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“TEN SPOONFULS MAKE A BOWL OF RICE”: AN
INTRODUCTION TO KOREAN CULTURE WITH
THE HELP OF ITS PROVERBS

Abstract: Korea is a rather unknown country and its proverbs are arguably not very well presented yet in paremiological research. Isolated from the West until only recently, the country's unique culture and its rich traditions are still not very well known. As an important player on the world's stage at the beginning of the 21st century, it is time for us to learn about Korea. This paper uses a selection of mostly older Korean proverbs to introduce certain aspects of Korean culture. Based on, and inspired by, a summer workshop in South Korea that the author attended in July 2010 with twelve other Vermont educators, the text introduces a selection of important Korean symbols, norms, and values and shows how these are reflected in the country's proverbs. Using many examples from the handful of proverb collections available in translation, the text shows how looking at the proverbial language of a people can highlight and explain certain aspects of cultural identity. The selection of traditional wisdom provided here serves as a valuable and interesting window into the culture of Korea as well as an opportunity to get to know many unique Korean proverbs.

Keywords: Proverbs, Korea, Culture, Symbols, Norms, Values, Business, Education, Buddhism, Confucianism

Spending time in South Korea for the first time is a mind-bending and eye-opening experience. The traveler finds a modern and vibrant country with energetic people – a place full of excitement, prospects, and beauty. Beneath the surface there is a long and rich history that has shaped Korea, but it is the more recent developments, especially after the Korean War had ended in 1953, that have transformed the country into what the traveler notices as soon as he is on the bus from the airport into downtown Seoul. Highways and streets are wide and multi-lane, traffic is busy at all hours, rows of tall apartment buildings fill the horizon, shiny office towers and modern hotels dominate the seemingly endless

downtown area, and neon signs illuminate the night into every corner. Newer and higher buildings are erected in every neighborhood, it seems, parks are beautified and equipped with fitness equipment and a rubberized trail for a quick morning workout, people are friendly and helpful, sometimes a bit distant, but very proud of their country – past and present – and eager to talk about it to the visitor. Korea has been called “the land of the morning calm” for its tranquil morning mist hanging in the mountains (a loose English translation of the Chinese characters for “Joseon,” the 1000-year dynasty that ended with the Japanese occupation in 1910), and “the hermit kingdom” in its more recent history for the country’s seclusion from the rest of the world. Both of these places – real and mythical – are still present today in some ways, but the calm of the early mornings has largely given way to the noise of construction, and the solitude of the hermit has now widely disappeared in a country well on its way to become one of the largest and most influential economies in the world.

Looking at the many startling developments in South Korea (hereafter called Korea) during the last 50 years – political, economical, religious, and social, just to name a few – one must ask the question how this was possible. In order for a society to achieve what happened in Korea, or better: for its people to accomplish what they did, there need to be certain traits that allow for such evolutionary shifts in a remarkable short period of time. This paper attempts to introduce some of the underlying cultural aspects of Korea that have played an important role in the country’s fast and vast development. The author was able to spend four weeks in Korea this past July (2010) and learned about the people and their culture while on a workshop with twelve other Vermont educators. Organized by the University of Vermont’s Asian Studies Outreach Program in cooperation with Yonsei University in Seoul, and funded by the Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad Program, this program offered a unique opportunity to explore and experience various aspects of Korean history, culture, and daily life.¹ I will summarize observations and learning without claiming that I fully understand the Korean ways, its people, or the cultural aspects that keep it all together. But especially since Korea is still a somewhat “unknown” and perhaps even “overlooked” country these days, I believe it deserves to be recognized and appreciated for what it is: a nation on the verge of dominance in the region,

and already an important player on the world's stage whose recent achievements and to-be-expected future accomplishments will have significant implications for the global community. We in the West are well advised to make an effort to learn about other peoples and cultures – including Korea's – and try to understand what makes them unique and different in order for us to live and work with them in harmony. In this flat world of ours, Korea is our close neighbor: not even a second away in cyberspace, its products in our homes (and on our roads), its companies building factories in our industrial parks, Korean colleagues in our offices, students from Korea in our schools and universities, and Korean families in our neighborhoods. The more we know about the country and its people, I believe, the better we will be able to coexist with them – all of us citizens of the world with very different pasts perhaps, but in all likelihood an increasingly similar and interdependent future.

Learning about another country and its culture is not easy. Not everyone will have the immediate opportunity to travel to Korea, and perhaps not even an interest to go, in order to see first hand what's left of the morning calm or the seclusion of the past (not much!), or how beautiful the people and places are. How harmoniously and efficiently the citizens seem to live together in this tiny country, and how inviting to the traveler who wants to explore their rich history and culture. There are many publications and Internet resources on Korea that can serve as good introductions for those who don't have any prior knowledge, or who simply want to expand on what they already know, but this paper will take a slightly different route: it tries to introduce "Korean" norms and values, and illustrate certain aspects of Korean culture with the help of their proverbs. I consider these short "sentences of wisdom"² as a meaningful window into the Korean psyche and into the make-up of the social fabric that holds it all together. There is a well-accepted quality in proverbs as this example from old Korea asserts: *There is nothing wrong in old sayings* (II,131).³

For the purpose of this paper, I have decided to limit the discussion to proverbs only, leaving other forms of formulaic language, such as proverbial expressions or aphorisms for another day. I have tried to select only those proverbs that appear to be unique Korean in terms of either the images or the words they employ. Most of the examples chosen here take their imagery from very Korean themes, or their metaphorical meaning highlights a

specific aspect of Korean culture, some of which are not associated at all with characteristics found in the West. Another criterion for quoting certain proverbs here is an easy-to-remember wording, at least as it appears in their English translation.

