

## Confucianism and Qualitative Interviewing: Working Seoul to Soul

*Sunghee Park & Neil Lunt*

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**Abstract:** With the internationalization of higher education, research settings and researcher backgrounds are becoming increasingly complex, further complicating disciplinary assumptions, traditions and techniques. This article highlights key practical and conceptual issues that arose during planning fieldwork, fieldwork conduct, subsequent analysis and writing up of a qualitative study carried out within a Confucian setting. Drawing on the experience with a detailed research study of a pay for performance scheme (involving 31 in-depth interviews undertaken by a South Korean researcher), this article explores conceptual and practical issues that emerged between Anglophone methods and countries with a Confucian heritage. It is discussed how processes of sampling/recruitment, ethics, fieldwork conduct (including insider relations, power hierarchies, and translation) are complicated in such settings. The article seeks to expand our understandings of qualitative research vis-à-vis contemporary Confucian cultures, something which has previously not been well addressed and which is part of the ongoing project of "globalizing qualitative research."

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## 1. Background

### 1.1 Globalized education and research methods

Recent decades have witnessed growing mobility in higher education: staff and student mobility; international benchmarking; partnerships; and exchanges underpinned by political support and economic and trade advantage. International research collaborations have become *de rigueur* for institutions and academics (HE, GENG & CAMPBELL-HUNT, 2009; McDONNELL & BOYLE, 2012; RIZVI, 2011; TEICHLER, 2009). Within this mobility there are encounters between prevailing western research standards and values and non-western contexts—the perennial core/periphery problematic and the associated challenge of "globalization of qualitative research" (HSIUNG, 2012, §1). [1]

The importance of making accommodations to research design and implementation are well documented by anthropologists and ethnographers, and highlighted within many cross-cultural discussions (c.f. BRIGGS, 1997; FUNG, MILLER & LIN, 2004). However, there continue to be roads less well traveled within social science methodology literature—including East Asian contexts and the practice of qualitative methods. This article reports on qualitative methods (in-depth interviews) usage within South Korea, and explores conceptual and practical issues facing such research in countries with a Confucian heritage. As MRUCK, CISNEROS-PUEBLA and FAUX (2005) highlight:

"We need to know more about what is happening in the different (national, disciplinary, medial) 'peripheries' to learn about the conceptual roots of our current practices and to act in a future globalized academia, opening our minds to the fascinating diversity (and unity?) of our memories, images, styles, focus, strategies and life-worlds as qualitative researchers" (§9). [2]

Such issues have relevance for three reasons: first, growing student mobility. In terms of absolute numbers, international students from China, India and South Korea are the most numerous. Asian students are 52% of foreign student enrollments worldwide (OECD, 2011, p.318), and the dominance of the English speaking destinations is clear: the United States receives the most international students in absolute terms—with 18% of all foreign students worldwide, the UK has about 10% and Australia 7%. Large proportions of these international students study social science, business and law: for example making up 55% of international students in Australia, over 40% in the UK, over 30% in US, and around 35% in New Zealand (OECD, 2011). Many such students study social science methods courses, at undergraduate, Masters and doctoral levels. [3]

Second, research settings and the backgrounds of researchers are becoming increasingly complex, not limited to a single country and not typically "cross-cultural" in the sense of fieldwork that is undertaken with participants who are from a different culture (see KIM, 2012, p.132; also TWINN, 1998). There are challenges which are brought sharply into focus when we examine prevailing disciplinary assumptions, traditions and techniques. [4]

Third, *social* research methods are in fact typically ontologically and epistemologically individualistic. The methods have been developed to study particular "social" settings (western, industrialized, capitalist) but in so doing, a broader methodological veil is drawn across all cultures and situations.<sup>1</sup> As recent editorials acknowledge, such methods are in fact cultural artifacts (CISNEROS-PUEBLA, FAUX, MORAN-ELLIS, GARCÍA-ÁLVAREZ & LÓPEZ-SINTAS, 2009, §2; RYEN & GOBO, 2011, p.411). Anglophone countries' ways of thinking about methodology have become a dominant research paradigm internationally and make particular assumptions (see HSIUNG, 2012). For example, its sampling typically centers on individuals not groups, and a number of indigenous cultures,

1 Although work such as PACKER (2011, p.9) focuses on "how best to grasp the interconnectedness and study it adequately," advocating a historical ontology that is critical of much current qualitative direction.

including Māori and Pacific Peoples in New Zealand (BISHOP, 2005; CARPENTER & McMURCHY-PILKINGTON, 2008; OTUNUKU, 2011; SMITH, 1997), Australian Aboriginal and Canadian First Nations (BATTISTE, BELL & FINDLAY, 2002; COCHRAN et al., 2008; MATSINHE, 2007) and African perspectives (SHAW & AL-AWWAD, 1994) have found such assumptions wanting. [5]

