

## Korean Culture – Very Informal Essays

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### 1. "In" and "Out"

Two of the most common first impressions that foreigners have of Koreans is that they are incredibly polite, and that they are incredibly rude.

In fact, the courtesy and kindness of Koreans is legendary and attested to by thousands of people who are fortunate enough to have a Korean friend. Overwhelming meals, unexpected gifts, constant and almost embarrassing attention to your personal whims: all of this and more has been yours if you have been invited out. This is not a modern invention; traditionally, one of the names of Korea was the "Eastern Land of Courtesy." The obligations of a host are paramount; the obligation of the guest is to lap it up.

On the other hand, the discourtesy and rudeness of Koreans is legendary and attested to by thousands of people who are unfortunate enough to have to walk on a Korean street. Overwhelming crowds, unexpected shoving, constant and almost painful inattention to where other people are going: all this and more has been yours if you have ridden the Seoul subway. This may be a modern invention: nowadays, one of the names of Korea might be the "Eastern Land of Discourtesy." The intentions of the individual are paramount; the obligation of the victim is to get out of the way.

Westerners have rather a hard time reconciling these two images of Korea, these two different sets of behavior, both of them from the same people. Hosts are so friendly; taxi drivers are so nasty. Is Korea really composed of two totally different sets of people living on the same peninsula?

Actually, yes. For Koreans, the world *is* composed of two sets of people - those they know and those they don't know. If you know somebody, then you have a relationship, and are obliged, very obliged, to treat him or her politely, kindly, and with every courtesy. But if you don't know someone, if you've never formally "met" that person, then the person doesn't exist. Such people don't count, and you don't have to do anything.

Thus your friends will buy you meals forever. I was quite close to one Korean colleague in the Yonsei University English department for over 25 years, and I was hardly ever able to pay for lunch when I was with him. He would say he was going to the men's room but sneak off to pay the bill; he paid in advance; he called ahead to arrange to pay the bill later; he dropped off his credit card surreptitiously on the way in, etc. This could have a case of courtesy used as a means of putting you in debt (you'd better believe it can be used that way!) but in this particular case I think he just knew me and liked me and felt obliged. On the other hand, the people in the street in Seoul who push you and walk through you aren't actually being discourteous and rude, and certainly not anti-foreign; they simply don't see you. They bump each other just as much, and never notice it, whether they bump or are bumped. Other people don't exist.

It turns out that all sorts of things in Korean society are explained by this distinction between "in" and "out." For example, it is one reason why the ritual of exchanging name cards is so important. That formal introduction is the moment when the "other" ceases to be a non-person and becomes a person. "In and out" explains why Korean students are so clean in their homes and so likely to throw trash on the campus streets - the street is outside their area, the territory of non-persons. This distinction is reinforced by taking off shoes in a house; the house is clean space, while "out" is for shoes, dirty.

But I am an American. (Throughout this series of essays, I make comparisons to American culture not because I think it forms a world standard, but because it is the only non-Korean culture I know.) In contrast to this dual system, Americans tend to value a single standard of treatment for all people. In fact,

equality of treatment is one of our most profound theoretical values. We should do things for people no matter who they are; we should be kind to strangers (even if we have to be wary of them nowadays). But this is not the only way to run a society.

American students assume that they will receive equality and fairness of treatment from public agencies, and are outraged when things are "unfair." Korean students have learned from their infancy that public agencies will treat them as "outsiders" and be "unfair" and unlikely to do what they ask. They *know* that the word "no" only means they have not yet found the loophole, the back door, the personal connection who will treat them as "in."

When Koreans look at Americans, they tend to admire our public behavior: traffic courtesy, not pushing or bumping, standing in line, saying "Thank you for shopping at Wal-Mart," etc. Koreans often say that public behavior in Korea needs to be improved. But when they get invited out by Americans, they tend to think that we aren't that wonderful as hosts. We invite them over for what is announced as a "simple lunch," and instead of the massive spread that a Korean would provide after such an invitation, they arrive and it's *really only a simple lunch!* Americans just don't go "all out" the way Koreans would.

