imply a troublingly constrained or flawed psychological disposition. Specifically, under the individualistic rubric, they are either beset by cultural dissonance in terms of internal and external cultural values, or engage in modesty just as a disingenuous ploy to project a favorable image of themselves. Given these unflattering representations of East Asians, we must pause and contemplate whether they indeed comprise the most perspicacious explanatory possibilities at our disposal. What we can say with conviction, however, is that if we only comprehend modern views and comportments concerning modesty (or humility) in the aforementioned ways, it ceases to be a virtue. At the very least, we must further scrutinize whether modesty (or humility) can differently be formulated as a virtue in the contemporary milieu, particularly in its nexus with tradition.

#### **IV. Two Collectivistic Forms of Modesty-Bias: A Potential Source of Confirmation Bias?**

Given the last remarks in the foregoing section, it is needed to examine other perspectives that construe modesty-bias consistently through a collectivist lens. The third type is a *semi-collectivist perspective* on modesty-bias: Individuals of this kind possess an underlying drive to uphold their positive self-regard, albeit one that diverges from individualistic self-esteem. Their positive self-perceptions stem from prioritizing the collective's needs over their own, advancing the goals of others, or evincing other-centered emotions like empathy (Markus and

Kitayama 1991, 242). We may refer to this type of positive self-regard as “relationship-esteem” or collectivist self-regard.<sup>11</sup>

The fourth and final type is a *robust collectivist perspective* of modesty-bias. For these individuals, modesty is not conceptualized in relation to self-esteem or any type of affirmative self-perception. For this sort of person, the pursuit of self-esteem is not their primary motivation. They align themselves with group interests by subordinating their own needs, or they act out of emotions that elevate others over themselves. They do so not because it is an effective way to preserve positive self-regard, but because they wholeheartedly embrace collectivist values and embody a collectivist perspective that aligns with those values.<sup>12</sup>

The modesty-bias construed in these two perspectives does not cast East Asians as individuals with an inner discordant self-image, at the very least, in contrast to the two individualistic construals of collectivism discussed in the previous section. Nonetheless, it behooves us to scrutinize if there are any other issues inherent in grasping the attributes of East Asians through these collectivist perspectives.

In cultural psychology, scholars have made noteworthy attempts to understand East Asians from a robust collectivist perspective. One prominent proposal suggests that East Asians affirm themselves through *self-criticism*, rather than self-enhancement, which is common among individualistic cultures. Unlike the latter, self-criticism among East Asians is not aimed at boosting self-esteem, but rather at self-improvement. Empirical data confirms that the Japanese tend to view themselves as incomplete, and thus believe that they must work hard to better themselves. In contrast, North Americans tend to rely on their past successes to enhance their self-confidence and self-esteem, which is typical of individualistic cultures.<sup>13</sup>

Another defining characteristic of collectivist cultures is *self-deprecation*, which is often considered representative behavior or attitude of

---

<sup>11</sup> See Heine et al. (1999, 786).

<sup>12</sup> Some cultural psychologists already pointed out that the motive for maintaining high individualist self-esteem cannot be universal, for it can be based on a North American individualized view of self and therefore culturally specific. See Heine et al. (1999, 785).

<sup>13</sup> As to a broad range of related works, see Heine et al. (1999, 770).

modern East Asians. It is also the polar opposite of self-enhancement, as it involves thinking of oneself as below average or worse than others perceive. It is widely regarded as a key component of modesty-bias (Markus and Kitayama 1991, 242). This tendency towards self-deprecation is also manifested in interpersonal interactions, where individuals may downplay their achievements or act foolishly to avoid making others feel envious or uncomfortable.<sup>14</sup> These attitudes and behaviors are often viewed as false modesty or impression management tactics in social settings, rather than virtues of modesty. Nevertheless, many scholars identify self-deprecation, namely the tendency to think less of oneself, as a crucial aspect of modesty-bias.

It is worth delving into the possibility that the prevailing understanding of East Asians as possessing self-critical and self-deprecating tendencies could be contributing to “confirmation bias.” As is widely known, this bias refers to the tendency to search for and interpret information in a manner that reinforces one’s preconceived beliefs or hypotheses, resulting in a distorted perception of reality that reinforces the original prejudice. For example, individuals who hold negative stereotypes about specific groups may selectively recall information that corroborates those stereotypes while dismissing contradictory evidence. While it may be difficult to completely deny that many Japanese individuals tend to be more self-critical than North Americans, given the substantial body of research supporting this contrast, it is possible that the accumulation of such empirical data merely perpetuates a flawed premise. Furthermore, there seems to be a dearth of reflection on the fundamental assumptions that underlie the validity of modesty-bias as a lens for understanding East Asians.

