FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of

Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
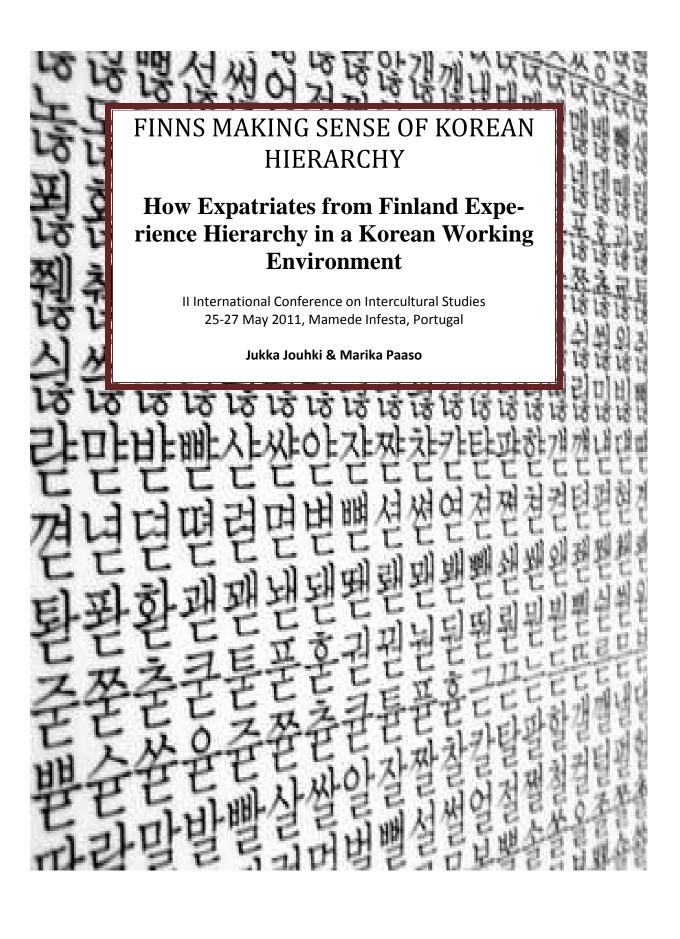
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Traditional Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

> When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

> In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

14

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of
Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
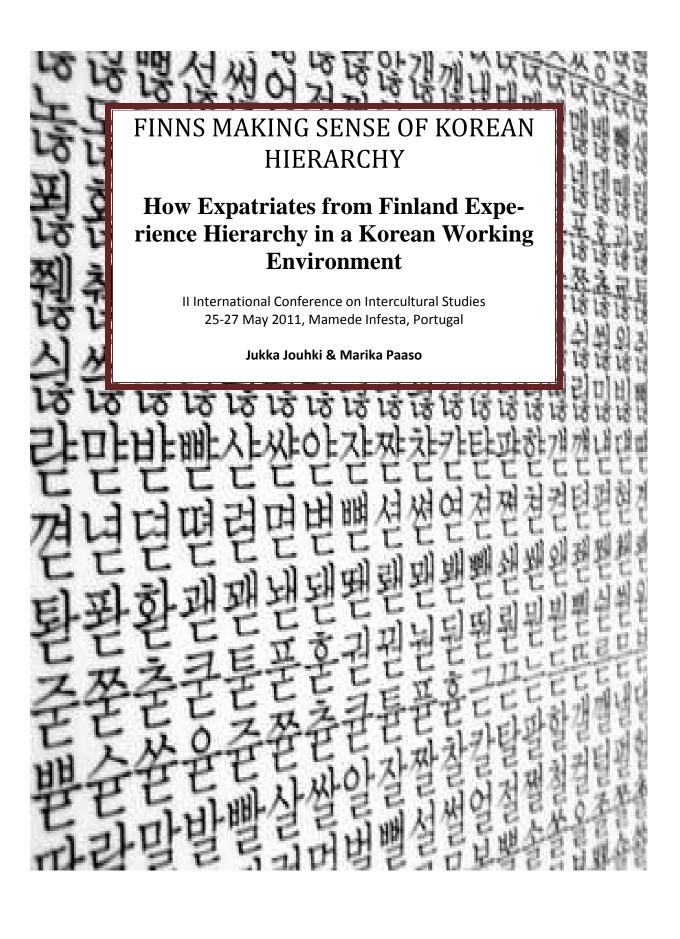
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Traditional Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

II International Conference on Intercultural Studies
25-27 May 2011, Mamede Infesta, Portugal

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

3

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

14

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of
Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
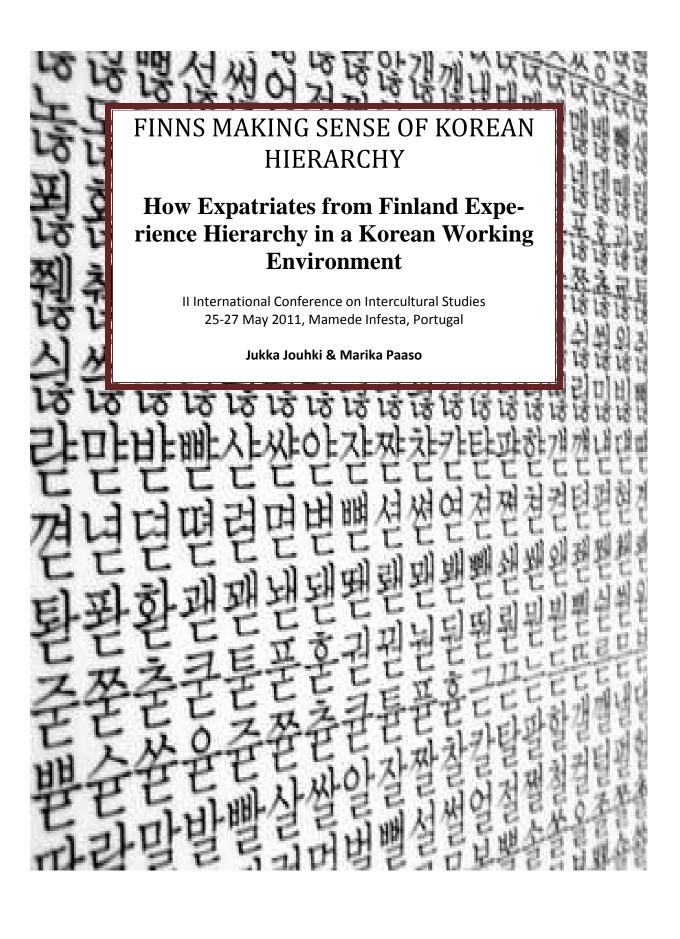
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Traditional Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of

Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
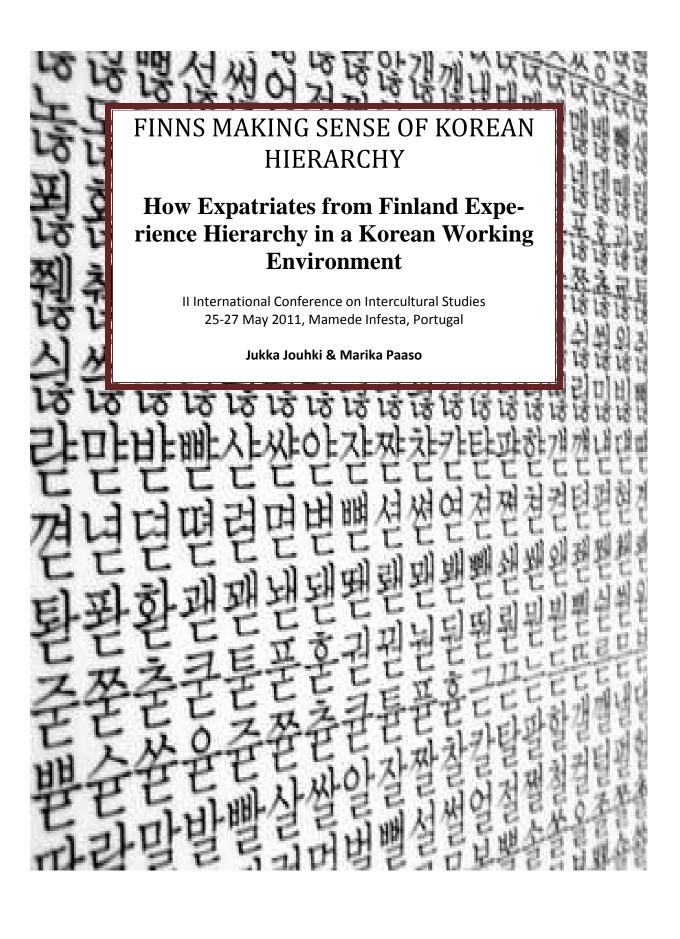
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Tradition-al Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of
Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
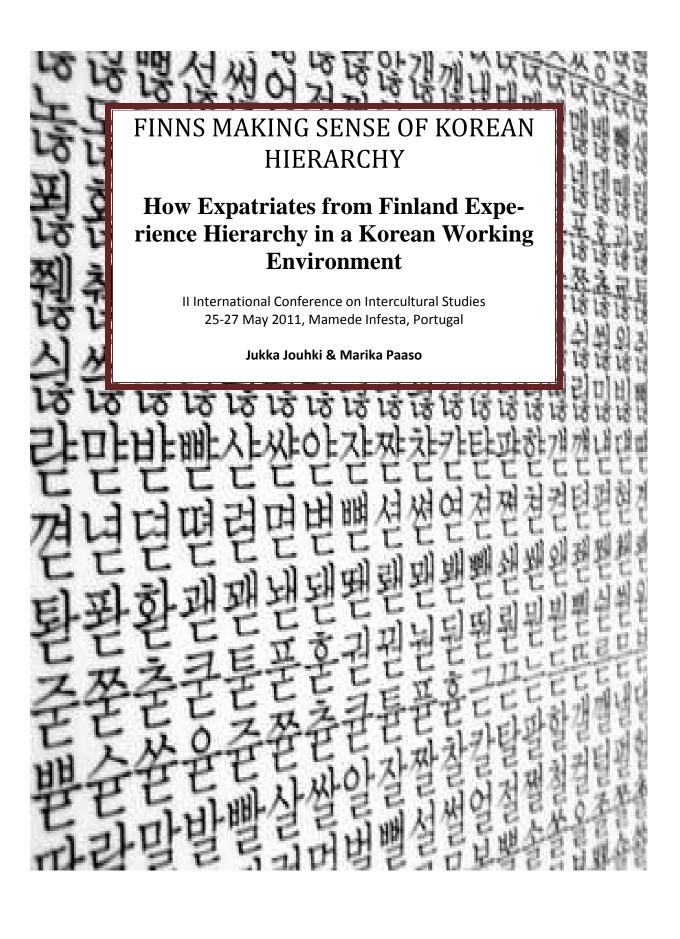
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Tradition-al Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of

Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
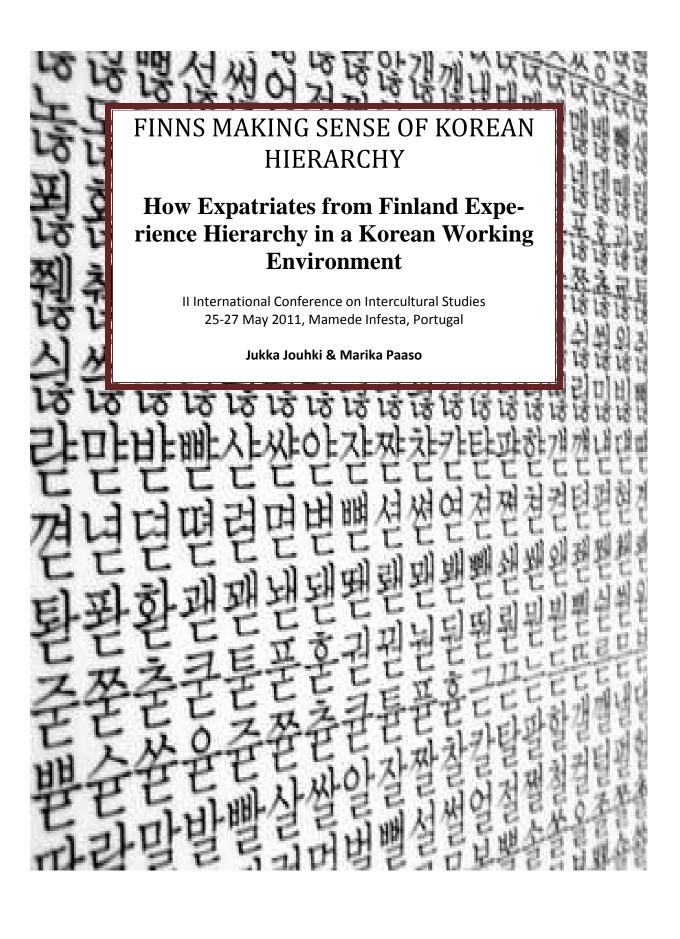
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Traditional Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

14

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of
Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
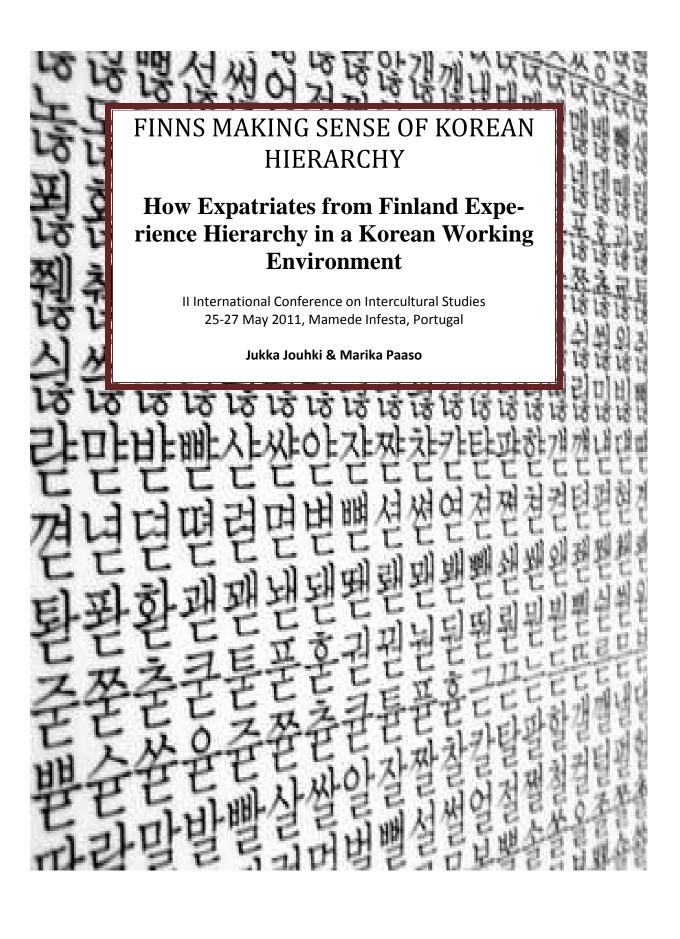
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Tradition-al Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

3

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

> It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

14

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of

Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
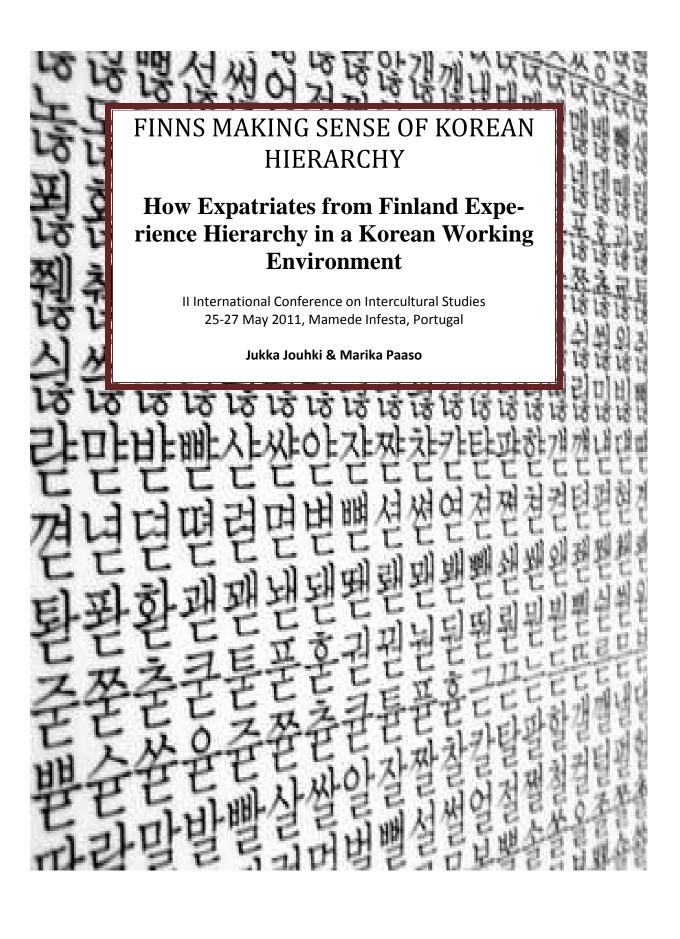
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Tradition-al Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

14

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of
Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
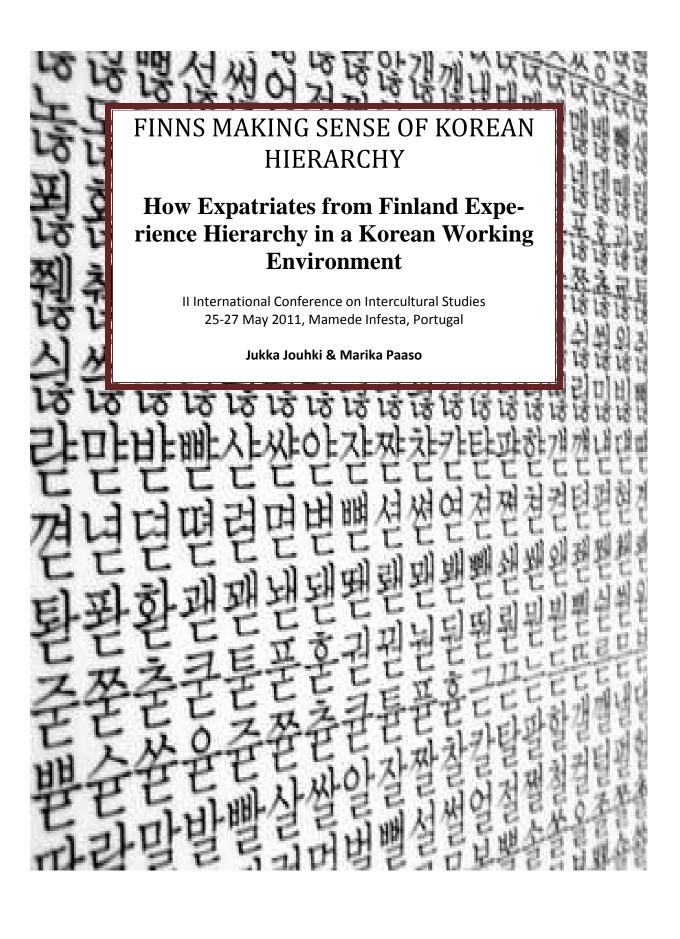
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Traditional Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
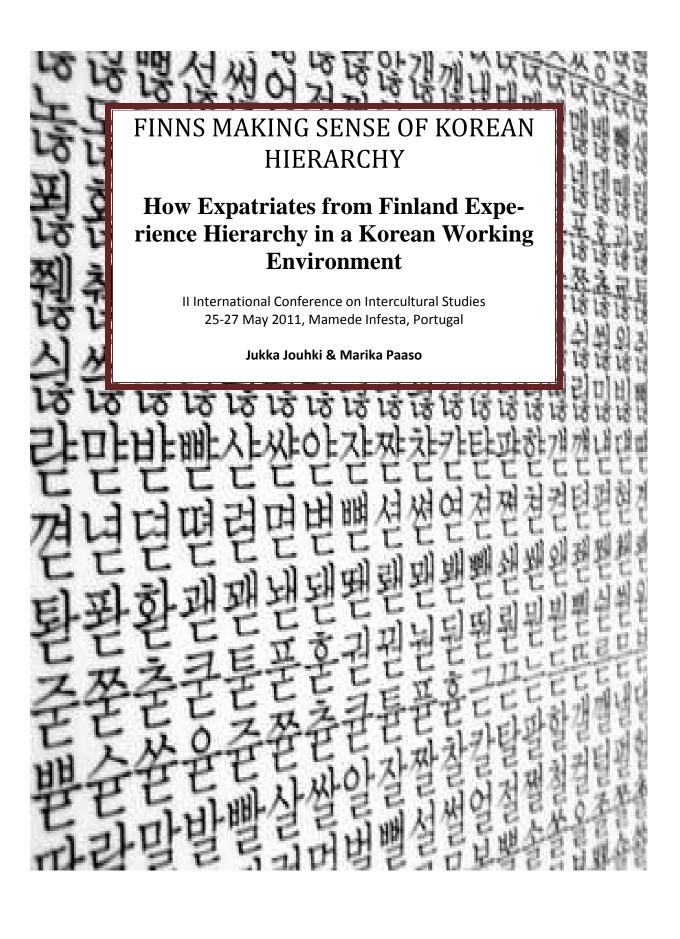
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Traditional Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

