

## MANAGERIAL “PROFESSIONAL SELF-IMPROVEMENT” CONCEPT IN EAST ASIAN COUNTRIES: ITS REINTERPRETATION IN MANAGERS’ EDUCATION

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### Summary

The article examines how leading East Asian economies reinterpret and operationalize the idea of continuous personal advancement within managerial education systems. Drawing on comparative analysis of China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, the study explores the evolution of normative expectations regarding the personal growth of organizational leaders and the cultural-philosophical foundations that shape these expectations. Particular attention is given to traditional intellectual frameworks (such as Confucian moral cultivation, Japanese kaizen-oriented learning culture, Korean notions of self-discipline, and Singapore’s hybrid meritocratic ethos) that continue to influence contemporary approaches to leadership development. The article investigates how these countries incorporate self-directed growth into national training programs, corporate human-capital strategies, and state-supported professional-learning ecosystems. It highlights both convergent tendencies, including emphasis on lifelong learning, ethical conduct, and collective responsibility, and divergent national trajectories shaped by local institutional environments and socio-economic priorities. The comparative findings demonstrate that East Asian models conceptualise personal advancement not as an individualistic pursuit but as a socially embedded obligation linked to organizational excellence and national competitiveness. The article as well evaluates the implications of these interpretations for global management education, arguing that the East Asian perspective offers a distinct paradigm that integrates moral, cultural, and performance-oriented dimensions.

**Key words:** PR China, Japan, leadership cultivation, Singapore, South Korea, professional capability growth, human-capital development.

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### 1. Introduction

In the contemporary global environment, the capacity of managers to engage in continuous self-directed advancement has become a decisive factor shaping the competitiveness of organizations and national economies. While the concept of professional self-development has been widely discussed in Western scholarship, its interpretation within East Asian contexts

remains comparatively underexplored. This gap is significant, as China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore (countries that demonstrated exceptionally rapid economic and social transformation in the second half of the twentieth century) have each constructed distinctive ideological, institutional, and educational frameworks that define the expected modes of self-improvement for managerial personnel. The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive comparative examination of how these four states conceptualize personal advancement in managerial education, treating it not as an auxiliary competence but as a strategic imperative embedded in national development models.

The relevance of the research derives from the growing international interest in alternative approaches to leadership development, especially those capable of integrating ethical, cultural, and performance-oriented components. East Asian economies today remain among the most influential actors shaping global technological, industrial, and geopolitical dynamics. Their approaches to cultivating managerial capacities, rooted in hybrid traditions that combine classical philosophical doctrines with modern human-capital strategies, offer important insights for countries seeking to enhance their own systems of leadership training.

The article aims to identify and interpret the core principles, cultural foundations, and institutional mechanisms through which East Asian states reinterpret the idea of managerial self-improvement. To achieve this purpose, the article formulates the following research tasks:

- to analyse the historical and socio-cultural origins of self-development doctrines in each country;
- to compare national models of managerial education and professional training;
- to determine common and unique features of self-improvement imperatives across the four cases;
- to assess the implications these models hold for contemporary global management education.

Methodologically, the study employs comparative analysis, cultural-historical interpretation, and elements of institutional and discourse analysis. These approaches allow for systematic identification of convergences and divergences in national frameworks, as well as tracing the influence of traditional belief systems (such as Confucian moral cultivation, kaizen philosophy, Korean discipline-based learning culture, and Singapore’s meritocratic developmentalism and others) on modern managerial training.

## 2. China: State-Led Development

China’s uninterrupted civilizational tradition and distinctive socio-political structure have produced a managerial paradigm markedly different from Western models. At its center is the principle of professional self-improvement, a duty-bound practice closely tied to state service, moral cultivation, and social stability. This principle is not a recent managerial fashion but a historical continuum that shapes China’s contemporary governance and economic strategy, offering a model increasingly influential in global discussions of managerial professionalism (*Xiang and et, 2024*).

Historically, China did not possess a “managerial class” in the corporate sense. Its closest equivalent was the scholar-official (*shenshi*): a generalist administrator responsible for taxation, public works, legal affairs, and local order. These officials were trained in the Confucian classics, and their authority derived from moral integrity and success in state examinations rather than technical business expertise. Their work embodied a holistic understanding of governance, where administrative competence was inseparable from personal virtue. Two

classical institutions embedded the ideal of managerial self-improvement deeply into Chinese culture. The Mandate of Heaven linked legitimacy in governance to moral righteousness and effective administration. While directed primarily at the emperor, it also implied that officials also had to cultivate virtue continuously to maintain social harmony. Failure to improve or govern effectively could symbolically forfeit Heaven's approval. Even more influential was the Imperial Examination System, which for over 1,300 years institutionalized a rigorous meritocratic process for selecting administrators. The examinations required decades of disciplined study, mastery of classical texts, and deep moral formation (*Chen and et., 2020*). This system created a managerial ethos grounded in relentless learning, self-discipline, and public responsibility.

