

Practice exchange

Teaching Korean cultural constructs to American students: Examples from a South Korea study abroad course

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The blend of traditional and contemporary culture in South Korea offers study abroad students a valuable setting to learn about psychological constructs. Despite South Korea's potential as a study abroad destination, the body of literature on teaching psychology abroad in the country remains undeveloped. An immersion experience can be a valuable way to teach study abroad students about culture-specific constructs. The present article highlights how I attempted to teach three culture-specific constructs (han, jeong, and chemyon) during a short-term, intensive study abroad experience in South Korea, utilising various excursions and activities. Examples of learning activities discussed in this article are The War and Women's Human Rights Museum to learn about han, Baby Box to facilitate discussion of chemyon, and dining out experience to learn about jeong. As appropriate, I integrate student written assignments and results from a survey to illustrate how the learning of the culture-specific constructs took place.

Keywords: South Korea, study abroad, culture-specific constructs, cross-cultural psychology.

STUDY abroad has been linked to a number of positive educational and psychological outcomes for students (Merrill et al., 2012). Given the benefits, it is not surprising that there is a growing body of literature on developing study abroad programmes and courses (e.g. Enns, 2016; Gross, 2016). In addition, because a 'one-size fits all' approach to teaching a study abroad course may not be as effective due to cultural differences between countries, the literature has highlighted study abroad in specific countries (e.g. Honduras; Dietz & Baker, 2019) or regions of the world (e.g. East Asia; Enns, 2016). It is puzzling, then, that a review of the literature on teaching psychology abroad reveals a lack of attention to programmes and courses in South Korea. Institute of International Education (2019) in its list of leading destinations for American students who study abroad identifies South Korea as the 20th most popular destination; the only other Asian countries listed are China (7th), Japan (10th), and India (17th) respectively. This significant

interest in South Korea as a study abroad destination makes sense, in light of its blend of traditional and contemporary elements. In particular, South Korea affords a unique opportunity for the learning of cultural constructs.

Korean Cultural Constructs

L.I.C. Kim (1993) describes several cultural constructs to illustrate deeply rooted 'Korean ethos.' Although L.I.C. Kim (1993) wrote about these constructs in relation to the mental health care of Korean Americans, the extension of them to a different context, such as a study abroad setting, seems appropriate for educators. The present study examines three of these constructs from L.I.C. Kim (1993): *chemyon*, *han*, and *jeong*. I define each of these constructs in the respective sections that follow so that the definitions can be provided in proximity to the corresponding learning activities.

The three cultural constructs share key commonalities that are relevant for this article. First, there are no exact English

equivalents to these constructs. As such, definitions provided in this article are approximations, and elaborations and contextual factors are required to fully grasp the meaning of the constructs. This also means that the study abroad setting, which affords students an experiential learning opportunity, is an ideal platform to teach the cultural constructs to American students. Second, the cultural constructs are conceptually linked to commonly taught cross-cultural constructs such as interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Given this, one strategy that the instructor can utilise is to use the well-known cultural construct as a foundation to also teach about the cultural constructs. Third, the constructs have significant mental health implications (I.J. Kim et al., 2006; L.I.C. Kim, 1993), and so for students studying psychology, chemyon, han, and jeong might especially pique their interest.

This article is based on a month-long study abroad experience in South Korea with 15 undergraduate students from a liberal arts institution located in the Pacific Northwest region of the US. The study abroad experience took place during autumn of 2018. While in South Korea, students enrolled in a course titled *Cross-Cultural Psychology* taught by me.¹ Following the Korea trip, I distributed a survey asking about the students' learning of culture-specific constructs. On this survey, students were able to provide permission for me to summarise and quote from their written assignments completed during the study abroad. Six participants filled out the survey and provided consent for their written materials from the course to be used. Survey participants were entered into a draw for a \$25 coffee shop gift card. The survey asked participants to rate the increase in their

understanding of han, jeong, and chemyon as a result of the study abroad experience. After that, participants were asked about the degree to which the activities discussed in this article addressed the particular cultural construct (e.g. How did dining out in Korea impact your understanding of jeong?), with the option to provide comments. All survey items were rated on a scale from 1 (*none at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). Whenever appropriate, this article draws from the survey results and students' written work submitted during their study abroad experience.² The Institutional Review Board of the author's institution approved this study.