14

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of

Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
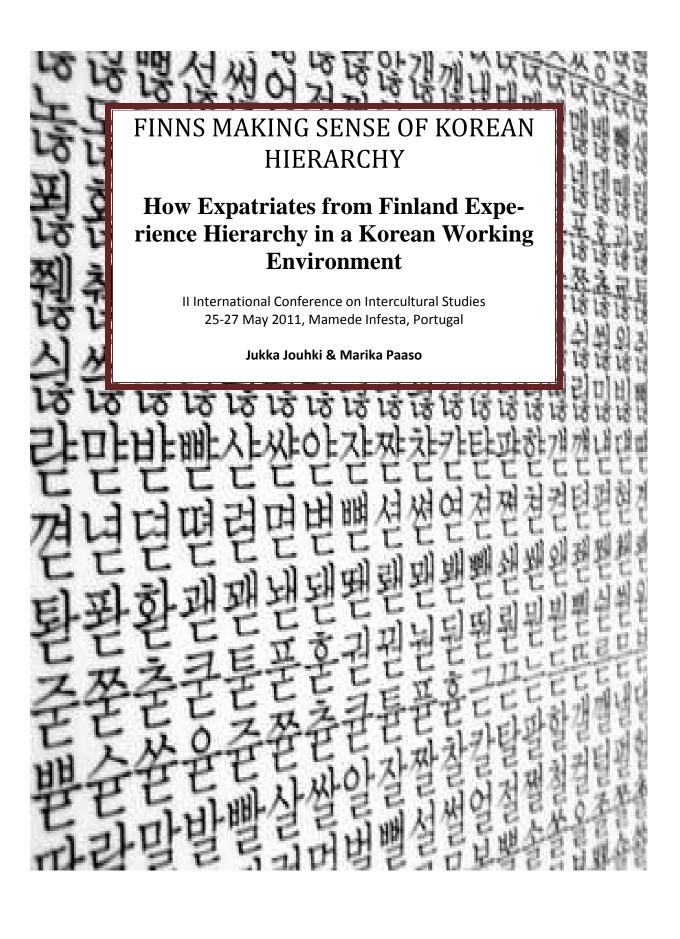
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Traditional Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

> When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

> In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

9

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

14

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of

Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
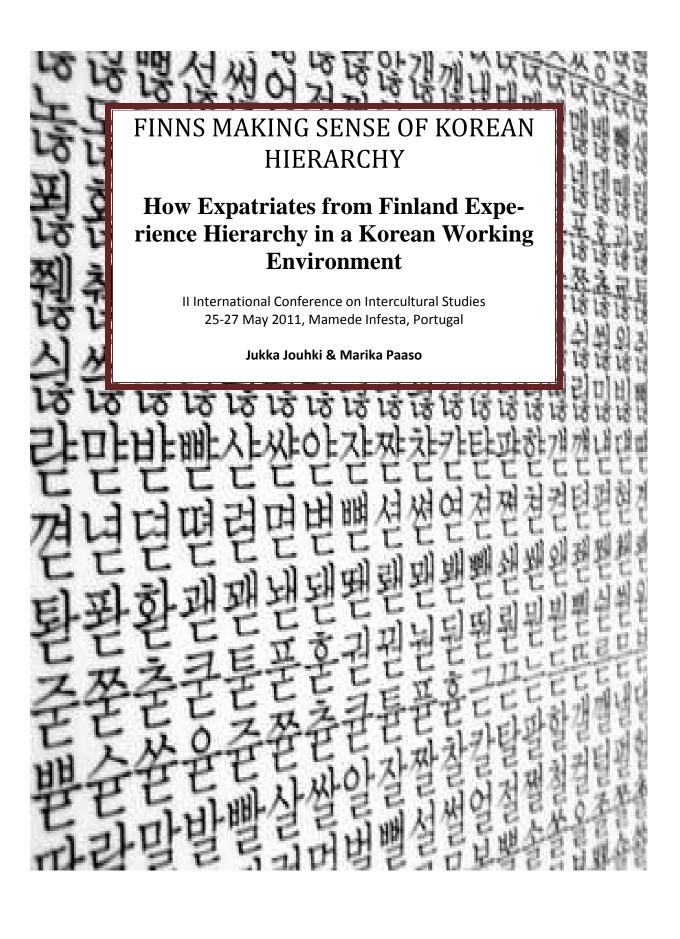
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Traditional Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

14

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of

Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
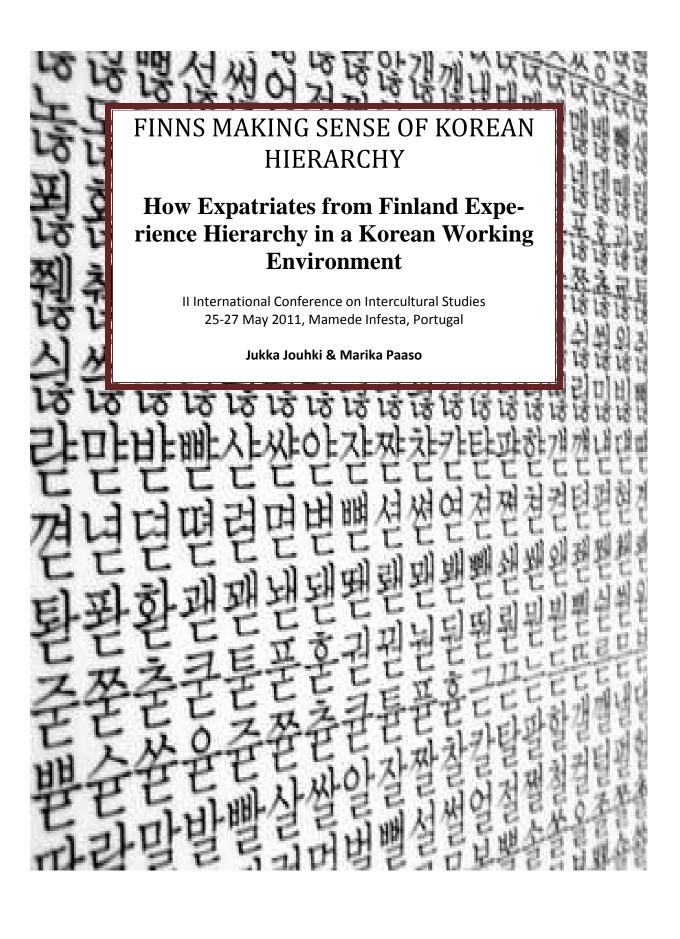
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Tradition-al Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of

Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
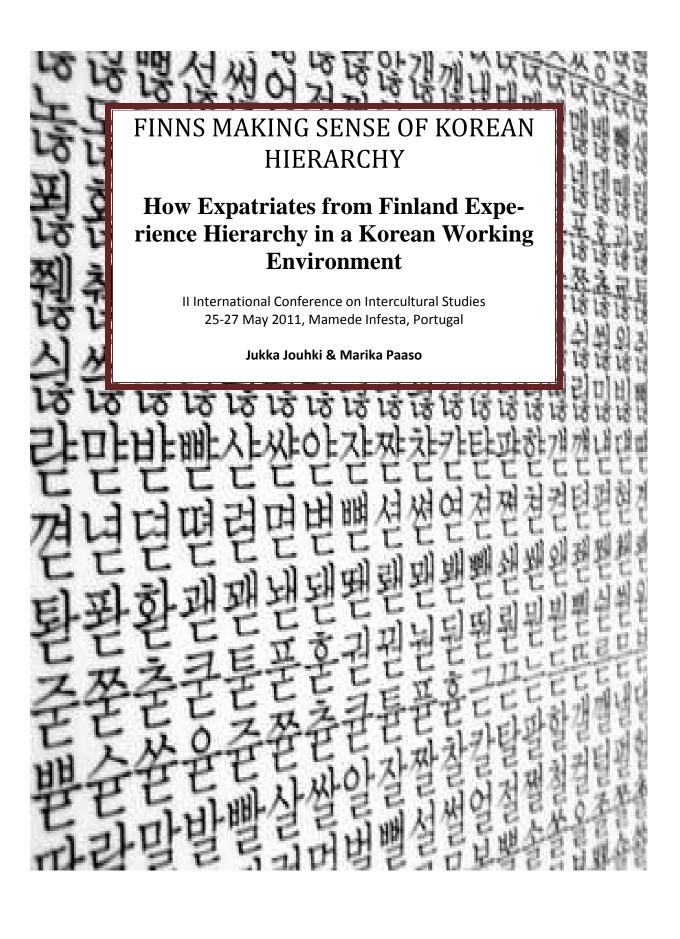
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Tradition-
al Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3,
pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in
East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

II International Conference on Intercultural Studies
25-27 May 2011, Mamede Infesta, Portugal

