

# The Nature of Korean Selfhood : A Cultural Psychological Perspective

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The fact that Koreans have their own unique cultural history and heritage suggests the possibility that Koreans' psychology is also unique to Koreans and different from the psychology of Westerners. It was attempted here to analyse the psychological concepts in everyday usage which were supposed to reflect characteristic make-ups of Korean psychology. For the purpose the concepts of Cheong, Woori, Chemyon, Noonchi, and Han were analysed from the perspective of indigenous psychology, finally constructing Koreans' self-psychology. Koreans self are characterised as being defined in group showing great concern about interpersonal relationship having developed very subtle way of emotional and implicit communications, having high sensitivity to social face, and their deep emotional stratum being stuffed with ambivalent emotional quality of anger and repentance, that is, Han.

## Introduction

One of the most powerful conceptual forces represented in the Western, particularly North American, psychology is individualism. This characterization does not just refer to the pervasiveness of individualism-related themes or topics in a plethora of current psychological research. It, rather, points to the psychology of individualism, from which conceptual emulation has been unwittingly set as a disciplinary routine.

This individualistic orientation is most apparent in the current representation of the basic psychological unit, the self. As described in the current Western literature, the self normally refers to an autonomous, individuated human entity. Individ-

ual beings are fundamentally separable from the other fellow beings, and exist as self-contained, unitary, or differentiated unit.

My argument here is not intended to refute the validity of this shared understanding of the self in the Western community of psychologists, but to challenge the cross-cultural applicability of this individualistic perspective of the self. As far as the Korean society is concerned, the individualized self is a socioculturally foreign and anonymous concept. It does not reflect the indigenous experiences of the self of the Koreans.

Recognizing the need for constructing a new concept of the self that can capture the daily experiential representation of the self of the Koreans, Sang Chin Choi, the author of the present

paper, and his graduate students at Chung Ang University have been working for the investigation of indigenous characteristics of the self of the Koreans. The present essay represents the summary of research results on the topic that they have collected for the last decade.

To begin with, I will briefly review existing cross-cultural literature on the self, which will include the self of the Japanese.

## Literature Review

In general, the self in collectivistic oriental societies is characterized as follows :

1. There is an emphasis on we-ness, collective identity, emotional dependence, collective solidarity (Hofstede, 1980).
2. The self is defined by the characteristics of the group he/she belongs to (Triandis, 1980).
3. There is an emphasis on relatedness (Kagitcibasi, 1987).
4. The self has a de-differentiated self boundary (Choi Soo-Hyang, 1992).
5. The Japanese self has a clear distinction between the self in a social context and the self in his/her own consciousness (Doi, 1973 ; Johnson, 1985).
6. The Japanese self manifests denial of itself in the interaction with other selves (Minami, 1971).
7. Among the Japanese, the dependent self (amae) is culturally acceptable.

The self in individualistic Western societies is represented as follows :

1. There is a strong emphasis on "I," autonomy, emotional independence, individual efforts, privacy, and pleasure-seeking.
2. There is an emphasis on exchange rather than on emotional attachment in interpersonal rela-

tionships (Sinha & Verma, 1987).

3. There is an emphasis on separateness (Kagitcibasi, 1987).

The common threads that run through the comparison of the self in collectivistic and individualistic societies are that the former emphasizes group-solidarity and group-dependent emotionality, whereas the latter puts forward individual-based efforts and existence first. To my view, this dichotomized understanding of the self in the orient as "not-being-individualistic" tells only half of the story. To get the heart of, say, the self of the Koreans, one needs to look at the indigenous characteristics that are unique to the daily experiences of the Koreans. In other words, the self of the Koreans needs to be told in its own terms. The following chapter deals with five indigenous concepts that are believed to be essential to the portrayal of the daily self of the Koreans.

