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Changing Korea

Understanding Culture and Communication



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others according to your—and your family’s—position and situation in society” (p. 30). Since the concept of *chemyon* is deeply rooted in Korean interdependence, shame—which is directly related to *chemyon*—would be heavily influenced by members of the individual’s in-group (Oak & Martin, 2000) and immense efforts are made by individuals to avoid shameful occurrences that may cause themselves (and others) to lose *chemyon* (Z. N. Lee, 1999). Lee coined the phrase “collective shame” to label instances where a society forces shame upon an individual, especially when the society’s values outweigh the goals of the individual. Due to such shame being based heavily on harmonious in-group relationships, a Korean sense of shame would be more associated with the fear that one’s inadequacies will result in the loss of union with or expulsion from the group.

American businesses may have a difficult time accepting and fully understanding the value of face-saving. In the United States, companies are quick to criticize its competition through advertising and through the media. However, in Korea, it is highly inappropriate for a business to criticize another. Any such comments are expected to be expressed in private (De Mente, 2001).

To summarize *chemyon*, it is a primary concept and sense of self that affects and relates to the other notions which influence Korean daily life. *Chemyon* can be linked to the Korean concept of *nunchi*, described below, which is the skill of “foresight” or “mind-reading.” If one or more of the participants in the conversation do not read the other’s mind correctly, *nunchi* fails and consequences, including the experience of shame and loss of *chemyon* on behalf of one or both individuals, may result from the misinterpretation of *nunchi* (S. Kim, 2003).

NUNCHI: KOREAN FACE AND TACT

Koreans define *nunchi* as “the sense of eye,” “eye measurement” or may also be thought of as “mind-reading,” which is a very important—and almost necessary—component of Korean communication (S. Kim, 2003). As Samovar and Porter (2003) put it, *nunchi* is used to discover another’s unspoken “hidden agenda,” paying close attention to the speaker’s nonverbal cues, “reading between the lines,” and finally responding appropriately given the context. *Nunchi* is a form of high-context communication and is often used to interpret and comprehend another’s thoughts, intentions, feelings, and desires which are seldom verbally expressed (S. Kim, 2003).

Nunchi is generally defined as being quick-witted, or being able to quickly grasp the situation. Every culture has a type of *nunchi*. In American culture it is more of an awareness of the situation, of being polite or using the proper etiquette. In Korea, *nunchi* means grasping the situation in a holistic manner. It is practiced

in every aspect of Korean daily life to some extent so that they can communicate in a socially acceptable manner and act in a manner appropriate to the situation. It means putting self into the context of the situation with others and the environment. In communicating with others, one has to abstract from and project to that which one wishes to communicate in an appropriate way: direct or indirect, verbal or non-verbal, in selection of language and tone used. Both speaker and listener need to understand their claim of who he/she is in context.

There are two components of *nunchi*: the execution and figuring-out. In order for *nunchi* to be successful, both the execution (i.e., the first speaker relaying their nonverbal *nunchi* message to the second speaker) and figuring-out (i.e., the second speaker's response to the first speaker) must be accurate (Samovar & Porter, 2003). Such misunderstandings often occur when one party does not understand, or is not familiar with, the concept of *nunchi* (i.e., a foreigner interacting with a native Korean). Furthermore, according to Oak and Martin (2000), "*nunchi* may also lead a Korean to speak words which differ from the meaning the Korean wishes to convey" (p. 33). In such a situation, both parties are relying on each other to accurately apply *nunchi* to decode the "real/hidden" message that is being communicated indirectly. A mutual understanding of both parties' *nunchi* results not only in successful communication, but also in the maintenance and preservation of both parties' *chemyon*. On the other hand, a misinterpretation of *nunchi* will result in loss of *chemyon* on behalf of both parties, in addition to a failure in communication.

Nunchi is a tool and skill to develop, maintain, or sustain relationships through effective communication. The self is connected to others in the interdependent construal; behavior is more significantly regulated by a desire to maintain appropriateness in relationships (S. Kim, 2003). *Nunchi* is a non-verbal way of reading situations, a high context form of communication, where the expectations of the listener and speaker are sometimes different and can create conflict or loss of face. For example, one interviewee, a professor, related the following instance of failure in *nunchi*. At the time of her marriage she wanted a small guest list and did not invite her superiors at the university. Somehow the vice president heard of the marriage and mentioned it to her dean. The Dean called her in and scolded her and asked her how she could not inform him before she informed the vice president. He was angry because from his viewpoint or *nunchi*, as her direct superior, his authority should have been respected, and he should have been informed of the wedding. Also, he thought he should have done something as her boss, and finally, he lost face because he was informed by the vice president who is his boss so she skipped one level of the communication channel (Chung, Sung-Whan, Associate Professor).