In traditional Korean society everyone lived in a village and knew everyone else and had to be polite; thus, "Eastern Land of Courtesy." Perhaps only with modern urban life has the "non-person" problem become so evident. Most foreigners who are in Korea or who interact with Koreans are most of the time in a small "village," a group of people properly introduced who know each other. Most of the time, things are fine. But if you go out in downtown Seoul, look out!

## II. No Men Are Created Equal

The problem of "in and out" is only a small part of a larger pattern: Korea is fundamentally *not* an egalitarian culture, not one that values equality of treatment, but one that makes distinctions between people, one that is hierarchical.

Well, you knew that Korean culture was hierarchical. But do you know what that really implies? I mean, it's arranged *vertically!*

Just as one clue, there is no word in Korean for "brother." There is no such word. There is a Korean word for "elder brother" ("*hyong*") and a Korean word for "younger brother" ("*tongsaeng*") but no word for just "brother." American brothers are generally equal to each other, but Korean brothers are not equal; the elder brother has what we would call the responsibility of a father toward his younger brothers. The relationship is different, so the word is different. My Korean friends always consider me slightly immoral in that I do not tell my younger brother what to do.

Koreans have separate words for elder sister and younger sister, too. In fact, they have different words for a man to use for his elder sister and for a woman to use for her elder sister. The words are different because the roles are different and the relationships are different and the responsibilities are different and *not equal*.

Korea is a Confucian society. Everyone is Confucian, including the Christians. Confucianism is primarily a system of ethics, not religion, and within ethics, even more a system of social relationships. The very center of Confucianism is the "Five Relationships" of "king to subject, father to son, elder brother to younger brother, husband to wife, and friend to friend." Note that four out of five of these are hierarchical. That's about right; Korea is at least 80% hierarchical. (And even "friends" only applies if the two were born the same year, and are thus the same age and capable of being roughly equal. And even then not quite, because the one born a month or a day or an hour ahead is senior. Even twins: like Esau and Jacob, the twin born first is the elder brother. Koreans are *very* confused when Americans claim that someone clearly not their own age is their "friend.")

Language reinforces inequality not only in things like the words for "brother" but in every sentence.

The "levels" of spoken Korean are controlled by and also define the relationship of the two speakers. Even if you know no Korean you will notice that younger people use a lot of long sentences ending with "-imnida," while older people talking to younger people end their sentences with short cutoff endings. Two people can't even talk to each other until they have defined their mutual relationship, hierarchically, by position or age.

Teachers, particularly senior teachers, maintain a certain dignity. Americans may think such teachers are putting it on, but in their minds they are simply being senior, acting as a teacher ought to act. Granted that Koreans treat Americans as somewhat outside the Korean hierarchical system (my "honorary" age for a long time was about 10 years greater than my real age, though the gap has diminished faster than I'd like), and granted that Koreans take things from foreigners that they would never take from other Koreans, still, hierarchy is the whole world, and being aware of one's relative place in the world is a way of making life easier in dealing with Koreans anywhere.

### III. Loyalty and Honesty

I had a terrible time in my classes when I was teaching at Yonsei because my students kept cheating on tests and plagiarizing homework. I had to watch them all the time. When I caught them, they were embarrassed, yes, and they knew they had done wrong, yes, but they said, "My friend asked me," as if that were a complete explanation. I know we have cheating in colleges in the U.S. and other countries, too, but sometimes I really got disgusted with their lack of honesty, their unwillingness to play by the rules.

It is *not* the case that Koreans are dishonest. It is *not* the case that honesty is not a value in Korea. Korean culture has a strong sense of honesty. The problem is the hierarchy of values. Honesty is a value, but there is a higher value, and it is loyalty.