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
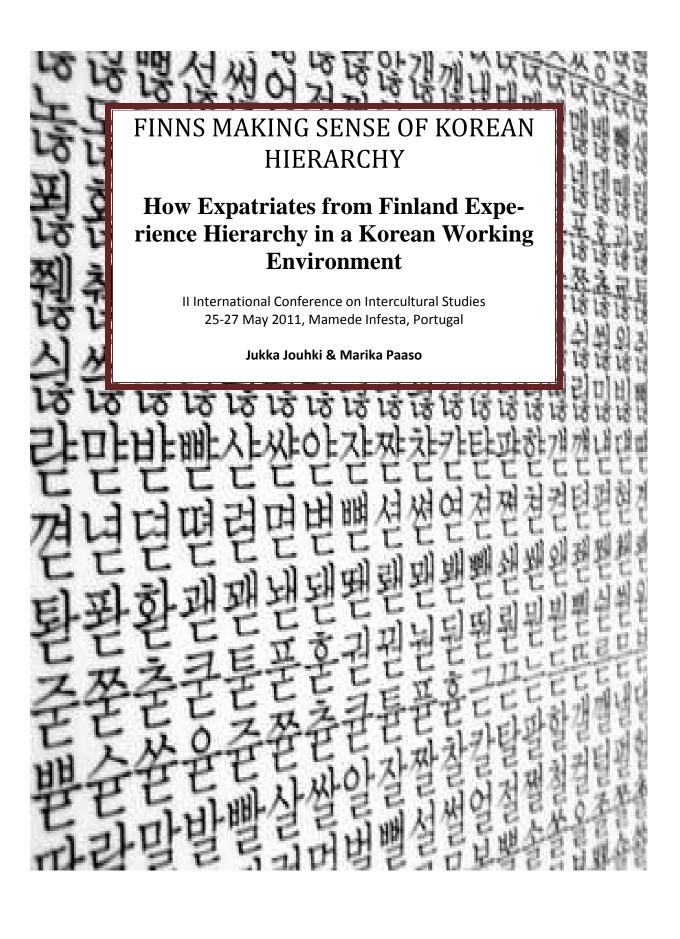
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Traditional Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

> When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

> In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of

Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
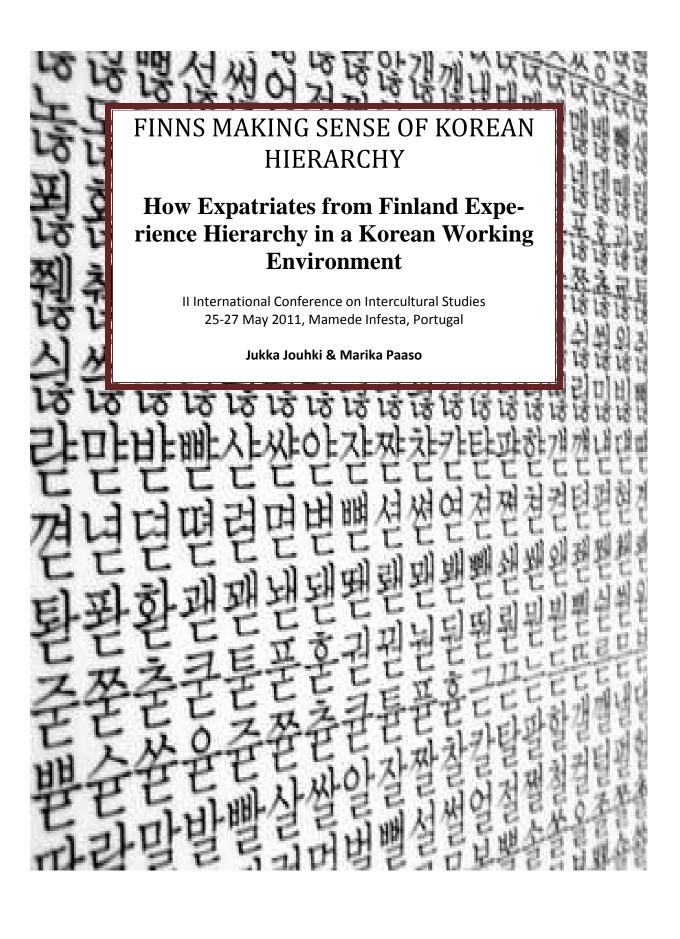
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Traditional Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3,
pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in
East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of

Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
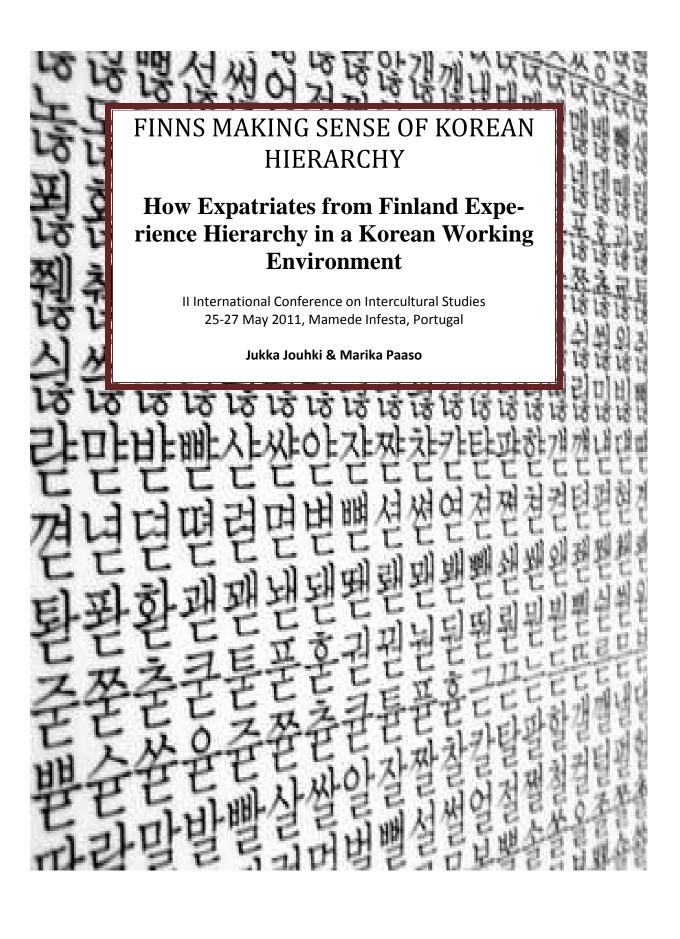
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Traditional Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

II International Conference on Intercultural Studies
25-27 May 2011, Mamede Infesta, Portugal

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of

Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
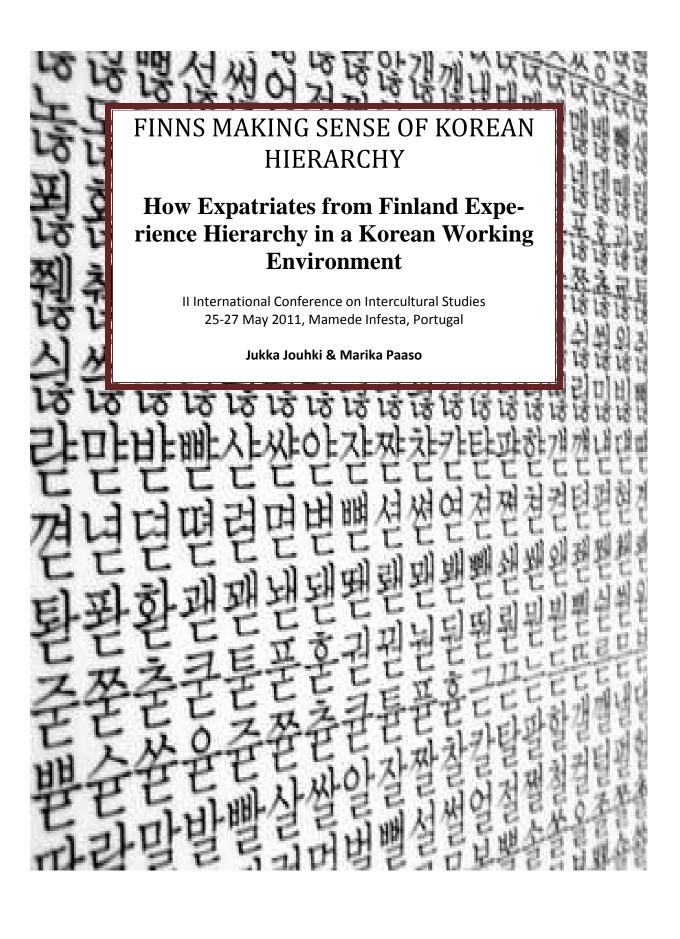
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Traditional Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of
Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.
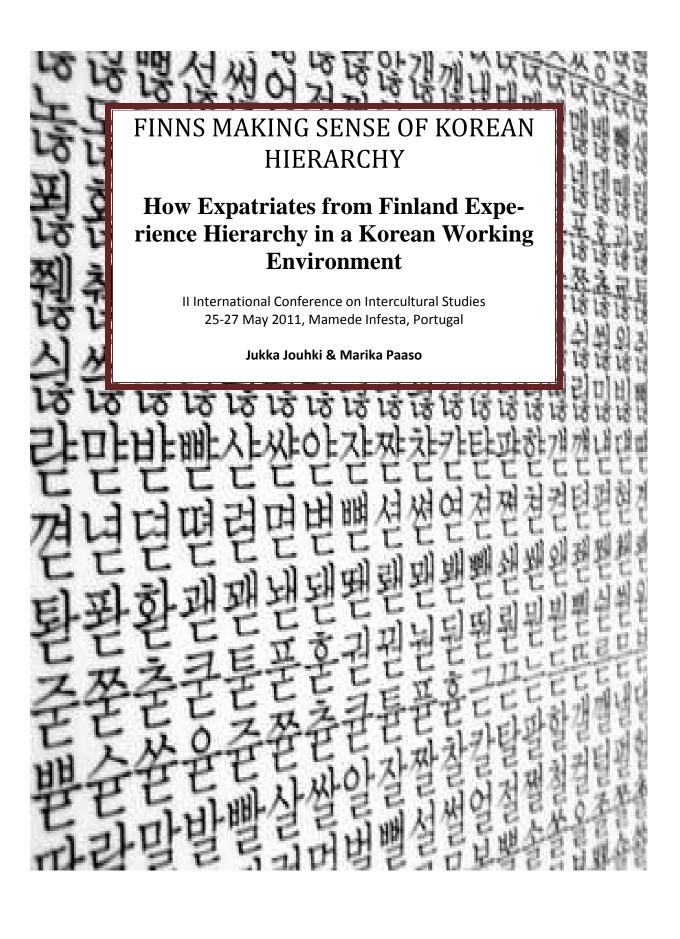
Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Traditional Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean

FINNS MAKING SENSE OF KOREAN HIERARCHY

How Expatriates from Finland Experience Hierarchy in a Korean Working Environment

Jukka Jouhki & Marika Paaso

ABSTRACT

Korean culture is often regarded as collectivist, hierarchical and harmony-oriented. In this paper we have chosen to focus on hierarchy. More specifically, this paper attempts to describe and analyze Korean hierarchy as experienced by Finnish expatriates working in Korea. The expatriates interviewed for the study worked with Koreans either as their superiors, subordinates or peers. The interviewees were chosen randomly, the only requirement being nationality (Finnish) and employment (currently working in Korea). The ten interviews conducted in 2007 are qualitatively analyzed. According to the results, hierarchy is mostly experienced in language, use of space and time, freedom of expression, how employees take the initiative and in the status related to age and gender. The article also discusses the cultural change Finns encounter with hierarchy in Korea and the problems of studying such experience.

