

Korean Culture And Its Influence on Business Practice in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

Different countries have different cultures from the influence of its religions, custom, norms and tradition. South Korea has its unique cultures and these cultures influence people's daily life as well as its business practices, especially in international business. It is essential for foreigners or multinational companies in South Korea to understand those cultures and use them appropriately to work better with Korean employees or partners. This paper mainly focuses on six parts of the Korean culture, which are Kibun, Inhwa, the power distance and hierarchy, Confucianism, the personal relationships in doing business, and business etiquette in Korea. All of these critical aspects of the Korean culture have strong influences on the way how to do business in South Korea. Without understanding them, it is hard especially for foreigners and foreign companies to do their business in Korea effectively and efficiently and have all successes in their business in Korea.

Keywords: Korean Culture, Hofstede Cultural Dimension, Confucianism, Korean Business Etiquette, K-Type Management

INTRODUCTION

South Korea, with the official name of Republic of Korea (ROK), is located in East Asia. It has nine provinces and six special cities, with the population of approximately 50 million. It has long history, and even though it has interactions with China and Japan for a long time, it generated its unique culture and developed its own tradition. Indeed, the Korean culture is very different from not only Western cultures, but also neighboring countries' cultures in every aspect of culture. Even though some components of the culture are similar to Chinese and Japanese ones, cultural differences make the way to do business in Korea different from other countries, especially from China or Japan. This is the reason why this paper will examine some of major aspects of unique Korean cultures which give significant impact on doing business in Korea. Specifically, this paper will focus on six critical aspects of Korean culture, including Kibun, Inhwa, the power distance/hierarchy, Confucianism, the personal relationships in doing business and business etiquette in Korea. Although there are more cultural aspects that influence its business practices in Korea, those six items of Korean culture are the most important ones regarding doing business in Korea by foreigners or multinational companies.

CRITICAL ASPECTS OF KOREAN CULTURE FOR BUSINESS PRACTICES IN KOREA

Kibun

As one of the most important key aspect of the Korean culture, which influences the way to do business in South Korea significantly, *Kibun* does not have direct English translation. It basically means a mood or feeling of balance and good behavior (Chaney and Martin, 2011). In South Korea, people are continuously trying to maintain the environment of stable *Kibun*, both in personal life and business world. People are willing to maintain their own *Kibun* as well as others'. It is not polite to disturb others' *Kibun*. For this aspect of Korean culture, it is much about the feelings of others (Southerton, 2008). People tend to do things with the respect of others' opinions and feelings, and sometime avoid saying "no" or bad news, to prevent hurting others' *Kibun*. Knowing this culture is very important to maintain the harmony, and especially in the business world. In the business world, Korean people always make an attempt to be polite, friendly, and do things with only the best of intentions. They do not want to lose others' face by criticizing them

in public. In business, a manager's *Kibun* is damaged if his subordinates do not show proper respect. A subordinate's *Kibun* is damaged if his/her manager criticizes him/her in public (Southerton, 2008). Therefore, it is very likely that Korean people would show their different opinions or feelings by giving positive or ambiguous answers. People need to read from their non-verbal or body languages to understand the actual meaning of the answers.

It is common for Korean people to understand each other; however, it is very easy to cause misunderstanding and/or confusing to foreigners. For example, Americans usually like to do business directly. They present their opinions and feelings by giving direct and clear answers. Sometime, they even seem argumentative to those who are from other countries. In this case, there is a very high chance that Americans would hurt Koreans' *Kibun*, and thus, it is hard for the two parties to achieve agreement on business. Therefore, it is very important for foreigners, like Americans, to understand the culture of *Kibun*, and be prepared and practice picking up their non-verbal and body languages to know the actual meaning. On the other hand, Americans should try to avoid too argumentative or aggressive when doing even small business with South Koreans.