That proverbs can be effectively used to illustrate certain characteristics of a culture is widely accepted in paremiology, the study of proverbial language. This is true for Korea and its proverbs as well. Tae Hung Ha affirms that the proverbs he collected “came to be regarded as golden sayings which reflected in succinct phrases the social life and philosophy of Korean people.”⁴ In his introduction to a dictionary of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean proverbs, Young H. Yoo expresses hope that his work “is found to be some contribution to those who are interested in the lands, peoples, and their cultures of the Far East.”⁵ And in a scholarly paper on Korean proverbs and how they reflect society, Chong-wha Chung states: “What proverbs say reveal what the lower class people thought, who they were, and how they lived. In this sense proverbs function as an undocumented socio-cultural history of the traditional society of Korea.”⁶ And finally, to further emphasize that the close connection between proverbial language and culture is a valid thesis, Yonsei Professor Chong-ho Ch’oe adds that “proverbs are a product of experiences in the quotidian life of the Korean people,”⁷ and Peter Kim says in a paper on the use of Korean proverbs in psychoanalysis: “proverbs convey culture-bound codes of behavior and rules of conduct, they tend to reflect the national values or ‘cultural ideas’ of their land of origin.”⁸

The origin of Korean proverbs is different from that of their Western counterparts for which Latin and Greek classics, the Bible, and medieval literature often provided the source. Korean proverbs, like those in other Asian countries, are often derived from Chinese and Sanskrit classics,⁹ but many were simply handed down from generation to generation by regular people based on experience and learning in their daily lives. Society of Old Korea, in general, was made up of two distinct groups: the *yangban* class of aristocratic, educated people who held all the powerful positions on top, and the general public below. Chung asserts that the “wisdom of proverbs was, unlike in the West, not shared between the two classes. Proverbs were strictly for the lower class.”¹⁰ Accordingly, these were eventually recorded in *hengeul*, the ingenious phonetic language that Korea’s King Sejong the Great invented in

1443 in order for the common folk to be able to read and write, and not in Chinese anymore, the language used by the upper class.¹¹ Looking at the few collections of Korean proverbs that are available (with English translations), it is obvious that most proverbs are indeed written in a folksy manner. In fact, the Korean word for “proverb” is *sok-dam* (“common language”) or *sang-mal* (“vulgar words”). Their design often appears less “clever” and more straightforward than what is frequently found in Western texts. For example, when comparing the wisdom accepted in many cultures that a good effort has its rewards – or that the lack of effort will yield no result – one can argue that the popular English proverb “The early bird catches the worm” or its German equivalent “Morgenstund hat Gold im Mund” needs some interpretation to fully understand its meaning, while the Korean version *Eat breakfast late and go to closing market* (I,389) is much more unequivocal and comes straight to the point: business on Korea’s weekly open air country markets was best during the noon hours, and he who arrived late would have missed the opportunity to buy or sell. No eating “worms” or missing out on “gold in the mouth” for him who sleeps late, but simply arriving at the market when it is too late for trading.

A good work ethic, as it is depicted in this particular proverb, is one of the predominant values in Korean culture that will be explored in this paper. I will define culture here as “a system of ideas, art, morals, laws, symbols, language, values, beliefs, norms [...] shared by people in a particular society.”¹² Specifically, I will look at a number of important Korean symbols, norms, values, and religions, and I will explore how those are reflected in the country’s proverbs. The goals of this paper, then, are to provide an introduction to Korean culture, but at the same time offer insights into the world of Korean proverbs. In the end, we will have gained an appreciation for both, or as they say: we have caught “two birds with one stone.”

SYMBOLS

Symbols of a culture are objects or concepts that have significance beyond their extrinsic meaning: they stand for something else. There is a small number of animals, for example, that have special symbolic meaning in Korea. As in other Asian cultures, the dragon (power), the crane (longevity), or the turtle (fortune) are depicted in various forms of artistic expression to represent certain

characteristics, but one of the more prominent symbols in Korea is the tiger. Accordingly, this animal that used to roam the northern mountains of the country is found in many Korean proverbs.¹³ It stands for vigor and power, but also for bravery and gallantry, and many of these attributes are promoted in Korean society as well as in traditional Korean sayings. Proverbial wisdom such as *A biting tiger has no horns* (I,628) or *Speak of the tiger and then he appears* (I,634) can be found in traditional sayings of other cultures as well, but in those without the imagery of this particular animal. Proverbs like *Even a tiger excites pity after he is shot down* (II,176) to promote respect for a defeated enemy, or *Where there is no tiger, the hare behaves like the lord* (I,635) to depict how even people of small stature can accomplish great tasks, show the wide range of proverbial meaning relevant to Korean culture where the symbol of a tiger is used.

Another important Korean symbol is *taegeuki*, the country's flag. It is regarded as one of the world's most complex flags in terms of imagery and meaning. The two-part circle in the middle, representing the dual principles of Yin and Yang, as well as balance and equality, is framed by four sections of broken and unbroken sets of lines (earth, heaven, fire, water) on a white background depicting the purity of the Korean people. These values, elements, and properties are found in many Korean proverbs, for example *Do your part and leave the rest to Heaven's decision, Earth accumulated forms a mountain, A buried fire will flare up* (III,78), *There is top and bottom even in cold water* (III,186), *It takes the clap of two hands to make a sound* (I,317), *Though heavens fall, there will be a hole to escape through* (I,326), *Even jade has flaws in it* (I,363), *If one month is long, another month is short* (I,411), *After the rain the ground becomes hard* (I, 492), or *No root, no leaf* (I,659).

Religious signs are very important and widely visible Korean symbols. The traveler notices those immediately in street scenes of modern day Korea. Signs of Buddhism, and more recently of Christianity, are present in many places with their well-known symbols: the swastika and the cross. Walking in the streets of Seoul these days, for example, or looking through the hotel room window, one is surprised to see the large number of crosses, many even neon-lit at night, that adorn all kinds of buildings that host a congregation. The rise of Christianity is a fairly recent phenomenon in Korea – especially during the last 30 years the number of

Christians has grown to almost one third of the population while it was in the low single-digit numbers at the beginning of the 20th century –, and concrete Christian religious proverbs can hardly be found in older collections, but aspects of Buddhist beliefs (about a quarter of today's Koreans declare that they follow this religion) are widely portrayed in traditional sayings.