From this perspective, it is possible to argue that modesty-bias, which encompasses both self-criticism and self-deprecation, is rooted in an excessive binary between the East and the West. The portrayal of modesty-bias as a hallmark of East Asian culture could be due to the stark opposition with the individualistic trait of self-enhancement.

---

<sup>14</sup> See Chen, Bond, and Chan (2009, 604). In the following papers, self-depreciation is described as modest: Exline and Lobel (1999); Gibson and Sachau (2000); Roberts and Levine (2021).

In other words, from the outset, the reason why self-criticism or self-deprecation is associated with East Asians is that the East represents everything non-Western that possesses a strong inclination towards self-enhancement. If that is the case, modesty-bias may be a consequence of a misleading dichotomy between the East and the West.

As a matter of fact, the dichotomy between East and West has been a longstanding subject of critique in the field of psychology. Cultural psychology scholars initially explored the contrast between collectivism and individualism at the level of different countries, with a particular focus on Japan and the United States. However, recent scholarship has raised concerns regarding the validity of such a binary contrast on a national level. Studies have demonstrated that cultural values differ even within the same country, and that the degree of collectivism and individualism varies across East Asian nations (Jeong and Han 2015; Chang 2010).

More recently, scholars have taken a step further, proposing that cultural aspects can coexist within an individual, not only at the societal or national level. These latest studies suggest that a person's cultural tendencies may be adaptable and context-dependent, meaning they can exhibit either collectivist or individualist characteristics depending on the situation (Oyserman and Lee 2008; Oyserman 2016; Singelis 1994; Choi and Lee 2019). Given these findings, the dichotomy between East and West, as well as broader issues of cultural differences, should be approached with caution. As scholars continue to investigate the complexities of social and cultural psychology, a more nuanced understanding of the cultural dimensions of the human experience is gradually emerging.

Despite the recent skepticism surrounding the dichotomy, I contend that the issue of confirmation bias persists. This is because the understanding of modesty-bias itself has not evolved in recent studies. Even if we acknowledge that the distinction between collectivism and individualism can be blended within an individual, the fundamental understanding that modesty-bias is a bias in collectivism, encompassing the tendencies of self-criticism and self-deprecation, remains unchanged. In other words, modesty-bias is still predominantly perceived as the opposite of the West, perpetuating a dichotomy

that reinforces the concept at an individual level. This concept, as a byproduct of excessive dichotomy, remains stagnant.

The real problem arises when we apply this concept to traditional humility. Through the lens of this modern construct, there is a significant risk of distorting traditional humility through the East-West dichotomy. This issue will be addressed in the following section, as it represents the most pressing concern that this paper aims to highlight.

## **V. Uncovering the Inconsistency between Confucian Humility and Modesty-Bias**

The question we must now grapple with is whether modesty-bias and Confucian humility are aligned. Yet, this inquiry is partly contingent on our interpretation of the latter. As presented in Section II, my understanding of Confucian humility may appear to lean towards the robust collectivist perspective on modesty-bias elucidated in Section IV, which disregards any notion of positive self-regard, especially, self-esteem. This is because the key tenet of Confucian humility is to focus on others while neglecting oneself, which is not congruent with a desire to maintain positive self-esteem. Of course, we can acknowledge that practicing Confucian humility may have a secondary effect of boosting self-esteem. However, this increase is not the primary motivation or justification for the practice. In fact, ancient and medieval Confucian thinkers did not consider self-esteem as a primary goal of Confucian humility, as there is no textual evidence to suggest so. Thus, it is challenging to establish a direct link between the practice of Confucian humility and enhancing self-esteem, as assumed by the two individualist perspectives on modesty-bias outlined in Section III.

