Chun, Namkyu

Centring Relationships More than Humans and Things: Translating Design through the Culture of the Far East

Published in:
Artistic Cartography and Design Explorations Towards the Pluriverse

DOI:
10.4324/9781003285175-15

E-pub ahead of print: 10/12/2022

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published under the following license:
CC BY-NC-ND

Please cite the original version:
13 Centring relationships more than humans and things
Translating design through the culture of the Far East

Namkyu Chun

Abstract: Throughout the development of design, as design has expanded widely beyond Western societies, relatively limited knowledge from non-Western cultures has been explored. Both for having an inclusive understanding of design and for turning a monologue into an interactive dialogue, different cultural perspectives need to be embraced. Thus, looking at four cases in diverse design subfields from South Korea, this study projects the possibility of incorporating a perspective from East Asian culture. Although the traditional approach to design is centralised on ‘things’, human-centred-ness has recently challenged this perspective. Through the lens of Korean culture, more contemporary discussions on design, including activism, decolonisation and postanthropocentrism, are an effort to recognise hidden or forgotten relationships in design beyond thing- and human-centred design, that is, relationship-centred design. In the context of South Korea, the ways in which the relationship is considered in relation to design are introduced for initiating more active conversations between cultures. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future studies and implications for the field.

Keywords: Korean culture, South Korea, relationship-centricity, plurality, case study, more than human-centred design

Introduction

In encountering other cultures, design is surprisingly still dominated by the Western perspective. Despite the historic development of design in the West, the geographical location alone cannot define its values and applications. In fact, the definition of design is discursive (Julier, 2013). What defines design is the people who embrace and practice it. Regardless of location, design is studied and practiced all over the world. However, diverse perspectives on design with distinctive cultures are under-explored by the overall design research community. In particular, a great number of individuals from/in East Asia, including South Korea and China, have been involved in design as students and practitioners (McRobbie, 2015; Moon, 2011). The discussion on design has been mainly Western-centric regarding not only the geographical context but also the knowledge generation for conceptualising and communicating design. In other words, although design has expanded widely beyond Western societies, relatively limited knowledge of different cultures from non-Western societies is understood. To have an inclusive understanding of design and turn a monologue into an interactive dialogue, different cultural perspectives need to be embraced. Thus, the current study projects the possibility of incorporating a perspective from East Asia, specifically South Korea.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003285175-15
With this pluralistic view, an interesting observation can be made while exploring the development of design discourses. As noted earlier, design as a field has moved away from its traditional boundaries. With its roots in industrial manufacturing, design had a dominant focus on designing ‘things’, or categories of products (e.g., clothes, furniture, domestic appliances, buildings, typefaces and visual identities). With human-centred design, it has started emphasising the human factor during the process of design under varying terms, including ‘users’ and ‘customers’ (Julier, 2013). In the 1980s, discussions on design broke the dichotomic view of things and humans, instead tending to focus on connections between them with diverse new labels, including ‘participatory design’, ‘codesign’ and ‘interaction design’ (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). More recent conversations on design have gone beyond humans and started embracing varying topics, including design activism, decolonisation, postanthropocentrism, circular economy and degrowth (see Mattelmäki et al., 2019). These conversations attempt to reorient the design discourse to be more inclusive and attentive to broader issues beyond Western societies. From the perspective of Korean culture, this can be seen as an effort to recognise what has been hidden or forgotten in the design between thing- and human-centred design: relationships. In this chapter, this is termed relationship-centred design. Supporting the discursive view on the definition of design, the research questions that the current study seeks to answer are as follows:

- How can relationship-centred design be conceptualised while acknowledging the particular culture of South Korea?
- How is design practiced through relationship-centred thinking in the contemporary context of South Korea?

These inquiries can contribute to design research by adding different interpretations of design practices from Korean culture. This further supports the new discussion on decolonising design that advocates for pluralistic approaches to design beyond the Western, first-world point of view (Abdulla et al., 2019). Additionally, the introduction of lesser known local cases in South Korea can increase the visibility of their approaches in the global context. Altogether, the contribution of initiating this culturally inclusive discussion is to make the conversation on design richer, more dynamic and more expansive.