The core idea of Buddhism (“the four noble truths”) is that life is suffering and that suffering is caused by people's cravings. In order to overcome this, one needs to follow in Buddha's path. The goal is to break out of the cycle of rebirth, achieve enlightenment, and enter Nirvana. In a more down-to-earth and practical view, one central idea is the belief that “good actions bring good results.”¹⁴ This concept, though not unique to this particular religion, is found in many Korean proverbs. *If you see one deed, you can tell ten deeds of a man* (I,171) shows that doing well toward others, including giving money to a Buddhist monk on the street, will be noticed and rewarded. That the act of giving is not a difficult task, in fact, it is easier than being on the receiving end, is the theme of the Korean proverb: *Sitting you give and standing you receive* (I,294). The symbol of Buddhism, the swastika, is often seen as a painted sign pointing toward a Buddhist temple or it is used to mark temple buildings themselves.¹⁵ These buildings can be enormous structures on elaborate grounds, often in remote, mountainous locations, but just as well a rather small building in the middle of a busy shopping street in downtown Seoul. To the believer it does not matter where exactly the temple is located – where the symbol points to, or where it is affixed – it is more important, this proverb says, that Buddha's teachings are followed regardless of location: *Each monk worships the Buddha in his own temple* (I,77).

NORMS

Important aspects of any culture are the norms that are expected from and followed by its people. Norms regulate and coordinate the interactions of individuals in a group. Adhering to certain rules of conduct is especially important in places where many people need to live very close to each other. Korea is a fairly small and extremely mountainous country where only about 20% of the land is arable. The art of living with one's neighbors in such close proximity plays an important role here. In a place the size of Indiana, there are almost 50 Million people in today's South Korea

and on average close to 500 people live in a single square kilometer (for Seoul this number jumps to 16,000). Under these circumstances, certain behavior can either tie together or push apart, and the proverb *Habits are at first cobwebs, at last cables* (Chung 151)¹⁶ suggests what is preferred.

The number of Korean proverbs that give advice for proper behavior in order to get along with one's neighbor is significant. That a conduct not in line with commonly accepted and expected norms is often frowned upon, is made clear in *Though a daylong hunger is unrecognized, a moment's shabbiness can be seen* (II,135). Where people live close together and very interdependently, they not only have to get along with each other, respectful and courteous behavior is an important prerequisite for the society as a whole in order to be effective. To show respect, one of the most prominent rituals between individuals in Korea is bowing. The proverb *A person who bows never gets his cheek slapped* (III,10) gives good advice to someone who tends to keep his head arrogantly high and is disliked for this attitude. Similar in meaning, the proverb *The riper the grain, the lower it hangs its head* (II,57) applauds the respected and accomplished person, who bows deep in order to show humility before his common man. Not only do regular norms require that subordinates bow first and deeper to their superiors, but in general it is good policy to show respect to another person by a sincere lowering of the head. The image of food – “grain” (e.g. rice or barley) in this example – is a common theme in Korean proverbs, as we will see in many other examples. As a staple of the Korean diet, especially “rice” plays the role of an effective carrier of meaning and adds didactic weight to many proverbs. But drinks are used as well to promote good behavior: *A full bottle of water does not make a sound* (III,185) speaks of the learned and mature person who does not make much fuss about his accomplishments, while the wannabe might try to compensate for his shortcomings by loud proclamations of his presumed stature. Not sticking out (too much), but rather trying to conform to the norms of the group, is an important rule in Korean society and will be discussed again later when we look at the country's value system.

Many other behaviors in Korea are based on respect and thoughtfulness. These include passing and receiving items with both hands, such as gifts or business cards, or covering one's mouth (especially by females) when laughing.¹⁷ Another important

Korean norm that the visitor may encounter is the ritual of filling other people's glass when drinking – especially alcohol. In general, the younger or more junior person serves the older or more senior person first, and then holds out his glass to be filled. For many business people, going out for drinks after work is a necessary step for forming career-making bonds with supervisors and co-workers. The need to serve each other in proper sequence (and good frequency) is an important interpersonal ritual and can be read into many proverbs such as *Tears fall in one cup of wine* (I,727) and *Half a cup of wine brings tears, a full cup laughter* (III,192).

Norms for behavior based on hierarchical structures like those found in workplaces and within families, also set fairly strict requirements for honorific speaking. Those rules are particularly difficult to comprehend for a Western visitor, and even more difficult to follow properly. People are not addressed by their names, but always with their title or their relationship – even within one's own family. The proverb *Say "uncle, uncle" and give only heavy burdens to carry* (I,669) shows the correct honorifics in addressing a family member (even though there are still a few relationship-defining components missing here), but the demand placed on that person in this example is not consistent with hierarchical norms. The use of honorific language is dependent on strict hierarchies found in families and in other authoritative structures, and we will look at these important aspects of the country's value system next.

VALUES

Besides norms that guide behavior of individuals or groups in a society, values represent additional defining aspects of a particular culture. Among other things, values describe what is commonly regarded as right or wrong, desirable or damaging, beautiful or awkward. One of the values held very high in Korean society is family. This does not only include the living, as it is to a lesser degree the case in Western cultures as well, but also the dead. Ancestor worship plays a big part in a Korean family's life where deceased family members are remembered in traditional rituals. Their influence on the living is a constant reminder as the proverb *If a man fails, he blames his ancestors* (I,1) shows – even if used here with a sarcastic undertone. The ceremony that is typically performed by the oldest son at the anniversary of a father's death will be explained in a more detail below.