Taken together such points—increased researcher mobility, exporting of research techniques and approaches, and the cultural roots of such methods—highlight tensions within cross-cultural practice. The view that "methods are still applied in non-Western countries with little reflexivity" (RYEN & GOBO, 2011, p.412; also HSIUNG, 2012), has currency beyond the wider indigenous movements detailed above, including being applicable to East Asian countries with a Confucian heritage. It is to this social and ethical philosophy that we now turn. [6]

## 1.2 South Korean culture

South Korea's experience of Confucianism will be used to develop this article's argument<sup>2</sup>. CONFUCIUS' teachings relate to codes of conduct, emphasizing human morality and relationships, and core ideas are humaneness and benevolence (SAGONG, 1993; SONG, 1990). South Korea is regarded as the most Confucian country in East Asia, perhaps more so even than China or Taiwan where Confucianism originated. Confucianism functions in everyday life as an ethic rather than a religion or political ideology (KIM, 1996a), and most South Koreans' daily conduct is regulated by Confucianism, emphasizing filial piety, reciprocity and harmony. [7]

Traditional Korean values are expressed in the form of five basic principles of relationships, focusing on the authority of superior higher positions, and which have contributed to maintaining a traditional hierarchy system in terms of country, community and family. This philosophy also contributed to establishing a strong patriarchal family system and unequal relationships (SAGONG, 1993; SONG, 1990). [8]

*First* and foremost, the expectation of respect for elders underpins the seniority system in South Korean society and management systems, including the civil service. As a result, Confucian values inform seniority being favored in promotion, evaluation and performance appraisal. *Second* is "respect for honor," related to the traditional value, *Ipsinyangmyung*, which means "personal success and well known reputation." Thus, personal success is judged by honor and reputation rather than income or wealth. Such cultural inheritance resulted in many South Koreans valuing academic learning for scholars and civil servants whilst less emphasis was placed on the contribution of commerce and manufacturing (KO,

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2 Whilst the numbers of Korean students abroad are sometimes more modest—around 1.2% of the UK's international students are from Korea—for other countries, figures are 11.2% of students (United States), 4.2% (New Zealand), and 2.6% (Australia) respectively, and they are illustrative of countries where Eastern philosophy dominates (OECD, 2011).

2002, p.376). Indeed, modern civil servants are expected to devote their life to the national agenda and pursue honor above rewards. [9]

The *third* traditional value is collectivism. South Korea's homogeneity arises from its historical experience and a concept of "one nation culture and single-race nation," resulting from overcoming attempts at invasion. This strong emphasis on unity also influences lower levels of social interaction at group and community levels. As a result, homogeneity and collective activity are highly prized within relationships. *Fourth*, the Confucian ethic elevates family, and this concept of family expands to groups, organizations and communities (YOON, 2001). *Fifth*, for this reason, personal networks become fundamental to relationships, with three kinds of personal connections: blood networks, regional networks, and school networks (JUNG, 2007). Regional ties and school ties still exert a strong influence on modern South Korean society. In summary, South Koreans are collectivistic in outlook, emphasize homogeneity, and thus are unlikely to immediately embrace or fully understand cultural world-views which emphasize individualism and difference<sup>3</sup>. [10]

The Confucian tradition is strongly reflected in the broader public service ethos and the corresponding structure of the national civil service system. The South Korean civil service has traditionally been a career service, where civil servants are recruited for life-long service via entry examinations and academic credentials. They are expected to make a life-long commitment to the service until the age of 60, and promotion takes place on the basis of individuals' grades (OECD, 2004, pp.3-4). "General service" covers most civil servants working in central government and also illustrates the traditional characteristics of South Korean bureaucracy exhibiting strong vertical classifications. [11]

Having overviewed the nature of Confucianism, the remainder of the current article is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the empirical study of fieldwork conducted in a Confucian setting. Section 3 examines the sampling and recruitment strategies of the study; Section 4 discusses the place of ethics and ethical review. In Section 5 we highlight issues arising from fieldwork conduct; Section 6 focuses on analysis techniques and approaches to the study. Section 7 concludes with a summary discussion. [12]

## **2. Utilization of an Empirical Study for Wider Methodological Reflection**

The basis of this conceptual reflection is a study completed by a South Korean researcher who collected data in South Korea and who drew upon Anglophone-influenced qualitative techniques. The empirical study itself explored the impact of a "pay for performance" scheme on the motivation and behavior of South Korean civil servants. The main purpose of the performance-based pay system introduced after 1999 was to create an atmosphere of competition and hard work

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3 Confucian and western cultural differences can be summarized by acknowledging HOFSTEDE's (1991, p.169) dimensions of: power distance; uncertainty avoidance; individualism versus collectivism; masculinity versus femininity; long-term versus short-term timeframe.

