Cultural Analysis, South Korea

This analysis is based on a two-day visit to Suwon, South Korea, a city of about one million inhabitants near Seoul, and a one-day visit to Seoul, the capital city, population over ten million.

1. Ascription/Achievement

There were many indicators that Korea is heavily ascriptive. One contact there told me that he was unable to get a job he applied for because he would have been older than his boss, which is considered unacceptable. He said that the first thing the interviewer asked him was “Given your age, why would you want this position?” He indicated that this is a common problem for people who, like him, want to change careers in mid-life. Because employers insist that superiors be older than their juniors, an older person can’t easily hire into an entry-level position to learn the ropes. My contact mentioned a prominent website that matches job hunters with employers, which specifies for each job the birth date after which an applicant must have been born in order to apply. He also said that his own employer, an American, has encouraged him to undergo additional education in the U.S., but that this would be pointless for him because he would not be able to enter a Korean company as a new hire due to his age.

A second example is a Korean contact who speaks both Korean and English at work. He has a colleague who is ethnically Korean but was raised in Canada. This colleague mentioned to him that she liked his English better than his Korean because his Korean was insulting to juniors. He explained to me that in Korean, there are many levels of language, depending on the social position of each person relative to others. Because he is the senior person in the office, his Korean language reflects his high status and the low status of others when he speaks to them, and it sounds insulting to his juniors and to his Canadian-raised colleague. English language, however, does not have this hierarchical structure, and when he speaks English with his employees, he sounds more neutral and respectful towards them. This suggests that the respect for rank and position in Korean language reflects the traditional ascriptive culture, which is impossible to disregard when speaking Korean, and serves to maintain a high level of ascription in Korea.

2. Universalist/Particularist

Universalism was consistently in evidence. An example is a parking lot at a cultural exhibit, where there was a guard telling people where to park. The
parking lot was very large and almost completely empty. We were directed to a particular spot, next to another car whose passengers were getting in and out and unpacking the car. Because they were standing in the parking space designated for us, we couldn’t move into it, but when the driver hesitated, the guard motioned him vigorously to go into that one space. There were hundreds of spaces around, but the guard wanted us to park in that space only.

In Seoul, there was a campaign to get people to take their trash with them rather than throw it in trash cans that the city would have to collect, so they removed trash cans in public areas. This was a new policy when I was there because one of the locals I was with explained it to another one. There were throngs of people in the area where we were walking, walking shoulder to shoulder. But there was almost no trash on the streets despite the fact that there was nowhere to get rid of it. People took it home with them to dispose of.

3. Diffuse/Specific

It was clear from my conversations with people that relationships are very important in Korea. Social networks are very important in business and other aspects of life. I was surprised to learn that elementary school reunions are popular—people keep up with people they have known since early childhood. People prefer to do business with people they know and family-owned businesses are common.

A colleague told me he was asked to hire a business contact’s daughter during a rough time for her. She had broken up with her fiancé and needed to figure out her future. He had hired her into a position of considerable responsibility, without advertising for the position or interviewing other candidates. These examples indicate diffuseness and an emphasis on relationships and personal networks.

4. Individualist/Collectivist

Students in my lectures commented that when dealing with western companies, they sometimes felt rushed in making decisions. They said western companies seemed to think whoever was representing them could make decisions on his/her own and that it was difficult to explain that they needed to consult many people within their companies to gain consensus before making a decision. This group decision making is characteristic of a collectivist orientation.
I saw a television show that featured a “mass game” by Samsung employees. There were at least 1,000 of them, staging something like a U.S. marching band formation, but much more complex. They formed complicated, moving pictures that changed colors and it went on for a long time. It clearly represented a huge investment of time by many people. I looked it up on the internet, and employees volunteer for this project, and competition is high among groups. This kind of coordinated activity suggests a collectivist approach to work activity.

5. Short-Term/Long-Term

In Seoul and Suwon, new buildings proliferated. This isn’t surprising, given Korea’s economic rise from poverty since World War II, but all of them seem to be built in a modern style, without design features that reflect or harmonize with older buildings. This is true in both Suwon, population 1,000,000, and Seoul, a major city where skyscrapers would be expected. There’s a neighborhood in Seoul that still has old shops selling traditional crafts, but it’s primarily a tourist attraction. People wear modern, western clothes, with traditional Korean clothes worn only for weddings and funerals. A contact told me that Koreans are looking to the future and want to “move out of the past”. He characterized Suwon’s local folk village and museum of a historic castle there as “boring”.

A U.S. colleague who trains Korean entrepreneurs commented that Korean inventors often don’t have the “psychological stamina” necessary to develop relationships with large international companies. They tend to expect things to move quickly, and when complications arise they become frustrated and apathetic. These features suggest a short-term orientation, with little emphasis on the past, and the present and future most clearly in focus.

6. Indirect/Direct

Students in my class were quite indirect in their interaction with me. They didn’t respond much to my questions and asked few of their own. One of them wanted to let me know that the exercises I was assigning were uncomfortable for her, but she prefaced her complaint with a long social discussion and ended it with the comment that it was good for her to have a different kind of work to do in class. Also, we talked about stereotypes of Americans, and they gave only positive examples. When I asked about negative stereotypes, they said they couldn’t think of any. When I offered some examples, they laughed, but appeared nervous.
In a museum, I was looking at exhibits with a recorded tour that I listened to through earphones. After each exhibit I was instructed to move to the next and push a button to hear about it. The instructions, when telling me to start the next recording, were “How about pressing the button to hear about the next exhibit?” These are the most indirect instructions I’ve ever received. The fact that they were translated into English in this form suggests a very indirect orientation.

7. Neutral/Expressive

People were very quiet in public situations—on trains, in my hotel and on the street. The hotel was almost silent, and although my room was near the elevator, which worried me initially, I never heard a sound from people getting on or off, as is common in the U.S.

People were also subdued in their physical movements, with few gestures. When they ran, they kept their arms at their sides. I noticed that people were more talkative and emotive in casual situations, but even then not particularly noisy.

8. Monochronic/Polychronic

Public transportation was very predictable, and people were on time for meetings. I didn’t notice excessive attention to watches or hurrying through meals, but activities seemed to begin and end on schedule.

There was no multitasking during my presentations to the entrepreneurs there. People waited till breaks to check their phones or computers. They didn’t get up and leave to take phone calls. These behaviors suggest a monochronic orientation.