

Aspects of Face and Cultural Dimensions in Kohls’ ‘Korea: People-Oriented and Group-Centered’: A critical review from an Intercultural Communication perspective

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Abstract

Chapter Six of Kohls’ popular guide to living and working in Korea presents Koreans as being people-oriented and group-centered. A critical review is presented from a perspective of intercultural communication, with regard to face and cultural dimensions. While Kohls’ case study is overlong with irrelevant material, he critically identifies face as a key concept in understanding Korean society. However he does not distinguish negative and positive face, nor identify face-work strategies that might help the reader save or give face. There is general agreement that Korean society is high-context, with high degrees of collectivism, power-distance, uncertainty avoidance, with long-term orientation and an interdependent construal of self. Although Kohls does discuss kibun, indirectness and harmony, he does not overtly identify Korea as exhibiting a high-context culture and communicative style in comparison with low-context American society. He also fails to identify another key Korean-American cultural differential, that of large versus small power-distance.

Introduction

In his popular *Learning to Think Korean: A Guide to Living and Working in Korea*, Kohls [1:81] commences a section dedicated to making the reader aware of what s/he needs to know about Koreans, with the discussion that constitutes the subject of this review. In addressing Korean society as being people-oriented and group-centered, Kohls discusses sincerity, face (providing a case study with commentary), the Korean feeling of *kibun*, indirectness and harmony, and collectivist versus individualist societies.

Kohls’ book is targeted at Americans intending to work in Korea, particularly businessmen. It is not an academic publication, and cannot be fairly criticized for failure to meet academic standards. However, Kohls has significant standing in intercultural business communication and as a Korean commentator, and his book is popular. I address my review following the order in which Kohl presents his chapter, paying particular attention to the key concept of face and cultural dimensions. I refer to Breen’s [2] comparative work written for a British readership (which Kohl cites in the opening paragraph of his chapter), Goddard’s [3] imperative to capture an insider perspective, Hofstede’s [4] cultural factors, Kim and Nam’s [5] concept and dynamics of face, Kim, Pan and Park’s [6] high- versus low-context comparison of Chinese, Korean and American audiences, Song and Meek’s [7] impact of culture on Korean management values and beliefs, Ting-Toomey’s [8] overview of cross-cultural face-negotiation, and her [9] mindful approach to intercultural conflict management, among others. By virtue of their Korean names and affiliations, I presume Kim, Dong-Hoon; Kim, Joo-Yup; Nam, Sang-Hoon; Park, Heung-Soo; and Song, Young-Hack to be cultural insiders.

Sincerity

Song and Meek [7:§26] note that 송실 (*song shil*), translated “sincerity or integrity”, is etymologically constituted of ‘to speak’ and ‘to complete/realize’, thus means to realize ‘that which is spoken’ or ‘being true to one’s nature’. Kohl observes that while this Confucian concept embodies one dimension of Korean people-orientation, sincerity and insincerity are defined in quite different ways in American and Korean cultures, which generates misunderstandings. But this dialectic rests on quite

different attributes, that of attention to external form as against concern with internal essence, and its validity is questionable. Kohls' coverage here is unconvincing, betraying a sense of disillusionment with American society. He does little to resolve the inherent conflicts that are evident between such Korean characteristics as external sincerity being simply unquestioning social conformity to a group ethic, a Korean willingness to transgress providing it is not exposed, Kohls' belief in a Korean sixth sense that unerringly detects insincerity, and a typical readiness, particularly when favors are desired, to mercilessly flatter with patent untruths: 'Teacher is so young and very handsome! I want A+!' (Anonymous Korean college student 2007, pers. comm.)

Like Kohls, Stover and Stover relate sincerity to face:

The Western theory of sincerity - a homunculus theory - requires that the actor within us correspond with the exterior action; that the authentic self not wear a false face... Chinese do not behave in accord with the same theory. For them, there is no psychological guesswork about sincerity because the self is defined by the sum of one's social roles, not by an inner man who handles those social roles with fidelity to one's true feeling. ... One's life is embedded in a social setting from which he derives his status and to which he owes the duty of interaction. Sincerity means discharging one's formal duties to maintain the system in which he acts. Not to do so is to lose face, which is more than embarrassment or the loss of social poise, but the loss of one's power position in a set of stratified relationships.

*pp.202-203,
quoted in Kim & Nam [5:526].*

Face

Kohls observes that the concept of face, even more than sincerity, is subject to intercultural misunderstanding. Koreans, in preserving face of others and self, demonstrate an absolutely sacrosanct respect for people, which can transcend literal truth.

