

Vertical Social Relations : A Diagnosis of Korean Society

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The mountains, rivers, coasts, seas and the four distinct seasons that nurture them, have played important roles in forming basic thoughts and relationships among the people of the Korean peninsula since earliest times.

Despite the changes, there are those who maintain that Korea – for all the high-rise buildings, superhighways and technological advances – still is one of the most Confucian of all countries, holding beneath the surface to a long cherished approach to the proper way of life.

Traditionally, in a Korean home the head of the family was regarded as the source of authority. All family members were expected to do what was ordered or desired by the family head. Strict instructions were to be obeyed without demur. It would have been unthinkable for children or grandchildren to place themselves in opposition to the wishes of their elders. Obedience to the superior was regarded as natural and one of the most admirable virtues. On the other hand, it was understood that the patriarch of the family would be fair in dealing with the family members.

The adage that a man must seek his own development and manage his family properly before he could govern the nation reflects the Confucian idea of order. This holds that if a man is unable to control his family, he could hardly be qualified to govern a country.

Under this system of order, man traditionally has been given the responsibility of representing, supporting and protecting the family as well as the power to command. If he cannot wield this power and exercise this responsibility, he loses face as the head of the family. Order that home is maintained through obedience to superiors, that is, children obeying parents, the wife the husband, the servant the master. It is a long social tradition that Koreans respect and obeys elders in accordance with social decorum.

Filial sons and daughters abound as well. Filial piety is considered the basic component and premise in the forming and shaping of personality.

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The traditional family consciousness expresses itself in filial piety, attaching the most importance to the father-son relationship. Parents are the absolute authority, to be accorded strict obedience and respect. However, filial piety concerns not only one's parents, but also one's conduct towards others and one's conduct in society. The value of a man emanates from the achievement of filial piety and if he violates the norm he is censured.

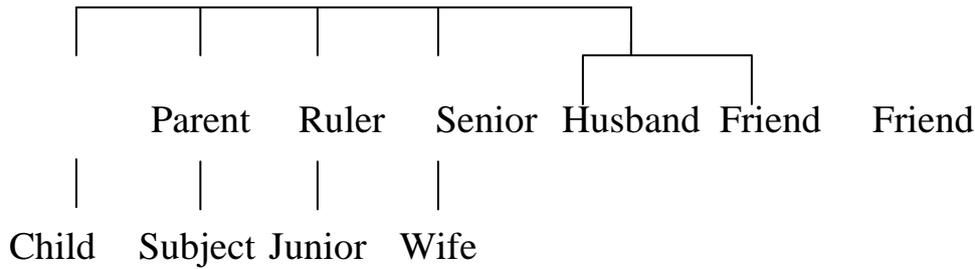
Traditionally, this concept of filial piety is even reflected in speech. There are complicated, elaborate sets of honorific words in Korean language (*Hangungmal*), depending on position. If not correct in speech and deportment, it is difficult to gain and maintain respect. Thus there are strict rules of conduct both within and out of the home.

How about society? The importance of social order can be observed specially on New Year's Day when, after the usual memorial services for ancestors, family members bow to grandparents, parents, older brothers, and relatives, and so on in accordance with age. Young people may even seek out the village elders to pay due respect by bowing to them, even though they are not related.

At meetings, social gatherings, or drinking parties, social order becomes an immediate question: who should greet whom first, who should sit where, who should sit down first, who should pour wine for whom first. Among close friends, those born earlier are treated as elder brothers and sisters. Among acquaintances, one is expected to use honorifics to those 10 years older than oneself. However, if the difference is less than 10 years, people address one another as equals. Care must be taken not to disturb social order for to do so is to be viewed as uncouth and lacking in social decorum.

Renowned Korean sociologist Kim Kyong-Dong said, whenever Koreans are relating themselves with others, one of the first things they would do is to locate each one's position in a hierarchical order, either by age, kinship status, occupational or other social status, even gender, or any other cohort experience. This tendency is already culturally embedded in the language structure itself, which contains one of the most delicate systems of deferential difference expression depending on the relative status of the speakers. In order to address properly to the other speaker, one has to make sure where each speaker stands in some hierarchical ordered system.

The traditional Confucian canon of five core human relationships juxtaposes parent and child, ruler and subject, senior and junior, husband and wife, and friend *versus* friend. It can be shown below:



Except for the last pair of friends, these relationships are hierarchical in nature. Respect for the elderly and social status has been stressed in this culture, which is reinforced by the status-seeking value orientation. Since the typical Confucian social order is elitist, upward mobility towards, or attainment of, a position with little has become one of the central goals in life. Male-centered patriarchal culture and the attending value of boy preference may be derived from this order.