in the public service, to attract competent and professional staff from the private sector, and to encourage a competitive attitude in the government so that every civil servant could carry out his/her tasks more efficiently and creatively (KIM, 2004). The pay structure of South Korean civil servants used to be based on seniority with pay rates determined by the length of service and automatic salary increases annually. The 1997 International Monetary Fund economic crisis meant that the South Korean government, influenced by ideas of new public management, saw competence and performance as key agendas to overcome difficulties (cf. COMMON, 2001; EVANS, 2004). Key objectives of the current 2012 empirical research study included understanding: public servants' views and attitudes towards the principle of using incentives; whether incentives increased public servants' commitment to their organization and their job satisfaction; and the unintended and dysfunctional consequences of the scheme. The piece does not report on the empirical findings themselves, but rather reflects on the practice and experience of conducting the study. [13]

In-depth interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection because of an emphasis on qualities of entities, processes and meanings rather than measurements in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2013, p.17). Qualitative methodology was unusual for the South Korean public sector context and adopting qualitative approaches is a significant methodological departure because in South Korean academic and policy circles, relatively little qualitative work has been documented. Most research methodology books published and used in South Korea focus on quantitative methods with explanations of statistical analysis (e.g. KIM, 1996b; NAMGUNG, 1997). For example, the South Korean studies (e.g. HA, GANG, CHOI, KWON & HWANG, 2004; HWANG, 2004) identified as investigating the effects of performance incentives adopt quantitative methods by using cross-sectional surveys. There are exceptions. For example, some developments within education (KIM & CHO, 2005), reflect a vanguard position that critical education studies often assume in challenging existing norms and frameworks (for example, New Zealand and the work of SMITH, 1999). [14]

The study used a topic guide for one-to-one semi-structured interviews (BRYMAN, 2004; FLICK, 1998) to establish both a grounding of factual information and a depth of understanding of respondents' viewpoints. Within the interviews, the South Korean researcher conducting the fieldwork began by introducing himself, including outlining work experiences and current status. Discussion with respondents then began with a summary of career and experience, including the length of employment and the method of entry to the public service, and a focus on important career milestones. The researcher is an insider—a civil servant on study leave from the South Korean public service—and a clear cultural expectation is that individuals situate themselves within the organizational hierarchy and identify their networks (year and cohort of entry and subsequent posting experience within the public service). Specific research questions were then introduced around the relationships of incentives and performance. [15]

Qualitative research is more than simply a technique, and represents a broader interaction or encounter. Any textbook portrayal of an interview is rarely achievable in a real interview situation. The emphasis on the researcher as an instrument (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 1995) focuses discussion on how data collection is fused with the characteristics and practices of the interviewer (GUBA & LINCOLN, 1981; HOLSTEIN & GUBRIUM, 2004; PEZALLA, PETTIGREW & MILLER-DAY, 2012). To this extent, the generic experience reported here will not diverge from broader qualitative practice—namely the importance of flexibility, responsiveness and facilitating the broader encounter. However, the clear methodological departure is that there are particular Confucian-influenced nuances within the qualitative research experience which this article highlights. The article's aims are thus threefold:

1. To highlight key practical and conceptual issues that arose during planning fieldwork, fieldwork itself, and subsequent analysis and write-up of the study.
2. To contribute towards an understanding of qualitative research vis-à-vis contemporary Confucian cultures.
3. To add towards the "globalization of qualitative research," moving beyond a critique of Anglophone methods and unpacking local, hegemonic discourses that limit the development of qualitative research (c.f., HSIUNG, 2012, §5). [16]

### **3. Sampling and Recruitment in Confucian Contexts**

The study used purposive sampling (BRYMAN, 2004) to identify prospective interviewees, and the researcher utilized personal networks and past work experience for opportunities to contact relevant officials. Four ministries were chosen, considering ministries where possible respondents, willing to accept an invitation, were working. A convenience sample of 31 respondents was chosen with interviewee selection balanced (using a matrix to consider characteristics being met and missing) in terms of rank, method of entry, length of employment and gender. Selected personnel were contacted via telephone or e-mail with an invitation letter, and subsequently interested individuals were contacted with an information sheet, and interview arrangements were made. Clearly, sampling by personal network is widely used and accepted in social research settings (see, TAYLOR, 2011). [17]

Within the South Korean context, sampling by personal network was pivotal in facilitating fieldwork processes: access to respondents, interview content, and building rapport. About four fifths of the interviews were arranged directly through the researcher's personal network, with the remaining interviewees recruited by snowball sampling in which personal networks also played a role. Personal networks and the bonds created with peers in the civil service were significant, allowing contact with senior civil servants and divisional directors, some of whom decided to participate in the study because of the particular researcher who requested the interviews. Indeed, whilst purposive sampling by personal network can be criticized for "cherry picking," allowing the researcher to hand pick respondents for ease, it perhaps fitted somewhat more naturally with Confucian

mores and expectations rather than attempting to recruit unknown individuals who lie outside networks. However, recruiting senior respondents (Grade 3 and above<sup>4</sup>) proved more problematic and they were typically less willing to take part in interviews. In terms of method of entry to the civil service (a distinctive consideration within the South Korean civil service), elite civil servants who began careers as middle level managers (Grade 5) were easier to recruit because the researcher belongs to this group. By contrast, non-elite civil servants who joined the civil service at lower rank (Grade 7 or 9) were difficult to select because they outside direct personal networks and these are difficult to permeate in Confucian-ordered societies. [18]

