

What makes Korea tick?

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Abstract. Within a short span of time since the end of the Korean War in the early 1950s, Korea has emerged on the world arena as an economic powerhouse and a success story which has been the envy of the world. Sea changes have taken place in Korea. World-wide interest in Korea as a nation, as an economy, or as a culture is generated. What is the cause behind all this?. This paper aims to sketch some of the defining cultural values which I believe are responsible for the Korean miracle. Some references will be made to Vietnamese culture as appropriate to deeply appreciate the similarities and as well as the differences.

Keywords: Korea, cultural values, Gibun, Han, arranged marriage, sojourner's mentality, cultural identity, inwardness, outwardness.

I recently made my first visit to Korea. This trip left a strong impression on me as a first timer. The vibrant streets with all the hustle and bustle were thronged with people on the move. Shops were well stocked with the best brands. People were well - dressed. Most of the cars I saw were made in Korea. Confidence exuded from the faces of those young passers by. Signs of worry and concerns were detected, too. And an intriguing question that occurred to me is what Korea is really about, and what makes it tick? This is also a question raised by Professor Choong Soon Kim, who gave me his "Kimchi and IT" as a gift on my first trip to Korea. I do not mean to say that I have absolutely no knowledge about this nation, but real and keen interests just occurred after this trip. The title of this paper is actually a line I borrow from Kim [1].

According to Choong Soon Kim, the word "Korea" acquires the metaphorical meaning of "morning calm and freshness" due to the long standing use of the word "Josean", originating from the name of the first Korean state of "Gojosen" with that sense. In fact the name "Korea" hails from the Goryeo dynasty (918 – 1392). Is it the land of morning calm or broken calm as Kim suggests?

As Choong Soon Kim [1] remarked Korea had a obscure identity, mistaken by some to be part of Vietnam, or was otherwise known as the "Hermit Kingdom". Although, originally known a "morning calm", Korea is believed to have had quite a turbulent history, subjected to foreign invasions and dominations by such nations as the Mongols, the Chinese, and the Japanese. The country has still remained partitioned since the end of the Korean War.

Korea's spectacular prominence in the world community, its economic miracle has produced a worldwide interest in Korean

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studies. It is now known as the exporter of cars, electronic equipment, ships, cell phones. The country has a strong presence in many parts of the world. It is now the world's second largest investor in Vietnam.

I believe that all this does not come about all of a sudden. But as we look back, it is noteworthy that Korea has something to offer the world very early on: in 1234 the first movable metal type for printing was made in Korea; in 1442, the rain gauge was invented; in 1592, the world's first iron - clad ships were launched. In 1443, the 25th year of King Sejong's reign the Korean alphabet was created. Geoffrey Sampson [2] has this to say about the Korean Hangul: *"We may well marvel at the outstanding simplicity and convenience of Hangul. Whether or not it is ultimately the best of all conceivable scripts for Korean, Hangul must unquestionably rank as one of the great intellectual achievements of human kind"*.

It is my view that Korean language and cultural studies may provide answers to the question raised above? Before trying to answer this question, let me just cite two examples which have got bad press in our local newspapers. Korean employers are notorious for their hot temper. They can easily explode. But Kim in his book somehow offers a convincing explanation: Koreans can display their explosive impatience as part of their rushed and hurried culture. Korean men want things done "yesterday for results tomorrow" this culture is known as *"thin - pan or Naembi culture"*. But it is also important to realize that they can forget and forgive soon. It is imperative to realize that they, too, have the ability to endure hardship as a result of their geographical and political, cultural circumstances.

Another instance concerns what is called *"arranged marriage"*. Vietnamese do not like to see Korean males "shopping for Vietnamese wives", going to a place where local girls line in a queue to view and pick the one they will marry. The general feeling is that this is

humiliating. Few in Vietnam are aware that the system of arranged marriage in Korea was firmly established as long ago as the 14 century, and in Korea this is quite a common practice. According to Kim, licensed and commercial marriage consulting centers have become quite popular.

Thus a awareness of cultural differences may eliminate misunderstanding, prejudices, and contribute to building better relations.

Kim attributes the Korean success story to such factors as historical adversity, the impact of the Vietnam war, Confucianism's unintended consequence, Korea's advantageous position, strong leadership, Jaebeol and dedicated workers. There is no question that they have contributed to Korean's economic well being and success, but one question still remains. That is what is it that drives everybody's everyday decisions, everybody's choices, or sacrifices for a better tomorrow. It is my belief that the answers are deeply grounded in their culture, their national character, or cultural identity. In other words, what is that "Koreanness" that sets Korea off from other nations? It is the cultural values that are responsible for all this. Kluckhohn [3] defines a value as: *"a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of actions"*.