That being said, it is worth considering if it is not completely implausible to examine Confucian humility through the semi-collectivist perspective on modesty-bias that accounts not for self-esteem but for a different kind of positive feeling or esteem, such as relationship-esteem, as explained in Section IV. At this point, it is important to distinguish relationship-esteem from self-esteem in a more detailed manner. Self-esteem is elevated by an individual's overall evaluation

of their worth based on their abilities, accomplishments, or personal qualities. Conversely, relationship-esteem is cultivated through an individual's appraisal of their value within the context of their relationships. It is augmented by their capacity to form and maintain healthy relationships, their perception of themselves as desirable partners, and their communication skills. Thus, while self-esteem is focused on an individual's evaluation of themselves as an independent entity, relationship-esteem takes into consideration their assessment of themselves in relation to others.

Thus understood, relationship-esteem aligns more closely with the basic orientation of Confucian humility, as it focuses on relationships rather than the individual. Even so, it is important to note that relationship-esteem is still about oneself. Therefore, it is doubtful whether such a positive evaluation of oneself is the basis or fundamental motive of Confucian humility. In fact, there is no textual evidence to support the claim that Confucian humility involves any form of positive self-evaluation, regardless of whether it is focused on the individual or the individual in the context of relationships.

Nevertheless, my ultimate intention is not to posit that the robust collectivist perspective on modesty-bias corresponds with Confucian humility. Rather, I would like to argue for the converse—that the aforesaid two robust collectivist tendencies, self-criticism and self-deprecation, have nothing to do with Confucian humility.

First, while the self-critical orientation may account for certain aspects of modern East Asian conduct, it is erroneous to conflate it with Confucian humility. Although the Confucian tradition stresses self-cultivation, this does not necessarily translate into a critical view of oneself. Instead, Confucian humility involves de-emphasizing oneself to demonstrate respect for others and evincing little direct concern for one's achievements, virtues, or abilities. This shift of attention away from oneself to others does not entail a self-critical focus, which is still directed inward.

Second, self-deprecation linked to modesty-bias is likely to be an irrational underestimation of oneself, as it involves considering oneself inferior to the average regardless of objective evaluation or facts, or evaluating oneself lower than how others see. This form of self-

deprecation does not align with Confucian humility, which instead endeavors to ensure that all individuals are assessed appropriately. As previously explained, Confucian humility is a path to pursuing *yi*, or Confucian righteousness, which rests on the belief that one's position and evaluation can be suitably determined in an environment where everyone is accurately evaluated. Therefore, pursuing righteousness is ultimately incongruous with any type of irrational self-underestimation.

In conclusion, whether modesty-bias is interpreted from an individualist or a collectivist perspective, it remains inconsistent with Confucian humility. As previously noted, this suggests that if modern readers construe traditional humility (or modesty) through entirely different lenses, such as those associated with modesty-bias, without sufficiently considering their compatibility, this construal can lead to the misrepresentation of traditional thought.

With that being said, the current matter goes beyond simply distinguishing modesty-bias from Confucian humility. Moreover, it would not suffice to argue that modesty-bias belongs to the present while Confucian humility belongs to the past, and thus they are merely distinct. As discussed in Section IV, even the notion of modesty-bias being a comprehensive explanation for modern East Asian behavior is highly questionable.

## **VI. Uncovering the Hodgepodge of Traditional and Modern Elements**

It is now evident that modesty-bias falls short of capturing the full essence of traditional Confucian humility and may not accurately represent modern East Asian attitudes and behaviors towards humility. So, how can we gain a more profound understanding of these traditional and contemporary attitudes and behaviors? To answer this question, we must delve into the lay theory, or folk psychology, that modern East Asians use to comprehend themselves and others in everyday life. Although lay theory is different from scientific theory, it still serves as a cornerstone of social cognition. We must recognize that modesty-bias may only capture a fraction of modern East Asians' lay theory about

humility, suggesting that some critical aspects of their experience might have been overlooked in psychological research. It is therefore possible to form a biased view of East Asians if we rely solely on the lens of modesty-bias.

Modern East Asians' lay theory on humility comprises various elements from different sources. For example, in the case of modern Koreans' humble (or modest) behavior and psychological state, a mixture of elements from Confucian humility and modesty-bias concepts may be present. To avoid perpetuating prejudiced research, we must acknowledge this hodgepodge of traditional and modern elements in East Asians' experiences. Thus, the study of behaviors and psychological states rooted in tradition, such as humility, must consider the mixed experience of modern people. This is where an interdisciplinary study of East Asian philosophy and psychology crucially functions. This paper has demonstrated its importance so far.

