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UNDERSTANDING  
GLOBAL  
CULTURES

Metaphorical Journeys Through 29 Nations,  
Clusters of Nations, Continents, and Diversity

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## CHAPTER 8



# Kimchi and Korea

*I think kimchi practically defines Korean-ness.*

—Park Chae-lin, curator of the Kimchi Museum  
(quoted in Demick, 2006, p. A30)

*As a child and young man in Seoul, Korea, I hated to eat kimchi and ran to McDonald's whenever possible. But then I studied for several years in the United States and sometimes had an uncontrollable urge to eat kimchi. Unfortunately the nearest restaurant serving kimchi was several hundred miles away, and many a weekend was spent traveling to and from it. I never realized the importance of kimchi and the feelings it engendered until I was deprived of it.*

—Korean professor of economics  
(personal communication, 2002)

**T**hroughout its long history Korea has suffered terribly at the hands of many nations—China, Japan, Russia, England, and France—whose armies invaded and ravaged it over several centuries. After being occupied by British troops in 1860, the Koreans in vain tried to close off their borders to foreigners and, in the process, earned the epithet “the Hermit Kingdom.” In 1910 Japan annexed Korea, which then suffered through 35 years of severe mistreatment until becoming independent in 1945. Although the Koreans were supposed to enjoy equal status with their Japanese counterparts, they were governed as a conquered people. For the first decade of Japanese rule Koreans were not allowed to publish newspapers or to develop any type of political organization.

During the 1920s Koreans were granted much greater latitude in voicing their opinions as a result of several large student demonstrations. The people gradually asserted themselves through various activities and organizations, including labor unions.

In 1937 the official Japanese policy of separate but equal treatment for Koreans came to an abrupt end, in large part because of the war between Japan and China between 1937 and 1945. Korea was mobilized for war and hundreds of thousands of Korean men were conscripted to help the Japanese army, both in Korea and China. The Koreans were required to communicate in Japanese both publicly and in private homes; they had to worship at Shinto temples; and Korean children were encouraged to adopt Japanese names. All the Korean-language newspapers ceased production. In effect, Japan was trying to assimilate Korea in every way imaginable, with the intent of destroying Korean culture and identity.

Fortunately, Japanese rule of Korea came to end in 1945 and Koreans reasserted their culture with full force. Even so, their freedom would not be assured until 1957, as Chinese and U.S. troops occupied the country during the Korean War (1953–1957) between North and South Korea.

This chapter concerns only South Korea, which became separate from North Korea because of the Korean War. At the time of separation, North Korea was the industrial powerhouse while South Korea was much more of an agricultural society. Today, however, years of Communist rule have virtually destroyed the economic base of North Korea while South Korea has flourished. It is possible and even probable that reunification will occur eventually, given the very poor economic condition of North Korea.

In comparison to most nations, South Korea is one of the most pure and unified cultures in the world. Admittedly, this purity is under attack because of globalization, but Korea is still recognized as the most Confucian nation in the world.

South Korea today is a small country, about the size of Indiana, with a population of about 48 million. It is mountainous and the country possesses few natural resources. As in many developing nations, South Korea's cities have become very crowded. About 22% of the people live in Seoul and, if the suburbs are included, this figure rises to 35%. Economic growth since 1970 has been incredible and South Korea is known as one of the five Tigers of Asia. While the 1997 Asian financial crisis created problems in the economy, especially in the financial sector, the economy recovered. However, the global economy began to deteriorate in 2008, and Korea, along with many other nations, is having some major economic difficulties.

Kimchi represents Korea in the same way that hamburger reflects the United States. Other than steamed rice, kimchi is the most popular food in Korea. Kimchi comes from a Chinese word translated as “immersing vegetables in a salt solution.” There are literally hundreds of versions of kimchi.