In South Korea, the way of paying attention to others' non-verbal and body languages, as well as the tones of what they say is *Nunchi*. The translation of *Nunchi* is eye measure. In other words, *Nunchi* is the ability to determine another person's *Kibun* by using the eye (Southerton, 2008). As mentioned above, people need to learn from others' non-verbal and body languages, as well as the tones to get the real meaning of what they said. *Nunchi* is like a sixth sense, but it is more looking at visual clues and understanding what the person is really saying. For example, if you are a boss of Koreans telling them that they are doing a certain thing wrong in their work, and they may take this to mean that you are not satisfied with all their work. Another example could be: A Korean may say to you that "Are you hungry?" He/she is actually saying "I am hungry, can we eat now?" So if you answer "No", it would hurt his/her *Kibun*. The correct answer would be to ask the Korean what he/she wants to eat (Southerton, 2008).

From the discussion above, we can tell that *Kibun* is an essential part of South Korean culture, and foreigners or foreign companies must learn to understand it and know how to react to this unique culture, in order to corporate better with South Koreans.

Inhwa

Another key principle of South Korean business culture is *Inhwa*, which is defined as harmony. As a collectivist society, consensus is an important element in promoting and maintaining harmony in South Korea. *Inhwa* was drawn from Confucian beliefs, and stresses harmony between people, especially unequals. Usually Koreans like to give positive answers and avoid or reluctant to give direct refusals. They do not want to hurt the harmonious environment by giving negative answers or refusing others to cause face losing. *Inhwa* usually exists in unequals of rank, prestige and power. In the business world, this term requires that subordinates be loyal to their superiors and that superiors be concerned with the well-being of subordinates (Alston, 1989).

In South Korea, people believe that a person owes total loyalty to parents and authority figures, notably rulers, elders, and organizational leaders, as well as those who are in high hierarchical rankings in their hierarchy. Therefore, workers see themselves as they owe the same loyalty to their employers and supervisors as to their parents and family elders. In the business world, Koreans show their respect to their employers and supervisors, and usually avoid conflicts as much as they can, if they have different opinions. They would like to obey the employers' and supervisors' orders to show their loyalty, and expect to get confirmation and satisfaction from their employers and supervisors. On the other hand, their employers and supervisors are usually concerned with the well-being of the subordinates. It means that they avoid blaming or criticizing their subordinates in public. Neither of the parties would like to do anything to lose others' face, which would cause disturbing the harmony.

However, there is no such concept like *Inhwa* in other countries, such as the United States. In the United States, people are not considering that conflicts with others' opinions are disturbing the harmonious environment. They believe that they have the right and freedom to show their different opinions and feelings to others, including their employers and supervisors. They do not have as strong loyalty as Koreans have in their work places. They believe everyone in the work place is equal, and feel free to share their thoughts. On the other hand, the supervisors are willing to consider the subordinates' opinions as well. They usually do not take their suggestions or different thoughts as a challenge or offence

to their authority or hierarchical position. Therefore, it is very easy for Americans to offend or disturb the harmony by showing their “conflicts”, if they lack the knowledge of *Inhwa*.

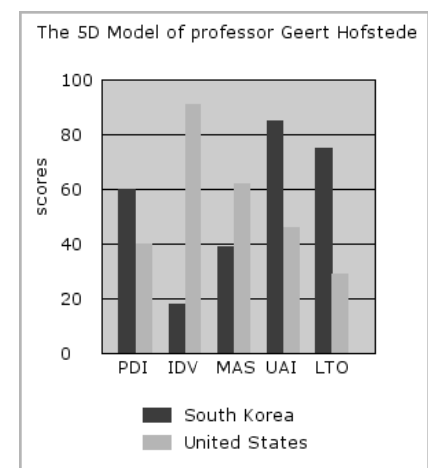
Because of *Inhwa* in the business world, the management style is categorized as “clan management,” a situation facilitated by the fact that many of Korean senior managers in a specific firm are related by family ties (Alston, 1989). While this atmosphere is not common in the United States, Americans pursue their own careers based on their interests, regardless what business the family have. It even has some regulations regarding the limitation of the same career the family members have. For example, if the father works in a bank for a certain level, like executive vice president, then his children are not allowed to work in the same company. Therefore, *Inhwa*, or total loyalty at work and clan management, is really rare in American cultures. It is hard for Americans to understand and even work well with Korean companies. They need to keep in mind that it is important to show the respect to the high-level managers, and avoid direct conflicts, especially in public. Knowing the concept of *Inhwa* would help American companies improve the collaboration with Korean ones.