Keywords: Confucianism, Korea, hierarchy, Finns, expatriates, experience.

CONTENTS

1. TAKING A LOOK AT KOREA

In this paper[1] we present and examine Finns' views on Koreans. For many Finns, South Korea (henceforth: Korea) is a rather unknown place as many people only have a vague idea that Korea is situated somewhere between Japan and China. Most Finns have heard of the Korean War and popular brands in technology but the rest of the culture, history and society of the country are more or less unknown. Perhaps for Finns, Korea represents "the Orient," Asia and the different ways of "the East." Maybe Finnish people associate Korea with ancient wisdom, colorful traditions and interesting eastern philosophies but they also see it as a country (like any other Asian country) with hard-working and collectivist people. Whether the images above have much to do with reality or not, experiencing another culture is significantly affected by preconceived notions and learned imagery associated with a certain part of the world.

In constructionist research, instead of difference, researchers focus on the *interpretations* the different parties make of each other within their own cultural context. (Jensen 2003, 3-5; see also Applegate and Sypher 1988, 42-44.) Thus in this study we do not assume or take stand on a tangible, definable and "real" Korean culture existing without its interpreters, but acknowledge that a culture is defined by its observers inside and outside of it. Hence our view of culture here is discursive-hegemonic (Crehan 2002, 199-208). A culture is what it is said and believed to be.

Korean culture is often characterized by its collectivism, hierarchy and social harmony (Shim et al. 2008, 25-45). We have chosen to focus on hierarchy, a phenomenon that seems to be the first to make itself felt when people experience the Korean communicational environment. Thus, our research question is: *How do expatriates from Finland experience hierarchy in a Korean working environment?* To answer this we have interviewed ten Finnish people working in Seoul who have Koreans either as their peers, superiors or subordinates. A semi-structured theme interview was chosen as best for this research as it provided the most space for the individual interpretations of the interviewees, enabled free expression and more than any other way allowed personal significance-making, albeit according to a loose guideline. As for the epistemological properties of this study, a phenomenological-hermeneutical research orientation (Laverty 2003, 7-13) was thought to be most suitable for a research object that includes elements related to inner consciousness such as experiences, evaluations, intentions and significances, and attempts to make phenomena qualitatively understandable rather than explaining and finding patterns quantitatively.

The ten interviewees (see Appendix) were eight males and two females, a gender imbalance that reflects the reality of expatriates in Korea. It seems that male expatriates, perhaps because of the paternalistic culture of the host country and to some extent that of Finland, are far more common than female expatriates. The age of the interviewees was between 26 and 61 years, most of them being in their thirties. Six of the interviewees had lived in Korea for a considerable length of time, from 4 to 12 years, and five of them had a Korean spouse. The rest were staying in Korea for between a few months and a few years, for work. Half of the interviewees worked in a Korean organization under a Korean superior and with Korean colleagues. Four worked in a Korean-Finnish organization under a Finnish boss and with Finnish and Korean colleagues. One interviewee worked in an international organization with Western and Korean superiors and colleagues. Three of the Finns worked as superiors and one of the three was also a subordinate. The

---

[1] This paper is largely based on a master's thesis by Marika Paaso (2008).

interviews were conducted during December 2007. Aliases are used here to protect the identities of the interviewees. All but one interviewee had familiarized themselves with Korean culture before moving to Korea by reading literature about the country. Six had taken courses about Korea or Asia before going to Korea. All but two had learned at least the basics of the Korean language but only four interviewees could speak Korean fluently.

2. UNDER EXAMINATION: HIERARCHY IN KOREAN CULTURE

Confucianism in Korean Culture

The centrality of human relationships stemming from Confucianism is a key factor if one wants to understand Korean or, more generally, East Asian culture and communication (see e.g. Yum 1988; Song et al. 2005). The Confucian heritage is often seen in the system of hierarchy penetrating all sectors of Korean sociocultural life, including language, school, home, shopping and business organizations. Often the hierarchy of Korean society and work life is the first lesson for a foreigner to learn in Korea (see e.g. Coyner & Jang 2007; Chung et al. 1997.)

According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), Confucian values are evident in Korean organizations, where social reciprocity is important, the division between insiders and outsiders is strong, human relationships are particularistic, rituals respected and personal and public relationships overlapping. Yum (1988) sees the Confucian heritage materializing in the Koreans' emphasis on cooperation, warm relationships, considerateness and group harmony. But the harmony has its price. In an atmosphere of social demands and duties individual initiative may be restricted, and the wide gap between "us" and "them" might lead to parochialism, and further to a limited sense of duty only to one's own personal network.

It is common to all hierarchical relationships that some people are always ranked higher than others and thus have more power (Park & Kim 1992, 399-400). Hofstede (2001, 98) calls the cultural dimension connected to hierarchy a power distance. The greater the power distance is, the greater the accepted differences between people of different statuses are. In cultures of great power distance, such as Korea, power is usually concentrated in the hands of the few and they quite naturally take advantage of the benefits it offers. In cultures of small power distance, power is at least ideally based on expertise. (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003; see also Merkin 2006.) In collectivist cultures hierarchy upholds social relations in a certain order and allocates to every individual his or her position in a particular group. In contrast, in individualistic cultures hierarchy is not taken for granted or seen as given in the same way, but it is more the result of competition in which individuals attempt to obtain the highest possible status. Because in societies like Korea hierarchy is largely defined by age, there is no such need for this kind of competition. (Triandis 1995; Merkin, 2006; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand 1995.)

In Korea, the Confucian view of the family, the prototype of society, is considered to set the hierarchy of working life. Children are expected to respect and obey their parents and they are not really encouraged to embark on any independent action or to develop initiative. (Park and Kim 1992, 399-400.) Hence there is a special power configuration between children and their elders which can be seen also later in working life. The role of parents—especially the father—is transferred to the workplace as the employer equals the just father of the family, and the employee

4

acts as the obedient son. (Hofstede 2001, 102-107.) A paternalistic leadership culture gives the leader a lot of power and great authority but, on the other hand, gives him the grave duty to take care of his subjects or subordinates. (Lee 2002, 13-14; see also Coyner and Jang 2007, 40.) A work community in a more collectivistic culture might actually demand paternalistic leadership. According to the American management theorist Douglas McGregor (according to Kauhanen 2002), executives often have to choose between two theories of leadership: they can either trust and give some freedom to their subordinates and thus encourage them to work to prove themselves worthy of this trust, or they can give their subordinates strict instructions and monitor them to make sure that they complete their tasks. In a community that is closely monitored people also learn to regulate their work input in relation to the surveillance, and when the all-seeing eye closes, the employees give up their goals. This is thought to be more common in collectivist and hierarchical countries. (See also Hofstede 2001, 240-241; Coyner & Jang 2007; Merkin 2006.)

At this point an important point about the concept "Confucian" should be made. Although it is central to our paper and significant in most inquiries into Korean culture and communication, we want to stress that it is not taken as *explaining* the patterns of culture and communication in Korea. We acknowledge that there is a correlation between "Confucian" and concepts such as "hierarchical," "paternalistic," "collectivist" and "social harmony" but we question their causal connection. Confucianism does not cause hierarchy and the like but, perhaps vice versa, hierarchy and its associates in a society might create a cultural atmosphere that is receptive to Confucian thought. There are many societies and cultures in the world that are hierarchical, paternalistic, collectivist and appreciate social harmony, but they are not Confucian. Thus we see "Confucianism" as a convenient label for naming the aforementioned qualities in the particular case of Korean culture

Korean Hierarchy

In societies with great power distance the pyramid of hierarchy is steep and older superiors are respected more than young employees. The emotional distance caused by hierarchy between the superior and subordinate results in employees not approaching their superiors and not criticizing their orders or opinions. In societies with small power distance, on the other hand, it is common for employees to take part in decision-making and question or challenge the status quo when it is felt to be unjust. (Hofstede 2001, 102-110; Merkin 2006; Robinson 1996.) In societies of great power distance, age is the most significant determinant of hierarchical relationship. Hence for example in Korea the process of getting to know a new person is often started off by inquiring about their age. (Park and Kim 1992, 399; Coyner and Jang 2007, 30-31.) The older one is, the higher in the hierarchy one is bound to be, and a superior can never be younger than his or her subordinates. Although it is true that experience comes with age, this system might not produce the best possible competence. (Coyner and Jang 2007, 41.)

The hierarchy of Korean society is explicit also in the Korean language, which has a complex morphology for showing politeness and societal ranking order. Age, social status, the level of familiarity and the formality of the situation influence what kind of language is used. This kind of fluidity is certainly evident in other languages too, for example in Finnish, and the degrees of familiarity and formality can be detected in language and the choice of words. However, in East Asian communication culture the range in the linguistic code and etiquette is significantly wider, the difference between honorary and familiar use of language is relatively great and this might not change even during a long-term relationship. In Korea, the same thing or the same action

might have many different names according to who is speaking to whom. The complexity or richness of the linguistic code can also be seen to reflect the importance of human relationships. The number of different expressions for a single thing often grows in proportion to its importance to the community. (Yum 1988, 382-383.)