## The Self of the Koreans : A cultural-psychological view

### 1. Cheong (情)

The Korean culture is often called a culture of Cheong. To that extent, Cheong is the most common and pervasive emotionality governing the Korean's psychological experiences vis-a-vis intimacy, relatedness, and affection in western cultural context. When this attachment-like feeling is transformed into an appreciative form of the affect-natured psychological bond, Koreans' Cheong reality comes into existence. Koreans' person-related Cheong is one of the most important emotional dimension toning the informal or personal aspect of their social relationships. There being no exactly corresponding notion in the West, Cheong can be roughly portrayed as feel-

ings of attachment on person, object, or place as a result of a long-time contact of intimacy, affection, and self sacrifice for the other person or objects.

For Cheong to be generated, there first should be an element of Historicity between Cheong agent and Cheong object, which can be person, object, or place. Cheong agent must spend a long period of time with the Cheong object. When Koreans have lived in a house for a long period of time, they often say they have developed Cheong with the house. When two neighbors have lived together in a same place for a long time, they may also say that they have developed Cheong with each other.

Temporal historicity, however, is not an enough condition for Cheong to be generated. While the Cheong agent and Cheong object spend time together, they should encounter times in which they come to recognize, confirm and reinforce the idea that they are not two different entities. When the two neighbors have gone through a tough time together living in the same community, they will develop stronger Cheong than those who have not got a chance to recognize that they are in the same fate.

Related to the above Solidarity element, the Cheong agent and Cheong object should create opportunities in which they feel they are not two different entities separated from each other. Cheong-ful people are, thus, often observed to be emotionally dependent upon others and not psychologically autonomous. Because of this emotional dependency imbedded in Cheong, Cheong can be most likely developed among those between whom intimacy, privacy, and warmy shared feelings are experienced.

What is implied in the Korean psychology of Cheong is that Koreans can develop most intimate emotional ties when they feel the shared mind (同

心) in which each individual's selfhood is ensured with the co-existence of the other's selfhood. For Koreans, giving one's Cheong to somebody mean giving one's mind to him/her. They can be most emotionally close to each other when their individual selfhood is opened to and merged into the other's selfhood, creating a fused unit of mind (一心). This collective nature of the self of the Koreans becomes even more apparent in the Korean psychology of We-ness to be dealt with in the following section.

## 2. Woori(우리, We-ness)

We-ness psychology is not unique to Koreans only. But compared to that of the Westerners, Korean We-ness psychology features the following characteristics that may be regarded to be indigenous to the Koreans.

- ① According to our research, while the Canadian participants emphasize cognitive awareness of commonality as a key factor defining a we-relationship, the Korean participants points to affective dimensions, such as warmth, intimacy, comfort, security, etc., as major association of we-relationship. Two things are to be noted here. One is that, to Koreans, the concept of We is not a phenomenon to cognize, but to feel. Secondly, to Koreans, the concept of We bring out positive interpersonal feelings that can be felt when the person is socially accepted in the group.
- ② In the Canadian's representation of we-ness, the individual "I" of we-members retain an adamant presence, whereas the Koreans' idea of we-ness overlooks the individual parts, and highlights the fused state of individuality, such as one-ness and whole-ness. Implicit is a complete absorption of an individual self to the whole of the group. This I-merged-We-ness should be distinguished from the Western con-

cept of We-ness in which individual "I's" still remain autonomous even in the context of We-group.

What is clear is that the autonomous and differentiated state of individuality is not one of the primary repertoires of the Koreans' representation of self. Koreans' selves lack the cognitive power to recognize the others as well as themselves as separate, individuated entities. They are very likely fused to the central power of the assumed-we-hood-ness. Once fused, they become not only invisible, but also indivisible. Being capped in this esoteric power of We-ness, the Korean selves hardly experience an autonomous individual existence.

### 3. Chemyon(體面)

If We-ness and Cheong aptly characterize the Korean grammar of close and informal relationships between individuals, the Chemyon psychology of Koreans best reveals status-conscious, social aspect of the self of the Koreans. Chemyon is literally the appearance or surface of one's self. Self-esteem need not be contingent upon the perceptions of others. Social esteem, however, is closely tied to Chemyon. So, Chemyon can be called the social self of the Koreans. The characteristics of the social self of the Koreans revealed by Chemyon psychology are as follows.