Another aspect of *Inhwa* is that each party has responsibility to support other persons or parties and make them happy. The latter concept is consistent with *Kibun*, which means the feelings. As a result, Koreans do not like to hear bad news, or they would wait until the late afternoon to deliver the bad news if they have to. Thus, the recipient will not have his/her whole day disrupted (Alston, 1989). Therefore, by knowing this aspect of *Inhwa*, Americans or American companies would avoid the disruption by notifying Koreans or Korean companies the bad news at the late of the day, such as the disagreement on their contract, the updates/changes of the products Korean companies manufacture, etc. Besides delivering the bad news later, Koreans avoid giving negative information outright. They may announce the negative news in an indirect and ambiguous way. This would mislead foreigners or foreign companies and thus, they need to read/listen carefully to get the hidden meanings of the *Inhwa*-related report.

Power Distance and Hierarchy in South Korea

South Korea is a country with high power distance and hierarchy. Usually, the eldest person in the gathering initiates activities, such as entering a room, greeting and eating. The person of lower status bows to the one higher (Cho and Yoon, 2001; Lee, Brett and Park, 2012). Similar to other traditional societies, for example, the higher positioned persons and senior members are expected to seat in the center or head position of the room for meal, and always get their food first served. Regarding the order, usually the elders and the one with higher hierarchy rankings go first to get food in a buffet restaurant. Youngers and juniors always show their respect by serving after them. Another atmosphere to show the power distance is the title addressing. In South Korea, people do not address each other by first names, as in the United States, but by their titles. This atmosphere even exists among students. For example, freshmen and sophomores usually show their respect to juniors and seniors by calling them brothers and sisters, and obey their orders, which are reasonable of course. On the other hand, juniors and seniors are supposed to take care of freshmen and sophomores, and set examples for them. Not like in the United States, students have the freedom to choose what courses to take, and thus, it is very common for a class mixing with different level students. Students even address their professor by their first names, which is rare and rude in South Korea.

According to the study in Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions, South Korea has a relative high Power Distance Index (PDI), with the score of 64. As stated in Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions, Power Distance Index (PDI) that is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. This represents inequality (more versus less), but defined from below, not from above. It suggests that a society’s level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders. Power and inequality, of course, are extremely fundamental facts of any society and anybody with some international experience will be aware that all societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others’ (Sama and Papamarcos, 2000). Compared with the Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions of United States, South Korea has



higher power distance (Chaney and Martin, 2011; Sama and Papamarcos, 2000). The comparison chart is showing on the right. This indicates that the society has higher level of inequality, and individuals and society in South Korea are more unequal than those in the United States. The comparison of United States and South Korean Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions explains the atmosphere what the American or other foreigners face in their daily business with Korean business partners or employees. Many foreigners who visit Korea first time are usually surprised that most Koreans bow to others, especially elders, and that younger persons need to wait until the elders and those who with high hierarchy rankings get their food (Lee, Brett and Park, 2012).

The high power distance/hierarchy does not only exist in the personal life, but also in the business world. Besides the way of name addressing, negotiations with Koreans also show the power distance. For example, senior Korean officials will not deal comfortably with a junior member of an American negotiating team, no matter how expert he/she may be. Koreans are extremely sensitive about titles and status, and those Americans who wish to deal with senior Korean officials should have senior rank themselves (Alston, 1989). Therefore, in order to collaborate well with South Korean companies, American ones must be aware of the higher power distance, and show their respect by sending the right officials to successfully negotiate the deals. On the other hand, the senior manager is usually the decision maker. Junior staff may possess more knowledge of the issues in hand, so it is important to engage with them as well. They may not offer an opinion, however, until the senior member of staff has passed judgment (Chen, 2004). Therefore, American companies should focus on the decisions made by the Korean senior managers, and at the same time, maintain the contacts with the junior staff. It is suggested for the American companies to send documents, such as proposals, company brochures, and marketing materials, to the decision makers as well as the junior staff in advance. This would show the competencies of the American companies.