Early forms of kimchi have been traced to the great wedding feasts held by King Shinmun, who ruled the country between 681 and 692 CE. Koreans probably created kimchi out of necessity. As mentioned above, Korea is a small country with few natural resources. The long winters made growing fresh vegetables very difficult. As a result,

families would spend weeks in the fall harvesting their crops and pickling them in salt solutions (with other spices added for taste) to ensure they would ferment and be preserved for the winter, providing food for the family all year long. Kimchi includes ingredients such as Chinese cabbage, sea salt, sugar, crushed red chili, radish, chopped ginger, garlic, and green onions. Today Koreans simply buy ready-made kimchi in jars and cans. They still eat it with almost every meal, although fresh vegetables are now readily available at any time of the year.

There is a national museum in Seoul, the nation's capital, dedicated only to kimchi. Given such facts, it is appropriate that kimchi should serve as our cultural metaphor for Korea.

## The 60th Birthday

A Korean's 60th birthday is important. Whereas in the United States, many people detest growing old and stop celebrating birthdays, Koreans tend to rejoice when reaching 60. Presumably all major life goals have been attained and it is now time to relax and enjoy life to the fullest. The Chinese zodiac cycle is 60 years long and Koreans believe that life runs in accordance with that cycle. Also, until recent generations, the estimated life span of those born in Korea was about 60 years. Thus the 60th birthday signifies that family and friends should gather to celebrate. Today the life expectancy of Korean men averages 74.5 years and the ritualistic birthday party is frequently repeated on a man's 70th birthday and beyond.

Often the birthday party is held at the *K'unjip*, or “big house,” the eldest son's household, where he lives with his wife, children, and parents. Through the eldest son, the family genealogy is traced from one generation to the next. He is responsible for caring for parents and conducting rituals in their honor and his wife is expected to produce the male heir for the next generation.

Korea owes much of its values and culture to Confucianism, which was first introduced to Korea late in the Koryo dynasty, which ended in 1392. The succeeding Choson dynasty, which ruled until 1910, adopted Confucian philosophies as the state ideology.

Confucianism is built on five relationships defining a hierarchical system in which there is a very high degree of power distance. These relationships are as follows:

1. Father and son: governed by affection
2. Ruler and minister: governed by righteousness
3. Husband and wife: focused on attention to separate functions
4. Old and young: organized on proper order
5. Friends: faithfulness

These relationships are reflected in most activities in Korean society. It is significant that except for friends, the relationships are based on authority and subordination. Even the father-son relationship is governed primarily not by mutual affection but by the

ability and willingness of the son to carry out his father's will. All of these relationships assume that the person in the superior position will act in a responsible manner, which will motivate the subordinate to react positively and in a similarly responsible manner. Confucius talks about the "ideal" man in this way, that is, striving to help others and the community but within a hierarchy. Thus Confucianism tends to create a particularistic culture in which people's behavior is motivated by their relationship with specific individuals. Koreans can be comfortable using different ethical values in different relationships and they may be very uncomfortable with universalistic values such as those prevalent in the United States, where general rules of behavior apply to all, regardless of the situational relationships at hand.

### The Family Model

Perhaps the key model or unit of analysis of Confucianism is the family and the mutual obligations that are central to it. In 2001, Lee Jong Dae, then chairman of the insolvent Daewoo Motor Company, was forced to lay off 7,000 employees, but he took extraordinary measures to find employment for them, including holding a job fair, sending a personal letter to his counterparts at 26,000 companies begging them each to hire one of his fired employees, enlisting politicians to sell his cars, and abjectly bowing to a fired employee at the job fair and profusely apologizing to him for having to lay him off. Rarely if ever do American executives make such extraordinary efforts (see Choi, 2001).

If the son successfully carries out his obligations, which include hosting the 60th birthday party, he will be rewarded on his father's death, as he inherits the house as well as a greater portion of his parents' estate than his siblings. Naturally he becomes the family patriarch.

At dinnertime during the 60th birthday party, each of the five relationships is activated. The food is placed in the center of the table for all to share in a communal manner. When members of the family are seated on the floor cushions and begin to eat, the son's hard-working wife will fill the father's plate first and kimchi will definitely be on it.