The value of family in present-day Korea is undoubtedly challenged by the characteristics of modern life. Too many responsibilities in school and at work, migration into the big cities, apartment living, women working, later marriages, more divorces, low fertility rates, and an aging population – just to name a few – have affected the family entity. The special place as an island in any storm that it had in Korean societies of the past is largely gone. Traditional proverbs, nevertheless, can still effectively communicate certain values to modern families. For example, *Though you eat food at ten different places, sleep in one place* (III,163) reminds the family members to regard home as the one place to return to every day. Working together as a family, as depicted in the proverb *The husband is a bucket and the wife is a jar* (II,73) promotes the functioning family as well. Teamwork between couples in the past, such as bringing drinking water from the well outside into the house, has taken on a more modern form in many Korean families: a husband often turns his salary over to his wife (or has his payroll check deposited automatically into the spouse's bank account), and she has the responsibility to save a portion and distribute spending money to the family members. As another proverb makes clear, the salary belongs to the family and not to the breadwinner: *The food of the monk is the food of the temple* (I,407). In many families, the husband receives an allowance that lets him go out to socialize with colleagues and friends in order to foster the all-important relationships that hopefully ensure his career development. The remaining part of the salary after paying the monthly bills needs to be saved to pay for the most important of all family responsibilities: the education of children. This very Korean value deserves a more detailed look later in this text.

Family as an important value in Korean culture can also become a more conflicting concept, and not always is it a peaceful entity of society. Beyond the nucleus of mother, father, and (these days mostly) the single child, extended family members often complicate the issue. Changes in family dynamics when the son marries, and his new wife moves into his family's house, can bring about issues that challenge peace and quiet around the dinner table. Difficulties between the new family member and the parents-in-law are proverbial in many cultures, but in Korea, with its complicated social structure in which ancestry, age, honorifics, and hierarchy play such important roles, some issues seem to be

intensified.¹⁸ Korean proverbs such as *If the daughter-in-law is detested, the grand-child is also detested* (III,38), *More hateful is the mother-in-law who stops the quarrel than the husband who does the beating* (III,138), *Even a dead mother-in-law is brought to mind when pounding rice* (I,419), or *When a family is going to ruin, a beard grows on the face of the eldest daughter-in-law* (I,248) show the magnitude to which living together as an extended family can have significant side effects. In today's society, however, many families do live in smaller units of only one or two generations, which is not "traditional" in the old Korean value system. But this is just a sign of the times: apartment buildings that fill the horizon and grow high into the sky in order to provide shelter for 16,000 people per square kilometer in Seoul, for example, do typically not allow for multiple generations living under one roof. Sometimes older parents might live in the same apartment complex as their children and grandchildren, so that the "roof" may actually be the same, but an elevator ride – perhaps even a subway stop or two – often separates the generations these days.

Within each family, the roles are clear and the male members and the elders are ranked at a higher level in many aspects of daily life. Korean proverbs such as *No younger brother is half as good as the elder* (I,74), *An old dog never barks uselessly* (III, 44) or "*A women's [sic] lack of talent is in itself a virtue*"¹⁹ illustrate these positions. Great respect for the elderly is a value that sets many Asian cultures apart: old age is not regarded as an unpleasant part of life that should be rejected or masked – older members of society are not looked at as a nuisance – but rather as another fruitful and productive time. That wisdom and experience come with age is a theme in many Korean proverbs such as *The old horse knows the road*.²⁰

While the hierarchy even within one family is of importance in Korea, the emphasis that is placed on hierarchical positions in general is remarkable. As mentioned before, the relationship between superiors and subordinates is an important aspect of the culture. Through its history, Korea has had many strong rulers who had used their power for the benefit of their subjects, but then there were also influential men who abused the authority they had. One does not have to go far back into Korea's history to find such examples. Political leaders in the second half of the last century, during the country's extraordinary rise from the ashes of war, have

caused their share of controversy which cannot be discussed here as part of this paper. But it is not surprising – nor is it unique to Koreans – that there is often a significant level of mistrust for authoritative rule. The cultural value of conforming to hierarchical structures, therefore, is often looked upon with some measure of suspicion or even cynicism. Proverbs such as *The upper waters must be clear for the lower waters to be clear* (I,699) or the aforementioned *Where there is no tiger, the hare behaves like the lord* (I,635) show the mistrust that accompanies the belief in authorities. The proverbial wisdom that *A small pepper is hotter than a large pepper* (I,463) cuts both ways as well: a person of smaller stature can gain a responsible position and influence things in a positive way, but just as well can this same person have reached a level in society that he has not earned. That the belief in authority can lead astray is depicted in the old proverb *Do not go where the big man died, but go where the big man's horse died* (III,115). The criticism here lies in people's egoistic decision to go and console the man of influence when his horse died in hopes that he would return a favor for such an act of kindness, but then they would not go to pay their respect if the man himself died, because no such favor could be expected anymore.

Another value that plays a prominent role in Korean culture is the attempt to uphold a healthy level of social harmony. Many millions living on little land require not only certain rules of behavior, but in general a sense of what works well in living with others – and what doesn't. In recent decades, Korea has seen its share of civil unrests, to be sure, but for the most part, there seems to be a deeply rooted persuasion to get along. Helping each other – and not being afraid to ask for help, because *A monk cannot shave his own head*²¹ –, and placing one's own individual interests below the common good, are important elements of the social structure.²² In Korea's case, one might argue in addition, fairly constant invasions throughout its history have promoted a particularly strong feeling of togetherness and strength on numbers.²³ But working together and getting along does not always need to be a laborious effort: it sometimes simply requires a friendly face – *No one spits on a smiling face* (I,547) – or finding a quick solution: if not persisting on one's own position can solve a bitter or lengthy dispute, then this should be the goal as the proverb *When the host runs out of soya bean sauce, the guest says he doesn't want soup*

(I,352) suggests. Why create a big problem, if a rather small concession can make things easier for everyone?