To explore the fusion of traditional and modern elements in the contemporary Korean experience, I recently collaborated with psychologists to conduct two studies aimed at understanding how Koreans perceive humility (Han, Choi, and Kim 2022). In Study 1, we collected open-ended responses from adults residing in South Korea (aged 19 to 59 years old) regarding their thoughts and experiences of humility. A professional research company recruited 167 participants (79 males, 88 females) who completed the survey after giving their informed consent. The participants were then asked to answer questions about their own perception of humility, as well as questions about demographic variables. We analyzed the responses and found that the participants' perceptions of humility were largely divided into seven categories, with aspects related to others or relationships being dominant. Specifically, responses focusing on others, relationships such as suppression of self-expression, respect for others, self-lowering, and courtesy accounted for 84.7% of the total responses, while self-focused responses such as objective self-evaluation, self-confidence, and self-development accounted for 7.9% of the total.

In Study 2, we itemized the contents of the seven humility categories identified in Study 1 to secure additional evidence for the categories. We conducted Study 2 with the same research company as



in Study 1, and 500 Korean adults (aged 19 to 59 years old) participated in the survey. There were 250 male and 250 female participants, and the average age was 44.23 years. Participants read statements related to humility and rated the degree of agreement between 0 points (do not agree at all) and 3 points (completely agree). We found that the average response value of the six categories excluding the self-lowering category was significantly higher than the median value of the scale. This indicates that the statements tended to agree that the six factors of suppression of self-expression, respect for others, courtesy, objective self-evaluation, self-development, and self-confidence explain humility.

However, when we examined the individual questions and the average value of the self-lowering factor, we found that the third question among the four questions used to measure self-lowering, which is “humility is to think less of one’s ability or value,” was significantly lower than the other three questions (Its average was 0.95.). The remaining three questions were “humility is downplaying one’s abilities, achievements, status, etc. in front of others ( $M = 1.70$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ),” “humility is treating others by lowering oneself ( $M = 1.80$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ),” and “humility is lowering oneself relative to the other person ( $M = 1.50$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ).” This shows that the participants recognized that self-lowering, particularly by underestimating or thinking less of oneself, is not a significant characteristic of self-lowering relevant to humility. When the third question was removed, the average of the self-lowering factor became 1.67, which was significantly higher than the median value of the scale, 1.5.

The above new research unequivocally demonstrates that Confucian humility persists as a prominent feature in the lay theory of modern Korean experiences. In particular, the research confirms that Koreans conceive of humility as a means of showing respect to others. Furthermore, it reveals that self-deprecation, often cited as a hallmark of modesty-bias, is not perceived by Koreans as a key component of their humble attitudes or behaviors in daily life. This underscores the fact that interpreting Korean humility solely through the lens of modesty-bias is likely to result in confirmation bias, perpetuating incorrect preconceptions about modern Koreans.

## VII. Concluding Remarks

The twofold challenge facing this paper lies in understanding the historical roots of Confucian humility and its contemporary expression among East Asians. The paper questions the validity of “modesty-bias,” which is said to be a characteristic of collectivist East Asian cultures, and argues that it may not accurately reflect the historical roots of Confucian humility or contemporary East Asian attitudes and behaviors related to humility. By disentangling modesty-bias from Confucian humility, the paper aims to provide a clearer understanding of tradition and contemporary experiences. It is essential to avoid distorting traditional concepts by examining them through contemporary frameworks and experiences. Additionally, distinguishing between past and present experiences can aid in gaining a better understanding of the impact of tradition on modern life.

Section II provides a concise overview of previous research on Confucian humility, exploring its original form in early Chinese thought and its conceptual development in medieval times. The humble person in the Confucian sense treats others as better and avoids highlighting their own achievements or self-worth, guiding them to focus on the other person’s strengths and avoid being viewed as superior. This is a unique manner of respecting others. Confucian humility has evolved beyond its original form in medieval times, as Confucian humility and *yi* (“righteousness”) are more clearly connected, with *yi* carrying the connotation of appropriateness and every individual occupying their proper social position. Therefore, Confucian humility seeks to achieve an ideal state where all people are treated properly.