- ① Because Chemyon is regulated by societal norms and rules of propriety, a person must behave in accordance with his or her social position. Acting in a manner contrary to one's position could result in the loss of Chemyon. The social selves are required by the society to act in a manner that is befitting of their positions.
- ② Maintaining Chemyon constitutes a social action carefully orchestrated by oneself or with the assistance of a partner in front of an audi-

ence. Thus, maintaining one's social face in Korea requires not only the individual person's discreet behavioral codes but also a highly complex inter-personal maneuvering skills.

- ③ Chemyon needs to be maintained mainly in formal and public settings. If Chemyon is rigidly observed even among close friends, the relationship will be strained. Implying is the multi-layered structure of Korean's social self that needs to be adopted to different social contexts.
- ④ Chemyon is an important phenomenon in a hierarchically relationalized society where one must be aware of one's own position and others' perception of self. In Korea where the selves are not only un-differentiated but also relationalized to the others, the "watchful attitude" toward the others and one's own self is an essential social technique to learn to survive.

### 4. Noonchi(눈치)

If the social currency of exchange between individuals in Western culture is overt behavior and its outcomes resulted, its corresponding currency for Koreans is the nature of the inner mind motivating and directing the overt behavior manifested. The concepts of Cheong and Woori (We-ness) which represent Korean psychology of interpersonal intimacy and close relationship commonly refers to certain state of inner mind of the persons involved in interactions, instead of describing particular form or nature of the overt behavior manifested or its outcomes.

Accordingly, Koreans are always alert on reading and conjecturing the nature of inner mind hidden behind the other person's overt behavior. The Korean concept of Noon-Chi literally meaning reading or conjecturing someone's mind including emotionality, therefore, finds its functional

values in Koreans' interpersonal and communicational psychology.

The Koreans' Chemyon psychology also positively contribute to the development and activation of Noon-Chi behavior. In Chemyon relationship where hierarchical formality is relationally or situationally precipitated, persons involved in interaction are likely to confront subtle conditions where the overt expressions of one's inner mind and emotionalities are better to be avoided. Under that condition, both Noon-Chi-giving and Noon-Chi-reading behavior/activities are likely to become a viable mode of interpersonal and situational adaptations. Implicit and covert, instead of explicit and overt, language of Noon-Chi is coded/decoded through multiple verbal and nonverbal channels in dynamic and situational context. As reasons for undertaking Noon-Chi behavior, Koreans gave the followings :

- ① When I sense that the other parties appear in their behavior and speech to desire to convey some messages.
- ② When I feel a Noon-Chi figuring-out process will be more advantageous than a direct communication in maintaining a smooth relationship with the other parties.
- ③ When I need to know how the other parties think about or evaluate me.
- ④ When the other parties show an unusual behavior not previously observed.
- ⑤ When I am in the lower position in the relational hierarchy or not very sure of the acceptability of my own behavior in a given context.
- ⑥ To make the others feel at easy by making them feel understood.

In sum, Koreans use Noon-Chi behavior to make the interaction smooth or maintaining the relationship on favorable terms, and avoid a problem-laden situation by taking a cautious attitude.

Social interaction is a risk-taking behavior, to some extent. Thus, people in most societies develop various social strategies to minimize and if possible, to avoid having the risk given the chance. Politeness is the most well known strategy. The main difference between the Western notion of politeness and Korean Noon-Chi is that the former is a more explicit form of communicative interaction to save each other's face.

Definitionally, Noon-Chi is also a form of politeness communication. But unlike the Western form of politeness communication, Noon-Chi behavior does not execute that "Excuse Me" attitude freely and overtly. When the Westerners have a tacky question to ask, for instance, he/she will first excuse himself/herself asking such a question to the other person. When Koreans are in that kind of situation, they wouldn't dare to say to excuse themselves. They will silently monitor the situation until they figure out on themselves the sign that it will be O.K. to utter the question at all.