The importance of both seniority and collectivism within Confucian settings potentially risk encouraging researchers within such settings to hand pick respondents—utilizing networks and thereby avoiding possibly uncomfortable interviews has a certain attraction. For example, many more direct subordinates would have felt obliged to participate if asked, but this would have weakened the sampling frame and not addressed the contributions of senior respondents. For that reason, the researcher constructed a matrix to consider characteristics being met and what was missing as recruitment progressed (balance of rank, length of employment, method of entry and gender). During fieldwork, the matrix was reviewed intermittently to check whether balanced sample characteristics were achieved, and new respondents were added to address missing components. [19]

Personal network influenced the length of interview and respondents contacted by personal network allowed on average longer times for discussions. Arguably, the personal network also helped obtain richer data, and numerous network respondents expressed the view that connections facilitated a smoother discussion. By contrast, it was sometimes more difficult to build rapport with respondents recruited via a process of recommendation. Interviews arranged directly through the researcher's personal network (exhibiting previous educational, employment or regional links) lasted typically for an hour and a half; those achieved by snowball sample approximately one hour. There was also a discernible analytical advantage because interviewees arranged through personal relationships gave detailed answers to questions including several examples and anecdotes, enriching the process of data analysis. This was the result of two dynamics: the importance of collectivism within Korean culture which values personal ties; and the role of "face" and relationship within Korean society whereby previous co-work experiences encouraged interviewees to speak out as much as they could. They felt at ease and also wanted to help the researcher to finish the study successfully by furnishing experiences. For example, one divisional director said that she had talked so much because she was glad to see the researcher and, as a result of previous organizational relations, felt strong bonds of affinity. [20]

Whilst some points are similarly obstacles in undertaking elite interviews elsewhere (HARVEY, 2011), there were distinct cultural challenges in creating

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4 The Korean civil service has eight vertical classifications (Senior Civil Service and Grades 3-9). The Senior Civil Service and Grade 3 are considered the elite grades.

such opportunities for data collection in South Korea. A related point is that, typically, North American, British and Australasian policy research would take place within the broad confines of traditional office hours, perhaps including a lunch or break slot, or even working late. However, about a third of participants preferred "after office hours" (evening or weekend), particularly deputy directors or lower ranked staff: a practical detail underpinned by broad cultural expectations about work role and responsibility (*Ipsinyangmyung*) and how this is reconciled with personal networks. [21]

The qualitative interview has particular cultural expectations, and some civil servants sought to negotiate a preferred style of encounter. For example, some respondents suggested receiving questions by e-mail so that they would reply by e-mail; others suggested interviewing using the telephone (also see OPDENAKKER, 2006). They were unfamiliar with the proposed qualitative approach, and implied that material could be conveyed more "efficiently" using written responses. Briefing the respondents about the role and nature of qualitative work addressed some confusion; however, using conversational interactions to produce valid and useful data fitted uneasily with wider beliefs and assumptions of knowledge and power. [22]

#### **4. Ethics Within a Confucian Fieldwork Context**

Modern social science is underpinned by the notion of "do no harm" and the importance of robust ethical conduct and processes of ethical review. Ethical review, in particular the role of institutionalized ethical review procedures, has become fundamental to good research (LUNT & FOUCHÉ, 2010). Ethical principles uniformly suggest that research should not be conducted without the full agreement of participants, should protect their privacy, and pay attention to the process of gaining access to participants (MILLER & BELL, 2002, p.53; see also BRYMAN, 2004; GREGORY, 2003). The research study gained ethics approval from a university-based ethics committee in order to comply with these expectations. However, procedures relating to research ethics are not similarly developed in South Korea and the ethical protocols and processes were seen by respondents as somewhat unusual. Much policy research and academic research that is published and available (in English or Korean) provide little information concerning ethics, and most doctoral research written in English focused on South Korea does not mention the ethics approval issue (e.g. KIM, 2005; KO, 2008; although recent exceptions include KIM, 2012). In Anglo-American social research practice, ethics has been a universalized norm but this sits somewhat awkwardly in South Korean-based fieldwork. In seeking to traverse these two cultural worlds—of ethical principles/institutionalized committees and the South Korean context—there was little guidance and experience available. Institutional ethics approval assumes a transparency and social values that are ill-fitting for a hierarchically ordered society such as South Korea. Whilst these hierarchical relationships and personal networks offer a legitimacy or passport to undertake the research, the addition of formal ethical requirements was perceived as adding strangeness to the encounter. (It is important to acknowledge that many



institutional ethics boards are embracing the need to allow modified procedures as research becomes increasingly internationalized.) [23]