In the following section, previous studies are introduced to support the conceptualisation of relationship-centred design. Afterwards, the research methods for collecting and interpreting the data are explained. Then, the findings from four cases that illustrate how design is practiced through relationship-centred thinking in the context of South Korea are presented. This chapter concludes with possible future studies on relationship-centred design.

Theoretical background: how Koreans think through relationships

In this section, a number of studies are presented, each illustrating the ways in which the notion of relationship plays a central role in Korean culture. These studies were conducted and written by Korean scholars, who are mostly situated in the field of social science. This selection of literature was intended to properly conceptualise relationship-centred design from the perspective of Koreans, instead of relying on
Western interpretations of Korean culture. A few Western publications have been cited to support the conceptualisation. In the following, the traditional philosophy of Confucianism is briefly introduced first to establish the historic background of Korean culture; then, the ways in which Koreans view the world through relationships are presented, here showing the influence of Confucianism.

**Traditional Korean culture with Confucianism**

Numerous cultures in East Asia, including South Korea, centralise their being and becoming in relation to relationships. This way of thinking originated from a number of traditional philosophies. However, the major ‘world view’, or philosophy behind this is generally thought to be Confucianism (Yum, 2009). June Ock Yum (2009) explored the influence of Confucianism on communication in East Asia; she introduced two key principles of Confucianism: in and eui (인 and 의 in Korean). The former means humanism and represents the overall philosophy of Confucianism. It has been interpreted by Western scholars as a natural human feeling for others based on the level of one’s relationship (McNaughton, 1974). The latter has room for interpretation but also has a deep connection to social relationships. Yum described eui as ‘part of human nature which allows us to look beyond personal, immediate profit and to elevate ourselves to the original goodness of human nature that bridges the ego and alter’ (1987). As a passage for practising these principles of in and eui as well as proprietary, rite and respect for social forms, li (禮) is the universal rule of human behaviour in Confucianism.

The emphasis of human, or humanism, in the first principle requires additional explanation to support this view of relationship-centred thinking. In Korean, in-gan (인간) means human being and is based on Chinese characters (人間). It is literally translated as ‘between men’ (Chung & Cho, 2006, p. 48) or ‘person between’ (Park, 2020, p. 514). According to this understanding of in-gan, human beings are not only individuals who exist in relationships with others but are also fundamentally ‘relational beings’, as noted by the Western view on social relationships (Strathern, 2005). Thus, humanism, or human-centric thinking, is more than just looking at individual human beings. It is instead deeply linked to the idea of relationship-centredness.

Meanwhile, even in contemporary society, it is quite common to find East Asians and Koreans practising this Confucianist relationship-centred thinking and considering what happens to their family and community first before making a decision or an action. In other words, how they are related to ‘humans and things’ significantly defines who they are instead of focusing on them as an individual. One can challenge that Korean society is generally recognised as ‘developed’ and Westernised in diverse layers from culture to economy; thus, individualism must have been deeply adopted to shift the relationship-centred thinking. Despite this perception, Korean society appears to have ‘a paradoxical process of individualisation without individualism’ (Chang, 2014, p. 2). From a sociological study, Kyung-Sup Chang (2014) presented the ways in which the idea of individualisation has strongly emerged in South Korea. He argued, however, that this phenomenon has remained as ‘deeply ideational processes’ when compared with Western individualisation. He noted that this is because of the rapid sociocultural and economic transformations that Korean society has experienced in the twentieth century (also known as ‘compressed modernity’). The partial adoption of individualisation in South Korea can be understood as merely a shallow imitation of Western culture rather than of its mindset.
**Influence of Confucianism on Korean culture**

The relationship-centredness from Confucianism can be traced to a myriad of cultural characteristics. Yum (2009) introduced the influence of Confucianism on interpersonal relationship patterns. Compared with North American orientations, she argued that East Asians, including Koreans, tend to have patterns of being particularistic based on the level of closeness; having a preference for long-term and asymmetrical reciprocity over short-term symmetrical or contractual reciprocity; having a sharp distinction between ingroup and outgroup members; using informal intermediaries—shared personal experiences between parties—to establish a new relationship; and blurring the boundary between personal and public relationships.

Furthermore, in relation to these interpersonal relationship patterns, Yum (2009) presented the Confucianism impact on communication patterns: being perceived as a process of infinite interpretation; having differentiated linguistic codes according to those people involved and the situations; having a strong emphasis on indirect communication; and being receiver-centred to stress the listening, sensitivity and removal of preconceptions, rather than focusing on the clarity and credibility of the message.