In modern China, the term manager (*jingliren*) reflects the dual structure of the economy. In state-owned enterprises, senior managers function as “cadre-executives,” appointed through the Communist Party's nomenklatura system, which evaluates political loyalty alongside professional capability. In the private and foreign-invested sector, managerial roles resemble global corporate standards but remain framed within state-guided national objectives (*Jin and et., 2022*). Across both sectors, high-level managerial responsibility continues to be conceptualized as a form of service to the Party-state.

The historical legacy in China has been systematically adapted into the legal and policy frameworks of the People's Republic. China's Company Law (2018) specifies the qualifications and duties of directors and senior executives, emphasizing competence and professional development. SOE regulations, such as the Guidelines for the Administration of Executives of Central SOEs, mandate formal training and ongoing assessment. For public administration, the Civil Servant Law requires continuous education, linking promotion directly to training outcomes and performance evaluations. Overarching these norms are CPC directives and Five-Year Plans, which identify talent development, vocational skills, and managerial professionalism as strategic national priorities (*Tan and et, 2025*). The Chinese state is therefore both sponsor and enforcer of managerial self-improvement. A nationwide network of Party Schools and Executive Leadership Academies, including those in Pudong, Jinggangshan, and Yan'an, offers intensive programs combining Marxist theory, Party discipline, modern economics, and global governance. These institutions function as the modern counterparts to the *keju* system, cultivating a politically loyal and professionally competent managerial elite (*Ottervik and et, 2023*). Performance evaluation mechanisms now require managers (especially in SOEs) to demonstrate progress in innovation, upskilling, and talent development, with stagnation directly affecting career advancement. The state also cultivates a national culture in which learning is a civic virtue. Campaigns promoting a “learning Party” and a “learning nation” underscore that continuous education is essential for leadership. Parallel reforms in vocational and technical education ensure a broad pipeline of skilled middle managers and specialists (*Jin and et., 2022*). This system embeds self-improvement across all levels of the managerial hierarchy, making it both a professional expectation and a political responsibility.

In sum, China's approach to managerial development fuses deep historical traditions with state-directed modernization. Self-cultivation is understood not as an individual pursuit but as a contribution to collective national goals. Managerial legitimacy thus stems from meritocratic selection, disciplined learning, and political-moral commitment to the Party-state. This integrated model presents a significant alternative to Western managerial paradigms and continues to shape China's rise as a global economic and administrative power.

### 3. Japan: Corporate Warrior and Group Harmony

Japan presents a model of managerial self-improvement that differs sharply from China's state-directed approach. Rather than relying on formal mandates, Japan grounds managerial development in social obligation, organizational culture, and deeply internalized expectations of lifelong refinement. Continuous improvement is not only a professional requirement but a culturally embedded value shaped by collectivist ethics, process mastery, and a long historical tradition that blends moral cultivation with disciplined practice.

The Japanese managerial role has evolved from a dual historical foundation. In the pre-modern era, leadership and administrative authority were shared by two groups. The samurai (bushi) formed the military-administrative elite responsible for governance, discipline, and order, while the bantō, senior managers of feudal domains and merchant houses, oversaw finance, logistics, and commercial operations. The second embodied a fusion of Confucian moral learning and samurai discipline, grounding managerial authority in competence, loyalty, and duty to one's lord within a rigid hierarchy. In contemporary Japan, managerial definitions are codified in the Companies Act, which distinguishes among executive officers (torishimariyaku), auditors (kansayaku), and operational managers such as kachō (section chiefs) and buchō (department heads) (Macpherson and et., 2015). Yet, formal law plays a secondary role. Japanese managerial identity is shaped more decisively by corporate custom, seniority-based promotion, and the expectation that managers take responsibility for cultivating their teams.

Historically, self-improvement in Japan was conceived as both a moral obligation and a functional necessity of any person. Confucian thought emphasized the cultivation of personal virtue as the foundation for governing others, while samurai values reinforced discipline, frugality, and continuous refinement (Vaszkun and et., 2022). These principles merged with traditions of kōshū (the master-apprentice learning model), through which tacit knowledge and craft mastery were transmitted over years of close guidance. This combination produced the enduring belief that a manager must understand the organization "from the ground up." Such historical practices later provided the cultural soil for kaizen – the philosophy of continuous, incremental improvement that has become globally emblematic of Japanese management.