Undertaking research in South Korea involved practices which, from a non-Confucian vantage point, could be considered perplexing, perhaps even unethical! Beginning the interviews required some distinctive protocol (e.g. outlining work experiences and current status), which went further than simply sharing common experiences in order to build rapport. The giving of a customary gift at the beginning of a business meeting or visit in South Korea was a sign of respect—but this would sit uneasily in many understandings of the interview process. This was particularly the case when, following the gift-giving, interviewees were then asked to sign the consent form in line with University research process. [24]

## 5. Fieldwork Conducted Within Confucian Settings

Because topics and questions were broader and more discursive compared with closed questionnaire design, some respondents were concerned their answers might seem inconsistent when analyzed. As a result, this produced shorter answers and abstract phrases and some participants felt unable to answer broader questions. Again, these issues are potentially common ones facing all qualitative research in general. Interviewees grumbled that the questions became more difficult when asked about dimensions relating to *culture* and *public service motivation*. There was an interviewee perception that the honor and motivation intrinsic to being a public servant did not require restatement, and the interviewer's task was to puncture such assumptions in order to talk about payment, incentive, work effort, and perceptions of fairness. [25]

As highlighted, the researcher in this study is a civil servant who had worked in a ministry, responsible for developing pay for performance, interviewing colleagues or supervisors within his own organization. Many participants were drawn from the researcher's personal network. Plausibly, this might affect respondents' answers through a power hierarchy, and elicit "socially desirable responses" (ZERBE & PAULHUS, 1987, p.250). There were pre-existing relationships, what GARTON and COPLAND (2010, p.535) identify as "acquaintance interviews" which involve colleagues and friends, thus requiring participants to negotiate their new identities as interviewer/interviewee. GARTON and COPLAND write "missing from current research into interviews as research sites is the contribution that prior relationships can play on developing rapport" (ibid.). Consequently, the researcher's situation in a study becomes crucial for research quality. Taking account of these dynamics highlights three issues: reflexivity, insider research, and power hierarchies. As will be suggested below, what are common issues has distinctive twists when considered in a South Korean context. [26]

Within qualitative research, the presence of the *researcher as the instrument* necessitates self-reflexivity (c.f. PEZALLA et al., 2012; RUBIN & RUBIN, 2005). How to address subjectivity becomes a key concern, and reflexivity is increasingly used in qualitative studies to legitimize and validate the research process

(FINLAY, 2002; PILLOW, 2003). YOUNG (2003, p.53) defines reflexivity as "self-reflection on one's research process and findings, self-awareness of one's social positionality, values and perspectives, and self-critique of the effects of one's words and actions upon the individuals and groups being studied." It would appear that the need for reflexivity is no longer questioned by researchers. Rather, "how to do it" becomes crucial (FINLAY & GOUGH, 2003, p.5; HSIUNG, 2008). [27]

There is broad agreement that a researcher's background must be available to make readers understand the experiences of the researcher and how they influence the research process (LEATHERBY, 2003; MARTÍN PÉREZ, 2006; MAYNARD, 2002). Similarly, one form of reflexivity<sup>5</sup> may involve documenting the researcher's thoughts about the research process (BANISTER, BURMAN, PARKER, TAYLOR & TINDALL, 1994), and the current article detailing the research process can be regarded as one way of "performing" reflexivity for the established qualitative tradition rather than the Confucian context itself. But what expressions and approaches of reflexivity exist beyond these broad alignments with qualitative recommendations, and is it necessary to talk about Confucian reflexivity? Within the South Korean context the balance between Confucian principles of conformity and cultivation (self-reflection for a higher ideal) is particularly intriguing. Being reflexive is itself a culturally-situated activity that draws upon a critical Enlightenment tradition and not something that can be exported akin to a technique. How such individualized processes of reflexivity interact with the wider order of social relations, including familial dynamics and authority, will be culturally contingent (KIM, 2012). There are various possible mechanisms and relationships to help facilitate such reflexivity including supervision processes, the critiques of research peers, and adopting a "critical friend" (FOUCHÉ & LIGHT, 2011). [28]

Obtaining access to interviewees within the study raises issues of *insider research*. Much research on insider activity assumes that researchers are advocates for others given, for example, a shared gender or ethnicity (c.f. PALMER, 2006; see also, KIM, 2012, p.135). The form of insider research discussed within this study has an organizational context rather than focusing on community relationships, and therefore parallels many forms of practitioner research where practitioners research within their own organizational setting (LUNT & FOUCHÉ, 2010). Insider research means there are particular ethical issues to address, including negotiating access with authorities and participants; keeping good faith by demonstrating trustworthiness and taking care with the writing up of the study, in order to protect ongoing relationships (also, COGHLAN & BRANNICK, 2005; WILLIAMSON, 2007). Undertaking insider research requires balancing the day-to-day role with the researcher role (GRAY, 2004), raising particular issues regarding confidentiality with the dangers of "role blurring" (WILLIAMSON, 2007, p.17; VAN DEN HOONAARD, 2001, p.22). All these points are relevant when considering the researcher's role as an insider studying pay for performance. [29]

5 Other forms of reflexivity beyond self-reflexivity include how to interact with participants and how to ask questions (see HSIUNG [2008] for discussion on the nexus of teaching-doing).

