

South Korean humanistic leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to identify and explore what leadership characteristics constitute humanistic leadership in the South Korean context. Moreover, this study examines how these leadership characteristics are connected to Korean culture.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on the information gathered from semi-structured interviews and other sources, including books, case study articles and news articles, this study captures a more comprehensive perspective of Mr. Kook-Hyun Moon, the former CEO of Yuhan–Kimberly.

Findings – The key characteristics of Mr. Moon's humanistic leadership that are identified in this study are: respect for all mankind, benevolence (seeking the greater good), sincerity (building trusting relationships with stakeholders) and continuous learning and innovation (developing self and others). These key characteristics set Mr. Moon apart from other leaders and are connected to the fundamental values and philosophies of Korean culture.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the current leadership literature by identifying and exploring Mr. Moon's humanistic leadership characteristics that enable him to gain respect and contribute to communities and society in the South Korean context. This study also finds that the humanistic leadership characteristics of Mr. Moon reflect three major attributes of Korean culture: the ideology of the Dangun mythology, the principle of Neo-Confucianism in Korea and jeong – an indigenous cultural concept in Korea (these attributes will be discussed in detail in the South Korean values and philosophies section). Such reflection suggests that investigating how humanistic leadership characteristics are connected to local cultural roots is important to enhance the understanding of humanistic leadership.

Keywords South Korea, CEO, Humanistic leadership

Paper type Research paper

In recent years, organizations have faced enormous challenges due to their detrimental effects on environment, lack of sustainability and decline in trust from various stakeholders (Pirson, 2017). Pirson argues that some of these problems are due to management theory and practice, which are based on the economic view of human beings. He urges management scholars to build a theory that is based on the humanistic view. Moreover, developing leaders who respect people as holistic human beings, constantly develop themselves and others, consider all stakeholders' interests and pursue the common good is crucial (Fu *et al.*, 2019).

Although common leadership characteristics exist across different cultures, they are also embedded in unique cultural backgrounds that leaders may exhibit distinct leadership styles (Dorfman *et al.*, 1997). South Korea has gone through significant social and political changes and a period of rapid growth in economy; western management theories and practices have also been introduced to South Korean companies (Shin, 1998/1999; Tung *et al.*, 2013). However, the traditional values and philosophies of Korean culture remain prevalent in modern Korea, and Korean leaders and workers in organizations are deeply embedded in Korean cultural contexts



(Son, 2010). Thus, the present study aims to identify and explore what leadership characteristics constitute humanistic leadership in the South Korean context.

In this study, we introduce Mr. Kook-Hyun Moon, the former CEO of Yuhan–Kimberly and current CEO of Hansoll Textile, as an exemplary case for a humanistic leader in the South Korean context. To respond to the dynamic and fast-paced changes in the country, similar to other Korean leaders, Mr. Moon has shown his adaptability, passion for achievement, future-focused vision and continuous innovation (Baik *et al.*, 2010).

However, his respect toward employees as holistic human beings, focus on social and environmental responsibilities, continuous self-development and effort to help others discover and reach their potential, promotion of transparent and ethical business practices and goal to seek the greater good are the characteristics that set him apart from other leaders. We use the case of Mr. Moon to identify humanistic leadership characteristics in the South Korean context. Korean culture and values can explain why Mr. Moon's leadership is well received and respected in South Korea.

On the basis of interviews and relevant books and articles about Mr. Moon, we identify the key characteristics of his humanistic leadership in this study, namely, benevolence (seeking the greater good), sincerity (building trusting relationships with multiple stakeholders) and continuous learning and innovation (developing self and others), as illustrated in Figure 1. The foundational basis that binds these characteristics is Mr. Moon's respect for all mankind. His leadership reflects the traditional values and philosophies of the Gojoseon dynasty of Korea [1] that is described in the Dangun mythology, Neo-Confucian principle of the Joseon dynasty of Korea [2] and *jeong* [3] – an indigenous cultural concept in Korea.

Yuhan–Kimberly

In the current study, we examine Mr. Moon's leadership when he was working in Yuhan–Kimberly, the current leading health and hygiene company in South Korea (LinkedIn, n.d.). Mr. Moon joined the planning and coordination office of Yuhan–Kimberly in 1974, after graduating from Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, was appointed as the CEO in 1995 and worked there until 2007.

Yuhan–Kimberly was established in 1970 as a joint venture of Kimberly–Clark Corporation (a US-based paper company) and Yuhan Corporation (a South Korean pharmaceutical company). The company has the largest share in the local market for baby diapers, sanitary napkins, facial tissues and paper towels (Shin, 2019).