Korean proverbs not only give advice for proper or expected behavior among people, they sometimes criticize actions that are in need of change, such as in *When the drowning fellow is rescued, he asked for his bundles* (I,687). In this example, a person fails to show the expected level of gratitude to someone who has helped him. The proverb takes its imagery from the bundle of personal belongings that the traveler in old Korea would carry on his back. If, after receiving help from a fellow man, one does not show appropriate gratefulness, it is said that he “asks for his bundle.” He is only interested in his own affairs and simply wants to continue with his life, as if he was not just helped by someone else. Other proverbs used in Korea criticize the spreading of rumors, because those clearly interfere with social harmony and interrupt the interpersonal cooperation that are important prerequisites for effective societies, especially for those where people are living together in small places. Proverbs such as *Talking about other people is eating cold gruel* (III,100), *Food becomes shorter and words become longer the farther they go* (I,734), or *Words without feet travel a thousand li* (I,732), for example, show how easily and far rumors can spread into every corner of society. A similar meaning can be found in *A house with a straight door can be used, but a house with a straight mouth can't be used* (II,103). In this proverb, it is not the spreading of rumors that hinders the people's ability to get along, but the “straight mouth” of someone who quarrels too much with his fellow man – even if there may be some truth in what he is saying. Arguing and quarreling are counter-productive in a society in which attempting to get along with your fellow man is important. The proverb *A fierce dog has no time to see the tip of his nose heal* (III,52) criticizes hostile behavior and marks certain people as outcasts from society. Respectful and harmonious interpersonal skills are valued highly and good advice always is: *Stoke your own fire* (Chung, 115).

Rather than arguing with each other, many Korean proverbs suggest that one should help one's neighbor. This is not only an expressed value that helps society to achieve common goals, it also lends support to the less fortunate in a group. The proverb *If you give barley, why can't you get a musk melon!* (III,3) promotes the idea of sharing toward a mutual benefit. During times of the

year when barley is available in abundance, other foods may not be obtainable for the barley producer because cash is tight. In old Korea, this was often the case during the summer months when barley was harvested and melons to complete the daily meal needed to be purchased from another farmer. The proverb reminds those with “melons” to return the favor of receiving “barley” from someone else. The underlying idea is that sharing and helping each other, especially in times of need or uneven supply, promote peace and harmony. Similar in meaning is the proverb *Ten spoonfuls make a bowl of rice* (III,161) which encourages individuals to work together toward a common goal. This can be especially meaningful if the result of such concerted efforts is used for the benefit of another person: the ten people who each give just one small spoonful of “rice” can feed an eleventh person who is hungry. The benefits for society are borne from the cooperation of its people: *Union is strength* (Chung, 239).

One characteristic that supports social harmony is a certain level of conformity within society. Many Korean proverbs promote the idea of surrounding oneself with the “right” or “same” people: *If sweet, swallow it; if sour, spit it out* (I,591). Finding others who make it easier to live with can be an important step on the way to a more harmonious co-existence. *A crawfish sides with a crab* (III,31) talks about two animals that are found in Korean cooking, but the similarities go beyond the fishy taste: they both move in a similar fashion through water and surf, and so do people of kindred feelings or interests tend to side with each other – either simply for company or as a defense against a common enemy. Hanging with the right crowd, and not sticking out – effectively illustrated by the proverb *A sharply angled stone will be chiseled off*²⁴ – is an important prerequisite for what’s valued: getting along in peace and unity. The proverb *Come near to Indian ink, and you’ll be stained with black* (II,8), then, warns of the negative influences if one associates with the “wrong” people. One should not get too close to that what (or who) might disgrace them – just like the calligrapher who does not keep a safe distance from the inkstone with his writing hand or his sleeves. Very similarly, the proverb *The quince disgraces a fruit shop* (II,124) puts the idea into words that shame and humiliation are to be avoided in order to keep harmony within a group of people. The quince, or *mogwa* in Korean, looks like a melon, but the fruit is usually not eaten

because it is too hard and does not have a taste. Hanging it in a fruit shop disgraces the other fruits and brings dishonor to the shopkeeper, just as a person who surrounds himself with undesirable people loses face and risks to be shunned by society.

As mentioned before, one of the most important values in Korean culture – and the most prominent reason given in answering the question how Korea’s rapid economic development in the second half of the last century can be explained – is education. The traveler to this country, who sees uniform-clad school children on the streets at any time of day (or night!), and seven days a week, immediately gets a sense of the importance that is placed on learning and studying. This zeal for education is on a very different level from the situation in the US, for example, and even from how it is in other Asian countries like Japan or China. The so-called “education fever”²⁵ in Korea where the majority of children go to cram schools after the regular instructions at a public or private school have ended, takes the urge to learn to an extreme. It is not uncommon for middle- and high school age children to go to these *hagwons*, study until about midnight, and then go home either for more studying, or for finally going to bed. Many children reportedly do not get more than four hours of sleep before another extended day of studying begins. The goal for all of this is an as-perfect-as-possible result in the national college entry exam that determines which college or university the student will be able to attend. Everyone’s aspiration is to go to one of the three most reputable universities – collectively and very appropriately called “SKY,” an acronym for Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University.

The basis for this extremely high value placed on education in general, and on attending one of the SKY-universities in particular, can be found in Confucian ideals. Korea has been called “the most Confucian society in the world”²⁶ and many Confucian sayings promote the value of learning. *Education is the meaning of life, I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand*, or *Study the past if you would define the future* show how important learning is. Sometimes one can see quotes from Confucius posted in public places, for example *Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous, The scholar who cherishes the love of comfort is not fit to be deemed a scholar, or He who learns but does not think, is lost! He who thinks but*

*does not learn is in great danger*²⁷ do not have a particular proverbial quality as far as their diction goes, but they do show the influence that Confucian thought has on Korean culture, and especially on education in this country. Old Korean proverbs such as *The dog that is raised in the school can recite classical poetry of the beauties of nature*²⁸ were meant to stress the importance of school and learning, but portray the education fever in a rather ironic way when read in our times: rogue studying of only what is tested on the exam – as it is practiced to an extreme in the current education system in Korea – largely undervalues learning important practical life skills or an appreciation of literature and art.

Despite the criticism one can raise when looking at education in Korea, especially pertaining to its negative effects on emotional and physical developments of young adults, the success the country has seen in terms of knowledge-based industrial growth is remarkable. That “education” must have played an important role, as it is widely and proudly mentioned by Koreans, is without any doubt. Economic success – moving up in worldwide rankings of various economic indicators, being awarded prestigious roles in international organizations and summits, negotiating favorable free trade agreements with other leading economies, etc. – is a value ranked high in Korean culture. Money plays an important role in society: *There is not a man who will spit on money* (III,133), and the resulting economic accomplishments made in the process are very visible characteristics of Korean life.