For example, Han Kyung - Koo (2000), cited in Kim [1] lists the following values that could have influenced the development of the Korean ethos in the course of this nation's history:

- a. An emphasis on "effectiveness" over "efficiency",
- b. An attitude of "now" or "never",
- c. A "Sojourner's mentality believing in carrying out a task hastily within a short period of time, even if it proves less profitable,
- d. A belief that it is acceptable to violate a rule because following one would cause one to lose out to one who use illegitimate ones, and

g. The development of factionalism to attract and assemble sympathizers to defeat opponents.

However, as a foreigner, what I understand and appreciate underlying all these accomplishments is what I call “a strong sense of patriotism” displayed by the Koreans I met and talked to. The Japanese occupation of the land during the second World War Two, the Korean War, and ongoing partitioning of the country must have left indelible emotional scars in the mind of the people. The country was impoverished, food shortages and unemployment occurred after the war. Those Koreans that I had a chance to talk with expressed a strong resolve to be equal, and treated equally like other nations in the world. They did not want to be poor. They wanted a richer Korea. This, I think is the drive force pushing Korean development and rise in the world. It has worked in tough times.

There are however, other critical traditional values at work, too. Kim mentioned, inter alia, an attitude of “*unhurried calmness, yet want fast results*”. Traditionally, hurried behavior was denigrated by Confucians, traditional scholars and farmers since it was interpreted as rash, imprudent, and “un-Confucian”. But now if you want to survive in Korea, you have to move fast, rush and hurry. It took Korea just less than 50 years to build a competitive car industry against 100 years for the Japanese. One of the reasons given in explanation of this characteristic is the fact that Koreans were descendents of a horse - riding, nomadic northern people (Goguryeo), and they became used to making decisions on horseback. By contrast, unhurried calmness is a desirable quality. A person seen hurrying will be described as someone who either lack the dignity required of a gentleman or woman, or this is indicative of the person living a hard life. The wet rice farming has basically left its impact on the formation of the Vietnamese character. Results won't come fast any way. Crops will take time to ripen. Fruits will be

ready in due course. It does not make sense to push.

An inclusiveness world view with exclusive “oneness”. Ample evidence may come from the fact that Koreans can extend the family group concept not only to their immediate family but also to the entire kin group to which they belong. Breen [4] notes that “*Korean see virtues in unity; one mind, one people, one system, one race, one path*”. In the Korean business world, school connections, regional ties, and kinship network work not only in the establishment of power groups at the top but also in the forging of informal ties at all levels throughout the organizations. To the outsiders, members of an intimate groups may show unkind, unpleasant, or unkind, or rude attitudes. For Vietnamese, family or class relationships are perhaps as strong. Vietnamese has this saying “*Một người làm quan, cả họ được nhờ* - *When a person becomes a mandarin, the entire family lineage may benefit*”.

A remarkable endurance, explosive impatience. The geopolitics of the peninsula has caused the Korean to develop a remarkable endurance. It has been considered a virtue. However, Koreans have also displayed impatience. This impatience plus with their hurried culture cause Koreans to display their emotions and feelings openly. Breen [4] remarks that “*Koreans can explode their anger easily*”. Failure to understand this can lead to problems in intercultural business communication. There is no question that people can express their emotions freely or they may control the expression of emotions. Vietnamese culture, basically a collective type, tends to discourage such expressions. Display of emotions especially negative ones like temper, or impatience in public places may be seen as signs of either immaturity or weakness. The other reason is that Vietnamese generally do not want to jeopardize harmony. There is strong support for the hypothesis that collectivists would feel less comfortable expressing negative emotions or crying in public.

Kim also observes some changes in the traditional patterns of behavior and thinking in modern times. Koreans are shifting from a mere display of politeness and humility to the “*can-do spirit*”, a defining feature that we can see in American culture. President Park Chung Hee is credited with promoting this kind of spirit so much needed in a competitive and globalizing world. The image of a self-effacing person is still seen in positive light in Vietnam, though. What Vietnam needs as we open up and want to be part of a competitive world is exactly the can-do spirit and more self-confidence.