Modern Japanese corporate life institutionalizes these historical patterns. Managerial development occurs primarily through internal labor markets, where generalist career paths expose individuals to multiple departments across their careers, fostering holistic organizational understanding. Daily managerial work itself becomes a learning mechanism: quality control circles, consensus-building processes, structured communication routines, and meticulous documentation all reinforce reflective practice, analytical thinking, and coordinated problem-solving. Although no single statute in Japan mandates managerial upskilling, several legal and policy frameworks strongly encourage it. The Companies Act identifies a director's duty of care and loyalty, understood as an obligation to maintain professional competence (Macpherson and et., 2018). The Industrial Competitiveness Enhancement Act, the Corporate Governance Code, and legislation promoting human resource development further incentivize firms to build strong talent pipelines and support lifelong learning.

The Japanese state, while less interventionist than China's, plays a strategic facilitating role. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) promotes human resource development as essential for national innovation and recognizes corporations that excel in employee training. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) manages national vocational standards and subsidizes corporate training. These policies operate alongside an education system that instills discipline, group cohesion, and respect for mastery from early schooling

onward (*Hennig and et., 2023*). Public campaigns celebrating monozukuri (the art of making) and takumi (master craftsmanship) elevate professional excellence as a cultural virtue. State-supported productivity movements also reinforce the gemba philosophy, which holds that real managerial insight comes from direct observation at “the actual place where value is created.” (*Saabye and et., 2024*) Managers are expected to spend time on the shop floor, observe processes firsthand, gather evidence, and identify root causes of problems. This practice not only enhances managerial competence but also demonstrates respect for frontline workers and the knowledge they possess.

Today, Japan’s approach to managerial self-improvement constitutes a distinctive cultural-technical system grounded in collective excellence. Authority is earned not through title alone, but through lifelong dedication to skill, discipline, and organizational betterment. By harmonizing traditional moral codes with contemporary corporate structures, Japan has developed a resilient and adaptive model of leadership – one that remains a global benchmark for process discipline, human-centered learning, and continuous organizational improvement.

#### 4. Singapore: Human Capital Development

Singapore’s managerial tradition differs fundamentally from those of older civilizations such as China or Japan, largely because the island did not historically possess an indigenous managerial class. In the pre-independence period, when Singapore functioned as a British colonial port city, managerial authority was concentrated mainly in two groups. The first comprised British colonial officers and expatriates, who dominated the civil service and governed the major trading houses that anchored the colonial economy. The second consisted of compradors and local intermediaries often from established Chinese, Indian, or Peranakan families, who served as cultural and commercial brokers. They staffed the critical middle space of the economy: managing labor, negotiating trade, coordinating logistics, and translating between colonial administrators and diverse migrant communities. Thus, early Singapore developed a transnational, mercantile prototype of a manager, shaped more by practical skill, multilingual fluency, and social networks than by formal bureaucratic training (*Cheang and et., 2023*).

In the modern era, managerial roles in Singapore are precisely defined through statutory frameworks. The Companies Act sets out corporate governance obligations for directors and officers, while the Employment Act specifies that a “manager” or “executive” is one who exercises substantial authority and discretion or serves in a confidential or strategic capacity. This definition also exempts such employees from overtime regulations, reflecting their leadership status. In the public sector, managerial positions are filled through the Public Service Division’s structured recruitment schemes, which prioritize merit and professional competence and form one of the most institutionalized talent systems in the world (*Tan and et., 2022*).

After gaining independence in 1965, Singapore confronted acute vulnerabilities: lack of natural resources, limited domestic market, and intense geopolitical pressures. Lee Kuan Yew and the founding leadership concluded that human talent was the country’s only viable asset, giving rise to a developmental ethos that framed continuous upgrading as essential for survival. The resulting cultural psychology, often described as kiasuism (“fear of falling behind”), became a powerful driver of competitiveness, discipline, and self-improvement (*Bedford and et., 2018*). As Singapore transitioned from a colonial trading hub to a modern technocratic state, the pragmatic managerial instincts of the comprador class were absorbed into a meritocratic system built on rigorous education, technical proficiency, and long-term economic planning. Selected Confucian values (respect for scholarship, hierarchy, and lifelong learning)

were adopted not for ideological revival but for their utility in supporting social cohesion and rapid modernization.