Insider/outsider are general notions accepted within South Korean society and Confucianism, and whilst homogeneity and family-like relationships are significant, there is a close relationship with insiders and cultural exclusions of outsiders to the social group. The advantages of insider research include accessibility, possibilities of intimacy and building rapport. Insider access was particularly valuable given the South Korean government system which elevates personal networks. As a result, scholars and researchers in South Korean universities may face difficulties accessing the civil service and collecting data because they are perceived as outsiders by civil servants. [30]

Insider research has the advantage of allowing access but must deliver robust data if it is to underpin knowledge claims. Considering the insider relationships of researcher and interviewees, it is apparent how Confucianism is stronger within the public services than broader South Korean society. For example, most civil servants tended to sloganize—including "honor" and "service of nation"—but if asked to clarify became rather embarrassed and uncomfortable. Such slogans and terms were taken for granted and considered basic discourse and tacit knowledge. Perhaps a non-insider interviewer would have elicited deeper reflection on these core social values, status and behaviors by standing outside such professional cultures and posing more naïve and searching questions? As MARTÍN PÉREZ (2006) identifies, there are different strategies and insider location to be negotiated when undertaking interviews. [31]

Insider status is itself nuanced because the researcher not working within similar ministries is likely to reduce the extent of "hierarchically-desirable responses." MERCER (2006) argues that the insider/outsider dimension is not sharply separated because a single identity—such as gender—cannot guarantee the status of an insider (see also GRIFFITH, 1998). The issue was similar for the South Korean context with insider/outsider relationships not reducible to a simple binary, but more nuanced to reflect Confucian orderings and multiple status/identities (KIM, 2012). [32]

There is relatively little literature focused on how Confucian contexts of hierarchy and deference to seniors impact research processes. Although some PhD theses (e.g. KO, 2008; YOON, 2001) are undertaken by South Korean civil servants who, as insiders, conduct interviews with civil servants, there is little reflection on insider status and *power*. Here the research produced two interesting illustrations of the interplay of insider status with gender and rank. First, traditionally in South Korea women are expected to assume a domestic role of care-giver and home-maker, with men seen as natural leaders. Despite the expansion of female labor market participation, a male-centered culture still exists in the shape of an authoritarian organizational stratification system which stresses hierarchies and authority, discriminating against female workers in terms of recruitment, job assignment (career path), and promotion. For this reason, women's economic participation and opportunities, and political empowerment are extremely weak compared to those of men, with South Korea placed towards the bottom of the gender gap

index.<sup>6</sup> The experience of interviews, therefore, was to provide different opportunities for male and female interviewees and this was relatively unexpected and unintended—here inevitably are the preconceptions of the male researcher being shaped by his own Confucian heritage. There were notable differences for female respondents during interviews: in most cases the duration of interviews with female respondents was much longer compared to male respondents; and female respondents used their interviews to express what they perceived as emotional hurt, voicing dissatisfaction with a patriarchal elite system. [33]

Second, in relation to status, power relationships were less clearly marked in interviews with division directors, deputy directors and lower ranked staff. This is possibly because most of them were contacted by personal networks and their ranks were similar to the researcher's. However, interviewing senior civil servants was challenging because the dynamics of interaction straitjacketed the number and depth of interview questions. Establishing rapport was difficult, time felt constrained, and there were inhibitions in asking questions. When these interviewees showed less interest, it became more difficult to continue the interviews. Asking specific questions to clarify vague or short answers was problematic. For example, a two-hour trip was made for one interview with a senior civil servant. At the onset of the interview the respondent said that she did not have enough time to complete it because of a subsequent meeting. Answers were short and general follow up questions difficult. This interviewee was two ranks higher than the interviewer, and they lacked previous experience working together. Including such a respondent was essential for the research however because there are relatively few upper-level female civil servants. [34]

Again, some of these practicalities are common to many elite interview settings (HARVEY, 2011, pp.436-439). However, for the researcher it was difficult to escape a preconceived cultural notion of it being an *honor* to have an opportunity to bridge South Korean civil service and academic practice. Despite detailed reading and understanding of the concept of reflexivity, the researcher still faced difficulties in seeking to practically challenge hierarchy and order. [35]

Whilst saving face is a key characteristic of many cultures (and endemic to the challenge of qualitative research), it is particularly central to Confucian cultures. Given semi-structured interviews, built on reciprocal trust and personal networks which provide a more comfortable atmosphere, these should have produced more open interview exchanges. Nevertheless, some signs of "socially desirable answers" were observed. For example, prior to the interview, several participants said they had many complaints about incentives, but during the interview their answers were far more guarded. As a tool to get close to data, the interview may still have difficulties in obtaining clear perceptions, particularly in organizational contexts where Confucianism can constrain by producing "organizationally desirable responses." [36]

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6 It is 104th out of 134 countries in 2010, whilst it was 115th in 2009 (HAUSMANN, TYSON & ZAHIDI, 2010).