One of the main reasons for the Koreans to take such a reserved and passive communicative behavior is that their selves are so relationally and hierarchically entangled that the "in-between" interpersonal dynamics preclude any openly expressed politeness approaches.

## 5. Han(恨)

Han is the inmost emotional fabrics constituting the basic, foundational structure of Koreans' cultural self. It is basic in the sense that Koreans' life including arts, literature, and even any daily activities can not be understood without modest understanding of Koreans' Han psychology. If asked for even any naive Korean to single out the most Koreanistic ethos reflected in Korean literature and arts, Han would never fail to be the theme of unanimous consensus.

Han refers to the complex psychological state of multiple pent-up emotions such as resentment, anger, grief, regret, hatred, etc., engendered by undefensible and/or irreversible tragic events. Those aversive emotions of Han remains, unresolved or not vented outwardly, in the deep seat of emotional structure. The concept of Han might be better understood only through looking at the temporal process of its development and transformation occurring intra-psychologically in the mind of the person involved in tragic events. The nature of Han state varies according to temporal

sequence. Four developmental/transformational stages were identified in Figure 1 presented below.

In Stage 1, three typical episodes producing Han were described: 1) being discriminated unjustly by others. 2) serious deprivations in basic important needs. 3) grave regret associated with unrevocable mistake. These episodes produce untamed, raw emotions such as fury, anger, vengeance, frustration, and outrage.

In the second stage, these raw emotions are transformed into Han emotion and further develop

Fig. 1. Four Stages of Han development

Stage 1 Reactive Phase	Stage 2 Transformation Phase	Stage 3 Reflective Phase	Stage 4 Transcendental Phase
Tragic event or situation Deprivation Injustice Mistakes	Acceptance or tragedy Self-blame Fatalism Nihilism Rationalize	Protest fate Yes, but... Why me? Optimism	Detachment disengaged Aloof Impartial Other-worldly
Raw emotions fury anger vengeance frustration outrage	Internalization of emotions suffering pain sorrow helplessness hopelessness	Emotional release grief & elation sorrow & joy sadness & happiness	Emotional serenity calm peace Void Nothingness tranquility
Social pressures passive acceptance suppress raw emotions	Social tolerance distancing sympathy pity compassion	Social acceptance consolation empathy <i>Cheong</i> verification	Cultural Glorification celebration collective consciousness glorification reification

into Han psychology when the external sources engendering these emotions can not be removed or straightened. Instead of venting out their anger and vengeance, they come to accept the given reality and gradually come to attribute the whole happening of the event as part of their own fate against which they can do nothing. When convinced that the cause of the event is lying within their own fate, there exists no more anger directed towards external sources. Yet, there still remains a lamentable feeling toward his/her own fate that has brought forth the whole circle of tragic experiences.

In Stage 3 where reflective pondering over the tragic episode occurs, the question of "why did this happen to me?" confront against the acceptance of the tragedy as one's own fate or fare. Here two contradictory emotions, one is outrageous, and the other self blaming, are to coexist in a single mind with a ever recycling superiority of one emotion over the other.

In the last stage of transcendence, the contradictory coexistence of anger emotion and cognitive acceptance of the externally forced tragic events, and ambivalent emotions of blaming both self and others are gradually transformed into personality orientation toward external world and life. This phase meets with Buddhistic sentiment of empty mindedness, transiency, and positive acceptance of ordeal and hardship.

If Koreans do not convince themselves that the cause of the tragic event is part of their own fate, and keeps on attributing it to the external sources, they would not develop Han(恨) but Won(怨), that is, revengeful mind, instead. A person of Han who has much Han in his personality and emotionality is likely to attribute the externally caused pains and hardship to one's own lot and thus to have highly developed secondary controls.