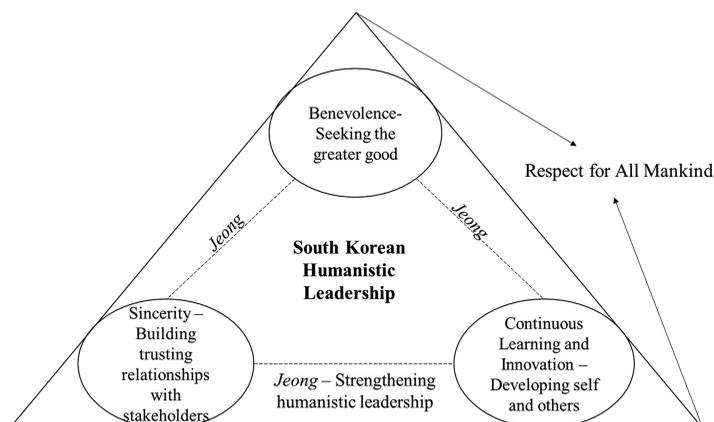


Figure 1.
South Korean
humanistic
leadership model

However, when Mr. Moon was appointed as the CEO in 1995, Yuhan–Kimberly was going through difficult times. Since its establishment in 1970, Yuhan–Kimberly continuously grew throughout its first decade, and the company was in rapid growth in the 1980s. In 1988, the market share of Yuhan–Kimberly in feminine care products reached 57.8%, whereas that of their major competitor P&G, a multinational consumer goods corporation, was 25.3%. However, in 1995, the market share of Yuhan–Kimberly dropped to 19.9%, whereas that of P&G rose to 67.5% (Moon, 2014). Internally, as Yuhan–Kimberly grew large, many interdepartmental conflicts occurred. Externally, customer loyalty and retention were poor; therefore, large retailers delisted Yuhan–Kimberly products (Sung and Choi, 2007).

Under Mr. Moon’s leadership, Yuhan–Kimberly achieved the largest share in the local market in baby diapers (67%), feminine care products (62%), tissues (55%), paper towels (55%) and moist wipes (48%) only within nine years since Mr. Moon became the CEO (Cho and Chang, 2007). As Yuhan–Kimberly focused more on the production of diapers that considers the local context and meets the needs of Korean consumers than P&G, their rivalry ended in 2007 when P&G withdrew their diaper business from the Korean market (Lee, 2011). Moreover, Yuhan–Kimberly won the Best Corporate Image Award for Ethical Management and was selected as one of the top five companies with the highest social contribution in 2001 by the Federation of Korean Industries. Outside the country, Yuhan–Kimberly ranked sixth on the list of Best Employers in Asia in 2003 by *The Asian Wall Street Journal* and Hewitt Associates (Cho and Chang, 2007).

Regarding the current performance of Yuhan–Kimberly, it achieved an annual sales revenue of KRW1,3272tn (approximately US\$1,139,618,753 using the exchange rate of 1,164.60 KRW/US\$ on January 22, 2020) in 2018 (Yuhan–Kimberly, n.d.). Although joint ventures usually encounter challenges when entering overseas markets, given that their business is supposedly focused on the local market, Yuhan–Kimberly has gained global competitiveness (Lee, 2011) and currently exports its products to over 20 countries, including South Africa, New Zealand, Russia, the UK and Vietnam (Yuhan–Kimberly, n.d.). The company was also ranked fifth on the list of South Korea’s most admired companies and always been in the top ten for 16 consecutive years (Korea Management Association Consulting, 2019).

Method

To examine and focus on Mr. Moon’s story, we adopted a semi-structured interview method. This research method is relevant, given that this study focuses on “how” (Yin, 1994; Pan and Tan, 2011) Mr. Moon leads and develops employees and contributes to communities. Given the multifaceted and underdeveloped nature of humanistic leadership research, delving into the history and personal background of Mr. Moon, including his professional and personal experiences and achievements, was needed to capture a comprehensive picture of his leadership. The main data for this study were collected in November and December 2019. Given the nature of humanistic leadership subject, this study was based on the retrospective insights of interviewees. Interviews were conducted in Korean and recorded with the permission of interviewees. Each one-to-one interview lasted for approximately 3 h.

Follow-up questions were asked via emails and phone calls. All interview recordings were first transcribed in Korean, and then translated into English. The interview questions were developed to understand Mr. Moon’s life in three phases. The first phase was conducted to understand Mr. Moon from his personal and family background. The second phase focused on his 20s to early years of work life. The final phase of the interview focused on the experiences, achievements, characteristics and behaviors of Mr. Moon that gave him the reputation as a humanistic leader. We also interviewed Mr. Moon’s follower, Mr. Deok-Jin Lee, the former Vice President of Yuhan–Kimberly. He and Mr. Moon joined Yuhan–Kimberly in the same year. Mr. Lee has worked with Mr. Moon for a long period and understands him

sufficiently to tell his story from the point of view of a follower, including Mr. Moon's personality, philosophy, leadership style, achievements and cultural values. After the interview with Mr. Moon, the interview transcripts were thoroughly reviewed to construct the key questions for Mr. Lee.

The list of questions is provided in [Appendix](#). To tell the life story of Mr. Moon, the interview transcripts were used to prepare a detailed picture of his experiences, including major events, which have facilitated the formation of his characteristics, and examples that demonstrate his humanistic leadership characteristics. To enhance the richness of his stories and understand his leadership, we also reviewed and included information from books, case study articles, news articles and documents listed on corporate websites. Visiting Mr. Moon's company to conduct the interview and brief observations also helped in further understanding his individual style.

Mr. Moon's leadership characteristics

Mr. Moon's leadership characteristics that are common among South Korean leaders

Among Mr. Moon's leadership characteristics, two characteristics, namely, leading by example and establishing and communicating a future vision, are consistent with South Korean leadership characteristics identified by [Baik et al. \(2010\)](#).