Case Study: The Case of Kim, the Copyboy

A case study illustrates the complexity and high priority Koreans give to face. At seven pages, it is too lengthy, containing much irrelevant material. Some form of attribution is needed, but none made: is this an authentic account, or one engineered to suit the topic? Emphasizing an act of theft immediately strikes one as being inauthentic; theft in public in Confucian Korea

appears comparatively rare, though Breen [2:45] also observes that stealing is less wrong than shaming someone. The polemic reinforces the cultural stereotype of the brash insensitive American youth through ignorance offending the profound sensitivities of an older and wiser Eastern culture.

Discussion of Face and Comments on the Case Study

Face has been conceptualized as 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes' (Goffman p.213, quoted in [5:523]), and defined as 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself' (Brown and Levinson p.61 quoted in [5:523]). Kim and Nam [5] propose face as a key variable to explain much of the complexity of social interactions in Asian organizations. Face has pervasive, significant, but often subtle influences on organizational behavior. Their twenty propositions of face dynamics suggest that Asian organizational behavior is better predicted by an individual's external attributes, such as face, than internal attributes, such as desires, emotions and cognition. Kohl's identification of face as a critical issue therefore accords with the consistent observation of scholars that, in most Asian cultures, concern for face is of utmost importance. However, Kohl does not distinguish between what Brown and Levinson (cited in [5:523]) identify as types of face: negative face, the basic claim to autonomy and rights to non-distraction, and positive face, the basic claim to competence. Much research into the dynamics of face has investigated firstly situations in which individuals lose face, focusing on the conditions of embarrassment or shame; secondly on what individuals would do in attempting to restore discredited face by creating favorable self images; and thirdly examining different types of face-work strategies and factors affecting the choice of strategies [5:523-524]. Of these three aspects, Kohls only addresses the first. Similarly, a literature review on Face summarizes research into concept (of face); conditions of losing face; consequences of losing face; and types and choices of face-work strategies [5:525]. Kohls addresses the first three of these aspects, but not face-work strategies, restricting his advice to merely admonishing his Western reader to be constantly concerned not to cause another person to be embarrassed, humiliated, or to lose face. Given also that according to Mao (cited in Kim and Nam [5:528]), face-transactions between

people of unequal social status take place over the long-term under the norm of reciprocity, where the superior is expected to give face or favor to his/her subordinate in return for getting face from the subordinate, it must be concluded that Kohls provides the reader with minimal specific advice on how to save face, and no real advice on how to actually give face.

Ting-Toomey [8] focuses on face-negotiation and conflict styles; how the strategies used in maintaining, saving, or honoring face are managed differs across cultures. She uses Hall's low- versus high-context communication framework to address face-negotiation, exploring concepts of face-saving, face-giving, face-losing, recovery from face-loss, conflict, face issues, and dimensions of face. Applications to Asian business communications are: the first application of face-giving is critical; face is always inseparable from webs of relationship; who has the greater or lesser face matters; face is a reciprocal concept; many intermediaries are used to preserve face; and face is long-term. In training people to go overseas, it is critical to teach about low- versus high-context cultures. This reinforces my subsequent criticism of Kohls' coverage as being inadequate in failing to incorporate specific discussion of low-versus high-context cultures and communicative styles, particularly given the radical contrast between his target American readers' native and Korean host societies.

Kibun

기반 (*kibun*) is of great importance in understanding Korean relationships, according to Beller et al. [10:§4]. The persons interacting in one's life are responsible for assessing one's *kibun* through 눈치 (*nunchi*), so they can meet needs and communicate effectively. *Kibun* is easily disturbed, as when a young person is irreverent to an elder. While Kohls' brief account is clear, I found Breen's [2:39] to be more helpful.

Indirectness and Harmony, and Collectivism versus Individualist Societies: Cultural Dimensions of Korea and Issues of Intercultural Communication

Given the subject addressed in this chapter, and the style of the document and its intended readership, how well does Kohls' chapter perform its intended function, and how adequately does it cover the concepts and perspectives of intercultural communication? A comparative table of Chinese values (Chinese Culture Connection, quoted in Neuliep [11]) ranks Korea with moderate Integration, high Confucian work dynamic, relatively low Human-heartedness, and high Moral discipline. Hofstede [4] identifies five cultural variables: individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. Figure 1a shows Hofstede's [12] cultural dimensions for the Republic of Korea.