Sections III and IV critically review recent discussions of contemporary East Asians in terms of one of the hallmarks of collectivist cultures, modesty-bias. The contrast between collectivism and individualism has been a significant framework for comparative studies of Eastern and Western cultures for decades in cultural psychology. Four different ways to comprehend modesty-bias based on its relationship with positive self-regard are divided. First, it is unclear how effective the first two individualistic perspectives on modesty-bias are in describing modern East Asians. These depictions may suggest a limited or flawed

psychological disposition among East Asians, and may either cause cultural conflict or use humble or modest attitudes or behaviors as a disingenuous strategy to project a positive image. Therefore, the fairest explanations currently available need to be reconsidered.

After discussing these individualistic construals of collectivist tendencies, in Section IV, the need to examine other perspectives that interpret modesty-bias consistently through a collectivist lens emerges. The two collectivist perspectives do not portray East Asians as having internal discordant self-images, unlike the previous individualistic perspectives. In this line of interpretation on modesty-bias, one notable attempt in cultural psychology suggests that East Asians affirm themselves through self-criticism instead of self-enhancement. Another defining characteristic of collectivist cultures is self-deprecation. However, Section IV points out that the common belief that East Asians are self-critical and self-deprecating could be contributing to confirmation bias, which is the tendency to interpret information in a way that reinforces existing beliefs. Modesty-bias, which includes self-criticism and self-deprecation, may be rooted in an excessive binary contrast between the East and West. Recent studies also suggest that cultural tendencies may be adaptable and context-dependent, which means that the dichotomy between East and West should be approached with caution. However, the issue of confirmation bias remains regarding the understanding of modesty-bias itself in the sense that it is still perceived as the opposite of the West, reinforcing the dichotomy at an individual level. This concept can lead to the distortion of traditional thought through the East-West dichotomy, which is the most pressing concern that this paper aims to address.

Section V addresses the question of whether modesty-bias and Confucian humility are aligned. While self-criticism and self-deprecation, which are linked to modesty-bias, may seem similar to Confucian humility at first glance, a closer examination reveals that they are actually quite unrelated. Confucian humility involves de-emphasizing oneself to demonstrate respect for others, and does not necessarily entail a self-critical focus or irrational self-underestimation. For this reason, it is important to note that attempting to understand traditional humility through the lens of modesty-bias can lead to

misrepresentations of traditional thought.

In the final section of this paper, it is pointed out that attempts to understand traditional Confucian humility through the lens of modesty-bias may fall short in accurately representing modern East Asian attitudes and behaviors towards humility. To gain a deeper understanding, we must delve into the lay theory that modern East Asians employ in their everyday lives to comprehend themselves and others. An interdisciplinary study of East Asian philosophy and psychology is therefore crucial to truly understand the fusion of traditional and modern elements in contemporary Korean experiences of humility.

To further support this argument, two studies conducted by the author in collaboration with psychologists are introduced. These studies unequivocally demonstrate that Koreans view humility as a means of showing respect to others and that self-deprecation is not perceived as a key component of their humble attitudes or behaviors in daily life. Therefore, interpreting Korean humility solely through the lens of modesty-bias may result in confirmation bias and perpetuate incorrect preconceptions about modern Koreans. It is important to consider these new findings when attempting to comprehend humility within the context of modern East Asian society.

## REFERENCES

- Brewer, Marilynn B., and Ya-Ru Chen. 2007. "Where (Who) Are Collectives in Collectivism? Toward Conceptual Clarification of Individualism and Collectivism." *Psychological Review* 114 (1): 133–51.
- Chang, Sujie. 2010. "A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study on Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Strategies: Across Korea, Japan, and the United States." *Korean Journal of Social and Personality Psychology* 24 (4): 1–17.
- Chen, Sylvia Xiaohua, Michael Harris Bond, and Bacon Chan. 2009. "Behavioral Manifestations of Modesty." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 40 (4): 603–26.
- Cheng, Yichuan 程伊川. 1983. *Yichuan yizhuan* 伊川易傳 (The Yi River Commentary on the Changes). In *Siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 (Wenyuange Edition). Taiwan: Shanmuyin shuguan.
- Cho, Geung-Ho. 1996. "Culture and Person Perception." *Korean Journal of Psychology* 15 (1): 104–39.
- Choi, Hoon-Seok, and Hayeon Lee. 2019. "A Synergistic Effect of Collectivistic Value Orientation and Independent Self-Representation on Group Creativity: Evidence from a Field Study." *Korean Journal of Social and Personality Psychology* 33 (4): 1–19.
- Exline, Julie J., and Marci Lobel. 1999. "The Perils of Outperformance: Sensitivity about Being the Target of a Threatening Upward Comparison." *Psychological Bulletin* 125: 307–37.
- Gibson, Bryan, and Daniel Sachau. 2000. "Sandbagging as a Self-Presentational Strategy: Claiming to Be Less than You Are." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 26: 56–70.
- Han, Ji-min, Hoon-seok Choi, and Doil Kim. 2022. "Social Representation of Humility." Poster paper presented at the 76th Annual Meeting of the Korean Psychological Association, Seoul, South Korea, Spring 2022.
- Heine, Steven J., et al. 1999. "Is There a Universal Need for Positive Self-Regard?" *Psychological Review* 106: 766–794.
- Jeong, Wook, and Gyuseog Han. 2005. "Self-Esteem as a Moderator of Self-Enhancing Tendency." *Korean Journal of Social and Personality Psychology* 19 (1): 199–216.
- Kim, Doil. 2020. "Qian in Early Chinese Thought." *Early China* 43: 1-27.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Forthcoming. "Song dai sixiang zhong de qian xun" 宋代思想中的謙遜 (Confucian Humility in Neo-Confucian Thought). In *Heijian yu guangming: Song Ming Qing ruxue* 黑暗與光明: 宋明清儒學 (Darkness and Light: Confucian Learning in the Song, Ming, and Qing Dynasties). (Working title). Taipei: National Taiwan University Press.