First, leading by example means that leaders walk the talk. Leaders who lead by examples tend to forgo self-interest and be willing to sacrifice for their employees ([Baik et al., 2010](#)). For example, Mr. Moon gave up his privileges as CEO, such as luxury cars and fancy golf club memberships. In the interview, he mentioned that he sold five to six corporate golf club memberships that executives could use. Instead, he rented apartment hotels that 3,000 employees could use for their vacation. He is also known for having a modest lifestyle. He lived in the same apartment even after becoming CEO, and he often taught his daughters about conservation and frugality. For example, his daughters grew up wearing second-hand clothes ([Sung and Choi, 2007](#)). His down-to-earth style moved employees and other stakeholders.

Another example is that Mr. Moon led a housekeeping campaign to provide a good working environment to Yuhan-Kimberly's factory workers. Under his exemplary leadership, the management team in the factory in Gunpo, South Korea, gathered and cleaned the work site in early mornings. At first, employees thought that the campaign was just for show. As their leaders continued to show up every morning and cleaned the work site, employees started trusting the management ([Sung and Choi, 2007](#)).

Second, leaders with a future vision can envision the direction of their organization, develop plans and put efforts to realize them ([Baik et al., 2010](#)). Mr. Moon is considered a visionary leader. According to Mr. Lee, the former vice president of Yuhan-Kimberly, Mr. Moon provides a vision and a big picture but delegates tasks and encourages employees to lead themselves. In 1987, Mr. Moon already established the vision of Yuhan-Kimberly for the coming years until 2000 (Vision, 2000) even before becoming its CEO. His aim was to create a company where all employees actively engage in continuous learning and move toward the achievement of their vision and dreams ([Sung and Choi, 2007](#)). In the interview, Mr. Lee said the following about Mr. Moon's visionary characteristic:

In 1987, Mr. Moon came up with Vision 2000. At that time, Kimberly-Clark also came up with their vision until 2000. However, this plan only included three business plans. Business planning only included plans for the next five months, and such planning was considered innovative that time. However, Mr. Moon was talking about the next 13 years—he is really a visionary. At that time, he was still a general manager, not the CEO.

Mr. Moon wrote a one-page summary of the company's vision. It was a long-term plan which could inspire the decision makers, employees, and stakeholders of the company. This summary included a

big picture of how Yuhan–Kimberly would look like by year 2000 (13 years from that point), such as achieving the largest market share in the consumer goods industry in Asia. This summary also included the company’s culture: our employees identify with Yuhan–Kimberly’s culture and have pride in the company, whereas the company focuses on employee development. This one-page summary led to hundreds of pages of business strategies. Only few people can look ahead that far. Mr. Moon sent his plans to Yuhan Corporation and Kimberly–Clark and convinced them.

Mr. Moon mentioned in the interview that leaders must articulate and communicate the vision and mission of their organization in a convincing way. He said:

I already had roadmaps for the next six to 10 years. However, if the roadmaps were not shared among major shareholders, small- or medium-sized shareholders, employees, and business partners, then I could only achieve very little in two years.

He motivated his employees by establishing and sharing an inspiring vision and mission. Mr. Moon communicated his vision and plans in a transparent and effective way, i.e. through a monthly video newsletter. This leadership characteristic – establishing and communicating an inspiring vision – is also similar to transformational leadership, which suggests that such leaders inspire and transform employees so that they identify with their leader and his or her vision, and then work to perform beyond expectations and simple transactions (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1985).

Mr. Moon also demonstrates empowering leadership (Amundsen and Martinsen, 2014). He focuses on employee development by supporting their autonomy and encouraging active participation. When Yuhan–Kimberly planned to open a new factory in Daejeon, South Korea, in 1993, Mr. Moon put together a factory design team to introduce a new paradigm. The goal of the design team was to plan and implement a system for the new factory and innovative ways to manage the system. He encouraged the design team members to perform job rotation (i.e. the systematic movement of employees from one job to another within the factory). In this way, they could experience and understand the whole process and develop an integrated view (Sung and Choi, 2007).

When the design team members pulled in different directions, he brought together the whole team comprising over 100 employees. Mr. Moon instructed the team members to visualize their ideal lives after ten years and then asked each team member how they perceive the new factory. He wrote down every employee response on a board and categorized them and then told them that these statements were Yuhan–Kimberly’s vision, which the design team was required to achieve. Throughout this experience, the design team could develop a sense of ownership over their job and the factory (Sung and Choi, 2007).

Mr. Moon’s humanistic leadership characteristics

Apart from the above leadership characteristics that are common among South Korean leaders (Baik *et al.*, 2010), we also identified the three key characteristics of Mr. Moon’s humanistic leadership (Figure 1): benevolence (seeking the greater good), sincerity (building trusting relationships with multiple stakeholders) and continuous learning and innovation (developing self and others). These key characteristics set Mr. Moon apart from other leaders. Moreover, these characteristics are connected to the fundamental values and philosophies of Korean culture, which will be discussed in the latter part of this paper.

Benevolence – seeking the greater good. Mr. Moon places strong emphasis on social and environmental responsibilities for the greater good. His remarkable campaign that aims to restore forests called *Keep Korea Green* demonstrates that he deeply cares about what is beneficial to society, which goes beyond the interest of Yuhan–Kimberly. In 1982, while working as the head of the planning and coordination office, he took a one-year sabbatical. During his sabbatical, he traveled to Australia and the USA and learned different

management styles and latest technologies. He was impressed with their green residential environments surrounded by forests and trees (Sung and Choi, 2007). In the interview, Mr. Moon stated:

One of the things I learned was that people can rebuild degraded forests. Saving the environment is important before it is too late. Thus, I decided to run a green campaign upon my return to Korea. At that time, our rivers, including streamlets and streams, were filthy. Thus, we started cleaning up rivers first, and then mountains.