3. EXPERIENCING THE HIERARCHY

> The hierarchy is like a structure in the background, one cannot go over or around it. You just can't get rid of it. So you have to accept it, if you want to be here. In a way you have to behave properly with those below or above you. Sure, it stems from Confucianism, it's a result of upbringing. At home people are brought up to respect and talk in a certain manner, so it just sticks in your mind, like something automatic. (Laura.)

Like the quote above reveals, to Finnish expatriates hierarchy was the most distinguishing characteristic of Korean culture and hence issues related to hierarchy were the first explicit elements to be experienced when they encountered Korean culture. They felt critical especially about the way that hierarchy was thought to inhibit the expression of disagreement and influence decision-making. Not only was it experienced as personally frustrating, but it was also considered to be dysfunctional in terms of the profitability and efficiency of work. As evident in the following chapter, hierarchy was experienced not only in matters like expressing one's opinion or decision-making, but also explicitly in language and talk, seating and people's use of time.

The Pitfalls of Parlance

Apart from two interviewees, everyone had studied Korean at least a little and so examples related to language came up in numerous contexts, and especially examples of observed hierarchy in speech were common. Many emphasized that, except on some rare occasions, hierarchy is always evident in speech: one speaks differently to the people above one in the hierarchy than to the people below one. The rules of hierarchy are limited not only to the relationship between the superior and his or her subordinates, but they extend to every single relationship. As the following excerpts show, only those very close to each other can omit the formal linguistics of politeness.

> Hierarchy exists between everyone, not just between the boss and the subordinate but everyone and everybody. Promotions are an example. The first one you get after three years and that already makes a difference. And on the lower level just the fact that one has a work history a month longer than the other plus age make a difference. So even if a person is just a year younger, a politer form of speech has to be used. So everyone is on a slightly different rung of the ladder from everyone else. Not necessarily inside a family or between friends but the situations where hierarchy does not apply are very limited in number. (Mika.)

Hierarchy in speech was noticeable also during short visits. Although Petri had been staying in Korea for only three months he had already noticed the hierarchy in the Korean language.

When you meet a Korean, you face a litany of questions about your age, marital status and so on. They ask you your age to find out how to categorize you, in other words situate you on a ranking scale. Although I had been warned about this sort of questions it did still surprise me in the beginning but I adapted to it pretty fast. You know, here they have different words for different hierarchical levels but when you don't understand the language it's hard to tell. (Petri.)

Hierarchy not only appears in forms of politeness and one's choice of words but it also determines topics of conversation, as hierarchical relations have to be established as soon as possible in the relationship. Laura suggested that the hierarchy of language plays an even more important role. According to her, Korean people are different depending on whether they are speaking Korean or English. To her, the question of hierarchy is specifically a question of the hierarchy of language because in English all are equal but in Korean the hierarchy between talkers is clearly evident. "So whether you are below or above shows in the speech, you get a sort of different vibe." Many interviewees did experience the place of work as totally different depending on the language used, Korean or English. Ville, for example, explained how in an English-speaking working community, under a Finnish boss "the atmosphere is quite different from somewhere else as there is not so much hierarchy."

The orthodox use of forms of politeness seemed to puzzle many interviewees. Even several years of living in Korea did not necessarily open up the hierarchical system of language to a foreigner. Thus, when caught in an ambiguous situation those who spoke Korean chose to use the most polite form of speech. They thought Koreans themselves did the same until they had worked out how the hierarchical relationships between the participants were going to be settled. Mika said that he always attempted to use the most polite form but still often found himself in difficult situations.

In a system of politeness there are sort of two parts. One is who you are talking to and the other is sort of the topic, what or who you are talking about. But they are sort of not connected to each other, and so it often happens that if I am talking to my boss about his boss, I obviously have to use all forms of politeness about his boss, but then if I talk about something in their relationship, I have to use a polite form when I talk about my boss but of course, as he is lower than his boss, I should use the sort of lower form. It's not always quite clear what the right verb is. (Mika.)

Mika added that politeness and respectfulness are not just a choice of words but "about tone of voice and all that sort of thing, eye contact and such, that's how politeness is formed." Many interviewees believed from experience that even though forms of politeness are usually for showing respect, they can sometimes be used to communicate remoteness. So, in some cases speaking without forms of politeness can be experienced as more polite than speaking with them. Mika, however, wanted to point out that even in close relationships forms of politeness are to be used if the difference in status or age is big enough.

Because of the subtle and complex nature of the Korean language, many interviewees thought it safer to use English instead of Korean, at least in more official situations and unless one could manage in Korean very well. For example, Eeva mentioned that even though small grammatical errors were surely forgiven they could, nevertheless, affect the image of one's reliability and thus also cause unnecessary misunderstandings between parties. Mikko too emphasized that English

was a wise choice especially in a business context if one was at all hesitant about one's Korean skills. He chose to use English although at home he spoke Korean with his wife. "For a foreigner it is easier when English is spoken here. It has huge significance in avoiding obstacles." Laura, on the other hand, noted that because hierarchy cannot be ignored in Korean interaction it might be easier to communicate in Korean as then the hierarchy is included automatically in the forms of speech.

Hierarchy in language manifests in complex arrangements of formality and politeness that can be difficult for a foreigner to get hold of. Hierarchy is nevertheless evident in a more concrete form in speech and addressing people. The interviewees described how even the closest colleagues should not be addressed by their given names. John Smith is not just "John" as he would be in Finland but "Mister Smith" or, depending on his status, "Professor Smith" or "Vice President Smith". Timo, for example, described how in Korean academic circles titles and degrees seemed to have greater significance than in Finnish universities. In Juhani's experience titles are particularly important in business. High level executives would not necessarily negotiate or discuss a matter with their inferiors, which means that people have to have the right titles before deals can be negotiated. Juhani too changed the "Managing Director" on his business card to "President" because that sounded more imposing and had more credibility among top executives. "I'm not that title-sick but it's just so important here," he said.

Long Hours

Hierarchy very definitely influences the way employees use their time, because in traditional Korean working culture employees never leave the office before their superior does. As a rule all interviewees were very critical of the 10 to 12 hours of work that Koreans usually put in each day. According to the interviewees the long hours were not about increasing the productivity of work but about pleasing the boss. Often the last hours at work were spent playing computer games and writing emails, but it was important to look as if one was working.

> All the time you have to keep thinking about what your superiors think and what they see their subordinates doing. That's why the employees usually come to work before and leave after their bosses. (Laura.)

> When the boss left the office everyone dug out their pillows and started to sleep right there, which is a slightly different attitude than in Finland. You know, it's the way in Korea, to work as long as your boss is at the office. Most bosses can't stand employees leaving earlier than them. If the boss works till ten, then everybody works till ten even though there is nothing to do. Equally, if the boss is not there, then people do nothing. (Mikko.)

The length of a person's working day depends on the length of his boss's day. If one is unlucky, one's boss does not have a life beside work, which means that the private lives of employees suffer. In other words, when the boss has power over the time his employees use for work, he decides on how much time they have for life outside of work. According to the interviewees, Finnish bosses were conscious of their power position in the office and did not purposely work overtime, so their employees could leave work after eight hours and go home with a good conscience. According to Laura the Korean employees also liked this policy.

South Koreans who work in a more Finnish working culture seem to really like it when they are given privacy and nobody is sort of nagging them all the time about doing this or that, and nobody is making them do overtime or go drinking until after hours. The men are used to it but women who have just gotten married or something else find this Finnish kind of working culture ideal. (Laura.)

According to the interviewees, hierarchy was visible in time-use also in the context of rapid changes in schedule. Many interviewees explained that if the management ordered something, it would get immediate priority and plans were totally remade "without a murmur." Scheduled meetings, for example, were often rescheduled at very short notice. Timo gave an example of how he got to know Korean hierarchy in practice the first time he visited Seoul. When a "request from above" comes, it gets priority over other scheduled meetings.

A year ago when I came here and had a few meetings scheduled, the head of the department asked me to come to his lecture. I told him that unfortunately I had two meetings scheduled already. He said I should cancel them. He said it in a way that made me think I *must* cancel them, and so I did. Back then I remember thinking that it's not just a figment of the imagination, you know, hierarchy in East Asian cultures. People don't question the word of the head of the department much. (Timo.)

Volatility of schedules and the possibility of cancellations seemed to be more the rule than the exception. For example, Antero explained how he always reconfirmed his meetings because "if the boss requests to see you, then other meetings are of course cancelled. It happens every day." Thus the successful organizing of a meeting often requires nerves and patience. Antero had noticed how the same reconfirmation rigmarole works the other way around. If he had promised to attend some meeting, people asked for confirmation many times, which made him feel frustrated. "I'm thinking, I've already told you that I'm coming. You don't have to call me all the time and ask."

The interviewees had observed that in Korea people do not plan things far ahead. Antero, among others, noted that "when a Finn agrees on something six months ahead, here people do things at very short notice." In Korea there is talk about a *bali-bali* mentality, meaning that things have to happen quickly. However, to many Finns this mentality appeared very casual and actually meant having no plans at all. For example, Petri had experienced that the future was not something to worry about in a Korean working place, "people just sort of ride the moment." Many interviewees experienced the quick rescheduling and lack of plans as disturbing. Mika was direct about it and said "it is one of the most aggravating sides, the last-minute changing of things." To Finns who were accustomed to being precise and punctual, changeable and rescheduled meetings appeared even as impoliteness.

So it's kind of amazing when I myself thought, before I came here, that respecting the other person means also being on time and sticking to what has been agreed, but here it doesn't fully apply and I can't figure out why. (Petri.)

Better Keep Quiet

The interviewees were unanimous about the fact that in a Korean organization it is not proper to question or evaluate the opinions, ideas or orders of one's superiors. For example, according to Mika it was simply not possible to give your superior negative feedback, even at the point when the boss's behavior had caused one to quit one's job. Likewise, Juhani thought that the possibility of criticizing one's superior was purely hypothetical: in practice it never happens.

> It goes with the age and then with the status. So you can't really just say to him… or you're finished because your superior is superior. Period. One can maybe state one's opinion but the superior has the last word. To argue with him is a little… It is the hierarchy, it's clear and evident here. (Juhani.)