People in Korea are rightfully proud of the stunning achievements made during the last fifty years when the country transformed itself from one of the poorest places on earth in the 1960s to one of the richest countries today.²⁹ But not just on statistical data sheets, also in the appearance of its cities and its people, it is obvious that Korea is a very affluent place. Signs of growth and improvements everywhere impress the visitor to Korea who admires the new buildings for their architectural boldness and sheer size, notices an impressive variety and quality of products in stores, is amazed by the number of well-dressed people and the most advanced technical gadgets they all seem to hold in their hands, appreciates the safe, clean, and efficient public transportation system that reaches into every corner of the country – as does the Internet – and is in awe of the many things he sees that attempt to make life easier and more enjoyable for Korean citizens (and

for tourists the country hopes to attract in increasing numbers). Big Korean conglomerates such as Samsung, Hyundai, or LG are among the largest – and most successful – companies in the world, and they provide many of the cutting-edge products that Koreans and other people around the globe use in their daily lives. The standard of living in Korea has improved at almost unbelievable pace over the last five decades and its entrepreneurial achievements are the envy of countries and companies everywhere.

There are a number of reasons for the country's economic success – besides good education. In Korea's case, a good part of these rapid developments is rooted in underlying cultural attitudes and aptitudes. Many Korean proverbs emphasize that a good work ethic is a prerequisite for financial success.³⁰ The aforementioned *Eat breakfast late and go to closing market* (I,389) is a good example. Similar in meaning is the proverb *Eat like a devil and work like a devil-post* (III,65) which takes its imagery from the wooden posts engraved with faces and Chinese characters that were placed along the roads in old Korea to indicate distances, but also to fend off evils from travelers. Since those posts did not do any "work," however, and stood idle by the roadside, the proverb uses them as a negative example for a lazy person who dallies his life away. The opposite message is found in proverbs like *Work like an ox and eat like a mouse* (II,160) or *A diligent beggar may eat hot rice* (III,5) which promote the idea that spirited work will yield good results. The direct correlation seen here between success and "eating" is a very common theme in Korean proverbs that often take their metaphors from food items. Rice, barley, melons, persimmons, peppers, and many other ingredients commonly used in Korean cooking play a prominent role in the country's proverbial wisdom. Koreans believe that *Eating is heaven* (III,66). They like to eat – fresh, colorful, nutritious, and very spicy – and they enjoy sharing their meals with others by placing many small bowls of different foods in the middle of the table. The significance of food and eating is a widely accepted carrier of proverbial wisdom and adds persuasive power.

Besides emphasizing the value of self-motivation, hard work, and diligence, as it pertains to business success, Korean proverbs depict other important entrepreneurial traits as well. *A frog shrinks into itself before it leaps* (III,91) uses the frog, another symbolic animal found in many genres of Korean folklore³¹ as a reminder

that a person should prepare carefully in order to make a successful step forward in his business. Good preparation, thinking things through properly, and not rushing to quick decisions, is promoted in other proverbs as well, such as *Even a soft, soft persimmon must be eaten slowly*³², *A quickly heated room cools easily* (I,517), or *Swim with both hands on the ground* (I,592). *A candy seller does as he pleases* (III,22) addresses sales and marketing skills necessary to run a successful business. It takes its imagery from the selling practice of the candy man in old Korea who would hawk his sweets (typically made of rice) on the streets or markets and then selling uneven portions – “as he pleases” in order to maximize his profit – by pulling the glutinous mass in longer or shorter pieces and cutting those off with scissors after being paid.

Another important characteristic of a successful businessman is experience. The proverb *The new year's soup plays the trick* (II,140) refers to the Korean custom of asking “How many years have you eaten?” in order to find out another person's age. Every New Year, Koreans eat one bowl of traditional soup, and accordingly the number of bowls eaten determines one's age. The Lunar New Year (*seol-nal*) is the second most important holiday in Korea (after the Harvest Moon Festival (*chuseok*) in mid autumn when many of the ancestral rituals take place), and its importance for a Korean's life cycle is great.³³ The proverb suggests that the more “new year's soup” a person has eaten, the more experienced and knowledgeable he has become with age, and his entrepreneurial abilities are of greater value. That success in business can be an ambiguous notion, however, is addressed in proverbs as well. *A big gate makes a big house* (II,52) depicts how a person may want to show his accomplishments by the size of the house he lives in – as it was done by rich aristocrats in old Korea – or by the massive gate he places between himself and others. That this is often merely a conceited idea of success, and not necessarily based on reality, can sarcastically be implied by using the proverb *A big drum makes a big sound* (III,60).

Some Korean proverbs convey wisdom that may help find success in business. *Bent trees guard an ancestor's grave* (I,650) suggests that everything – no matter how useless or imperfect it may appear – can be good for something, for example, that certain people can make good employees if placed in the right position. *The man who walks wants to ride when he sees a horse* (II,128)

can be used to depict a successful manager's decision at one point in his life to have other able people (typically the oldest son) carry on the work for him. For those offered that job, even if it sounds impressive, waiting for another opportunity that may lead to success more likely, the proverb *Even the Governorship of Pyongyang is refused if not wanted* (I,301) may be good advice. General wisdom for a certain behavior, much of which will support good business decisions as well, is communicated in many Korean proverbs such as *Unless you enter a tiger's den, you cannot capture a tiger cub* (I,629), *Unless you go up the mountain, you cannot catch a tiger* (I,630), *Keep cool even if the tiger carries you off* (I,637), *A debtor is a slave* (III,40), *The blindman blames his stick if he falls* (III,9), *The high branches are more easily broken* (II,14), *Put off for one day, and ten days will pass* (II,123), or *Don't whip a horse that is going as fast as he can* (Luomala, p.493).

Many of the values and norms found in Korean culture, as already mentioned, have their roots in religion. Religions themselves, therefore, are important sources and carriers of proverbial wisdom. It can be said that "Korea is one of the most religiously diverse societies in the world,"³⁴ and its proverbs hint at many different religious themes or take their imagery from one of the multiple beliefs followed by people in the country. There are four main religions in Korea, or better said schools of thought: Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, and Shamanism.