Upon returning home, Mr. Moon developed the environmental management concept and led environmental conservation efforts. At that time, although forests in the country were destroyed during the Korean War, environmental awareness among the public was low, and the government primarily focused on economic development while largely ignoring environmental responsibilities (Jin, 2010).

He launched a tree-planting campaign called *Keep Korea Green* in 1984 (Kwon, 2001), and the company decided to allow public participation in the campaign to raise public awareness (Chung *et al.*, 2012). This decision was difficult because at that time, environmental conservation was considered a government role, and citizens were not allowed to plant trees on government-owned lands. Considering that the company did not own lands to plant trees, and planting trees on government-owned lands was illegal, Yuhan–Kimberly had to pay fines every time it planted trees. In addition, when the company decided to launch the campaign, donation was its only option because institutional support for environmental movements in the private sector was unavailable (Chung *et al.*, 2012). Although Mr. Moon faced these adversities and challenges when the campaign was initiated, he adhered to the company's core values – environmental sustainability and responsibility – and kept the campaign for more than ten years. After the fall of the military regime in South Korea in the early 1990s, Yuhan–Kimberly was exempted from paying fines, and environmental awareness increased in the country (Chung *et al.*, 2012). After receiving an appreciation award from the South Korean government in 1997, Mr. Moon decided to expand the company's forestry efforts. Under his leadership, the company came up with the *Forest for Life* project. It was the first multilateral collaboration project in South Korea that involved academics, civic activists, government agencies and business entities for raising public awareness and educating people about forests and environmental issues (Chung *et al.*, 2012).

Under Mr. Moon's leadership, in 1984, Yuhan–Kimberly donated KRW50m (approximately US\$62,200 using the average exchange rate of 804 KRW/US\$ in 1984) for developing forest resources to the Korea Forest Service (later relocated to the National Forestry Cooperative Federation). Since 1984, Yuhan–Kimberly has planted more than 50 million trees in national and public forests and has created forests in more than 700 schools. Since 1988, the company has been organizing field studies for high-school students to experience and learn about forests. Other campaign activities include distributing books on environment and supporting relevant research (Jin, 2010).

Even after his departure, the company has continued to implement the *Keep Korea Green* campaign to achieve its new vision of *A Better Life through Coexistence of Forests and Human* (Yuhan–Kimberly, 2017). The company recently created a pilot tree nursery to produce saplings, which can help recover forests in North Korea. Outside of Korea, the company has also helped restore forests in Mongolia, planting over ten million trees with the Northeast Asian Forest Forum since 2003 (Shin, 2019). Although Yuhan–Kimberly started the campaign as part of its corporate social and environmental responsibility program, it also improved the company's brand image and financial performance (Sung and Choi, 2007).

Moreover, Mr. Moon demonstrates his focus on social and environment responsibilities by integrating consumer needs and sustainability issues into business practices. In the interview, Mr. Moon talked about Yuhan–Kimberly's toilet papers. The company used to

manufacture toilet papers in various colors. Given that the dyeing process produces huge quantities of wastewater, the company had to perform wastewater treatment, which required massive amounts of chemicals and electricity. Thus, Mr. Moon started asking if colored toilet papers were consumers' ideal. He also asked if printing patterns with different sizes and colors would be better than dyeing. Mr. Moon believed that the company could obtain the most beneficial ideas from its consumers; thus, the company asked consumers what they really wanted and carefully listened using focus groups. Consumers said that they actually prefer white toilet papers with some patterns to colored toilet papers. Accordingly, they stopped producing colored toilet papers and started producing white toilet papers with patterns. They also started using digital textile printing to minimize energy use and reduce wastewater generation. In contrast to conventional printing, digital printing can significantly reduce water toxicity and acidification (Yuhan–Kimberly, 2008). Mr. Moon emphasizes the importance of listening to consumers and finding innovative ways to improve sustainability and organizational performance.

Sincerity – building trusting relationships with multiple stakeholders. One of the first things Mr. Moon did after he became the CEO was to engage with multiple stakeholders by building trusting relationships with them. It began with promoting transparency and ethical business practices. Mr. Moon believed that the company should build transparent and ethical relationships with its suppliers to increase product quality. Mr. Moon built a purchasing innovation team to develop flat, rather than hierarchical, relationships with suppliers. Mr. Moon led the effort to eliminate bribery and corruption in the supply chains. In the first few years, suppliers kept sending gifts even though the purchasing department did not accept any gift. Following Mr. Moon's efforts, managers in the purchasing department continued to return cash and gift certificates they received and paid back suppliers for gifts that could not be returned. As a result, suppliers stopped engaging in bribery and focused on improving product quality, and Yuhan–Kimberly could earn supplier loyalty (Sung and Choi, 2007).

Mr. Moon also changed longstanding business practices for sales representatives, such as drinking and playing golf with potential and existing clients. He banned kickbacks for business purposes. Initially, sales employees resisted the changes, but as Mr. Moon applied these new rules to himself and led by example, sales employees eventually accepted the changes and started focusing on improving and utilizing their sales know-how and skills. Mr. Moon supported sales teams by providing a rigorous training program to sales employees, so that they would not rely on previous bribery practices. Team leaders were sent to Kimberly–Clark to learn about the best practices and global trends, and sales experts from the USA were invited to train Yuhan–Kimberly employees, so that they could improve their knowledge and skills through discussions and case studies (Sung and Choi, 2007).