These patterns of interpersonal relationships and communication provide a conceptual framework to grasp the abstract idea of relationship-centred tendency in Korean culture. Of course, East Asian culture, including Korean culture, cannot be understood exclusively through the lens of Confucianism. However, these patterns clearly present distinctions compared with Western patterns. Moreover, they hint at the ways in which relationship-centred design may be conceptualised.

Based on this, relationship-centredness, or relationship-centred thinking, can be conceptualised as a way of being in/with the world, here with careful consideration of the myriad of relationships at the personal and social levels. From this, relationship-centred design is conceptualised as the practice that considers context-specific relationships during the design process, embracing the conditions of things and humans (see Figure 13.1).

---

**Figure 13.1** A scheme of relationship-centred design.
Research methods

From this cultural context of South Korea, the current study employed a case study research strategy to exemplify relationship-centred design through design practice (Yin, 2014). Johansson (2007) noted that case studies can be beneficial for practice-oriented fields of research because the individual knowledge of practitioners tends to be developed through model cases or personal experiences. Moreover, the strategy of a case study that can support the illustration of relationship-centred design through multiple sources of evidence was beneficial for the current study (Yin, 2014).

However, the purpose of the current study is not to unpack the entire Korean design community. Rather, cases were selected through purposive sampling to illustrate different approaches to relationship-centred design in diverse subfields, including interaction, urban, spatial and clothing design. Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were considered because the role of design is clearly observable in their operation compared with family-owned conglomerates, including Samsung and Hyundai (Sinha, 2000). Through the network of the author, the research participants were communicated with.

Regarding the methods for data collection and interpretation, the general principles of qualitative research were employed (Flick, 2009). The data were collected for each case through semistructured interviews with a key actor and through the use of varying documents, including news articles, blog postings by the case representatives and official websites (see Appendix 1). Because of the pandemic condition, the communication and research were conducted remotely via mobile applications, including Kakao Talk and Zoom. The interviews were done in Korean but translated by the author, whose mother tongue is Korean. After coding the data in iterations, thematic analysis was conducted to identify meaningful themes from the cases (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings: four cases of relationship-centred design in Korea

In the current study, four cases from diverse subfields of design were explored in the context of South Korea, namely Design Spectrum; Iksundada Studio; NohTaerin and Associates; and Fiorka. In these cases, the ways in which relationships are considered in relation to design practice were explored. The introduction to each case begins with a brief description. The activities and approaches that are relevant to relationship-centred design follow. Figure 13.2 includes the images representing each case.

Design Spectrum: loose yet long-lasting relationships

The first case is an open platform that organises events to exchange ideas and networks for local designers who work in the broader industry around information technology (i.e., user-experience design and interaction design). It was founded by Jihong Kim in 2017. While previously working in Samsung Electronics as a designer, he experienced that designers in different contexts have rich experiential knowledge, but this knowledge tends to remain at the individual level. In particular, from his trips to foreign fairs, where he encountered how knowledge can become more innovative and richer through active dialogues, he realised a strong demand to localise this practice in the Korean context. Thus, he envisioned creating an informal platform where the exchange of diverse experiences on design methods can take place in reciprocal and
collaborative manners. Accordingly, the process of knowledge sharing has become its main area of interest. Overall, this creates a network of local designers through educational events. The platform initially focused on sharing ‘how to design better’ through online and onsite channels, including workshops, fairs, panel discussions, talks, podcasts and social media. More recently, it has revisited the type of knowledge it is sharing by increasing the emphasis on ‘how to cultivate a better design culture/environment’ for those who have limited resources. This change took place because careless knowledge sharing can impact a broad group of designers by unintentionally providing biased knowledge. Moreover, it is intended to avoid serving a selective group of designers who are in an established condition.