According to Kim theory, respect for status and accompanying power, privilege and authority, breeds authoritarian mentality, tolerating concentration of power and privilege, and creating a culture in which orders of superior are followed without question. Combined with Confucian ‘bureaucratism’, now much reinforced by the Japanese version of autocratic authoritarian militarism and the ascendancy of the military in the political arena, has the bureaucratic authoritarianism been formed in Korean society. This hierarchical order and authoritarian principle of organization still persist in the social life of the Korean people even today, when resistance against this order has constantly been attempted with mixed success.

One of the peculiar aspects of the society is the boy preference. But who is it, who wants boy – father or mother? The author asked one of his classmates in the KDI School – who prefers? She replied, *Omoni* (mother). He again asked – as a conscious woman what you will prefer after your marriage? Of course a son, she replied again. This is the common scenario of all transitional* societies where people very often see crying mothers only after their 2nd daughter has been born.

‘Korea’ means morning calm. People are also calm and quiet. Once known as the ‘Eastern Land of Courtesy’, Korea (originated from Koryo dynasty) in its long history, seldom cultivated overseas interests (US, Russia, China, Japan etc.), never invaded its neighbors, nor sought development outside given boundaries. Ancient Chinese records say it was the custom of the Korean

* F.W. Riggs identified transitional society as ‘prismatic society’. Formalism, dualism, overlapping, heterogeneity, nepotism, hierarchy etc. are the main characteristics of this society.

people, being so courteous to each other, to avoid walking on the road, fearing it would hamper the movement of another.

This is actually a contradictory phenomenon. Even though, people were soft, polite and humble, but over the time autocracy has left its 'trademark' in their mind and this is identified at the domestic level. However external behavior and appearance never indicate that those people had a prolonged tradition of authoritarianism.

Is Gender Inequality Involved in Vertical Social Relation?

The Korean people have always attached importance to the concept of fidelity. Women, even if their husbands died young, were encouraged to be faithful by serving his parents and not remarrying. In some case, girls whose husbands-to-be died during the engagement period never married.

The strict application of these rules resulted in severe restrictions on women while relative freedom was allowed for men. For women there was the law of three obediences: obeisance to the father before marriage, to the husband upon marriage, and to the son after the husband's death. This female submission was not due to any supposed weakness or inadequacy on the part of the female, but simply the organization of the society. The woman's role was 'within', that is within the home, which was her domain. The man's role was 'outside', that is in all the affairs of society and life beyond the confines of the home.

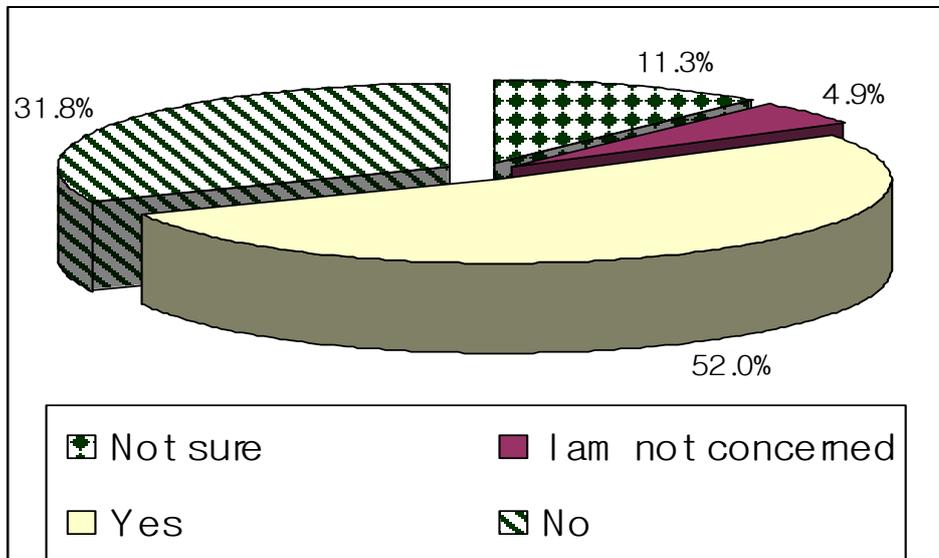
Nowadays, regardless of their de jure equal status and educational and economic achievements, Korean women still suffer from gender inequality and sexual discrimination. It is not that Korean women have meekly accepted the centuries-old Confucian role requiring women's absolute submission to men.