Of course, loyalty is a value for Americans, too. Those of us in academia are less regularly conscious of it than some Americans, perhaps, but when something comes which demands loyalty, Americans have it, whether to the nation, to a friend, or to a family member. But for us it is not usually a higher value than honesty.

But not so for Koreans. Loyalty *is* higher than honesty. Thus my students will engage in behavior that I call cheating in order to be virtuous. Consider yourself in such a situation. First, the Confucian drive to success through education means your parents have impressed on you from birth the absolute importance of excellent grades. "B" is a failing grade. (The parents are right, by the way. If you do not have absolutely top grades you will not get into a top university. Since hiring by the top companies is based on what university you attended rather than on any personal achievement, a "B" in high school could seriously damage your life prospects.) If you are an obedient child, you want to please your parents. Of course, it's best to have studied and to know all the answers on a test. But if you don't, you know as an obedient child that it is morally unacceptable to bring home a low grade. So you ask your friend for help. If you do *not* ask, you reveal yourself as fundamentally lacking in virtue. If you have been well socialized, there is no conflict. Similarly, if your friend asks you for help on an exam or to copy your homework, you must help your friend or show yourself to be inhumane, disloyal, not a friend, thus lacking in virtue.

In a small country and a small society where human relationships are extremely important, more important than structural and official relationships, where the whole world works by the old boy network, it is not so surprising that loyalty is the top value. Looking at it another way, we should ask just what *is* the relationship between, for instance, father and son. If you ask a Korean what one value summarizes the correct relationship between the pairs of the Five Relationships in Confucianism, the answer will some version of "loyalty." If you ask a Korean what one word expresses the most important ideal in Korean culture, the way "love" is often considered the ultimate ideal in Western culture, the answer will be "loyalty."

The tough thing in cultural conflict is not the conflict of good against bad. The tough thing is when it's good against good. There's a fine book on Korean culture which says it right in the title; it's called *Virtues*

*in Conflict*. (The book is actually about women's roles - I'm just borrowing the title.) Which *should* be more important, honesty or loyalty? Why do Americans say that honesty is a higher value than loyalty? Why not the other way around? Who is to decide?

If there are events in your experience with Koreans in which their behavior seems to be in conflict with your values, then it's time to remember the fundamental and obvious principle that the Koreans are playing by their own quite functional set of values. They are probably wondering why your values are so screwed up. As for me, rather than blaming Korean culture or trying to change it (a fruitless task!), I usually try to set up some system which forces things to be done "right," i.e. the way I want. In class and on tests, I watch very closely and never assume the honor system will work. I always double-check abilities shown on homework assignments by giving in-class assignments as well. On the other hand, I can only do that in areas where I am in control, like the classroom, or in selecting Fulbright Korea grantees when I was Executive Director. Just as often, I have no control and must learn to be satisfied with understanding what's going on. Korean culture is certainly not going to change in my lifetime, or yours. But your interactions with Koreans will certainly be more pleasant when you understand why they act the way they do.

#### **IV. Personalized Politics**

One difference between Korean and American loyalty is that in general Americans are loyal to abstracts or ideals and Koreans are loyal to people. Nationally the highest loyalty for Americans is to the Constitution. In fact, the best way I know to define what makes an American is one who lives under and generally accepts the system of governance embodied in the constitution and other national documents. Certainly Americans value loyalty to such abstracts higher than loyalty to specific people. How often have I heard Americans say, "I respect the presidency, but I don't like the president" or "I honor the office, not the man"? This is true in my own life, certainly. I can't think of many actual people (outside my family) that I am personally loyal to, but lots of institutions, from the Fulbright program to Yonsei University, definitely to my church and finally, yes, to the representational principles of the U.S. Constitution. I think many Americans are like this, though we don't talk about it openly very much. Certainly we put more value on abstract standards than on the desires of people. In my profession as a university professor, that would be academic standards; as a Fulbright administrator, it would be objectivity in the selection process. Most professors believe that students should be judged by some standards, and that students should strive to meet those standards.