The last point is related to relationship-centred thinking. For operating the platform with a network of designers, the notion of ‘loose relationships’ is emphasised to keep both a broad range of interests from diverse participants and the culture of the reciprocal community. Kim noted that if participants become overly involved in the platform, they may want to control it for their benefit. The platform avoids being dictated by a singular authority, instead keeping it informal and inclusive as a community. In this way, their contribution to the platform does not become burdensome but can remain enjoyable throughout their participation in the process of knowledge sharing. Furthermore, this communal culture that prioritises building personal networks can contribute to the continuous bottom-up development of new initiatives in the local context.
Iksundada Studio: the more (relationships), the better

The second case is about a design agency that intends to turn forgotten and underdeveloped spaces into inviting new venues. In 2014, Han-ah Park and Ji-hyun Park (the cofounders of Iksundada Studio) came across an untouched area with old hanok buildings (traditional Korean houses) in the middle of Seoul, Capital of South Korea. Different from nearby popular tourist sites with a similar setting, including Insa-dong and Buchon-dong, Ikseon-dong remained underexplored until recently because of the zoning regulations that had prohibited new developments. While looking for potential tourist guesthouses, the founders of Iksundada encountered the area. They immediately recognised its hidden values and turned it into a place where nostalgic sentiment met new stories as a way to provide unique experiences to its visitors.

Interestingly, not having design training has helped them discover and rediscover the area and bring in fresh stories and ideas instead of just new furniture and products. For the Iksun-dong project, the main idea was for visitors to have a holistic experience of the culture ‘New Analog’ that connects old and new beyond the place. For this, they created four categories of ‘eating, viewing, listening and feeling’ and developed 24 stores and public spaces accordingly. By working with diverse design teams working in diverse subfields, including interior architecture and visual communication design, they have learned to develop their own approaches to design. Moreover, they have evolved with the area while learning what it means to (re)design a place. For instance, they could avoid criticism of gentrification by developing a joint investment to help local actors, including young entrepreneurs, actually own the newly developed venues. This has provided more sustainable business opportunities to local stakeholders while learning how to deal with complex relationships in the area. Their learning has recently been acknowledged by international design awards, including IF (2021) and Red Dot (2021), for their later project in Soje-ho.

From its name—Iksundada—its approach to relationships can be drawn. The name comes from the old phrase Dada-iksun (다다익선), which can be roughly translated as ‘the more, the better’. Simply switching the order of the words, it inscribed a new feeling to the old phrase and kept the connection to its inaugural project Iksun-dong. Instead of dictating the design of every detail or using an underdeveloped area as an investment, they distributed roles and ownership with as many local actors as possible to coauthor new stories that resonate with both old and new, as well as locals and visitors.

NohTaerin and Associates: healthy relationship building

The third case is situated at the intersection of healthcare and space. NohTaerin and Associates (formerly known as We Are KAI) was founded by Taerin Noh in 2010 and has been known for its extensive experience working with hospitals on a range of scales. Starting with the interior styling of spaces in the hospital setting, its design scope has shifted to more sensitive spaces, including a morgue and hospice room. More recently, it has been designing the overall experiences of patients and staff in the hospital space. Noh noted that a morgue and hospice room may be difficult because they deal with extremely personal and emotional experiences. However, the theoretical concept of ‘a good space’ can be applied because they have limited aspects to consider while designing. Meanwhile, the general flow of services in the hospital,
especially an outpatient clinic, requires careful understanding of the entire healthcare process from the perspectives of different stakeholders. More importantly, for diverse services in the hospital, it is often unclear what is actually designed for clients. Thus, the design team must explain why less visible changes are needed in the design process rather than simply showing what could be made physically.

When it comes to relationships, NohTaerin and Associates takes a clear position that involving stakeholders (e.g., hospital staff and patients) in the process of designing can lead to healthy results. Possible answers to certain design problems, which are often complex and hidden, can be discovered in discussions rather than proposed by a single designer or design team. Thus, Noh emphasised the importance of communication and evidence-based design to clearly convey the value of design beyond visual styling. In addition, designing health experiences requires a multidisciplinary team; this means that relationships within the team also need to be carefully considered. In other words, in a fast-paced design project, distinctive roles of different design experts are often less recognised. Coordinating their roles depending on the project is important yet overlooked. NohTaerin and Associates advocates for the establishment of healthy internal relationships prior to the installation of health experience design.

Fiorka: in-gan-centred clothes

The last case is a small business that designs custom-made clothes specialising in uniforms. Its name, Fiorka, is adopted and modified from the Swedish word *fika*, which refers to a coffee break in the afternoon. Its founder and designer, Jaewoong Chong, noted that he was deeply inspired by this word, which recognises basic human qualities, including the work-life balance. With the rapid speed in the fashion industry, this view is often overlooked. In particular, its tendency to commodify clothes simply as products to sell has created distance between wearers and clothes. Thus, Chong founded the company in 2012 with the strong intention of designing more sustainable clothes while recovering the humanism aspect around the design process.