Some scholars suggest that Shamanism was the original Korean religion. "Shamanism has been the enduring core of Korean religious and cultural thought, exercising a profound influence on the development of Korean attitudes and behaviors as well as cultural practices."³⁵ Its main focus is on this world: rituals are performed to ask spirits for success and prosperity, as well as health and a long life. People visit shamans in order to make contact with spirits and to ask that material wishes be fulfilled. Shamans act as mediators between this world and the spiritual world and their method of communication typically involves food, music, and dance. Surprisingly, there are not many proverbs that seem to be closely related to this traditional folk religion. Those found are often reminders that patience and trust are necessary to see wishes come true, or that the rituals performed are not always crowned by success: *If you want to watch the dance-seance of a sorceress, watch till the feasting cake is laid out* (I,561) or *A sorceress can-*

not dance out her own devils nor can a blind fortuneteller tell the day of his own death (I,568).

Buddhism, until the recent rise of Christianity in Korea the largest religion, is not as old as Shamanism. As already shown earlier, many proverbs are related to this particular religion. Buddha, monks, temples, and a variety of Buddhist beliefs or values are found as direct or indirect references in many proverbial sayings. Most of these proverbs, such as *Chant the Buddha's call while the mouth is idle* (I,78) or *Hold a Buddhist mass for Buddha!* (III,15) remind believers that only praying and following the Buddha's teachings is the path to enlightenment. Traditional proverbs of Korea typically don't have distinct Christian motives because this religion was introduced to the country only in the outgoing 18th century and Christians were persecuted severely at times for the next 100 years or so. While it has gained a phenomenal following in the later part of the last century, much more influential on Korean culture is Confucianism. More a system of ethical rules and moral codes than a strict religion, it is probably correct to say that most Koreans are Confucian in some way, even if their religious faith goes to Buddha or God.

Daily life in Korea revolves very much around Confucian ideas. Most of the values that have already been mentioned above, such as ancestor worship, the importance of family, respect for the elderly, social harmony and conformity, and especially the relevance of education, are all directly related to Confucian values. Central to Confucianism is the importance of relationships and bonds. Among those, filial piety ranks very high. Since it is an expected behavior, and deeply rooted in the Korean psyche, many proverbs do not state the obvious, but rather take a look at situations where the traditional duty of children for their parents is amiss. For example, the proverb *There is no filial child in a long illness* (I,361) is used when a person loses patience after doing something for a long time, and *Three cups of wine after death are not worth one cup in life* (III,195) reminds children that parents need to be treated well and respectfully, especially while they are still alive. This saying takes its imagery from the annual ceremony to commemorate the ancestor's death, when the children (the eldest son) pour wine three times and lay out a splendid meal for the spirit of the deceased. The food is prepared ready to eat, chopsticks provided, and the tops of various fruits cut off so that the

spirit can enter (and “eat”) easier. The criticism lying in this proverb is that this meal is often more sumptuous than what the children had prepared for parents during their lifetime.

With this last example of many different aspects of Korean culture given here, it can be said that trying to introduce a foreign culture will always be an incomplete endeavor, because it has too many characteristics that all have their own special place in the total picture. Nevertheless, it is important to find at least some level of access to norms and values of other peoples in order to better understand what they do and what they say. Traveling is perhaps the best way to get to know people of other cultures and the country they live in – and to learn a lot about one’s own at the same time – but this is not always possible. Using various media resources is relatively easy in today’s digital world, but where to start? This paper tried to highlight some of the most prominent cultural aspects that one encounters when traveling to Korea and hopefully the reader will find that its culture is now not so “foreign” anymore. Korea is a country on a fast-paced track in many ways, and without doubt, especially as we go forward, will be one of the more influential participants in the global community. If the reader should remember a few cultural characteristics – or some of its powerful proverbs – the author shall regard this paper as a successful attempt to catch “two birds with one stone,” as mentioned in the beginning, or better, as they say in Korea: “two pigeons with one bean.”³⁶

Notes

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² Mieder, Wolfgang. “Popular Views of the Proverb.” *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*, 2 (1985), p.119. Print.

³ Most proverbs used in this paper are taken from the book *Maxims and Proverbs of Old Korea* by Tae Hung Ha (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2000) which was first published in 1964, and I owe many interpretations of proverbs to his detailed comments. The title “Old Korea” suggests that the proverbs found in this collection are predominantly Korean in nature, because the influence of other (Western) proverbial language in this long secluded country should be relatively minimal. Accordingly, using this book – and to a lesser extent other collections which will be identified below – also means that more recent aspects of Korean life and thought may not be represented here. This paper, therefore, does not include proverbs directly related to topics such as the Japanese occupation, thoughts about re-unification, or the recent rapid industrialization and opening of the country in general. All proverbs taken from *Maxims and Proverbs of Old Korea* are quoted here with their number in this collection (part and proverb number).

³ Tae Hung Ha, Preface (no page number).

⁴ Tae Hung Ha, Preface (no page number).

⁵ Yoo, Young H. *Wisdom of the Far East. A Dictionary of Proverbs, Maxims, and Famous Classical Phrases of the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean*. Washington DC: Far Eastern Research & Publication Center, 1972, p. xiii. Print.

⁶ Chung, Chong-wha. “Identity of the Underprivileged and Reality of Poverty as Reflected in Korean Proverbs.” *Memoirs of '96 Tokyo International Proverb Forum*. Tokyo: The Japan Society for Proverb Studies, 1996, p. 31. Print.

⁷ Ch'oe, Chong-ho. “The Concept of Language in the Traditional Korean Thought.” *Korea Journal* 1985, p. 19.

⁸ Kim, Peter and Cohen, Ronald. “Verbal Abstraction and Culture: An Exploratory Study with Proverbs.” *Psychological Reports* 1977, No. 41, p. 967. Print.