Confucian relationships demand that the father should begin to eat first, followed by others in order of age. Ranking by age is critical and governs so much of Korean life that when Koreans meet a stranger, one of the first topics of conversation is each person's age so that each person can immediately assume the appropriate role in the relationship as the superior or the subservient. In comparison, asking a person's age in many Western cultures is considered intrusive.

With the exception of those who are friends, no one at this party (or anywhere in Korea) refers to others by name. Rather, titles are used to highlight hierarchical rankings. For example, the eldest son will be referred to alternatively as *son*, *big brother*, *husband*, *father*, *elder*, or *young one* throughout the day, depending on circumstances. The titles are so important that many at the party may not know the names of others. Supposedly some families separated during the Korean War could not reunite because the brothers and sisters did not actually know each others' names, making a search impossible.

## Strangers by Day, Lovers by Night

Many aphorisms mirror the Confucian perspective on male-female relationships, including the one in this heading, which is focused specifically on husbands and wives. Given the subordination of the wife, it is logical to expect that the wives and their daughters prepare the birthday feast and clean up. Men are expected to be good workers and represent the family in public. The women are to provide children (in particular, at least one male), care for the family, and be subservient in public.

First and foremost, the relationship between a husband and wife is functional. Romantic love is an afterthought that is nice but not critical, for the purpose of marriage is to carry on the family lineage by producing a male heir. Even today, although less often, marriages are often arranged, frequently by matchmakers. As might be expected, the husband and wife may know each other only slightly, if at all, at the time of marriage.

Because of the importance assigned to the functions of husband and wife, Korean families still want to approve or veto any potential union. Families tend to believe that successful unions are created when both husband and wife are of similar social and economic status. Also, ancestral heritage is usually critical when evaluating potential partners, for members of the same family clan, or *tongjok*, cannot marry. A *tongjok* includes families that share a surname and have a similar heritage or source dating back for several generations.

### Finding Partners

This emphasis on tradition causes many problems for younger people, as traditional Confucian practice is to separate males and females until marriage. In large cities such as Seoul, it is sometimes difficult to meet potential partners, and the more affluent young people sometimes go to "booking clubs," spending hundreds of dollars in one night to engage in a stylized form of matchmaking. Men and women sit at separate tables, and when a man sees a woman he wants to meet, he asks a waiter to bring her to his table. Frequently she acts as if she is resisting but reluctantly accompanies the waiter to the man's table; the waiter may hold her arm firmly, thus signifying her resistance. In the event that she does not like the man when they meet, she can politely leave (see Choi, 2002).

A newly married woman leaves her parents' household permanently to join her husband's family, in which she ranks at the bottom, below all the other siblings. If she marries the eldest son, she will be required to care for both her husband and his parents. Her standing improves if she delivers a male heir.

In public, women traditionally enter and exit elevators after men, help men with their coats, and follow dutifully behind them as they walk down the street. However, as is represented by the yin and yang of the Korean flag, wives do possess power, especially at home.

As this discussion implies, women face difficulties in the workforce. The gap between median earnings of men and women is 40%, in comparison to a gap of 21% in the United States, even though nearly 90% of females attend college and 52% of females work. Apparently the lack of opportunity has motivated many women to seek opportunities outside of Korea. For example, of the 138 women golfers in the elite category of the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), 34—almost a fourth—are Korean (Ramstad, 2007).

### The Work Ethic

Korean men's status is a function of their occupation and the company employing them, and the strong Confucian work ethic requires that the men work long hours. They are often absent from home as a result. At home the wife has more power than the husband: She manages the family finances, runs all the activities in the home, and takes care of the children. Some men become helpless at home. Hence, Korean widowers often remarry almost immediately after a wife dies, just to keep the household operating effectively.