This section has outlined various reflections on insider research within a Confucian context. A key point is that being an insider brings its own challenges, and an enduring question throughout the planning, conduct and analysis should be—what sort of insider am I? Moreover, insider status may be contested and re-shaped in subtle ways through the life and conduct of the project (for example, different interview locations, at different points in time, and with a range of respondents). Within projects, researchers may not be uniformly insiders but also embrace the identity of stranger, visitor or initiate (FLICK, 1998, pp.59-61). [37]

## **6. Analytical Complexity Within a Confucian Setting**

There are implications for analysis that arise from the recruitment strategies and research conduct. Whilst recruitment and conduct drew on Confucian norms, how are such norms balanced or displaced by those associated with western qualitative research at the stage of analysis? We provide four examples that arose during the study and identify how they were resolved. [38]

First, relating to translation: interviews were conducted, transcribed and analyzed in Korean, and final analysis was translated into English. Translation involves a translator who interprets a word in an original language and finds its equivalent word in a target language (ESPOSITO, 2001). How well original meaning of words uttered by interviewees can be translated in association with nuance, background and cultural context is complex (TEMPLE & YOUNG, 2004, p.174; see also MARSHALL & ROSSMAN, 2006; TEMPLE, EDWARDS & ALEXANDER, 2006). Achieving an objective account by solving problems of translation is giving way to acknowledging that reducing equivalence to a technical matter may be something of a holy grail (c.f. TEMPLE, 2008, pp.357, 361; TEMPLE & YOUNG, 2004, p.163). Qualitative research has contained relatively little discussion of the complexities of translation (ESPOSITO, 2001; LARKIN, DIERCKX DE CASTERLÉ & SCHOTSMANS, 2007; TWINN, 1997), and several studies (e.g. KHANUM, 2001) are criticized for not informing readers that data were translated (TEMPLE & YOUNG, 2004). [39]

Translation was necessary for this piece of work written in English, but with fieldwork undertaken in South Korea. But given that translation is required, who should undertake this activity? As the researcher understands both Korean and English, he had the expertise to conduct interviews in Korean and translate them into English, if required. Respondents talked a great deal about traditional values and culture, and these Confucian nuances were probably beyond foreign translators' abilities. For example, the practice of "resisting" individualized pay for performance (known as 1/n) involved teams of workers sharing individual bonuses. This 1/n practice can be understood as an accumulation of collectivistic culture and involves some unique South Korean civil servant behaviors and informal codes. Confucianism and the traditional social rank system therefore complicated translation and understanding. MARSHALL and ROSSMAN (2006, p.112) assert that researchers' translation of interview words on their own could lower the risk of misinterpretation. The researcher also played a "hybrid" role, both finding equivalent meanings in the translated language and conveying

cultural context from the original language ("cultural broker") (TEMPLE & YOUNG, 2004, p.171; TEMPLE et al., 2006, §21, 29). [40]

For the present study, the researcher translated the interviews. Respondents' responses were related to the South Korean civil service system and its distinctive sub-cultures, including the method of entry and rank (Grade) system, and level of duties in the organizational chart of each ministry. It is difficult for a non-civil servant translator to understand and translate these concepts and systems to an appropriate level. Indeed this was illustrated when a fellow South Korean was asked to translate a pilot interview script. The outcome was problematic, not because he lacked a Korean background and linguistic ability, understanding of Confucianism or English proficiency, but simply because of gaps in his understanding of the Korean civil service system. Translation is thus linguistic, cultural *and* sub-cultural (organizational) in nature, and although common to all cross-cultural research practices, there are subtleties evident when research is undertaken in Confucian settings. [41]

Second, collecting data in one setting (South Korea) and analyzing it in another setting (European) within a British University raised the issue of balancing Confucian norms around gender and those of a more critical social science. The sample included female civil servants, a group that is underrepresented at senior levels of the South Korean civil service. During initial data analysis these female perspectives were included within the whole set of public servant interviews that were reported and from which conclusions were being drawn. The researcher had to be encouraged to explore the transcripts separately and to acknowledge gender as a fundamental category of analysis. However, when this gender partitioning was undertaken some conclusions specific to the female respondents—including how they used the interviews to express dissatisfaction and grievance—were apparent. Here, the researcher's initial blind spot towards gender analysis can be seen to reflect the influence of Confucianism and his experience of the South Korean public service. This was challenged by the longstanding traditions and commitment of qualitative research towards ensuring a critical social science. [42]

Third, the Confucian setting with accepted hierarchies and social mores gave opportunities to use social networks to recruit respondents and to collect rich data. However, there were also corresponding risks of the sample being wholly dominated by networks and undermining the integrity of the study. In this case there is a pragmatism that must ensue—research sampling requires access to *some* respondents to be (considered research or) researched at all, but there should also be constant reflection and tailoring to ensure that data has wider validity. [43]