The structure of the rest of the article for sections on han, jeong, and chemyon is as follows. First, I briefly describe the cultural construct. Next, I provide examples of how I connected the construct with activities, field trips, or observations to help students deepen their understanding. Whenever appropriate, I quote from student reflections or survey responses.

Han

Han refers to 'an unresolved grief, frustration, loss, or resentment in response to traumatic experience(s)' (Shin, 2018, p.486). Therefore, one way to understand han is as internalised collective trauma. For Koreans, two related sources of han are the experience of colonial oppression from Japan and the Korean War. Thus, learning about the historical facts but also how they impact modern South Korea helped to solidify my students' understanding of han. Also, we discussed han in the context of mental health, such as how historical and modern oppression of women in Korean society might result in a sense of han, which in turn might impact

¹ As a faculty member in the Psychology Department at my US institution, I teach *Cross-Cultural Psychology* to undergraduate students three times a year. The course taught in South Korea is equivalent to the one taught in the US, but with the addition of activities and excursions.

² To minimise confusion, whenever I quote from student written reflection completed during the Study Abroad, I use the word 'student'; whenever I quote from the survey results, I use the word 'participant'.

one's wellbeing and psychological distress. Participants reported a notable increase in their overall understanding of han as a result of the study abroad experience, $M = 4.50$ ($SD = 0.84$).

Japanese Colonialism

To learn more about han, we visited The War and Women's Human Rights Museum (The War and Women's Human Rights Museum, n.d.). This museum provided a powerful experience that helped to introduce the concept of han. Most visibly, it told the stories of South Korean 'comfort women' who were forced into sex work during the Japanese invasion. In a written reflection, one student observed, 'There was no sugar-coating of the tragedies that happened, and for the hour or so I was in the building I felt that I was a part of the trauma, that I could also feel the angst and hurt of those women.' The museum also included stories of oppressed women from other parts of the world, and this was a clear message that the oppression of women and resulting trauma is a global issue that needs to be addressed. A student wrote, 'I appreciated how the museum did not paint this pain as something of the past, but rather as a lasting trauma that still requires societal work to rectify.' Finally, the museum visit was a solemn reminder that the comfort women's story is ultimately a source of han for *all* of Korea, not just those who directly experienced the trauma of engaging in forced sex work. This was further emphasised in one of the displays noting that, to this day, protesters gather weekly in front of the Japanese Embassy in South Korea to demand a better response from the Japanese government (for more information, see Limon, 2014). A student astutely wrote the following:

After taking this class – particularly seeing firsthand the tension between Japan and Korea – I'm beginning to want to educate myself more about global relationships, because it is infinitely more relevant to psychology than I previously thought. I've never seen countries

that the US fought against as personally offensive/repulsive, and I falsely assumed other countries felt as indifferent as I did. I was very wrong. I learned – and saw firsthand – how personal war & its atrocities are to the Korean population. I'm starting to understand [h]an and the sense of unity in South Korea much more than I did at the beginning of this trip.

In sum, the learning about the complex relationship between South Korea and Japan through a historical perspective was beneficial for the students. Participants thought that they learned a great deal about han through the exposure to the history of Japanese colonialism and its impact on South Koreans, $M = 4.50$ ($SD = 0.84$).

DMZ

In our study abroad programme, we discussed the Korean War and its relation to the current global sociocultural-political climate. To enrich this discussion, we toured the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separates the two Koreas. Many students admitted that they were influenced by the Western media's oversimplification of the North, South, and US relations, and visiting the DMZ was a powerful counter to the inaccurate narrative. One student noted, '[T]he experience has made me a lot more understanding towards the North and South tension, because from a US perspective, I was only ever told that North Korea = communist, dictatorship, bad, and South Korea = free, good.' We framed our discussion of the North-South Korea dynamic using the sibling metaphor – that the division in the Korean peninsula can be understood as separated siblings. This is not only metaphorical but also literal, as emotional reunions between separated family members took place around the time of our study abroad, a current event I was able to introduce to my students (Choe, 2018). Related to the sibling metaphor, my students observed that the South Korean DMZ tour guide referred to North Koreans as 'my brothers,' whereas a US soldier who also served as a guide used

the word ‘enemies’ to refer to North Korea. One student commented:

From our tour guides Mr A and [US soldier] Mr B, I saw a stark contrast in how they spoke about the North and South Korean governments and people. Mr A had obvious desires of reunification, going so far as to say Kim Jong-Un is his brother. Mr B referred to North Koreans as the enemy, and shared his negative experiences with North Koreans, such as when North Korean soldiers made obscene gestures at him and other military members. Mr. A displayed a deep sense of discontent about the division, conveying the han, or collective angst that Koreans experience. Mr B seemed to only want to share about the division of the two countries.

All of these experiences and ensuing discussions related to North and South Korea served to give my students a glimpse into the collective trauma, or han, of siblings at war with each other. Participants rated the DMZ experience as helpful for their learning of han, $M = 4.17$ ($SD = 0.98$).

Jeong

Jeong can be understood as a ‘caring mind for others, as do siblings, which consists of attentive, empathetic, helpful, and supportive behaviors’ (Choi & Han, 2008, p.207). In essence, it is a deep interpersonal connection and attachment with others that go beyond the typical affection. Participants reported a high level of learning about jeong, $M = 4.33$ ($SD = 0.82$).

Dining out

My students experienced jeong through dining out together. A typical Korean meal includes many shared side dishes. In fact, it is not uncommon for even soups to be shared in a large bowl. Therefore, family members, friends, or even co-workers who eat together share different dishes during a meal. Whenever my students ate at a restaurant in South Korea, they experienced the strangeness of having to share dishes with each

other. In lecture, we processed this practice against the backdrop of interdependent self-construal – specifically, that the boundary of the self is fluid in an interdependent context like South Korea, compared to more rigid boundaries in an independent context (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In addition, this discussion also reinforced jeong as a deep attachment that allows ‘intrusions’ into personal spaces, such as individuals sharing food. This intrusion into others’ physical space also occurs when inevitably, one has to reach across the table to take a portion of a side dish; this behaviour is expected so that everyone has access to all the side dishes on the table. What is also unique about jeong in the context of a typical Korean meal is that the sharing of dishes is reserved only for close (or at least, meaningful) relationships. Therefore, jeong is not to be shared with everyone, but rather to be reserved for those who are part of the close social network. The simple activity of dining out provided an opportunity to further dialogue about the nuances of interdependence (e.g. importance of in-group relations). One participant commented, ‘The contrast between dining out in America and dining out in South Korea made Jeong exceptionally apparent. The amount of sharing, physical contact, and general lack of “personal space” really illustrated this concept of community and all being “one” with each other.’ Another participant pointed out that ‘even when grilling meat at the Korean barbecue there was a show of attachment and effort for each person.’ Participants agreed that they learned a lot about jeong through dining out in Korea, $M = 4.20$ ($SD = 0.84$).

Public bathhouses

Although it was not a required activity, a group of students chose to experience going to a public bathhouse, or a *jjimjilbang* (H. Kim, 2018). The basic setup of a *jjimjilbang* includes a large bath area separated by gender, and a larger lobby with heated rooms, food, and entertainment. It is common practice for families and friends to

go to a jjimjilbang and separate by gender to go to the bath area, and then meet up in the lobby (fully clothed at this point) to relax, converse, and eat with each other. The part of the jjimjilbang experience that is especially culture-specific is being naked in the bath area in the presence of others. A jjimjilbang promotes a different level of interpersonal bond (i.e. jeong) than what might be typical in a Western context, and for my American students who explored this activity, they experienced a snapshot of jeong with their American peers. In reflecting on this experience, some of the students expressed that they felt an unspoken sense of interpersonal bond with others who were also in the public bathhouse – people who were strangers to them – simply because everyone was on ‘equal footing’ in the sense that all were without clothes. Some students astutely reflected on the irony of being naked in front of others in a Korean culture that places a strong emphasis on physical appearance and in particular, Western standards of beauty, and at least during the time that they were in the bathhouse, not being judged for their physical appearance. In sum, the students who sought out this experience gained a valuable glimpse into what jeong looks and feels like in a Korean context. Participants were mixed in their perception of going to a public bathhouse as a learning experience, $M = 2.67$ ($SD = 1.34$).