Mr. Moon could build trusting relationships with stakeholders because he did not only care about productivity and organizational performance but also deeply cared about stakeholders' welfare. He led the housekeeping campaign to provide a good working environment for Yuhan–Kimberly's factory workers. He also led the effort to improve employee health and safety and the working environment for suppliers. Yuhan–Kimberly implemented supplier performance evaluations in which the purchasing, research and development and manufacturing departments evaluated their potential suppliers in terms of safety, product quality and working environment in addition to production cost. On the basis of this system, the company could build transparent and trusting relationships with its suppliers (Sung and Choi, 2007).

Given that large global retailers, such as Carrefour and Walmart, entered the Korean market in the early 1990s (Sung and Choi, 2007), and the financial crisis hit South Korea in 1997, Yuhan–Kimberly branches faced various challenges and struggles during the decade. In the interview, Mr. Moon said that although other companies in Korea were laying off employees due to the financial crisis, Yuhan–Kimberly did not only support its branches but

also created additional jobs. Mr. Moon provided 220 trucks to branches to support their business and sent employees from headquarters to help branches digitize their work. Moreover, the company created 440 new jobs to assign two people per truck. His efforts to go through hard times together impressed the branches, and the company could maintain trusting relationships with the branches.

Continuous learning and innovation – developing self and others. The emphasis of Peter Drucker (1999) on continuous learning and the five business principles of Ill-Han New (founder of Yuhan Corporation), namely, “respect for humans,” “customer satisfaction,” “social responsibility,” “value creation” and “innovation orientation” (Drucker, 2009) inspired and influenced the leadership philosophy and business practice of Mr. Moon. He focuses on continuous self-improvement and learning about new things, such as digital transformation. He said in the interview that since high school, his motto has been “innovation continues and renovation continues.” In the interview, he mentioned the following about continuous learning and innovation:

I do not see challenges as something frustrating or problematic. Instead, I see challenges as new opportunities.

I see learning and training as habits. I believe that all employees should seek lifelong learning and continuous innovation. As soon as we stop learning, we move away from our customers, latest technologies and skills, new regulations, and from our children and younger generations. Thus, lifelong learning plays a critical role in maintaining our values, dignity, and good relationships with our children and family.

During the financial crisis in the late 1990s, the operating time in Yuhan–Kimberly’s manufacturing plant was reduced by more than 50%. Instead of a large-scale layoff, Mr. Moon devised an innovative job sharing system called the *four crews/two shifts* system. Under this system, factory workers go through a 16-day cycle wherein a team works the day shift for 12 h for four consecutive days and another team works the night shift for 12 h for four consecutive days. After four days, additional two teams take over the two shifts, and the previous two teams take four days off – three days of rest and one day of paid educational training. The system showed positive results, increasing the fiscal revenue from KRW3,761,658,000 (US\$332m) in 1996 to KRW8,198,784,000 (US\$704m) in 2003 (Drucker, 2009).

Aligned with the *four crews/two shifts* system under Mr. Moon’s leadership, Yuhan–Kimberly started providing its employees corporate-sponsored in-house educational training called the *lifelong learning* program, which included leadership, team-building, communication, foreign language and computer skills (Chang *et al.*, 2012). The company also supported 70% of the cost for employee education outside the workplace. Mr. Moon created a system that supports individual-, group- and organizational-level learning through study groups in which employees share their knowledge and skills (Sung and Choi, 2007). In the year following the implementation of the system, the annual number of employee suggestions for work improvements and innovations increased by 1,200. Moreover, starting from the second year, the new system resulted in increased employee productivity (Drucker, 2009).

The *four crews/two shifts* system and *lifelong learning* program did not only increase employee productivity but also employee satisfaction with job and life. Both helped employees find their meaningful purpose at work. Lee and Chang (2010) interviewed Yuhan–Kimberly’s factory workers and found that through the *lifelong learning* program, they could understand how their work contributes to their company, society and country. The workers learned about the social values of their work. One of the study participants said in the interview, “If the purpose is only money, then honestly, working day and night shifts is difficult. . . I like the people in my workplace, the company, and its management philosophy,

not money. . . The company does not regard me as a machine that makes money through manufacturing products, but a human” (p. 162). Furthermore, the learning activity of workers did not only occur in the work sphere but also in their personal or family life sphere because the *lifelong learning* program included various subjects, such as foreign languages, current affairs, economy, society and culture. For example, employees could utilize their foreign language skills when using the machines imported from other countries, such as Germany; some employees also practiced English conversations with their children at home, which allowed them to spend time and interact with their family (Lee and Chang, 2010).

South Korean values and philosophies

Before proceeding to the section on how the humanistic leadership characteristics of Mr. Moon are connected to the fundamental values and philosophies of Korean culture, we review the major attributes of Korean culture in this section to provide a background.

Given that the history of the Gojoseon dynasty contains the fundamental world view and culture of old Koreans, considering the establishment of the Gojoseon dynasty (i.e. the first Korean state) and the story of Dangun (i.e. the legendary founder of Gojoseon) over 4,300 years ago as the beginning of Korean history is reasonable (Ryu, 2008; Son, 2010). According to the Dangun mythology described in the Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms (*Samguk yusa*), Hwanung, the son of Hwanin who is the supreme God of heaven, descended to Earth from heaven to govern the world and realize the ideology of *Hongik Ingan* (홍익인간; humanitarianism) (Kim, 2018). One day, a bear and a tiger came to Hwanung’s residence and asked to be transformed into humans. Hwanung agreed on the condition that they remain out of the sun for 100 days and only eat mugworts and garlic cloves. The tiger was unable to keep up with the condition, but the bear was transformed into a woman named Ungnyo after only 21 days. Hwanung married her, and Dangun was born (Cartwright, 2016a).