A fourth point concerns how analysis itself requires strict processes, including that it is comprehensive and systematic. Analysis must examine the whole body of interview data, understanding (rather than ignoring) data outliers and ensuring that no single voice or perspective dominates the findings (whether age, experience or social position). Here we must eschew any pragmatism and maintain a fundamental commitment to the nature of qualitative research,

upholding integral processes that make qualitative research a valid methodology at all. Such commitment includes ensuring that critical perspectives voiced by respondents are reported within the findings. This expectation is counter to many norms of a Confucian public service but underpins the norms of a western qualitative research tradition. [44]

## 7. Summary

When undertaking research in Confucian settings, there are clearly common issues to address in line with broader qualitative research. Some of these are unproblematic, part and parcel of ensuring that the technique becomes a culturally appropriate encounter. However, the nature of Confucian societies presents potential conceptual and epistemological gaps between methods and implementation. Whilst arguably the setting—the South Korean public service—is a particularly strongly Confucian and hierarchical context, this article still serves as a useful reflection for other East Asian contexts. [45]

What are some of the wider implications of the points presented in this article? First, the unfamiliarity with qualitative research may decline over time, as circulations of students, researchers and ideas increase. Moreover, cultures are not themselves static and care should be taken to avoid essentializing and freezing culture. Indeed, western culture and knowledge exert a growing influence and legitimacy in contemporary South Korea (particularly evident in the tendency to prize American scholarship and intellectuals), and the growing internationalization of its higher education is also evident. [46]

Second, discussion should be seen in the wider context of attempts to "decolonize methodology" by sharpening our critical awareness of research practice and the nature of disciplines and disjuncture of cross-cultural work (BATTISTE et al., 2002; COCHRAN et al., 2008; MATSINHE, 2007). As SMITH (1999, p.65) notes: "Most of the 'traditional' disciplines are grounded in cultural world-views which are either antagonistic to other belief systems or have no methodology for dealing with other knowledge systems." [47]

Beyond the theoretical revelation that cultural context matters, the detail of *how* it matters in Confucian settings is important to understand in light of the dearth of "textbooks at the periphery" (for example, see criticisms of HSIUNG, 2012). Understanding qualitative work as an encounter rather than a technique at least ensures ongoing attention to making the encounter more valid. Acknowledging how particular hierarchical values and social expectations shape the nature of the encounter, and the process of knowledge-creation that ensues are important to reflect upon. There are also certain practical considerations—how an interview schedule is organized, expectations around making appointments, the protocol of meetings, and researching within strongly networked societies have implications for outsider and/or non-Asian researchers. [48]

Some dimensions are more problematic. Exhortations to "be reflexive" are not themselves without difficulty because it is necessary to ask—in what ways and for

what purposes is reflexivity required? Insider and outsider relations as a research dynamic necessitate awareness of the research context, and insider relations may become more strongly enmeshed in particular organizational and professional settings. Power hierarchies as they are delineated (for example, status) may limit the incisiveness of qualitative work, but in other instances (such as the case of gender) provide valuable outlets for resisting voices. [49]

Further attention must be paid to Confucian and East Asian research settings in order to understand the application and limitations of western-derived methods. Discussion must also focus on the opportunities of such method to contribute towards forms of knowledge production and cultural self-awareness. A related issue is how social research methods are taught and communicated. Craft and apprenticeship are potential pathways to help "grasp the local and the contextual aspects of complex cultural settings" (RYEN & GOBO, 2011, p.412) rather than textbook and didacticism. There is clearly the requirement to understand "domestic obstacles and transformative potential" (HSIUNG, 2012, §25) of qualitative research for policy settings as outlined in this article. The discussion reported here and the study that influenced it suggest qualitative research has potential to uncover valuable insights—about processes, about the taken for grant organizational discourses, hidden voices, perception and beliefs. Moreover, the associated exhortation to reflexivity, at least if properly communicated and understood, has some capacity to contribute towards enhancing critical faculties of Confucian researchers. [50]

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## Authors

*Sunghee PARK* has degrees from Seoul National University (BA, MA) and a PhD from the University of York. He is a career civil servant, and was recently on secondment to the 2014 Incheon Asian Games Organising Committee (as a Departmental Director).

Contact:

Sunghee Park

Director, Marketing Department  
2014 Incheon Asian Games Organizing  
Committee  
Seoul, Republic of Korea

E-mail: [sp567@korea.kr](mailto:sp567@korea.kr),  
[yorker2007@gmail.com](mailto:yorker2007@gmail.com)

*Neil LUNT* is a reader in social policy at the University of York. Formerly he taught policy studies in New Zealand (Massey University). He has a longstanding interest in cross-cultural and cross-national research methods and approaches and particular interests in East Asian social policy.

Contact:

Neil Lunt

Department of Social Policy and Social Work  
University of York, York, UK

Tel: 44 1904 321235

E-Mail: [neil.lunt@york.ac.uk](mailto:neil.lunt@york.ac.uk)

URL: <http://www.york.ac.uk/spsw/staff/neil-lunt/>

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