While making tailor-made suits for private customers, Fiorka has an array of clients from global high fashion and accessory conglomerates, including LVMH and Kering, that operate local branches in South Korea. While following references from its clients, the company designs custom-made uniforms for their service staff, including salespeople, who work in the local boutiques. The problem has been the management of these uniforms because they are worn daily but for a short period of time. After one season, the existing uniforms often require redesigning to fit the new visual identity of the brand. In other words, they are to be thrown away. Thus, Fiorka has developed reformable uniforms that can last for several seasons. Additionally, the proper methods to care for clothes are taught through video material (Chong, 2021).

Meanwhile, Fiorka’s long-term goal has a clear connection to relationship-centred thinking. Throughout previous experience working for different fashion brands in Korea, Chong realised that although the message from a fashion brand remains the same, periodic changes require the continuous production of new clothes. Through this discrepancy between the symbolic and material productions of fashion, he attempts to turn the overall process of making fashion meaningful to more members in society. To achieve this ambitious goal as a starter, Fiorka has started the planning process to hire people with disabilities for the firm’s production line. This brings a balance to the glamorous image of high fashion while empowering those who are
marginalised. Chong explained that Fiorka cannot exist alone as a member of society. He wants to involve marginalised groups to make their work impact on the other end of high fashion, which is often seen as more important. In this way, Fiorka can create a reciprocal relationship by connecting the two extremes.

Discussion and conclusion

With the aim of contributing to the polycentric view on design, the current study has explored East Asian, especially Korean, culture with a lens on Confucianist relationship-centred thinking. This was done to conceptualise relationship-centred design and demonstrate how it is practised in the context of South Korea. Figure 13.3 summarises the findings of the cases.

These cases have not only demonstrated Korean interpretations of design practice but also projected possibilities to expand emerging discussions in design, including decolonising design, design activism and circular economy, through the view of non-Western culture. These contributions hint at new research avenues for future studies. In the following, four possible scenarios to further explore relationship-centred design are suggested:

- Further exploring Korean culture for conceptualising relationship-centred design can be conducted. For instance, the notion of jeong (정), which can be loosely...
translated as the feeling of attachment between people who are in a close relationship, is another vital element to comprehend relationship-centric thinking in Korea and can be added as an element beyond Confucianism (see Park, 2020).

- This chapter introduced four cases from different subfields of design. Additional cases in different subfields can be conducted to exemplify other approaches to relationship-centred design in the context of Korea.
- Alternatively, the integration of design into society can be explored from the perspective of policy-making. The Korea Institute of Design Promotion (KIDP) is a governmental organisation that is responsible for design-related nationwide activities and policies. The year 2020 was its 50th anniversary (KIDP, 2021), and its history can support the view on relationship-centred design while situating it in the broader breadth of time and scope.
- Finally, it is important to note that this approach of relationship-centredness is not exclusive to either Korean culture or Korean design practitioners. For example, from a recent study on fashion sustainability in Latin America, the notion of relationship—or trust and affect—was emphasised as a distinctive characteristic for the Brazilian context (Valle-Noronha & Chun, 2021). Careful comparisons of the relationship-centred approach to other contexts can make the conversation on the plurality of design more dynamic and relatable to other design research communities.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the research participants and reviewers who contributed to this chapter. This project has received partial funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 870759. The content presented in this document represents the views of the author, and the European Commission has no liability in respect of the content.

References


Appendix 1
The research participants of this study are presented in Table 13.1.

Table 13.1 Basic information on research participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design Spectrum</td>
<td>Jihong Kim</td>
<td>Founder/design education manager</td>
<td>June 9th, 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iksundada Studio</td>
<td>Jinwoo Kim</td>
<td>Chief marketing officer/design manager</td>
<td>June 11th, 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NohTaerin and Associates</td>
<td>Taerin Noh</td>
<td>Founder/chief designer</td>
<td>June 9th, 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiorka</td>
<td>Jaewoong Chung</td>
<td>Founder/chief designer</td>
<td>July 16th, 2021</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>