Despite all this social, political, and economic participation, Korean women have not resolved the fundamental issue affecting them: namely, the patriarchal culture that not only discriminates against women but oppresses them as well. In fact with the advance of industrialization and capitalistic development, systematic exploitation and oppression of women have become more conspicuous. Some of the women related issues that were highlighted during the 1990s attest to the effect of aggressive capitalism underpinned by patriarchal culture on women in Korea. According to the arguments of socialist feminists, patriarchy is an essential instrument of capitalism.

In Korea, all kinds of prostitution are illegal. But still, there are many brothels across the country, with labels like 'shady spot of human rights', or 'lair of crime'. *Miari Texas* or *Cheongnyangni 588* are with many large-scale unlicensed prostitute quarters. Few years ago, there was a survey for students' opinion conducted in Korea University with a single

question: Do you agree to introduce public prostitution to Korea? The findings of that survey can be shown below:

(The result mentioned here is the people's mentality of a male centered society)



Is Military Culture an Invisible Virus in Korea?

Korean Modernization was started from the armed forces. Here, military culture is based on the Korean history – invasion by the imperialistic Japan, the Korean War, and the dictatorship of a military junta for thirty years. Thus military culture has assimilated the thinking style of Korean people without realizing it.

It begins by portraying patriotic soldiers at the end of the Chosun Dynasty. Because they were trained voluntarily, compulsory execution was nonexistent. There only existed an order system according to the social class. After that, under the rule of Japanese imperialism, Korean soldiers who were included into the army experienced frequently beatings and cruel treatment by the Japanese military. After the 1945 independence, soldiers who were infected by the Japanese unreasonable military culture became leading figures in the founding government. Soon the Korean War broke out and President Lee Seung-man adopted the use of military policeman for political purposes at the end of the war. Subsequently, the dictatorship of a military junta followed: Park Chung-hee, Jeon Doo-hwan, and Roh Tae-woo. Under this historical background, Korean society was highly affected by the military culture.

When we think of the military, order and obedience pop into our head. In troops, it is indispensable to follow senior comrade's order for successful military operations. To maintain this order system, vertical line of command is applied to the troop.

Kang Man-gil, a professor at Korea University said in the *Munhwa Ilbo* Column, “Before the military dictatorship, one or two year juniors didn’t call seniors’ names at all. Instead of their names, they called them Kim byung, Lee byung or so. Just because the student number happens to precede another number, it doesn’t mean that she/he is old or has more practical experience. It is the remnants of the military culture to treat people rudely by the priority of entrance”.

In the book ‘Fascism Belongs to Us’, we can find that a company employee expressed some sentiments about his military life simply like this: “I got to know the principle of organization after receiving some hard beatings from my superiors and I, in turn, by beating other persons to a pulp. Now I know how to make a person work and do what superior officers want”.

During the war, there is only the winner or the loser. In the troops, even though there is great strategy and impassioned fighting, everything is lost when they are defeated in the end. On-line newspaper, *Daejabo*, analyzed, “Military way of thinking only focuses on getting the result in time. It also influences the citizen’s way of thinking. We can also find this type of thinking in weak building constructions built under the military dictatorship due to hasty construction, they run the risk of collapsing”. Koreans usually place emphasis on the result rather than the process, even though the process may be wrong.

One can also find military culture in the army reserves. All Korean men are mandated to serve in the military service even after their regular military service term is over. They are called army reserves. Being accustomed to unique habits in military. Some discharged army reserves exhibit tendencies to exhibit a sense of superiority to women and to emphasize all walks of life based on the vertical line of command.

Wallzang, Pusan National University feminist Webzine (Web magazine) wrote, “A few things that I hate about army reserves”. They represented their antagonistic feelings toward army reserves after conducting a group study of them by saying that army reserves made indecent jokes, made sexual harassment remarks at drinking parties, caused mess violence, and displayed laziness. Of course army reserves refuted *Wallzang* immediately, paralyzing the site. Actually the *Wallzang* situation signifies the aggressiveness of the Korean military culture, which is inherited from Japan imperial troops and its return to citizens. This situation shows that the features of the reserves are slowly diminishing nowadays.

As most men have duties to perform a military service, they are likely to be exposed to the military culture, hence inadvertently being accustomed to it. Although military culture is essential and is to be understood in the army, it is undoubtedly entrapping some aspects of the social life today.

After the first change of regime from military authorities to the non-military Kim Young-sam administration in 1993, army has changed continuously. Keeping step with the change, military culture in Korean society appeared to be disappearing little by little. Civil society expects the coming of Korean Society in which a person is viewed by conversation and process rather than controlled by the blind order, violence, and the result.

Verticality in the Education and Training

Education:

The vertical culture has affected the school culture as well. In some extreme cases, a few teachers expect students to obey their orders blindly. "Some teachers regard their positions as senior officers", said Woo Sang-bum, a freshman in the Department of Law at Kyung-hee University. This teacher's attitude also affects student's relationship between juniors and seniors. Because they will learn from their teachers.