Korean Confucianism and Collectivism

Confucianism permeates the Korean life. It influences both the personal lives and business world in a high extent. Confucianism is an ancient Chinese way of thought that has spread through much of East Asia, and it is often described as a religion, which is not completely right. It is indeed a way of life. Kung Fu-Tzu, known in Western countries as Confucius, lived in China around 500 BC. He was a teacher who offered his students a system of order during a period when China was disrupted by warfare (Kim, 2009; Smyth, Wang and Hwee, 2000). He had five moral disciplines to govern the five human relationships: (1) Justice and righteousness should mark the relations between sovereign and subject; (2) There should be proper rapport between father and son; (3) Separation of function between husband and wife; (4) The younger should give precedence to the elder; and (5) Faith and trust should reign over relationships between friends (Kim, 2009; Smyth, Wang and Hwee, 2000). In short, the five disciplines indicate the five relationships of ruler and subject, parents and children, husband and wife, brothers and sisters, and friend and friend. Confucianism stresses duty, loyalty, honor, filial piety, respect for age and seniority, and sincerity (Cho and Yoon, 2001; Von Gilnow, Huo and Lowe, 1999).

In general, Confucianism influences South Korean society very much in many different ways, such as the status, social contacts, relationships with others, etc. For example, Korean status is determined by age, gender, education, family background, wealth, occupation, and political ideology. Social contacts determine success. Genealogy and backgrounds are important and determine how people are treated in the hierarchical society (Chaney and Martin, 2011). South Koreans tend to be very friendly, and their culture has a strong emphasis on group ties. An individual is expected to consider the benefits and interests for the whole group/community which he/she belongs to. The Korean society, as a collectivist society like many other Asian countries, requires people living in a harmonious “family”. Consistent with the concept of *Kibun*, people are not supposed to embarrass others or cause others losing face in public. People are expected to avoid disturbing others’ *Kibun* by considering the “family” as a whole. In other words, South Koreans are generally more group-oriented and collectivist. This is also shown in the comparison Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions chart of United States and South Korea.

As shown in the chart above in this paper, the Individualism (IDV) of South Korea, with the score of 18, is much lower than that of United States, with the score of 91. According to Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions, Individualism (IDV) on the one side versus its opposite, collectivism, that is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups.

On the individualist side, it was found societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. On the collectivist side, it was also found societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts and grandparents) which continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. The word “collectivism” in this sense has no political meaning: it refers to the group, not to the state. Again, the issue addressed by this dimension is an extremely fundamental one, regarding all societies in the world (Sama and Papamarcos, 2000; Yang, 2006). The score of 18 indicates that South Korea is a very collectivist society. This is manifest in a close long-term commitment to the member “group”, be that a family, extended family, or extended relationships. Loyalty in a collectivist culture is paramount, and over-rides most other societal rules and regulations. The society fosters strong relationships where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group (Aiken, 1995; Sama and Papamarcos, 2000; Yang, 2006).

The impact of this culture to South Korean business manifests especially in decision making and negotiations. Usually, it takes longer for South Koreans to make a final decision, because all of the members need to consider others’ opinions and values. The decision is based on the careful consideration of the interests of the whole team, and at the same time, maintaining the stable *Kibun* environment. Therefore, when negotiating with South Koreans, Americans or other Westerners should be aware of this culture, and be patient during the negotiation process, or be prepared that the negotiation process may take more than one meetings to complete the deals. They should also appreciate the collectivism, and think in terms of the good of the whole team, to successfully negotiate business with Koreans.