Both *chemyon* and *nunchi* are much less important in contemporary Korea than they were in times past. Because of the influence of Western individualism

and egalitarianism, Koreans are less sensitive to notions of hierarchy and feel less compelled to preserve harmony, *hwa*, in relationships, therefore, there is less motivation to display *nunchi*. The same is true for *chemyon*. As noted above, the major ways in which Koreans lost face was by not showing filial piety and a wife's disobedience to her husband. These values are being severely altered with the new individualistic ideals that are influencing Korean values and behavior. Koreans have begun to place more value on personal accomplishments and less value on "we-ness" and group loyalty (Na & Duckitt, 2003). Shame is now seen in failure. It is not as shameful to dishonor your family as it is to be unsuccessful in life. Important now are efforts by each individual for liberty, equality, reasonableness, and achieving material wealth. Accordingly, the feeling of shame in modern Korean society is associated with the lack of such values, or a lack of achievement. The change from collectivist ideals, where family name was the most important thing, to more individualistic values has created a different type of society to live in. Koreans are now focused on themselves and feel shame if they do not succeed in life.

THE KOREAN INDIGENOUS VALUES OF *UYE-RI*, *KIBUN*, AND *CHEONG*

There are several final concepts that are important in understanding traditional and contemporary Korean culture—that bring together the related values discussed so far: *uye-ri* (justice and loyalty) and *kibun* (setting the mood for interaction) and *cheong* (affection) (See Figure 3.2). To build *cheong* within a relationship, it is necessary to form a firm foundation of trust and loyalty through *uye-ri*.

Uye-ri: "Justice and righteousness"

The concept of *uye-ri* was derived from the Confucian tradition which stressed ethical behaviors and actions in government (S. Kim, 2003). According to Yum (1987), *uye-ri* can take on several related meanings: (1) justice, righteousness, and morality; (2) fulfilling obligations and remaining loyal/faithful; and (3) maintaining relationships that center around *uye-ri* (i.e., being responsible for keeping a relationship ethical and just).

Uye-ri is not only required to be a lawful citizen, but it is almost a prerequisite to be part of the Korean in-group—*Uri*. Honesty and loyalty are needed to form tight bonds between members of the in-group, especially between family members, friends, and co-workers. When asked the question: "regarding your job situation, can you explain the orientation process in the company? What values

herb-medicine healers, and sending appropriate gifts on traditional holidays, and sometimes offering bribes, as described in Episode Seven.

Although Christianity is one of the influential in-groups in Korea, the custom of consulting fortune tellers is very popular as well as a public secret, especially in high society. When the company conducts its yearly personnel assignment and when college entrance examinations take place, it is a common practice for Koreans to consult fortune tellers. As a person raised in a high-context system, the wife of the CEO expects her interlocutors, in this case Mrs. P and other members, to know what she needs on specific cultural events or what is bothering her, so that she does not have to be specific. In this environment, a wife's ability for reading the boss's wife's *nunchi* and finding out what she needs and wants for certain events and holidays could play a subtle but an important role in her husband's promotion, especially when the husband's ability is compatible.

Traditionally, family members not only share a collective public face that has been achieved by a family member, but they also share the family face when social norms have been violated by any one of the family members, unlike similar violations in an individualistic society in which the consequences of an individual's wrong-doing have less impact on the family as a whole. The Heinz Ward case is an example of how Korean individual identity overlaps with the family's collective identity. Heinz Ward, Pittsburgh Steelers wide receiver and MVP of the 2006 Super bowl, is the son of a Korean mother and an African American soldier. When his mother was married to Heinz's father and bore a son with the same skin color as his father, Heinz's mother became a *persona non grata* in Korean society and her family's collective face was shamed. When she visited her parents some years ago, her sisters abused her physically because of the shame she had brought her family. Ethnically, Korea is one of the most homogeneous counties in the world, and race can be very much a discriminatory factor, especially against a minority race, such as African Americans, or mixed-race individuals. However, with the recent embrace of globalization, and the importance of wealth and professional success in determining social status, Heinz is now seen as a successful and wealthy hero and proudly welcomed as a partial Korean, a very different treatment than his mother received while she was raising him. So social status based on wealth and success in present-day Korea seems to outweigh the social prejudice against inter-racial marriages.

HAK-YOUN (SCHOOL-TIES)

"To Americans society is a collection of individuals. To Koreans it is a collection of groups" (Kohls, 2001, p. 123). Among those groups, school-ties have been the