According to Son (2010), the Dangun mythology contains the basic assumptions about human beings and how people should live their lives. The first assumption is about human nature. According to the Dangun mythology, people originated from the supreme prince of heaven, Hwanung. Following this mythology, Koreans developed the view of human nature that heaven and man are in a single body. This view has a connotation that all humans are equal, and all human lives are precious (Son, 2009). The second assumption is about human relationship and leadership. Hwanung descended from heaven to govern the world and to realize the ideology of *Hongik Ingan*, which means “love humanity” (Tangun, n.d.), or “broadly benefit humanity or devote to the welfare of all mankind” (Korean Ministry of Education, n.d.). This ideology suggests that people, especially leaders, must promote other people’s welfare as well as their own.

The ideology of *Hongik Ingan* in the Dangun mythology serves as the founding philosophy of Korea and guiding principles of how people should live their lives in modern South Korea (Son, 2010). The third of October, Dangun’s birthday, is still celebrated as National Foundation Day (*Kaechonjol*) (Cartwright, 2016a). As stated in Article 2 of the Basic Law of Education in Korea, *Hongik Ingain* is the main goal of education in South Korea (Korean Ministry of Education, n.d.). The third assumption is about self-discipline. In the Dangun mythology, the bear, following the order of Hwanung, remained in a dark cave for 21 days with the only wish to become a human. This story can be understood metaphorically – to practice *Honik Ingan*, people should first discipline themselves, which requires persevering and enduring and then return to the original mind resembling heaven.

Another major attribute of Korean culture is the influence of Confucianism, especially Neo-Confucianism, on ways of life, social relationships and moral beliefs (Yang, 2006). Neo-Confucianism is a version of the Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties of China. Neo-Confucianism is generally categorized into two different schools of thought,

the Cheng-Zhu school and the Lu-Wang school. The Cheng-Zhu school led by philosophers and scholars Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi was the dominant school of thought. “Neo-Confucianism expanded its moral horizon by developing comprehensive philosophical theories of moral virtues and a good life from the perspective of the governing order of the universe and the moral metaphysics of the mind” (Seok, 2018, p. 376). Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi’s school of Neo-Confucianism was introduced to Korea in the last century of the Goryeo dynasty.

After the fall of Goryeo dynasty, the Joseon dynasty was established, and Neo-Confucianism became the foundation of state ideology. As Neo-Confucianism focused on education and development, Neo-Confucianism schools (e.g. *Seowon* and *Hyanggyo*) were established, producing prominent scholars and philosophers, including Toegye Yi Hwang and Yulgok Yi I (Seok, 2018; Son, 2010). Toegye (1568/2008) and Yulgok (1575/2007) argued that leadership should start with self-cultivation and self-improvement. Toegye added that self-cultivation is the process of becoming a sage. Specifically, he stated that if one concentrates on one thing and does not deviate from it, and if one is careful in one’s demeanor and gets comfortable in concentrating one’s mind on one thing, then one’s learning becomes faithful, and entering into the state of being a sage becomes easy (Toegye, 1558/2003). Self-cultivation is the process in which people transform, and benevolence (*in*) gets ripe (Toegye, 1558/2003). Toegye also emphasized that the ultimate goal of self-cultivation is to reach a state of unity of heaven and man (Son, 2010). The philosophical foundation of Confucianism on leadership emphasizes the core virtue of benevolence (*in*) (Wang *et al.*, 2012). Yulgok also emphasized leaders’ self-cultivation. He argued that when leaders reach *in* through self-cultivation, they go beyond self-interest and become altruistic. Moreover, when leaders show virtuous behaviors and directions developed through self-cultivation, organizational members and other stakeholders follow, resembling a parent–child relationship (Son, 2010).

Connections between Mr. Moon’s humanistic leadership and South Korean culture

In this section, we discuss how the leadership characteristics of Mr. Moon reflect the fundamental values and philosophies of Korean culture. As shown in Figure 1, benevolence (seeking the greater good), sincerity (building trusting relationships with multiple stakeholders) and continuous learning and innovation (developing self and others) are the key characteristics of his humanistic leadership. The foundational basis that binds these characteristics is Mr. Moon’s respect for all mankind, which is based on his belief, as Mr. Lee mentioned, that everyone is valuable regardless of their position, status, income and educational background. Mr. Moon’s respect for people reflects the ideology of *Hongik Ingan* and the principle of Confucianism – they both focus on the unity of heaven and man, which suggests that all humans are precious and valuable (Son, 2010).

The focus of Mr. Moon on the greater good reflects the ideology of *Hongik Ingan* and the principle of Neo-Confucianism in Korea. According to both, leaders must focus on benefiting humanity and being benevolent – caring for others. The story of Mr. Moon, shared in this paper, shows his desire to help others. When Mr. Moon develops and implements business plans, he considers the implications on employees, the company, communities and the society as a whole. He also places high value on corporate social responsibility – the amalgam of economic, legal, ethical, discretionary and environmental responsibilities that organizations have to society (Carroll, 1979; Dahlsrud, 2008).