Personal Relationships for Doing Business

In South Korea, the personal relationships are essential for doing business, and usually established before the beginning of the business process. In order to be successful, it is vital to establish good personal relationships based on mutual trust and benefit. Korean business culture is firmly grounded in respectful rapport (Southerton, 2008). In order to establish the personal relationships, it is very helpful to be introduced by a mutual friend or acquaintance at the appropriate level. Once the foreign company is successfully introduced to the Korean one, it is important to send the relevant documents, such as proposals, company brochures, etc. to get the contacts. After establishing the personal relationship, it is suggested for the foreign company to maintain the relationship by continuously contacting the Korean company. Therefore, time should be allocated for this process, particularly during the first meeting, which is frequently used to simply establish rapport and build trust. Once good, solid relations have been recognized in South Korea, continuous reinforcement and maintenance is vital (Chen, 2004; Kim and Briscoe, 1997). Foreign companies should be patient doing business with Korean ones, and take the business as a long-term one instead of one-time deal. The better and stronger the personal relationship with the Korean company, the more successful the partnership would be.

To more understand the personal relationships in South Korea, foreigners and foreign companies should be aware that it is a collectivist society. People are not comfortable doing business by individuals. In other words, Koreans are not willing to do business with a stranger without friends’ introduction and support. By introducing and establishing the personal relationships, South Koreans would be more willing to consider the foreign company as a part of the group, and thus, they would collaborate for the interests and benefits of the whole group.

South Korean Business Etiquette

South Korea has its own unique business etiquette, and all of the etiquette is influenced by their unique cultures in some extent. Acquiring this culture is essential for foreign companies to do better business with South Korea. South Korean unique business etiquette mainly exhibits in six aspects, which are introduction, greeting, business cards, business meeting, K-Type management style, and gift giving.

In South Korea, introduction by a friend or a person in a company that you are working with is very important. Meeting the right people in a company almost always depends on having the right introduction (Chaney and Martin, 2011). As discussed before in this paper, personal relationships are one of the key cultures in doing business in Korea. Introduction by a third party is one of the personal relationships. Koreans are more comfortable doing business with those who they know and trust. Introduction by a third party implies to Koreans that the person/company they will work with are trustable, and thus, the business relationships between them could be more solid and last longer.

Greeting

In South Korea, greeting is one of the steps that businessmen do not want to skip. It usually happens after the introduction. The usual greeting between men is a bow, accompanied by a handshake. To show respect, the left hand is placed below the right forearm while shaking hands. Women do not shake hands as frequently as men (Chaney and Martin, 2011). During greeting, maintaining the eye contact is appreciated. Many foreigners who had some experience of doing business with Koreans said that they learned the unique greeting culture during their stay with Koreans. Every time when they met with their Korean partners and colleagues, every Korean bowed to each other, and then followed by a handshake. The bowing also happened in restaurants whenever they visited restaurants with their Korean partners and co-workers. Every host or owner bowed to customers when they went inside. The bowing is one of the most surprising cultures to most foreigners.

Business Cards

South Koreans attach importance to business cards exchange, with their certain way. Usually, after the handshake, business cards are exchanged between professionals during initial encounters. The cards are presented and received with both hands. It is recommended that foreigners obtain bilingual business cards with Korean on one side and English on the other side. When you present your business card to Koreans, please keep in mind that the Korean language side should be facing up, with your both hands. People are expected to handle the business card by their right hand, if they need to pass the card to others. After receiving the card, it is suggested to nod your head to show your respect and thanks. Once you receive it, try not to stare too hard at those business cards as it will come across as impolite and/or possibly offend the Korean businessmen (Southerton, 2008).

Business Meeting

Because business is based on personal relationships and trust in South Korea, usually it takes longer to complete a deal. Therefore, it usually takes several meetings to finish the business. The first meeting is usually a start of the business-relationship building process. Very little might be discussed which relates to the actual business in hand for a while, with most time being spent exchanging pleasantries, discussing travel and other small trivia (Chen, 2004; Pelham, 1997). American companies, however, value time as one of the most important things, and usually get the business done as soon as possible even in the first meeting. Meeting with South Koreans would sometimes be a frustrating cultural shock for Americans if they don't understand the process of developing real business with Koreans. It is important for Americans not to show impatience or irritation at this stage. It is suggested for American companies that they could view the first meeting as an essential first step or investment in creating a rewarding, trustable and long-term business relationship.