- Kim, Eun-mi. 2001. "Gyeongseong eonhaeng-ui munhwa simni hakjeok bunseok: Gyeongseong igiseong-eul jungsim-euro" 겸손 언행의 문화심리학적 분석 : 기능적 이기성을 중심으로 (Cultural Psychological Analysis of Modesty Behavior: With Specific Focus on Functional Selfishness). PhD diss., Chung-Ang University.
- Kurman, Jenny. 2003. "Why Is Self-Enhancement Low in Certain Collectivist Cultures? An Investigation of Two Competing Explanations." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 34 (5): 496–510.
- Markus, Hazel Rose, and Shinobu Kitayama. 1991. "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation." *Psychological Review* 98 (2): 224–53.
- Nichols, Shaun. 2004. "Folk Concepts and Intuitions: From Philosophy to Cognitive Science." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 8 (11): 514–18.
- Oyserman, Daphna. 2016. "What Does a Priming Perspective Reveal about Culture: Culture-as-Situated Cognition." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 12: 94–99.
- Oyserman, Daphna, and Spike W. S. Lee. 2008. "Does Culture Influence What and How We Think? Effects of Priming Individualism and Collectivism." *Psychological Bulletin* 134 (2): 311–42.
- Roberts, Annabelle R., and Emma E. Levine. 2021. "Hiding Success." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Interpersonal Relations and Group Processes* 120 (5): 1261–86.
- Singelis, Theodore M. 1994. "The Measurement of Independent and Interdependent Self-Construals." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 5: 580–91.
- Xing, Bing 邢柄. *Lunyu zhushu* 論語注疏 (Annotations and Commentaries on the Analects). In *Siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 (Wenyuange Edition). Taiwan: Shanmuyin shuguan.
- Yang, Kuo-shu 楊國樞. 2004. *Zhongguo ren de xinli yu xingwei* 中國人的心理與行為: 本土化研究 (The Psychology and Behavior of Chinese People). Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue.
- Zhu, Xi 朱熹. 1983a. *Lunyu jizhu* 論語集注 (Collected Annotations on the Analects). In *Siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 (Wenyuange Edition). Taiwan: Shanmuyin shuguan.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1983b. *Zhouyi benyi* 周易本義 (Original Meaning of the Book of Changes). In *Siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 (Wenyuange Edition). Taiwan: Shanmuyin shuguan.

\*\*\*The initial version of this paper was presented at the conference, “Contemporary Moral Psychology and Cross-cultural Moral Psychology,” which took place at Georgetown University on September 22–23, 2022. This was co-sponsored by Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, the Center for the Contemporary Study of East Asian Classics and Critical Confucianism (CCECC) at Sungkyunkwan University, and the National Research Foundation of Korea. The draft received various comments from several participants who attended the conference, and it was revised based on their feedback. Especially, I would like to thank Philip J. Ivanhoe, Hoon-Seok Choi, and Shaun Nichols for providing extensive comments on the revised draft of this paper.

■ Submitted: 28 March 2023

Accepted: 20 July 2023