⁹ Paczoly, Gyula. “Korean, Chinese, and Japanese Proverbs.” *Papers on intercultural communication*. Budapest: College for Foreign Trade, 1995, p. 54. Print.

¹⁰ Chung, Chong-wha, p. 32.

¹¹ Not only did the new language bring about significant social and cultural changes, the success of King Sejong’s invention can be seen today: Korea boasts one of the highest literacy rates in the world and the language has been placed as a treasure on the UN’s World Heritage List.

¹² Kim, Eungi. “Understanding Korean Culture.” Korean Studies Workshop for American Educators 2010. Lecture given on July 21, 2010 at Yonsei University, Seoul. For the purpose of this introduction to Korean culture, I am following his selection of the country’s most important cultural aspects.

¹³ See also *Tigers, Frogs, and Rice Cakes. A Book of Korean Proverbs*. Auburn, Ca: Shen’s Books, 1999. This children’s book includes 20 proverbs and proverbial expressions of which three use the symbol of the “tiger.” In some Korean proverbs, the tiger takes the place of animals typically found in Western equivalents, such as in *A tiger out of the mountain; a fish out of water* (III,177).

¹⁴ Vermeersch, Sem. “Korean religion.” Korean Studies Workshop for American Educators 2010. Lecture given on July 7, 2010 at Yonsei University, Seoul. No slide number.

¹⁵ The symbol of the swastika can be seen in Korea in another connection, because it is also used by Shamans. The swastika painted on house walls, as part of billboards, or hung in windows, typically point to a Shaman's place of business. Shamanism and Confucianism – the latter without any visible “symbols” – are of significant importance in Korean culture and will be discussed later as part of the country's value system.

¹⁶ This text is found in Chung, Chong-wha, on p. 151. Proverbs taken from his book will be quoted in parentheses.

¹⁷ It is important to note that there is a small number of Korean proverb collections that are not available in English translation and could not be included in this study. This is one reason why not every cultural aspects mentioned here is supported by a proverb.

¹⁸ A disturbance to the family structure, one must imagine, that was more prominent in old Korea, was the custom of men having concubines. Many Korean proverbs take their imagery from such situations that were talked about more openly in the past than it would be the case in our days. Two of many examples are *A concubine can not bear the sight of another concubine* (II,26) which shows the competition for relationships with married men of wealth, and *The village wench takes a yaman husband* (II,74) that depicts how not only officials took concubines, but how they were sometimes seduced by women with a certain lack of moral standards.

¹⁹ Kim, Eugenia. *The Calligrapher's Daughter: a Novel*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009, p. 170. Print.

²⁰ Paczolay, Gyula. *European, Far-Eastern and some Asian Proverbs*. Veszprém: Central Library of the University of Veszprém, 1994, p. 64. Print.

²¹ Yoo, p. 60.

²² Recent examples of such demonstrations of unity in Korea are the “Gold Collection Campaign“ in 1997 (3.5 million Koreans gave 160 tons of gold, approx. \$2 billion, to support their country during the economic crisis), the “screaming Red Devils” (24 million Korean soccer fans supported their team enthusiastically in public places during the 2002 FIFA World Cup), or the Taean Oil spill in 2007 where a million volunteers sped up the clean-up from an estimated 7-10 years to a mere two years. These three examples were given by the Korean Ministry of Strategy and Finance in a presentation to Wall Street investors in March 2010 (by Vice Minister Kyung-wook Hur, slide no. 13). Copy provided by Prof. Joon Ho Hahm for his lecture “Korean Economic Development” at Yonsei University on July 3, 2010 as part of the Korean Studies Workshop for American Educators 2010.

²³ Korea's unique geo-political position between two powerful neighbors (China and Japan) that invaded or challenged the small country frequently over many centuries, is reflected in the proverb *In a fight between whales, the backs of shrimps are burst* (Yoo, p. 184) which provides yet another good illustration of how Koreans see their country.

²⁴ Yoo, p. 237.

²⁵ Seth, Michael J. *Education Fever. Society, Politics, and the Pursuit of Schooling in Korea*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002. Print.

²⁶ Barry, Patricia. "Confucian Society: A Mixed Blessing." Lecture notes at <http://www.koreasociety.org>

²⁷ These quotes at <http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Confucius>

²⁸ Yoo, p. 306.

²⁹ Based on Gross Domestic Product per capita: \$87 in 1962 to about \$20,000 in 2007. Source: Joon-Ho Hahm at his lecture "Korean Economic Development" at Yonsei University on July 3, 2010 as part of the Korean Studies Workshop for American Educators 2010. Slide no. 2.

³⁰ In annual working hours alone, Korea ranks highest of all OECD members (see <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/38/58/39696376.pdf>).

³¹ *A frog in a well* (I,285) is a famous Korean saying about someone or something disconnected from the outside world, which describes Korea itself well during the country's seclusion from the rest of the world until the mid 20th century.

³² Luomala, Katharine. "Four Aspects of Twelve Korean Proverbs Used In Hawaii" In: *Proverbium 1 (1965) – 15 (1970)*, ed. Wolfgang Mieder. Bern: Peter Lang, 1987, p. 493. Print.

³³ Birthday celebrations in Korea are important cultural events. Especially the first birthday (*tol*) is celebrated on a large scale (as well as the 100th day) because the death rate of children younger than one year used to be very high in the country. The birthday guests bring various objects such as books, writing utensils, or money and the child is asked to pick one object. If the child picks up a writing utensil or a book, it is expected to become a scholar and if it picks money, it will be wealthy. Other objects may include food items (government official), a sword (military career), or threads (long life). Another important birthday is one's 60th at the completion of a cycle in the Oriental zodiac. A Korean's "age" is often confusing for Westerners because in addition to the actual birthday (counting as age one), every Korean advances in age on Lunar New Year.

³⁴ Vermeersch, Sem. No slide number.

³⁵ Kim, Eungi. No slide number.

³⁶ Chung, Chongwha. *Dictionary of Korean and English Proverbs*. Seoul: Tam Gu Dang, 1995, p. 95. Print.

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