Koreans tend to have a differing concept of loyalty. Loyalty is to individuals, to persons, rather than to abstracts or ideals. This has been most evident in Korean politics, where the differing goals of the political parties are irrelevant, and the personalities of the leaders of the parties are everything. One previous president of Korea, Kim Dae Jung, headed six or seven political parties over the years, while maintaining essentially the same politics and the same followers. Such behavior pervades Korean society, business, and education. University professors have their "disciples," special students whom they shepherd and guide through graduate work and finally into academic jobs in their own departments; Those students become the next generation, loyal to their mentors all though their professional lives. In business, individual managers have groups of loyal followers who do whatever they ask. And so it is with Koreans anywhere. The Korean individuals you meet all have sets of relationships and loyalties to their classmates, their superiors (not necessarily the ones they're now working for) and their colleagues, none of which will be evident and all of which may affect their performance, the accuracy of their evaluations, their attitude toward their current jobs, and their attitudes toward you.

The constellation of relationships a Korean works within has three main groups - family ties, school ties, and regional ties. Family ties can be very broad by Western standards, including what we would consider quite distant relatives. School ties include elementary school buddies, middle- and high-school friends, and college connections, all of which are extremely important to the progress of one's career. For instance, at one time a few years ago 80% of the management of the top Korean *chaebols* were graduates of just three universities: Seoul National University, Yonsei University, and Korea University. Regional ties (or hometown ties) are perhaps least understood by foreigners, and can range from the

common resentment of Jeolla Province people against what is felt to be the common arrogance of Gyeongsang Province people, to the relationship of two students whose ancestors came from the same county.

Of course, America has relationships, Old Boy networks, classmates, hometown friends, and mentors too. But we are taught that loyalty to them is *supposed* to come after our loyalty to the profession, to academic standards, to what is "right." But if personal relationships are more important than abstract standards, how objective are letters of recommendation?

Koreans criticize the American emphasis on abstract standards as cold and inhumane. In America, they say, "things" are too important, while in Korea "we Koreans" put a higher value on human life. Maybe they're right. But be aware that in any case, the Koreans you interact with are going to have a strong loyalty to people; it may cause static in your value system, but if you know the cause of the static, you can compensate for it and enjoy people who need people.

## V. Groupies

One student is nothing. A batch of students is more powerful than a university. A big batch of students is more powerful than a government.

Korea is a collective society. While we Americans revere the individual and think that individual rights and individual development are the highest good in society, Koreans believe that the group is far more important than the individual. This is one of the major factors working against individual initiative in Korean students. (Parenthetically, Korean students can be very good indeed in showing initiative and creativity in the right setting; however, it's usually a group setting.)

Korean language reinforces this idea in Koreans from an early age. Everything is "uri", which means "us" or "our." When Koreans refer to their own language, they do not say "Korean", they say "our language." They do not refer to Korea, but to "our country." Not home, but "our house," even, yes, "our wife" or "our husband" (this does not imply gleeful spouse-sharing, but "the person who has the role of wife in our house"). All this reinforces the sense of the group, rather than the individual, as the basic unit of society.

Of course, the "basic unit" can be of different sizes for different situations. "Our family" is a few people; "our department" might be several hundred, "our university" is many thousand, "our country" is 50 million (or 70 million, if you include North Korea). But in each case the sense is of being part of a group, a group with limits. Everyone inside the group is "in"; others are "out." The individual finds identity as part of the group. And the group is in competition with, feels exclusiveness, perhaps hostility, toward everyone outside the group.

This emphasis on the group rather than on the individual is reflected in Koreans' ideas about privacy. Seeing how Korean children seldom have their own room and how children often sleep in the same room with their parents (at least until the age of seven or eight), and how everyone walks into everyone else's room in the family, Americans complain that Koreans have no privacy. On the other hand, seeing how our houses have no walls around them, and how everyone who walks past can look across the lawn and right into the windows if they want, Koreans complain that Americans have no privacy. Of course, for us, privacy is for the individual in (or against) the family; for them, privacy is the family against the world.