Regarding the negotiation in business meetings, foreign companies, like Americans, need to keep in mind that the society is a high hierarchy society. Therefore, they need to know who the decision maker is, and contact the person prior to the actual meeting. Usually, the senior managers are the decision makers, and junior staff is playing a role as supportive. American companies should focus more on what the senior managers think about during the negotiation. However, this does not mean that they could ignore the junior staff. It is recommended for American companies to keep contacts with the whole team, because one of the management styles of South Koreans is team-oriented (Aiken, Kim, Hwang and Lu, 1995; Chen, 2004).

K-Type Management Style

Because South Korea is a society with high power distance and hierarchy, the management style is quite different from that in the United States or other many Western countries, which has lower power distance. Therefore, Korean management style, called K-Type management, consists of top down decision-making, paternalistic leadership, clan management, personal loyalty, compensation based on seniority and merit ranking, high mobility of workers. The organization structure of companies are highly centralized and formalized with authority concentrated in senior levels. Major decisions go through a formal procedure of approval from top levels of management (Aiken, Kim, Hwang and Lu, 1995; Alston, 1989; Chen, 2004; Cho and Yoon, 2001). When working with Korean companies, American ones

should value the decisions made by the senior managers. As discussed earlier in this paper, Korean society values harmony as one of its most important honors, both in personal life and business world. American companies should keep in mind that they need to avoid conflicts, especially in public, with senior managers. They do not want to disturb the harmony to take the risk of ruining the business.

Gift Giving

In South Korea, gift giving is part of doing business. It is done to secure favors and build relationships (Southerton, 2008). Gift giving in South Korea is not seen as a bribery or corruption. Normally, business gifts should be of good quality but inexpensive. The gifts from the givers' home country would be much appreciated and impressive, regardless of the price. The gifts should be wrapped before giving, and opened in private rather than in the presence of the giver. When handing out more than one gift, the giver(s) need to make sure that senior members are given gifts with greater value than junior members, because respect for seniors is everything in South Korea (Aiken, Kim, Hwang and Lu, 1995; Chen, 2004). When you are given a gift, it is polite to seem to refuse the gift a couple times before accepting.

Those items discussed above are part of the unique business etiquette in South Korea. Understanding them before doing business with Koreans, is very important and critical. Besides those items of Korean business etiquette, there is some other business etiquette that foreigners and foreign companies should pay attention to. For example, punctuality is important in South Korea, however, top-level executives may occasionally be a little late for meetings or appointments (Chaney, 2011). While Americans are expected to be on time, no matter what management level the person is. Another different culture is that the behaviors at working places are stricter compared with the United States. For example, putting your feet on a chair or table is considered rude, while it is OK to do so in the United States, if in a casual situation. Therefore, there are many lessons for foreigners to learn about how to do business with Koreans, and one of the ways to do so is learning Korean unique culture prior to actually doing business with Koreans or in Korea.

CONCLUSIONS

More and more foreigners and foreign companies have been doing business with Korean and Korean companies for the last decade as many Korean companies become major players in global markets with their impressive performance. As foreigners and foreign companies are more involved in business with Korean and Korean companies, they would often face some difficulties of handling their daily business with Korean and Korean business people because of different expectation, practices and behaviors in each stage of business. Most of those differences come from cultural differences between Korea and other countries. Although Korea is regarded as one of the most internationalized or Westernized countries overall in Asia, many Koreans still keep their traditional culture very much and follow their tradition, custom and practice developed from their culture significantly in doing business. So, understanding the Korean culture, tradition and custom helps foreigners and foreign companies do their business with Korean and/or in Korea efficiently and effectively and finally enjoy all kinds of successes with their business.

Foreigners and foreign companies will be more familiar with the way how to do business with Koreans and in Korea if they understand more about the Korean value system based on its culture and recognize the impact of those six parts of South Korean unique cultures to its business. The more foreigners understand the Korean culture, the more they could enjoy their business with Koreans and in Korea.

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