In contemporary Singapore, managerial self-improvement functions as a central pillar of national economic strategy. A defining feature is the tripartite partnership among the state, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), and employer federations such as the Singapore National Employers Federation. This coordinated approach ensures alignment between policy, workplace implementation, and workforce engagement, enabling a unified national commitment to lifelong learning. Several legislative and policy instruments operationalize this system. The SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG) Act establishes the statutory body responsible for promoting nationwide upskilling (*Lim and et., 2024*). Complementary frameworks such as the Continuing Education and Training (CET) Masterplans and the SkillsFuture 2025 roadmap provide industry-specific skills frameworks and long-term targets. Corporate governance rules (especially the Monetary Authority of Singapore's Code of Corporate Governance) emphasize continuous professional development for directors (*Ye, 2021*). By defining the managerial category, the Employment Act clarifies the primary target group for advanced state-supported development programs.

The state acts not only as regulator but also as principal investor in managerial talent. The SkillsFuture Credit scheme provides every citizen aged 25 and above with an initial credit (currently SGD 500, equivalent to EUR 16575), supplemented by periodic top-ups, for approved training programs. Subsidies covering up to 90 percent of course fees and absentee payroll support for employers further lower barriers to skill development. Singapore also invests in an elite managerial pipeline through the Public Service Commission (PSC) Scholarships, which fund study at top global universities in exchange for bonded service. These scholar-managers go on to lead the civil service, strategic ministries, and Government-Linked Companies such as Temasek Holdings and DBS Bank. Institutional training infrastructure reinforces these pathways (*Cheang and et., 2024*). The Civil Service College provides advanced programs in policy, leadership, and governance, while local universities offer internationally respected MBA and executive education programs aligned with national priorities such as urban innovation, biotechnology, and financial technology. National campaigns ("SkillsFuture," "Learn for Life") promote continuous learning as both civic duty and personal responsibility, embedding self-improvement into social identity and professional expectations (*Lim and et., 2024*).

Today, Singapore presents one of the world's most deliberate and comprehensive models of state-engineered managerial self-improvement. Through centralized planning, data-driven human-capital investment, and an unwavering meritocratic ethos, managerial legitimacy is anchored not in inheritance or ownership, but in demonstrated capability and alignment with national strategy. This system has produced a highly adaptable, globally competitive, and politically cohesive managerial class, illustrating how a modern state can intentionally cultivate the professional ethos of its entire economy.

## 5. South Korea: Hyper-Educated Elite Leadership

South Korea's approach to managerial self-improvement is inseparable from its history of compressed, state-directed industrialization, which created a culture of intense competition, credentialism, and relentless personal advancement. Korean managers have long been viewed as frontline agents in the national project of economic catch-up and global competitiveness. This understanding developed through a dramatic transformation of Korea's governing and economic structures.

Historically, managerial authority in Korea was concentrated in the yangban, a hereditary scholar-aristocracy. Their legitimacy rested on mastery of Confucian literacy and success in the gwageo examination system, modelled after China's State Imperial exams keju. The yangban's primary function was civil administration; commercial enterprise was considered inferior and left to clerks, interpreters, and specialized workers (Lee, 2023). This created a bifurcation between scholarly prestige and practical management. The collapse of the dynasty, followed by Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), dismantled the yangban system and introduced a new industrial-bureaucratic order. After liberation and the devastation of the Korean War (1950–1953), space opened for a new managerial elite: pragmatic entrepreneurs who would later drive South Korea's rapid industrialization.

In modern South Korea, managerial roles are defined both legally and through deeply entrenched corporate culture. The Commercial Act and the Act on External Audit of Stock Companies outline the responsibilities of directors, auditors, and executive officers. Yet, the most influential managerial hierarchy derives from the chaebol system – family-controlled conglomerates that dominate the economy. Titles such as sajang (CEO), bujang (division head), gwajang (section chief), and daeri (assistant section chief) carry not just functional meaning but significant social prestige, marking a person's rank within an organizational “tribe.” Promotions reflect internal bylaws, seniority norms, and Korea's strong labor regulations rather than statutory requirements (Yoon and et., 2015). Thus, the modern Korean manager occupies a hybrid identity shaped by legal responsibilities, hierarchical corporate culture, and the legacy of rapid economic transformation.