Arguing with the boss, especially in front of others, was understood to be impossible also because questioning someone above you in the hierarchy would make him lose face. At worst the employee might even lose his or her job. The interviewees were even skeptical about the possibility of expressing negative feelings in private, face-to-face. This limitation on the free expression of opinion was to the interviewees a very negative characteristic in terms of the efficiency and profitability of work in Korea. In a hierarchical organization unprompted activity was neither expected nor desired. In practice, for example in meetings, it was the superior who spoke and the subordinates who remained quiet unless their opinion was asked for. This ran contrary to Finns' views about sharing ideas and putting forward different views as a very important factor in developing an organization.

> In some ways one might have to be careful not to appear too smart even though one was. In some cases you just have to realize you have to shut up and keep to yourself. It would often be much better though, if employees could express their own opinions more. (Eeva.)

Because expressing one's opinion is not encouraged, people in Korean organizations do not share and discuss information. This kind of "non-discussion culture" was seen to cause a lot of unnecessary work. When matters are not discussed it is often noticed all too late that they are going in the wrong direction. In Mikko's experience things might have to be re-done many times because the team was not sharing information early enough in the project. When members of a team do not know what other team members are doing, several people might be wasting time doing exactly what other people are doing. According to Mikko "it is not enough that everybody is doing their job well. A system has to be developed so that people know what others are doing."

Antero shared another kind of experience. According to him, Korean employees respect the Finnish and egalitarian discussion culture where thoughts can be expressed freely and even criticizing the boss is allowed.

> Here we work as if we were working in Finland. I think they [the Korean employees of the Finnish-run company] appreciate it too. We work partly as teams and discuss matters openly here. If they have some suggestions on how I could do something better, I do it but something like that couldn't happen in a Korean organization. You just can't ask your superior to do something. He asks you. (Antero.)

In Finland the interviewees had got used to chatting with their bosses on the same level, so to speak, and also to expressing their doubts or criticisms if necessary. In Korea the same kind of behavior was out of the question, except on a night out drinking when alcohol helped employees to bring up issues. Some of the interviewees were more troubled than others by the restrictions on expressing opinions. Juhani came prepared for the hierarchy of Korean culture and described the status quo as merely "interesting". In contrast, Eeva thought the situation was very frustrating indeed.

> In Finland you can defend yourself but here, if the boss says that something is like this, then you are more like "okay" even though you don't really agree. It is frustrating, and I have always been the kind of person who states her opinion. In Finland it is appreciated but here I have found out that it's better to keep your mouth shut and just support the ideas of the management. (Eeva.)

Some people, however, had quite the opposite experience and questioned whether hierarchy really did restrict the expression of opinion. Timo said that he had often been surprised at the outspokenness of Koreans. In a conference he attended, for example, a young woman had strongly criticized a presentation made by the head of the department. Timo noted that even in Finland he would have not expressed his differing opinion so boldly. Timo also talked about a colleague with whom he had a joint project and from whom he needed frequent feedback. Timo was glad about the colleague's criticism but also puzzled by this directness and wondered whether his own assumptions had mistakenly led him to conclude that Koreans were indirect and shied away from giving criticism.

The Boss Decides, the Employee Waits for Instructions

Power in Korea is often very centralized and only people on the highest level have the right to decide on issues. This was seen as complicating work in many ways. Several interviewees talked about the strict hierarchy causing stagnation, as things did not proceed without a go-ahead from the big boss. If the person in charge of decision-making was not present in a meeting nothing would happen. Juhani, among others, emphasized that it was extremely important to be in touch with the right people but on the other hand to be careful not to tread on the toes of the wrong people, "and not overtake people in the hierarchy." Hierarchy as inhibiting the potential value of the decisions that are made came up in various interviews. When decisions are made alone by any one person they are bound to be more one-sided than those made in a more democratic system where many different views can be openly presented and discussed.

Mikko, for example, emphasized the importance of discussion, as in his experience if decisions are made without really talking things through then the decisions do not reflect a wide enough view. Antero explained that the reason behind one-person decision-making is the fear of losing face. For this reason asking for help and hiring consultants is avoided. "You know, if I, having the status that I have, used a consultant, it would mean that I couldn't do it myself, and then I would lose face," Antero said. According to the Finns' experiences, decision-making is sometimes even avoided in a Korean work place. If the decision turned out to be a poor one, one's job might be in jeopardy. In the same way higher level managers rarely admit their mistakes. According to Antero, the fear of losing face can be seen for example in how cooperation partners or negotiators always want to know beforehand the questions to be discussed during a meeting. They

will not even agree on a meeting if they do not know exactly what the agenda of the meeting will be. "Then they prepare for the meeting together and decide on the answers but if you happen to ask something else they get confused," Antero explained.

Many interviewees thought that the fact that decision-making is concentrated in the upper levels of the hierarchy passivizes the lower levels. Koreans were said to be extremely diligent workers when they are given precise instructions, but "if employees are given freedom to work in their own way to the best possible solution, then usually nothing happens," said Mikko. Several interviewees thought that in their experience a lack of independent and creative work was the main weakness of a Korean organization. That is why Finnish executives in Korea have to learn a different kind of style than they would use in Finland, where bossing people around is avoided and subordinates are given quite a lot of freedom. In Korea people want to be told what to do, and a soft touch by the management might be considered weakness.

> Here people are given orders more like in the army. I have had to learn a tougher way of speaking. What in Finland is considered as overdoing the boss's role in Korea needs sort of extra flogging. People expect a certain toughness from a person in a higher position. Otherwise it's a sign of weakness. (Mikko.)

From the experiences of the interviewees, one could get the idea of Korean working places usually following hierarchy quite obediently. "No one will ask why. When big brother just says so and if he is a couple of years older too, then you just have to obey him," said Ville. Mika wanted to make the point that if one starts to go solo in a working place, one might step on somebody's toes. In his experience Finns have often had problems with their Korean superiors for this reason and "many have wondered about why the boss blows his top for no reason." Thus Mika suggested one should proceed gently when, for example, trying to suggest changes in the work place, "to think about who is affected by them so that he wouldn't offend anyone and would understand what kind of consequences his behavior has." Ville, in contrast, was more ready to question the decisions of his superiors in the hierarchy: "It doesn't mean that if somebody older than me tells me to do something I would do just about anything." On the other hand, Ville was working in a company run by Finns so he did not have to directly confront this problem at work. Mikko emphasized that the un-Korean working culture in his Finnish-run office appealed not only to him but also to many Koreans. He thought that the weaknesses of the Korean system had now been identified and that in many respects European and American styles were becoming more popular also in Korea.

Generation and Gender Define Status—But for How Long?

Age is thought to be the most important element defining hierarchical relations in Korea. The older person is always higher than the younger one in the hierarchy and thus has to be treated with respect. Age is also valued at work: a superior is traditionally never younger than his subordinates, and in the hierarchical system promotions go with age. Several interviewees had observed how a young director or negotiator in Korea was rarely accorded other people's trust or respect. Juhani and Laura, among others, emphasized that Finnish companies sending their representatives to Korea should be aware of this.

It's like… it's been discussed in Finland too that when they send people abroad, especially management level people or people from sales and marketing, that they should learn the basic things. In Korea you can make huge mistakes at the very beginning, and the whole thing might finish right there. If you get a young chap, say, responsible for sales or management, they will take a look at those young chaps if not with downright contempt at least with suspicion. They just don't understand how a guy this young could be a manager. (Juhani.)

A thirty-something executive is not convincing to Koreans because they value age. Thus in Korea a young boss is still a rare exception. The interviewees thought that foreigners, however, might be given more freedom in this matter. For example, in the Korean context Mikko was in a relatively high position considering his young age (30 yrs.) but he said he had not had any authority problems despite some small friction at the beginning. Surely it was partly due to the organization being an international one, and Mikko noted that in a Korean organization he would have been unlikely to reach such a high level as he had now. Although this was also slowly changing too, the older generation especially had difficulty in accepting a boss younger than they were themselves. If a younger employee rises above an older one in the hierarchy, it means personal failure for the older employee and a public loss of face. Hence European firms usually send more experienced people to work in Korean organizations. On the other hand, Antero mentioned how the working community sometimes wishes a young person would join them. He gave an example of a Finnish company that was hiring staff for its Korean outlet. The Finnish company was interested in hiring a senior level person, but the Koreans preferred a younger person as a colleague, one who "wouldn't mess up the hierarchy patterns."

In addition to age, the hierarchical structure of Korean working life gives great significance to gender. If a young man has a hard time convincing his employees of his value in Korea, a young woman in the same position is just impossible to imagine. The interviewees described how Korean companies have women working for them and some have even been promoted in the hierarchy. However, in those cases the woman's task usually involves "more liberal circles." Especially the older generations of men are conservative and do not necessarily approve of a woman as a partner in cooperation. Thus, even if a company itself might be willing to promote a woman to a high position, it might not have the courage to do so because it might hurt its relations with those with whom it did business.

The female interviewees had also experienced gender discrimination. Laura described how in official meetings men shake hands and exchange business cards with each other but might ignore her totally. "Sometimes I feel like I'm air to them." Eeva described how especially at the beginning she was annoyed by how girls and women were treated as "chicks" whose only function was to please the men. She still felt angry when women were treated unequally because of their gender. "That I have learned to accept, you know, to shut up for the hierarchy. But the fact that you are a woman and therefore somehow looked down on is intolerable."

The interviewees nevertheless reported that Korean society has changed rapidly during the past few years: nowadays it is also possible for a woman to combine family and work. However, the interviewees reported that society still does not encourage women to enter the workforce: maternity leave is only three months long and the day-care system is very underdeveloped. However, Mikko noted that already most new civil servants are female and he said that when they get promoted by age in the future, there will be a lot more women at higher levels. Many interviewees

had also noted that men were usually stricter about hierarchy than women. This was evident in, for example, language-use, where men hold on to hierarchy more than women do and rarely leave out the respectful forms. Women do not benefit from the hierarchical system and thus are more ready to give it up. Hence the more women enter higher positions in working life, the more change in organizational structure and working culture might be expected. Many interviewees emphasized that change was imminent, since the younger generations were in many ways very different from the older Koreans who still believed in the power of the traditional hierarchical system. Most interviewees felt that the potential reduction in the importance of hierarchy in the future was a good thing, although a few added that it was unnecessary to totally eradicate it from Korean society.