For example, Mr. Moon launched the *Keep Korea Green* campaign because he deeply cares about what is beneficial to society and humanity, which goes beyond the interest of Yuhan–Kimberly. When Mr. Moon launched the *Keep Korea Green* campaign, public environmental awareness was low, and institutional support was unavailable for the campaign. Despite these challenges, Mr. Moon maintained Yuhan–Kimberly’s core values – environmental

sustainability and responsibility – and moved forward with the campaign because he believed that it would serve the good of the whole society. That is, restoring forests and creating green environments can have positive and long-term effects on people's well-being and health, and companies can have physically and mentally healthy employees, which, in turn, lead to positive work and organizational outcomes.

Mr. Moon's focus on building trusting relationships with multiple stakeholders is aligned with a Confucian virtue, i.e. being trustworthy. According to this virtue, leaders who go beyond self-interest and seek others' welfare merit trust (Koehn, 2001). He sees employees and other stakeholders as holistic human beings, not work or production units. For instance, as mentioned in his interview, Mr. Moon once stayed with the labor union for two full days without any other executives and carefully listened to the union members to learn about their views. His willingness to listen and humbleness impressed the union members, and he was able to build a trusting relationship with the union.

Moreover, the role modeling of Mr. Moon in work and non-work contexts is aligned with the Confucian virtue that leaders can shape the characters of followers by role modeling and showing benevolence. He showed stakeholders that his campaigns and practices were not simply lip service or for show. He convinced them by engaging in continuous efforts and leading by example. He gave up his privileges as a CEO and lived a modest lifestyle. When employees perceive virtuous behaviors from their leaders, these employees likely follow rules and practices (Wang et al., 2012).

His dedication to develop himself and others is aligned with another Confucian virtue, self-cultivation and helping others learn. Korean Neo-Confucians, Toegye and Yulok, stated that self-cultivation is a prerequisite for reaching benevolence (*in*). Therefore, leadership should start with self-cultivation or self-improvement. Through the story of the bear transforming into a human, the Dangun mythology also shows that people should first discipline themselves with perseverance to benefit and help others (*Hongik Ingan*). Reflecting on these virtues, Mr. Moon highly emphasizes employee growth and development. Mr. Moon's *four crews/two shifts* system enabled employees to have time for training. Through the *lifelong learning* program, Mr. Moon promoted continuous learning and innovation in professional and personal spheres. In addition, he did not only improve employees' job skills and knowledge but also helped them discover and reach their full potential and find a meaningful purpose at work. He also serves as a role model for his employees by making learning a habit for himself. For example, he said in the interview that by collaborating with other leaders, he continues to learn about new technology and digital transformation to effectively respond to today's technology-driven, fast-paced business world.

There is also an indigenous cultural concept in Korea called *jeong*, depicted in Figure 1. Derived from Confucian values focusing on harmonious social relationships, *jeong* represents the unique attribute of interpersonal relationships among Koreans. Although no direct translation exists for *jeong* in English, it can be broadly defined as "a bond of affection or feeling of empathy to others" (Yang, 2006), and it is shared and experienced between two or more people. Given that social relationships are considered an expansion of family relationships in Korea, *jeong* experiences among family members are naturally extended to other members of the society (Yang, 2006). For example, Mr. Moon refers to his employees as family members.

In the late 1990s, Yuhan–Kimberly experienced financial difficulties due to the financial crisis. Instead of a large-scale layoff, Mr. Moon initiated and led the *four crews/two shifts* system because he regards his employees as family members whom he should protect, and giving up on family members is not an option. He encouraged employees to go through tough times together (Sung and Choi, 2007). Mr. Moon's efforts to build and maintain trusting relationships with stakeholders, to promote employee growth and development and to seek the greater good are aligned with *jeong*, which is about trust and warm feeling of unity among

people (Yang, 2006). Considering that *jeong* is developed through exchanging caring minds and loving emotions in the course of sharing joyful and sorrowful experiences (Choi, 1997), *jeong* can strengthen humanistic leadership characteristics over time.

Limitations and future research directions

This study has three main limitations that suggest avenues for future studies. First, this study focuses on how Mr. Moon's humanistic leadership reflects the traditional values and philosophies of the Gojoseon dynasty of Korea that is described in the Dangun mythology and Neo-Confucian principle of the Joseon dynasty of Korea. It is also important to pay attention to the fact that Confucianism, Shamanism, Christianity, Buddhism and other new religions coexist in South Korea and thus influence the values and philosophies of Koreans (Kim, 2002). Given that Christianity and Buddhism influence large segments of the population in South Korea (Korean Statistical Information Service, 2015), examining how these religions influence South Korean leadership characteristics will be beneficial.

Second, this study concentrates on Mr. Moon's leadership, given his humanistic approach and stellar achievements. Future studies that examine similarities and differences among multiple South Korean leaders who demonstrate humanistic leadership characteristics will enhance the understanding of South Korean humanistic leadership.

Third, data collected in this study are primarily retrospective recollections, which may be subject to self-reporting and retrospective biases. Future studies will benefit from using multi-source data. For example, information collected from different stakeholders will help capture a more comprehensive view of humanistic leadership.