## Conclusion

A few years ago, I had an opportunity to have dinner with my Korean friends at one of restaurants in Hawaii. In the restaurant we were served by a Hawaiian waitress. She was smiling at us, helping us choose our menu. At the table, we were talking about Hawaiian personality. All of my Korean friends simultaneously made the same voice shouting "Oh! the Hawaiian waitress has a deep Cheong for us Koreans". As a matter of fact, that was a Hawaiian hospitality instead of Korean "Cheong".

This is a clear example showing how one's own culture influences perceptions of peoples's behavior in another culture. Culture not only conditions the nature of our experiences but also programs the very psychology of our cultural behavior. The cultural psychology operational in a particular society is transformed into psychology of people of the particular culture, and vice versa.

Koreans have a long, unique cultural history and heritage. This implies that they have unique and rich, culturally toned "mind" psychology. The Koreans' mind psychology has been studied with the Western psychology of behavior. The psychological concepts developed in individualistic Western culture such as identity, self, ego, exchange, autonomy, self-actualization, alienation, growth psychology, guilt feeling, involvement, etc., might be imposed upon Koreans but can not be assimilated as such by Korean students or even by Korean scholars. If assimilated, they are likely be distorted in Korean cultural way.

In the present paper, five psychological concepts of Korean cultural heritage were analyzed; Cheong, Woori, Chemyon, Noon-Chi, and Han. These concepts were taken from living everyday language. The results were distilled and abstracted as follows.

First, while Westerners place primary significance on manifested behavior and its outcomes, Koreans put more emphasis on the inner mind(心情) which are assumed to be responsible for the behavior produced. This points to the necessity of Korean psychology for incorporating social psychology of inner mind(心情) of Koreans.

Second, the Western concept of individualistic self can not be applied directly to the understanding of Koreans. The concept and theories of Koreans' self need to reflect Koreans' cultural and historical experiences and the process of their transformation into Koreans' psychological properties.

Third, Koreans' social self has a multifaceted nature. In close in-group relations, the selves of individuals are fused to each other, forming a collectivistic we-group self. On the other hand, the self in social relations is oriented toward one's social face and status. On this level of interaction, Noon-Chi and Chemyon are sensitized and activated.

Fourth, Koreans' emotional self is best characterized with Han emotion. Han emotion penetrates through Korean literature and arts.

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# 문화심리학적 관점에서 본 한국인의 「自己」

최 상 진

중앙대학교 심리학과

본 논문은 한국인의 심리적 특성을 반영할 수 있는, 즉 '한국인 심리학'을 실험적 및 탐색적 수준에서 구성해 보는데 그 목적을 두었다. 그 동안 한국인의 심리구조, 의식구조 또는 가치관이란 주제로 연구 또는 논술 되어져 왔던 문화심리적 개념, 즉 체면, 눈치, 한, 정 그리고 한국사람이 말하는 한국식 '우리'의 개념을 해석학적 또는 실증적 방법으로 필자가 분석해 온 것을 본 논문에서는 종합적으로 관련시켜 보았다. 이러한 시도는 궁극적으로 한국인의 마음(Mind)의 발견적 탐색으로서, 여기서 더 나아가 한국인의 문화적 자아구조를 구성해 보는 실마리가 될 수 있다고 믿는다. 한국인의 자아적 특성은 집합적이라기 보다는 관계지향적이며, 따라서 한국인의 자이는 개별적이라기 보다는 집단관계적으로 규정된다. 한국인은 대인관계에서 독특한 감정구조로 밀착되며, 그러한 감정구조는 서양의 애정, 호감과는 구분되는 정(情)의 요소로 대표된다. 대인의사소통의 형태는 명시적이라기 보다는 암시적이며, 따라서 상대의 마음을 읽는 눈치기제가 발달해 있다. 한국인의 자아요소중에서 가장 심층적 위치를 점하는 요소는 한(恨)이며 한의 감정상태는 일본인의 원(怨)이나 서양의 증오(憎惡)와 구분된다. 즉 한의 심리상태는 원망과 자책이 혼합된 모순적 감정복합이다.