Korea is noted for its strong work ethic, as we might expect in a Confucian culture. Koreans spend more hours on the job than their counterparts in any other comparably developed nation. Also, it is quite common for men at all levels of business to attend nightly functions with their coworkers and business counterparts. These functions often include not only dinner but late evenings of drinking and karaoke-style festivities.

There is a downside to this excessive emphasis on work, although it is largely responsible for Korea's remarkable transformation from a rural to an industrial nation since 1970. Today agriculture accounts for only 8% of employment, industry 46%, and services 56%. However, the Southeast Asian Crisis of 1997 was accompanied by massive layoffs of workers and many of them lost faith in the relationship between hard work and success/status. Suicide is common and is the fourth leading cause of death, increasing from 11.8 per 100,000 people in 1995 to 26.1 per 100,000 in 2005; it is the leading cause of death for Korean men in their 20s. One sociological explanation is that Korea has created a modern society in which many of its members live by traditional rules based on family status and shame (Rodriguez, 2007). When there is too much tension between these traditional values and living in the modern world, some Koreans may feel that they have let down their families and experience a feeling of shame, both of which are supposedly precursors to suicide.

Similarly, women work very hard to fulfill their many duties. Because their functions revolve around the home, Korean women tend to be evaluated on their ability to run a tight ship. The Korean home is almost unfailingly well maintained. Some Korean wives who have emigrated to Western nations do not like returning to Korea too often because of the onerous family responsibilities that are automatically thrust on them when they arrive.

Korean children also possess the strong Confucian work ethic. They help out at home and are expected to work hard at school. Korean children attend school 6 days a week, and even the younger students will have 2 to 3 hours of homework. Like Japan, Korea has a literacy rate that is nearly 100%.

### Kimchi's Public Role

The history of kimchi serves to highlight Korea's collectivist nature. As noted earlier, Korea has suffered many periods of foreign occupations, and during them, kimchi reflected the collectivist nature of Koreans, which was critical for survival. Families often had to hide food to protect it from foreign soldiers. Kimchi proved to be perfect for these resourceful people. Because it is a preservable food, Koreans would bury the kimchi underground to protect it from soldiers until the family was ready to eat it.

As in other Asian cultures, Koreans, when first introduced to one another, tend to ask "what company do you work for?" rather than inquiring about a person's title or occupation, which is of much more importance in the West. Also, people use their surnames first, followed by their individual names. Given such collectivism, it is easy to understand why Koreans have traditionally deemphasized individual stars in favor of team effort. However, an emphasis on individualism is emerging, as our discussion of Korean female golfers indicates. Hee Seop Choi (2005), first baseman for the Chicago Cubs, reflects this emphasis: "In spring training I'm in every newspaper (in Korea) every day. In the regular season, they watch it on TV. . . . My job is baseball. That's it. After that, I'll talk to my country. I'm happy to do that."

In Korea, what is good for the group is viewed as more important than what is good for the individual. This is a high-context society in which loyalty and the party line are valued more than the truth. Koreans are often uncomfortable with direct Western communication styles. Instead, from the highest levels of government to the household level, people are expected to tell the "truth," which is not facts per se but rather thoughts and feelings conforming to traditional ideals and norms. The messages delivered, then, can be found not in what is said but in the implicit message underlying the spoken words.

Men and women are expected to control their thoughts and emotions and express only that which serves society best, as we might expect in a Confucian culture. For example, when asked to lie under oath to save a friend, more than 90% of people in Western cultures, such as the United States and Canada, but only 37% of the Koreans, would refuse (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998).

### The Irish of Asia

Koreans can be compared to the Irish because they tend to be more emotional than their Asian neighbors. Kim Sun Yang, a food scientist, addressed this issue of

emotionality: “Koreans are very much like kimchi—hot tempered. . . . On the outside, both kimchi and Koreans might seem rude, but once you get to know them, they become long-lasting friends” (quoted in Solomon, 2001, p. A1).