Chemyon

Chemyon refers to ‘one’s social face, influencing the formation or maintenance of social relationships’ (Choi & Lee, 2002, p.332). Chemyon can impact how one makes decisions and behaviours in interpersonal context (Choi & Lee, 2002). Another helpful way to conceptualise chemyon is to frame it as including a shame emphasis (e.g. I don’t want to embarrass myself socially) but also a pride component (e.g. I want to bring honour to my family); in other words, it includes elements of both fear of losing social standing but also a desire to gain it (see Choi & Lee, 2002). Overall, students reported

a high level of learning about chemyon, $M = 4.33$ ($SD = 0.82$).

Baby Box visit

My students and I visited the Baby Box (Shim, 2016), which is a religious organisation where mothers can drop off their newborns so that the babies can receive temporary care and eventually be (a) transitioned back to the mother, (b) transferred to an adoption agency, or (c) moved to an orphanage. The organisation also provides professional counseling to the mothers, many of whom present at the Baby Box location with significant distress and trauma. Visiting and interacting with the Baby Box staff was meaningful for my students. In particular, students learned about how a cultural construct like chemyon may be connected to this type of work. According to the Baby Box staff, a frequent reason that mothers decide to bring their newborns to Baby Box is due to the deep cultural shame or stigma attached to certain types of pregnancy (e.g. teenagers, unmarried women, married women who have had extramarital affairs, married women going through divorce), and the societal emphasis on chemyon might be the driving force behind the shame. One powerful example of chemyon that we learned about is that the mothers often drop off their babies late at night when no one is around, and right after they sprint away as if to get away as quickly as possible; to counter this, the Baby Box staff installed a sensor and a video camera on the baby box and monitors this 24 hours, so that as soon as the baby box door is opened, an alarm goes off inside the building and a professional counsellor runs out to try to engage the mother. This description of the elaborate setup to counter the (in this case) deleterious correlate of chemyon was a powerful image that facilitated the understanding of chemyon among my students. One participant noted on their survey:

Going to the baby box was a very impactful experience...as the [counsellor] explained, there [are] many young women [who] feel

helpless and shameful about how they would be viewed in the public eye. While [the counsellor] is able to convince some that there is hope and help, there are many more who are too afraid of the social stigma...that their baby may bring.

Participants rated the Baby Box visit highly in terms of its ability to illuminate the construct of chemyon, $M = 4.40$ ($SD = 0.89$).

Counselling centre visit

My students deepened their understanding of chemyon through a visit to a university counselling centre in Korea. The guest speaker during our tour noted that the use of mental health services can go against the idea of maintaining social integrity, or chemyon, and as a result it could serve as a barrier to seeking psychological services for South Korean college students. The guest speaker discussed how Korean counselling centres can keep in mind chemyon in conducting outreach, so that the cultural shame associated with the utilisation of counseling may be reduced. The guest speaker and my students brainstormed ways to package counselling centre services in a way that was compatible with the cultural emphasis on chemyon (e.g. emphasising that the programme will help with academics or wellbeing, de-emphasising stigmatised labels). This was a great discussion for my students as they reflected on how to make counselling more attractive across cultures. One participant responded on the survey:

The idea of chemyon, combined with jeong, really helped me understand why seeking help for mental illness is such an issue among South Koreans. Not only is there a great deal of

concern for the face of the individual, but due to the presence of jeong, anything that reflects badly on you personally also reflects negatively on those around you. Not only do you have to combat the shame that surrounds you personally struggling with mental illness, but also with the potential shame and judgment that could come down on your family and friends for your 'weakness.'

Participants rated this aspect of learning about chemyon favorably, $M = 4.67$ ($SD = 0.52$).

Conclusion

This article highlighted some innovative ideas for teaching cultural constructs during a study abroad experience in South Korea. Cultural constructs are difficult to grasp for those who are not part of the particular culture, and therefore hands-on experiences and related discussions are helpful in introducing and deepening their understanding. My hope is that the contents of this article will spur further conversations regarding the various ways that instructors teaching abroad can do this in their courses.

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