Conclusion

In this study, we identify and discuss what leadership characteristics constitute humanistic leadership in the South Korean context by examining Mr. Moon's leadership characteristics. Our findings suggest that certain aspects of the leadership characteristics identified in the story of Mr. Moon are consistent with existing leadership theories, such as transformational and empowering leadership. However, these theories do not incorporate all of the characteristics identified in this study. Thus, this study contributes to the current leadership literature by identifying and exploring humanistic leadership characteristics that enable a leader in South Korea to gain respect and contribute to communities and the society. These characteristics are focusing on developing self and others, building trusting relationships with multiple stakeholders and improving human welfare and social and environmental responsibilities for the greater good. We also found that the leadership characteristics of Mr. Moon reflect the ideology of the Dangun mythology, the principle of Neo-Confucianism in Korea and *jeong* – an indigenous cultural concept in Korea. Based on these findings, we developed and presented a conceptual model of South Korean humanistic leadership and its relationship to the fundamental values and philosophies of Korean culture (Figure 1). This model can serve as guiding principles of humanistic leadership that leaders may apply to their business practices to focus on the humanistic view of people in organizations rather than the economic view. Furthermore, our findings suggest that it is important for leadership scholars and practitioners to study the relationship between humanistic leadership characteristics and local cultural roots to enhance the understanding of humanistic leadership.

Notes

1. The Gojoseon dynasty of Korea is considered the first Korean state, which ruled northern Korea in the second half of the first millennium BCE. According to the Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms

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- (*Samguk yusa*), the Gojoseon dynasty was founded in 2333 BCE. However, modern historians continue to debate when exactly it existed (Cartwright, 2016b).
2. Neo-Confucianism was introduced to Korea in the last century of the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392). After the fall of Goryeo, the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), the last and longest-lived dynasty of Korea, was established, and Neo-Confucianism became the foundation of state ideology (Seok, 2018).
 3. Derived from Confucian values, *jeong* is the unique attribute of interpersonal relationships among Koreans. *Jeong* will be discussed in detail in the connections between Mr. Moon’s humanistic leadership and South Korean culture section.

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CEO	Follower
(1) Before we start our formal interview, can you tell me a little about yourself?	(1) Before we start our formal interview, can you tell me a little about yourself?
(2) Can you briefly describe your career path?	(2) Can you briefly describe your career path?
(3) When you look back on your career so far, what experiences have had the greatest impact on you as a leader (or as a person)? Can you describe these experiences and how exactly they have influenced your career?	(3) When you look back on your career so far, what experiences and events have had the greatest impact on you? Can you describe these experiences and how exactly they have influenced you?
(4) What are your work values? What do you value most as a leader? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power (social power, authority and wealth) • Achievement (success, capability, ambition and influence on people and events) • Hedonism (gratification of desires, enjoyment in life and self-indulgence) • Stimulation (daring, a varied and challenging life and an exciting life) • Self-direction (creativity, freedom, curiosity, independence and choosing one's own goals) • Universalism (broad-mindedness, beauty of nature and arts, social justice, a world at peace, equality, wisdom, unity with nature and environmental protection) • Benevolence (helpfulness, honesty, forgiveness, loyalty and responsibility) • Tradition (respect for tradition, humbleness, accepting one's portion in life, devotion and modesty) • Conformity (obedience, respect toward parents and elders, self-discipline and politeness) • Security (national security, family security, social order, cleanliness and reciprocation of favors) 	(4) What are your work values? What are the work values exhibited by the CEO you perceive as the most important?
(5) Why are these values important to you? How did you develop these values?	(5) Can you describe the CEO's leadership style?
(6) Can you describe your leadership style? Can you provide three events/examples that demonstrate your leadership style?	(6) Can you describe your organizational context and culture?
(7) Can you describe your organizational context and culture?	(7) When you think of a humanistic leader, what words come into your mind to describe humanistic leaders in general? (Or, what is your understanding of humanistic leadership?)
(8) How do your organizational context and culture influence your leadership style and work values? Can you provide specific examples?	(8) Do you think that the CEO's leadership style is aligned with humanistic leadership?
(9) How do Korean culture and values influence your leadership style and work values? Can you provide specific examples?	(9) Can you describe experiences/events in which you think that the CEO has demonstrated humanistic leadership?
	(10) Describe in detail what happened during such experiences and how you felt toward the CEO
	(11) How did you react when the CEO tried to initiate innovative strategies to overcome such problems? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were the immediate actions implemented by the CEO? What were the employees' attitudes and behaviors toward the CEO's actions?
	(12) Do you think humanistic leadership can be developed or cultivated? Soil or seed?
	(13) Where do you think the CEO has obtained his/her strength from?
	(14) Do you think that the CEO perseveres when he/she faces challenges from shareholders, followers or other stakeholders?

Table A1.
Interview questions

(continued)

CEO	Follower
(10) If any, what are the things you do to develop yourself as a leader? How about for your followers?	
(11) When you think of a humanistic leader, what are the words that come into your mind to describe humanistic leaders in general? (Or, what is your understanding of humanistic leadership?)	
(12) How is your leadership style aligned with humanistic leadership?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the experiences by providing a temporal context and by describing the people involved • Describe in detail what happened during such experiences and how you felt about them 	
(13) Major challenges/problems	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you deal with such encounters? • How did your followers/employees react? • Any changes made after the events? 	
(14) Can humanistic leadership be developed or cultivated? Soil or seed?	
(15) What/who influenced you?	
(16) How do you persevere when you face challenges from shareholders, followers or other stakeholders?	

Table A1.

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