Korean kimchi tends to be more fiery than Japanese kimchi. Some estimates suggest that Japan produces 70% of the world’s kimchi, which has motivated several Korean firms to develop and market creative brands of kimchi and sell them worldwide as the new salsa (Solomon, 2001). Any non-Korean company selling its kimchi in Korea leads to emotional reactions in defense of the native product. For example, a small Chinese-owned shop in Seoul began to sell kimchi at half of the cost of Korean brands and farmers demanded that the government pass a law mandating high tariffs. The government was reluctant to do so, as it might cause a trade dispute with China.

A good amount of this emotional expressiveness can be traced to Korean collectivism and long periods of domination by foreign powers, during which they spasmodically arose in fierce and open rebellion. But some of it is an outgrowth of Buddhism, which 25% of the population practices. The principle of the Middle Way that the Buddha advocated—keeping emotions under control, even to the extent of holding the body as quiet as possible under all conditions—is still dominant in South Korea. As discussed in “The Japanese Garden” (see Chapter 3), such practices in combination with traditional Confucian ideals tend to result in suppressed emotions that periodically flare up.

Given this perspective, it is easy to understand why Catholicism with its emphasis on rituals, collectivism, and shared emotional expressiveness has been much more successful in Korea than in other Asian nations. About 25% of the population, particularly those in the younger generation, practice it. Evangelical Protestantism is also popular, for similar reasons. Also, Christianity is viewed as less restrictive than Confucianism in terms of onerous family obligations, as exemplified by the activities at the 60th birthday party.

### Harmony and “Face”

Collectivism and repressed emotional expressiveness are both related to *kibun*, the sense of well-being and harmony among people, which is central to the Korean way of life. The concept of *kibun* is closely related to “face.” Taken literally, losing face means losing an eye, a nose, and ultimately the entire face and the person’s life. Losing face is a very serious matter, and even minor criticisms in public are problematic. Unlike the Western concept of winning at all costs, face is the set of unspoken rules by means of which everyone’s dignity and group harmony are preserved. Negotiations are frequently long and drawn out, simply to avoid losing face and to give face to others. Negotiations also involve a great deal of high-context behavior, including an abhorrence of saying no directly. Palliatives, such as “perhaps we can consider this proposal at another time” or “that would be difficult,” may really be the equivalent of no. Like the context-specific Chinese, the Koreans tend to study an actual situation at great

length before agreeing to a course of action, and that study includes getting to know prospective business partners well before doing business with them. Unlike Westerners, who tend to start negotiating by taking a position and then modify it as they proceed, the high-context Koreans are frequently comfortable with an ambiguous position at the start that gradually coalesces into a position or conclusion near the end of the negotiations. U.S. managers listening to an audiotape of Chinese managers making a decision reacted incredulously because of this pattern of behavior, as did Chinese managers who listened to U.S. managers making decisions (Twitchin, n.d.). Although no comparable analysis of Koreans and Westerners has taken place, we can reasonably expect similar findings, given the significant Chinese influence on Korea.

If Koreans like someone, they are prone to express this feeling more openly than their Asian neighbors. It is not unusual for a Korean businessman to take off his gold watch and give it to a Western visitor who has just said in passing that he likes the watch. Such actions are also rooted in Buddhism, which believes that it is the gift giver and not the person receiving it who is the main beneficiary.

Just as kimchi reflects collectivism, it also mirrors the Korean trait of emotional expressiveness. Positive emotions tend to occur not only during the 60th birthday party but also at any meal where kimchi is served. But when the high-context nature of Korean communication is violated, especially when kimchi is on the table, the affront is serious and may well lead to an unpleasant and jarring emotional confrontation.