Inward-looking mentality, a traditional trait shared by Asians, is giving way to an *outward-looking mentality* as Korea is moving beyond its borders, interacting with the outside world. The saying in Korean “*The arms naturally bend inward*” reflects aptly this sense of inward psyche. H. H Underwood [5] points out Korea has many songs and poems about hometowns and homesickness. The one who just thinks deeply and appears lost in thought is better than one who mouths their ideas. “*It is the empty vessel that makes the greatest sounds*”.

Asian cultures have long encouraged their children to be *depending, obedient and cooperative*. As is known, dependence is good for developing close family ties. A good student is normally understood as some one who listens to his teachers and often does what he or she is told to. Cooperation is obviously a must for agrarian societies. The downside of these norms is that children tend to avoid speaking their minds before superiors, and discourage constructive feedback from others. In intercultural communication contexts, this behavior may be mistaken for a lack of competence or confidence. However, what we are seeing in Korean society is perhaps a relaxation of these norms, and children can have an open display of emotions, and express their views more openly.

Cultural values which are believed to be

responsible for the Korean success story are first an emphasis on *education*. Koreans have recognized the role of education in improving social and economic well-being since the Three Kingdoms period. President Lee Myung Bak in explaining the success story of South Korea during a conversation with Vietnam National University students on the 20th of October, 2009 in Hanoi talked about South Koreans’ determination not to stay poor and their resolve to move forward. He also attributed the achievements to the investment in education. Koreans not only send their kids to the best schools at home but also those overseas, largely in English-speaking countries. Allocations for education account for 8.2 % the total GDP and have steadily increased around 7% per year through 2007. According to reporter Joon Ya-young (2008), Koreans spent 5.1 billion USD on studying, training or practicing foreign languages abroad, of which 70% went to the US and Canada (source: the Bank of Korea). Vietnamese is also well known for the tradition of learning for life. They also have the same zeal for knowledge and skill. But probably, where the difference is is that Vietnamese tend to learn to get a job as a public administrator, or a high-ranking official, rather than a commitment to contribute to national development and prosperity.

Koreans are also famous for their desire to release what is called “*Han - unfulfilled wishes and desires*”. The desire to release “Han” may be regarded as the prime force pushing Koreans to accomplish things within a short period of time. Another feature, which is tough to translate into English is “*GIBUN*”. This word refers to feelings, mood, or state of mind. Things go according to Gibun. If the Gibun is positive, the chances of successes are high, and if it is low, the outcome may not be good. Crane (1978: 25), cited in Kim [1] remarks “*in interpersonal relationships, keeping the gibun in good order often takes precedence over other considerations*”. Vietnamese mood or Gibun has the same impact on the outcomes of

business transactions or relationships. Thus, sensing the communicator's mood is a must - do before making up your mind as to whether to move forward. This may sound irrational to the westerners who are known to possess analytical and linear thinking. However, this is what should be taken into account in intercultural communication.

one-upmanship or outdoing others is another defining feature of Koreans. History shows that Koreans have been good students of other traditions and cultures, but they have also been successful in knowledge transfer. Once they have adopted novel ideas, knowledge, they have amazingly managed to excel, and often outdo the originators.

In short, the changes as well as the accomplishments that we see happening in Korea today are not the overnight stuff, but in fact, they are the results of geo-political and cultural forces. These undercurrents may not be

easily detected by the naked eye. They are there, and they have not only exerted their influences on the course of Korea's history, but also shaped the Koreanness of Korea.

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Điều gì tạo nên Hàn Quốc?

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Chỉ trong một thời gian ngắn kể từ sau sự kết thúc của cuộc chiến tranh Triều Tiên vào đầu những năm 50 của thế kỉ XIX, Hàn Quốc đã trở thành một cường quốc về kinh tế, và câu chuyện thần kì Hàn quốc đã là tâm điểm của nhiều cuộc thảo luận hay hội thảo quốc tế. Vậy nguyên nhân là gì? Do những nhân tố gì mà Hàn Quốc lại có vị thế như vậy? Bài viết theo quan điểm cho rằng các giá trị văn hóa có một vai trò cốt yếu trong sự phát triển của mỗi dân tộc. Do vậy, chúng tôi tìm hiểu sự tác động của một số giá trị văn hóa Hàn Quốc với quá trình phát triển của quốc gia này trong khoảng thời gian qua.

Từ khóa: Giá trị văn hóa, bản sắc văn hóa, tâm trạng, Hàn, hướng nội, hướng ngoại, trạng thái tâm lí của người lưu trú tạm thời.