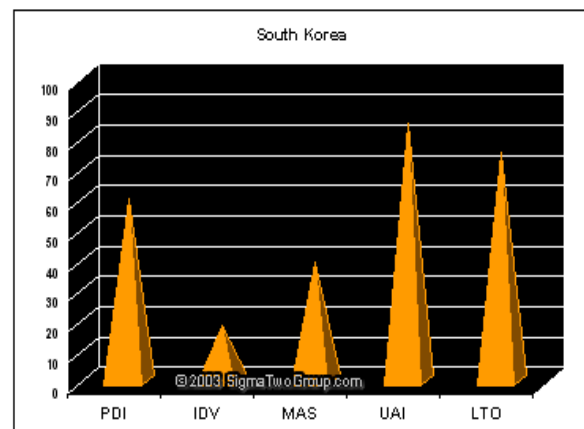


Figure 1a: Hofstede's cultural dimensions of the Republic of Korea

Hofstede identifies Korea's highest Dimension to be Uncertainty Avoidance, indicating a low level of tolerance for uncertainty. To reduce this uncertainty, strict rules, laws, policies, and regulations are adopted, the ultimate goal being to control everything so as to avoid the unexpected. Consequently, change is not readily accepted and risk-aversion is high. Korea's low Individualism rank indicates a Collectivist society, manifest in close long-term commitment to the member 'group'. Breen notes [2:178-179], 'In the scale between individualism and group conformity, the Koreans are somewhere in the middle... They tend to seek loyalty to a sub-group within a large organization.' Loyalty is paramount, over-riding other societal rules. The society fosters strong relationships:

everyone takes responsibility for fellow group-members.

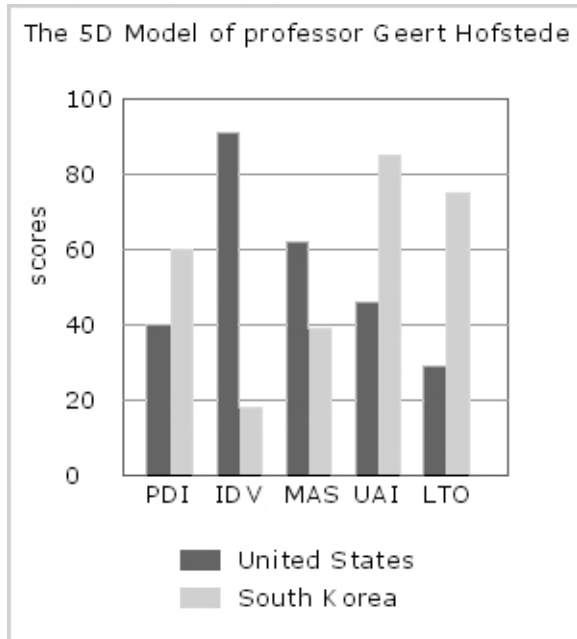


Figure 1b: Hofstede’s comparison of cultural dimensions of home culture (America) and host culture (Republic of Korea)

Kohls’ book compares Korean and American perspectives. Hofstede’s [13] Korean-American comparison in Figure 1b shows Korea to have relatively higher power-distance, dramatically lower individuality, relatively lower masculinity (which I find rather questionable), substantially higher uncertainty-avoidance, and much higher long-term orientation. Several studies (e.g. Ting-Toomey [8]) also call attention to Hofstede’s identification of South Korea as having a very high power-distance index. There is general agreement that Korean society is high-context, characterized by high degrees of collectivism, power-distance, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and with an interdependent construal of self. One would therefore expect Kohls to refer to most of these.

Kohls’ coverage of these Cultural Dimensions and Issues of Intercultural Communication

Kohls’ chapter cannot fairly be considered in isolation, when his book elsewhere [1:50] includes a summary comparing traditional Korean and mainstream American values, which does include many of these factors:

Table 1: The Kohls Values Continuum (after Kohls)

Traditional Korean Values (Prior to 1960)	Mainstream American Values
Acceptance of Fate	Control over the Environment
Stability, Continuity, Tradition	Change and Progress, “Development”
Priority: Human Relationships, Harmony	Priority: Time and its Control
Rank, Status, Hierarchy	Egalitarianism, Fair Play
Group Orientation	Individualism, Independence, Privacy
Birthright Inheritance	Self-Help, Improvement
Cooperation	Competition
Past Orientation	Future Orientation
“Being” Orientation	“Doing” Orientation, Achievement
Formality, Protocol, Ritual	Informality, Innovation
Indirectness and Saving Face	Directness and Openness
Philosophical Consideration	Practical Application
Spirituality	Materialism