For Koreans, the word "kae-in," meaning "private" or "individual," is actually a word with rather negative connotations, in contrast to the very positive connotations "individualism" has in English. Thus it is not surprising to learn that "individual initiative" is generally not valued very highly in Korea. Of course, there has been some change as modernization has taken hold, and many individual entrepreneurs have succeeded. And nowadays some Korean parents are teaching their children to get ahead by being highly assertive, though such children are still perceived by others as obnoxious or bullies. As I mentioned, *group* initiative can be highly successful, for instance, in setting up small groups of three or four students

and giving them brainstorming assignments. The hierarchical leader of a group will often make quite bold decisions - through in the name of the entire group, not the individual. It remains true that in Korean organizations individuals seldom feel comfortable taking action by themselves. There must be group discussions and group consensus before the group leader states what action is to be taken.

Koreans feel they are by no means as consensus-oriented as the Japanese. In the broadest of generalizations, Koreans are also considered to be more feisty than the Japanese, more open with their feelings, more likely to break out of the mold and act as individuals and make decisions (for good or bad); generally they seem to Americans to be not as hard to "read." Nonetheless, Koreans and Japanese are somewhat similar in their relation to the Confucian tradition, and both traditions are quite different from ours. In fact, if you think about it, isn't it a bit odd to say that the individual (one person) is more important than the group (many people)? In any case, as you deal with Koreans, don't be frustrated if they show a relative lack of individual initiative. How could they possibly have it when their culture tells them it's bad?

## VI. Heredity and Environment

Lots of Korean children are adopted overseas each year. This has become a big issue in Korea lately, as some Koreans consider it embarrassing to their nation. I, on the other hand (partly because I have two adopted children who used to be Korean) consider it one of the finest things that Koreans do, allowing their children to be adopted by people who really want them. The fact is that Koreans do not adopt children very much, and many Koreans cannot understand that my wife and I really love our adopted children.

Traditionally, Koreans did adopt occasionally. If one did not have a son, one might adopt the second son of a relative (a "spare") to carry on the family line. The adoptee need not be young; often the adoptee would be in his teens or older before the need to adopt would be recognized. But the person to be adopted had to be related to you, and in the correct generation, the next generation after yours in the clan register. (This has changed recently as Koreans have begun to adopt more girls than boys, because they are believed to be "easier" to raise.)

Americans don't care very much about being related to the adopted child, but they want to adopt young. My elder daughter came to my house when she was five days old - that's the way to do it, no?

Americans and Koreans are equally crazy in our view of the world. In the makeup of any human being there is a mixture of heredity and environment. But we Americans tend to believe only in environment. Look at that adoption pattern - get 'em young and they can become anything, right? We want to adopt infants! Then there will be no problems! Koreans, on the other hand, tend to believe only in heredity. Look at that adoption pattern - get 'em from the family and we know what we're getting, right? We want to adopt relatives! Then there will be no problems!

Of course, heredity determines much of my height, aptitudes, even diseases. Environment determines much of my behavior, achievement, even diseases. Thus both Koreans and Americans are wrong. But being wrong never affected a good solid social attitude (theirs or ours).

The American attitude to environment and heredity may come from the American experience, where everyone was an immigrant and the new land determined what you were; anyone could become anything, and the past was left behind (in theory, and never mind the marginalized). The Korean attitude to heredity may come from the Korean experience, where everyone was in the same place for 5000 years and family determined what you were; no one could *become* anything (in theory, and never mind actual social mobility).

Of course, modern Korea is built on a denial of all the resignation and fatalism implicit in this attitude. Now everything changes; everything can be changed. But both attitudes are strong in Korea - yes, everything changes, must change; but at the same time in some ways nothing changes, particularly in people and relationships. Old attitudes to adoption have not changed. People without children still adopt,

but instead of adopting relatives, they sometimes conceal the adoption not only from the child, but even from the neighbors, the wife getting progressively more "pregnant," then going to the hospital and bringing home the adopted newborn publicly as her own. A child known to be adopted may be bullied or (worse) pitied by neighbors and classmates.