### Business and Culture

Business in Korea is a direct reflection of the cultural values highlighted by kimchi. South Koreans have organized their business activities in a manner similar to that of the Japanese, who resurrected the outlawed *zaibatsu* after World War II and reconfigured them as the modern *keiretsu*. A *keiretsu* is a large consortium of companies, perhaps 300, that have overlapping boards of directors, one large bank, an import-export arm, and subcontractors, for example, Matsushita. In South Korea these groupings, which are heavily family-based in terms of ownership, are called *chaebols*, for example, Samsung. However, the operations of the *chaebols* are more reflective of Chinese culture than Japanese culture because the Japanese stress employee participation to a greater extent. Like the Chinese, the Koreans tend to believe that power flows downward, and they act accordingly. This may be one reason why management and labor are more separate in Korea than in Japan (see Carroll & Gannon, 1997). Ownership in the *chaebols* is also less dispersed among non-family members than in the Japanese *keiretsu*. Because of the Asian crisis of 1997, Korea has become a more open economy, but the *chaebols* are still important.

At work, Koreans experience difficulty in taking a risky position or making an individual decision. Nearly all action is taken by committees, which provide a buffer to prevent any one person from drawing attention to himself for decisions that later

prove to be problematic. Recently, for example, Martin Gannon made a presentation at a conference in Korea, before which he described a few procedural activities such as the placement of the podium that would facilitate interaction. Although several people supposedly responsible for such activity indicated that everything would be done, in fact, nothing was. In various forms this aversion to taking individual action is repeated in many contexts.

In the public arena Koreans provide others with very little personal space. While some of this behavior occurs because of crowded living conditions, it also is caused by adherence to cultural values. The respect for relationships and their governance of action apply only to known relationships. If a relationship has not been clearly defined, then Koreans act as if the relationship, or other person, does not exist.

When a relationship does not exist, Koreans will avoid action because they do not know the correct response. Instead, they will treat other people as if they do not exist, leading to no or limited personal space. For example, in such nations as Canada and the United States, lines are universally honored; in Korea, there is no respect for public lines. Instead, people push and jostle to get to the front of the line. In grocery stores strangers bump into each other with their carts, and they don't even notice this slight inconvenience. By comparison, a fistfight might occur over a similar encounter in the United States.

In the GLOBE study of 62 national societies (House et al., 2004), Korea ranked last in terms of practicing gender egalitarianism and 49th in terms of valuing it, findings that reinforce our previous discussions. Similarly, Korea ranked 18th on the practice of assertiveness, as we might expect from the Irish of Asia, although 31st on valuing it. These findings suggest that Korea is experiencing a conflict between values and practices, most probably because of the rapid transformation of the economy. Still, the value of institutional collectivism remains strong: Korea ranked 2nd on this dimension. Geert Hofstede's research (2001) generally confirms these results.

### A Confucian Approach

In sum, kimchi's preservative nature and its historical role in safeguarding families in times of crisis and war make it an excellent proxy for the Confucian and collectivist nature of Korean society. Kimchi spotlights the Confucian ability to let time stand still, revere tradition, and create the hierarchical rules surrounding relationships. The use of kimchi to protect families reflects the importance of putting the good of the country and family ahead of the individual, protecting against risk, and understanding the value of the present moment.

However, this perspective on Korean culture may be too oversimplified. As globalization spreads, Koreans have tried mightily to preserve their heritage, but new international Korean superstars in sports, the increasing respect accorded women in the workplace, and the weakening of the financial system created by the *chaebols* in the face of the global economy and markets are slowly making Korea a new place.

Perhaps a supplementary cultural metaphor for Korea is the national flag, whose symbol is the *taeguh*, representing unity and harmony or what Korea essentially values. Still, the *taeguh* has two parts, the yin and the yang. In combination yin and yang connote harmony, but separately, they represent opposites. Possibly the opposites better define modern Korea, because the contrasts and tensions in the culture have become more pronounced. These contrasts include the subordination of women in family relationships versus their hidden power in the household; the need for self-control balanced against the explosive volatility of individual emotions; and the hierarchy of power created by the Five Relationships vis-à-vis the collectivism that officially preaches at least a degree of equality among members of the group. Last, but perhaps the most potent contrast, is the pull of history and tradition and the push of globalization. Still, kimchi and its symbolic meanings capture a large part of Korean culture and behavior and a visitor to this nation would be remiss to overlook its importance.