Table 2: Post-1965 South Korean Core Values (shown in bold type) (after Kohls)

Acceptance of Fate	Control over the Environment
Stability, Continuity, Tradition	Change and Progress, “Development”
Priority: Human Relationships, Harmony	Priority: Time and its Control
Rank, Status, Hierarchy	Egalitarianism, Fair Play
Group Orientation	Individualism, Independence, Privacy
Birthright Inheritance	Self-Help, Improvement
Cooperation	Competition
Past Orientation	Future Orientation
“Being” Orientation	“Doing” Orientation, Achievement
Formality, Protocol, Ritual	Informality, Innovation
Indirectness and Saving Face	Directness and Openness
Philosophical Consideration	Practical Application
Spirituality	Materialism

Subsequently Kohls [1:62], elaborating on the modern transformation of Korean society, identifies certain important changes in core values. Significantly, he identifies Group Orientation, and Indirectness and Saving Face as core values that are not changing; while priorities of Human Relationships and Harmony are being retained while becoming matched by those of Time and its Control. However, a puzzling limitation of Kohls’ discussion is that nowhere does he explicitly introduce Hall’s key concept of high/low context culture. By contrast, Kim, Pan and Park [6:508] recognize face-saving and group orientation as prominent aspects of the concept: in a high-context culture, people through repressing self avoid direct confrontation so as to maintain social harmony and intimate bonds between people. Amenities and cordialities are maintained no matter how they feel, typically using indirectness as a means to reduce open and direct disagreement, and hence as Kim, Pan & Park point out there is a strong notion of face-saving [6:511]. Song and Meek [7:§16] also identify Korean culture as high-context, where non-verbal, spatial and physical cues play a critical communicative role, as against overt and precise communication. Indirect communication is preferred to overt oral or written statements. People are expected to be sensitive to facial and body expressions, as well as physical positioning of individuals in the group/work setting. *Nunchi*, facial reading to discover *kibun*, is needed to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships and effective problem solving. While

Kohls’ sections on *kibun* and on indirectness and harmony tacitly recognize Korean communicative style as being high-context, nowhere in his book does Kohls overtly ascribe it as being so.

Nor does Kohls in this chapter explicitly relate power-distance (though elsewhere he does regard Rank, Status, Hierarchy as a core unchanging value, see his tables above), which omission is a failing, particularly given Hofstede’s identification of South Korea as being a large power-distance culture, whose members, according to Ting-Toomey [9], give priority treatment and asymmetrical respect to those in high-status positions. As Song and Meek [7] observe, within Confucianism (predominantly) all human relationships are vertical, a social structure recognized by Mencius in the Five Relations:

between father and son, there should be affection; between sovereign and minister, righteousness; between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions; between old and young, a proper order; and between friends fidelity.

Legge pp.251-2, quoted in Song & Meek [7:§9].

Proper recognition of this vertical nature even extends to Korean grammar discourse: according to Song and Meek [7:§11] the social status of the addressee must be recognized by appropriate use of verbal suffixes, honorifics and inflections, though Kohls does not mention this.

Conclusion

Kohls provides adequate coverage of many cultural variables that affect intercultural communication, but fails to explicitly address the key Korean-American cultural differentials of high- versus low-context communication and large versus small power-distance. Goddard [3:§3] observes such abstract categories necessarily describe cultures “from the outside”, but fail to capture an insider perspective. Kohls’ chapter, in addressing sincerity, indirectness and harmony, *kibun*, and in particular, face, effectively clarifies the point of view of cultural insiders. His chapter would be considerably improved by radically shortening his case study, integrating discussions of high- versus low-context communication and power-distance, and further expanding his coverage of face to incorporate positive/negative face and important face-saving and face-giving strategies.

Even allowing for his identification elsewhere in his book of important changes in core values [1:62], Kohls’ chapter already appears somewhat dated, as Korea undergoes rapid societal change. Modernization, urbanization, widespread English study, mass media, computers and the Internet will inevitably and profoundly affect Korean communicative style, as digital convergence will similarly affect the concept and dynamics of face, presenting an intriguing area for future research. Hofstede’s indices [12] show a 49% Christian religious population, who presumably are developing a concomitant individualist sense of guilt. Meanwhile, the current governmental TV promotion of Korea portrays an elderly man in traditional *hanbok*, traveling. He rides the 350+km/hr high-speed KTX, his attention fixed not on the paddy fields outside, but on his 3G cell phone’s tilt-screen video-display - “Korea... Sparkling!”

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