While the Korean attitude toward heredity may be of only academic interest to that majority of people who have not adopted, it affects a large group of people whom I dealt with as an international educator. These are the hyphenated Koreans, most often Korean-American. The typical experience in Korea of Korean-Americans can be quite negative. Their first introduction to Korea is in the taxi from the airport, where the taxi driver scolds them for not speaking Korean well. They have often felt varying degrees of isolation in their home countries, and had expected that in Korea they would feel at home. But they are soon disabused of that notion.

A survey was conducted some years ago among the summer session students at Yonsei's International Division, 95% of whom are Korean-American, about their ideas of Korea and Koreans. The results were much as expected - it's a beautiful country, they like the food, they don't like the traffic, Seoul is bigger and more modern than they expected, they feel satisfied with their study experience, etc. But one figure stood out. When asked about the basic character and attitude of the Korean people, 65% of these young Korean-Americans replied that Koreans were an *unkind* people, and only 25% that Koreans were a kind people (plus 10% "other").

The problem is heredity and environment. If a student was born in New Jersey, went to high school in California, speaks only English, and is a student at the University of Michigan, I, speaking as an American, know that that student is an American. But the average Korean will believe such a student is a Korean - but a "bad" one. If your parents were Korean, then you are too! If I can say "Ann-young-hash-im-niker" ("hello"), no matter how badly, Koreans will say how impressed they are by my Korean language skills. If one of those students makes even a slight error in grammar, particularly in the small suffixes that indicate politeness and relative place in society, they are criticized severely - because they are Korean, and Koreans don't make those mistakes.

Among the students on American campuses are growing numbers of students who look Korean but aren't. As Americans, they don't accept their "place" in the Korean hierarchy. Meanwhile, the Koreans among your international students *do* accept hierarchy. The Koreans are often graduate students, who think they are in charge. The Korean-Americans are often undergraduates - nobody is in charge of *them*. So you have two Korean student associations, not always talking to each other. All because of heredity and environment.

## **Conclusion**

Korea is said to be the most homogeneous nation on the face of the earth. Among South Korea's 50 million people, the largest, in fact the only, resident minority group is the 10,000 Chinese. They are scattered around the country - Korea is the only country in Asia without a Chinatown. Only one out of every 4500 people is from an ethnically different group. (Actually, there are several hundred thousand foreign "temporary" workers in Korea and a substantial number of Asian wives of Korean men - they are unlikely to leave and may change Korea in the future, but they are still "invisible" and not considered to be part of the permanent population of the peninsula.)

One of the greatest assets of Korean society is its homogeneity - all one language, one culture, one race, one nation, allowing mass education, communication, and understanding within the boundaries of the country.

One of the greatest liabilities of Korean society is its homogeneity - no experience of diversity, no openness to difference, sometimes a bit of racism and xenophobia thrown in, with these negative points not merely a sad reality which exists despite inclusive ideals, as in the U.S., but part of an ideology of purity and uniqueness and exceptionalism which is reinforced by government, education, media, and

family.

It is the homogeneity of Koreans which makes it possible to begin to describe something called "Korean culture." I always remind myself that individual variation can be very great. Nonetheless, many Korean I meet and work with seem to fit the patterns I have described, and others, including Koreans themselves, have recognized these patterns as forming something "Korean."

All these characteristics from all these sections fit together - hierarchy, personalized loyalty, group orientation, nationalism, heredity - to produce a cultural group that has survived a long time. Korean culture is changing, but slowly, and these characteristics will not disappear in our lifetimes. As we try to understand Koreans, so they also try to understand us. Maybe we can use the opportunities now open for those of us in international education, Koreans and Americans, to meet each other in the middle.