At some Universities, one kind of violence remains in the junior and senior meeting orientations. Kim Chan-woo, a freshman in the Department of Physics of a university, said, "At the first orientation, I just got punished without any special reason, and after that, I came to harbor a skeptical view about the whole university life".

The insensitivity to the violence has already spread out to high schools. Ha Jung-jin, a sophomore in the Division of German Language and Literature at Korea University, said, "When I was a high school student, senior used violence while admonishing us for not obeying them. Moreover, school teachers didn't voice disapprovals of this behavior of our seniors and even seemed to approve it tacitly".

(The Granite tower, Campus Journal of Korea University, October 2001)

Training:

As we said Koreans focus on result, not the way they have been achieved. It is like on a war field where the army commander never asks the soldiers how they killed the enemy. The Commander only asks how many opponents they killed. It is the numbers that are important.

We can add the example of Pak Se-ri, a few years ago, when Pak Se-ri caused a sensation in LPGA; lots of people were excited about her championship. Not one person raised objections against her father's grotesque way of training her, letting a little girl walk alone in a public cemetery at the dead of night to expel any thoughts about fear.

But one thing, these kinds of evidences do not necessarily mean that such social behavior and situation are prevailing everywhere in all of the educational institutions. These are just ready references.

Ranking Culture in Drinking Behavior

Confucianism upholds the harmony of group members. We can frequently witness this unique Korean culture – forming a group – in many drinking houses. A Korean drinking house usually has a table with four chairs. Whereas a bar (western drinking house) has a different system. It is convenient to drink by oneself and enjoy solitude in a bar. These two different drinking house structures seem to represent the difference between western individualism and eastern group culture. In the past, groups were usually organized according to regionalism and kinship. But nowadays groups are formed based on school relations.

Another characteristic of Korean drinking culture is to drink together and to exchange drinking cups with one another. Offering it to a senior means honor, and offering it to a person who you have met for the first time means intimacy.

In the drinking party, some times seniors pressure one to drink. There exists a culture that ranks people according to their drinking habits. It was during the period under military dictatorship that, the meaning of Confucianism was distorted by the authority: it was used as the governing ideology that demanded obedience and discipline from subordinates. The distorted Confucianism led to the ranking culture while drinking.

In the past, when a man reached a drinking age, they had to learn drinking manners. At that time, there was no forcible act which carried out in persuading one another to drink and further more, one could stop drinking at his own will.

In Closing

The objectives of this paper are not to indicate social disorder and unrest or to draw a pessimistic conclusion about a society. It is also not true that a patriarchal society invariably makes vertical relations everywhere, discriminates women, establishes an autocratic regime and brings violence in the society. In a true sense, these all are interrelated and are the byproducts of patriarchal society, as well as people's attitudes and mentality. Patriarchal attitudes not only exist in the minds of men, but also in that of women. Or should we think that only women are being feminist, not men?

Traditionally more hierarchical than China and not feudal like Japan, Korea grafted Confucian paternalistic and political values onto a strong, vertically oriented indigenous social system. The result is visible; for example, in the way its military command structure gave South Korea a unique capacity to implement development programs after 1961.

Dictator Park Chung-hee was different from many leaders of the newly independent states emerging from the colonial chrysalis. Syngman Rhee in South Korea and Kim Il-sung in North Korea received political

legitimacy from their anti-colonial struggles. After that, Park Chung-hee exploited two important traditions: 1) the old dirigiste concepts of the Confucian state, in which the leader is the father and knows what is best for the people, his children; and 2) a powerful military command system. He centralized virtually all institutions and organizations and by nationalizing the banks created a monopoly on all institutional credit in the society. He rigidly controlled labor and its unions. He unified economic planning and budgeting in the Economic Planning Board under a deputy prime minister. The result was what has sometimes been called a “bureaucratic authoritarian’ state. Perhaps no other noncommunist society has experienced such pervasive economic control, reaching down even into the villages. President Park rewarded good economic performers with additional, often subsidized, credit, prizes and public recognition but denied such largesse to non-performers or those who did not play the economic game according to the government rules.

Here we can conclude by quoting one gossip of Adolf Hitler. During the 2nd World War, a few envious Army Generals complained against one outstanding General of Hitler saying that – Fuehrer, he is a heavy drinker. Hitler replied – its good, his drinking habit makes him a successful General, so I prefer his drinking.

Here one can also say that we should prefer a kind of dictatorship, which can bring growth, development and prosperity for a disadvantaged society.

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