4. DISCUSSION ABOUT HIERARCHY—IMAGINED OR NOT

The Finnish expatriates found hierarchy to be one of the most difficult characteristics of Korean culture to acclimatize to. Power—just like value and respect—should be based on skills and merit and not on age, status and gender. The same kind of results have been reported in earlier studies on expatriates in Korea (see e.g. Song et al. 2005; Merkin 2006) and can be understood through Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede 2001, 79-98; ibid. 2003). Hierarchy in the Korean language was experienced as not only difficult in itself to learn but also as the root of many problematic situations. Interestingly, the fact that poor knowledge of the language could cause unintended impoliteness goes against the popular faith in enthusiasm compensating for a lack of language proficiency and his contention that learning even a little of a native language might send a positive signal about the stranger.

Hierarchy was also seen to act in the use of time and in attitudes to plans. In a hierarchical system an order from above always overrides other plans and thus schedules are often revised at short notice. The Finns experienced this kind of uncertainty as disturbing and even impolite. This observation about time use can also be explained by different conceptions of time. The Finns can be seen as representing a monochronic concept of time and Koreans as living in a polychronic culture (Hall 1984). In monochronic cultures people try to proceed according to plans made well beforehand, and to carry out assignments one at a time from start to finish. In polychronic cultures numerous matters are dealt with simultaneously and assignments are put on hold if maintaining connections requires it. In working life different conceptions of time have been observed to manifest themselves in for example attitudes towards plannedness, punctuality, sticking to a schedule and cancelling or rearranging meetings. (Salo-Lee 1996; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988.) These same issues were mentioned by the interviewees in this study. However, the line between monochronic and polychronic cultures is vague and South Korea, for example, is occasionally (at least partly) defined as a monochronic culture (Gesteland 1999, 158). The monochronicity of Finns is also not altogether undisputed as Germans, for example, see Finns as being not punctual but very spontaneous: invitations are presented at the last minute and scheduled meetings are called off suddenly (Salo-Lee and Winter-Tarviainen 1995). This is a good reminder of the relativity of cultural differences and thus of classifications of societies under exclusive labels.

Finns' biggest problem with the hierarchical system was the culture of no discussion and the undemocratic decision-making. These experiences of Finns coincide with the impression that emerges from much previous research. According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), in countries of great power distance superiors and employees feel unequal, and this can be seen in the fact that

subordinates never criticize the word of their superior. Lee (2002, 13-14) has claimed that leadership based on Confucianism disables initiative. Also the Finns who were interviewed for this study criticized the lack of initiative of Korean employees and felt that the gap between superiors and their subordinates weakened the efficiency of work.

According to Hofstede (2001, 102-110), the hierarchical relationship between subordinates and superiors becomes evident in a great emotional distance which, among other things, means that those lower down the hierarchy do not approach their superiors but the superiors contact their subordinates if they are needed. The Finns also questioned this aspect of Korean working culture. However, one of the interviewees noted the opposite kind of behavior. This interviewee had observed professors and university students spending time together in a restaurant despite the hierarchy, almost like close friends. Although it is just one case, it leads to a interesting question: can there be closeness and warm relationships within a strong hierarchy also? There is no logical reason to claim that strong hierarchy means less warmth in relationships. The same thing is discussed in Myllymäki's (2007) research, where the Japanese, who are considered to be very hierarchical, often experienced the relationship between a superior and a subordinate as very close.

How authentically this study has managed to capture the experiences of expatriate Finns in Korea is left for the reader to decide, but perhaps a more interesting question is in what way the experiences relate to the "reality" of Korean working life and how much they reflect the conceptions and discourses that we have formed through socialization, education and the media. Hence a very essential question that a reader and an analyzer of our sort of study must ask is the connection between reported experience and reality. We think it is safe to claim that the uniformity of the experiences in this study can be partly explained by the participants' uniformly internalized and digested imagery of Asian and especially Korean culture. In this imagery Asian cultures are essentially hierarchical in nature. When for exampel Finns have learned that Asians are collective, harmony-oriented and hierarchical, they are more inclined to interpret the reality to suit their preconceived notions—even if there is a discrepancy between the observations and the preceding cultural knowledge. Thus one needs to consider how much the results of this study actually tell us about hierarchy in Korean work environments in reality and how much they tell us about the way outsiders experience and interpret it.

Western stereotypes of Asian culture probably function at least to some extent as a shared source of interpretation and influence people's observations. It may very well be that different situations evoke uniform interpretations that confirm and reinforce a specific stereotype. If one has already decided that Koreans are hierarchical, one might interpret situations accordingly, whatever the actual characteristics of the situation. Alternatively perhaps the authors of this paper subconsciously filtered the data that emerged in it to support the common stereotype of Asians or Koreans, whether it be a pure delusion or a fact. It may thus be that a common discursive formation (see .e.g. Foucault 1971) explains at least in part the uniform experiences of the interviewees.

As for the Koreans' appreciation of hierarchy and of harmonious human relationships based on duty and inequality in the traditional Confucian society, it still seems to go on although according to the literature and interviews there are signs of change. Loyalty, obedience and respect for one's elders have long been the aspects of hierarchy Koreans value the most. However, during recent decades Korean society has changed drastically and allowed "foreign values" (often labeled as "Western" or "American") to enter the culture through the media and travel. The importance of traditional Confucian values, such as hierarchy, have recently been discussed among Korean aca-

demics and scholars have questioned their definitions, meanings and worth, as well as their suitability in a globalizing society under pressure from so-called modern values. Koreans have wondered whether individualism will inevitably triumph over collectivism or if universalism will replace particularism in relations with other people. (See e.g. Song, Hale and Rao 2005; Lee 2002; Hyun 2001.) How this will come about in practice, and how people will experience it, is quite another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applegate, James L. and Howard E. Sypher (1988), 'A Constructivist Theory of Communication and Culture', in Young Y. Kim and William B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication. International and Intercultural Communication Annual, Volume XII*, Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 41–65.

Chung, Kae H., Hak Chong Lee and Ku Hyun Jung (1997), *Korean Management: Global Strategy and Cultural Transformation*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Coyner, Thomas L. and Song-Hyon Jang (2007), *Mastering Business in Korea: A Practical Guide*, Seoul: Seoul Selection.

Crehan, Kate A. F. (2002), Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1971), *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock.

Gesteland, Richard R. (1999), *Cross-cultural Business Behavior,* Copenhagen Business School Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1984), *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hofstede, Geert F. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across the Nations*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hofstede, Geert F. and Michael H. Bond (1988), 'The Confucius Connection: From Cultural Roots to Economic Growth', *Organizational Dynamics*, 16: 4, pp. 4–21.

Hyun, Kyoung Ja (2001), 'Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 25: 2, pp. 203-229.

Jensen, Iben (2003), 'The Practice of Intercultural Communication —Reflections for Professionals in Cultural Meetings', *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, http://www. immi.se/intercultural, accessed 20 March 2008.

Kauhanen, Erkki (2002), 'Lännen sankari on idän luuseri', [The hero of the west is a loser in the east.] *Tiede* 5, pp. 18–25.

Kim, Choong Soon (2007), *Kimchi and IT. Tradition and Transformation in Korea*, Seoul: Ilchokak.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003), 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of
Historical and Methodological Considerations', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:3, pp. 1-29.

Lee, Seung Hwan (2002), 'A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism', *Korea Journal*, 42: 4, pp. 5–26.

Merkin, Rebecca (2006), 'Power Distance and Facework Strategies', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 35: 2, pp. 139–160.

Myllymäki, Sami (2007), 'Kansallisen kulttuurin vaikutus suomalaisessa, amerikkalaisessa ja japanilaisessa johtajuudessa' [Influence of national culture in Finnish, American and Japanese leadership], Master's thesis for the Department of Management and Organization, University of Vasa, Finland.

Paaso, Marika (2008), *Korea kasvoista kasvoihin: Suomalaisten ekspatriaattien kokemuksia eteläkorealaisen työelämän arvoista ja vuorovaikutuksesta* [Korea face-to-face: The experiences of Finnish expatriates on South Korean values and interaction in work life]. *M*aster's thesis in Speech Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Park, Myung-seok and Moon-soo Kim (1992), 'Communication Practices in Korea', *Communication Quarterly*, 40: 4, pp. 398–404.

Robinson, James H. (1996), 'Professional Communication in Korea: Playing Things by Eye', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 39: 3, pp. 129–134.

Shim, Theresa Youn-ja; Min-Sun Kim and Judith N. Martin (2008), *Changing Korea: Understanding Culture and Communication*, New York: Peter Lang.

Singelis, Theodore M., Harry C. Triandis, Dharm P. S. Bhawuk and Michele J. Gelfand (1995), 'Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism: A Theoretical and Measurement Refinement', *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 29: 2, pp. 240–275.

Song, Yong-Jin, Claudia L. Hale and Nagesh Rao (2005), 'The South Korean Chief Negotiator: Balancing Traditional Values and Contemporary Business Practices', *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 5: 3, pp. 313–328.

Triandis, Harry C. (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism,* Boulder: Westview Press.

Yum, June Ock (1988), 'The Impact of Confucianism on Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Patterns in East Asia', *Communication Monographs*, 55: 4, pp. 374–388.

APPENDIX

Background information of interviewees.

Alias	Age (m/f)	Time in Korea (current/planned total)	Position	Working language	Organization
Petri	30 (m)	2 months/3 months	Subordinate	English	Korean
Tapio	36 (m)	4.5 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	English	Korean
Mika	30 (m)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korea, English	Korean
Ville	26 (m)	2 yrs / 2 yrs	Subordinate	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Antero	61 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior	English, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Eeva	39 (m)	12 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, English	Korean
Juhani	45 (m)	6 months / undefined	Superior	English	Finno-Korean
Laura	30 (f)	4 yrs / undefined	Subordinate	Korean, Finnish	Finno-Korean
Mikko	30 (m)	6 yrs / undefined	Superior and subordinate	Korean, English	Korean-EU
Timo	33 (m)	6 months / 1 yrs	Subordinate	English	Korean