The traditional Korean ethos of self-improvement is deeply rooted in the historical belief that advancement must be earned through disciplined study. For centuries, the gwageo examinations required candidates to memorize classical Chinese texts and demonstrate exceptional scholastic ability. This created a cultural template linking social mobility to intellectual exertion: an idea that persists in South Korea's contemporary educational and corporate culture. After the Korean War, the absence of a traditional commercial managerial class required chaebol founders to recruit leaders from the military, which supplied discipline and hierarchy, and the civil service, which provided administrative capability. In this new context, the focus shifted from literary refinement to technical and practical mastery, redirecting long-standing diligence toward industrial and economic development. A related cultural thread is jeongsin-joseong, or spiritual cultivation, rooted in Confucian and Neo-Confucian ideals (Lee, 2023). Although the content of study has shifted to engineering, management theory, and global business, the expectation that leaders engage in continual self-cultivation has endured. Today, self-improvement is a non-negotiable component of South Korea's hyper-competitive corporate environment. Major conglomerates operate elite in-house academies (such as Samsung's Global Strategy Group and LG Academy) that function as intensive training centers for high-potential managers. These institutions teach global strategy, leadership, and organizational culture, fostering a cohesive and loyal managerial elite. The broader culture reinforces this through widespread credentialism, known as the “spec” race. Advancement depends heavily on educational pedigree (especially degrees from the elite SKY universities), professional certifications such as CPA or CFA, and high-level English proficiency (Dittrich and et., 2023).

The state plays a significant role in formalizing these expectations. The Framework Act on Human Resources Development mandates a national plan every five years to strengthen vocational training and core competencies. The Act on the Development of Vocational Skills of Workers establishes the Vocational Competency Development Tax, which requires companies above a certain size to invest a fixed percentage of payroll in employee training or pay an

equivalent levy. Post-1997 corporate reforms also demanded greater board professionalism, indirectly encouraging firms to hire more highly qualified managers. The historical evolution of state involvement is equally important (*Shim and et., 2020*). During the developmental era (1960s–1980s), the government pursued rapid industrialization with coercive determination, generating the well-known *ppalli ppalli* (“hurry, hurry”) culture that demanded swift learning and adaptation. As Korea matured, the state shifted from direct control to strategic facilitation, investing heavily in STEM universities and research institutes such as KAIST to ensure a continuous pipeline of technically skilled managers. HRD Korea, under the Ministry of Employment and Labor, administers the national skills system, manages the training tax fund, maintains the National Competency Standards, and operates the K-MBA program for SME managers. More recently, government initiatives promoting the “Creative Economy” and entrepreneurship have sought to diversify managerial pathways beyond chaebol-centered structures (*Lee and et., 2025*).

In essence, South Korea’s system of managerial self-improvement is characterized by competitive intensity, compulsory corporate investment, and a deeply embedded culture of credentialism. The historical commitment to scholarly mastery has evolved into a modern race for educational and professional achievement, while the state acts as both regulator and investor. The result is a managerial class defined by resilience, technical sophistication, and a relentless drive to excel in an increasingly globalized marketplace.

## 6. Conclusions

The comparative analysis of China, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea demonstrates that the concept of managerial professional self-improvement in East Asia is neither uniform nor purely contemporary. Rather, it emerges from a long arc of cultural, institutional, and political evolution that continues to shape managerial expectations, organizational practices, and national development strategies. While each country has constructed its own distinctive model, all four share a foundational belief that managerial competence must be continually cultivated and aligned with broader societal or national goals and demonstrate several trends in common:

- in the countries under consideration managerial professional self-improvement is understood as a social obligation, not merely an individual pursuit. Whether grounded in state ideology, corporate community, or national competitiveness, managerial development is framed as essential to collective progress;
- all four countries institutionalize learning through structured pathways (examinations, rotational careers, training academies, national talent schemes), ensuring that improvement is systematic rather than incidental;
- moral and character development remains an integral component, reflecting long-standing East Asian traditions that connect personal virtue with effective leadership;
- each national system ties managerial growth to strategic economic objectives, ensuring that self-improvement serves both organizational performance and national resilience.

The study thus illustrates that East Asian models of managerial self-improvement offer alternatives to Western managerial paradigms that prioritize individual autonomy, market incentives, and technical expertise. Instead, the East Asian approaches emphasize embeddedness of the manager within the organization, the organization within the nation, and professional growth within a broader ethical or civic framework. Understanding these models is increasingly important as East Asian economies continue to shape global production networks, technological innovation, and managerial thought. Their approaches highlight the possibility of systems

in which leadership development is holistic, morally anchored, and strategically coordinated across societal institutions. For scholars and practitioners alike, these findings underscore the need to move beyond universalized Western frameworks and engage with culturally and structurally diverse paradigms of managerial professionalism.

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