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NATIVE PROVERBS AS CONDENSED CULTURE AND  
KEYS TO MENTALITY: AN APPROACH TOWARD  
UNDERSTANDING ONE'S KOREAN COUNTERPARTS

This study offers insight from a Midwest-born business professional's 20-year experience of hiring and training dozens of Korean immigrants for factory work. The writer has gained other perspective by studying the Korean language, and from working with students, businessmen, professors, and clergy from the 4,500-member Indianapolis Korean community.<sup>1</sup>

Since long before their 2,000-year recorded history, Koreans have maintained a separate, homogeneous culture, a strong sense of national identity, and a clearly defined ethnic, cultural, and linguistic unit, distinct from Japan and China. The Korean language, unrelated to Chinese and Japanese, belongs to the Uralic- Altaic language family, which includes Mongolian, Tungusic, and Turkish. These other languages may have shared a common parent language with Korean, though some linguists believe that the parent language and Korean may have originated together from a yet earlier language. As of July, 1996, some 45 million people lived in South Korea and 25 million in North Korea. Several million Koreans live in other countries, including two million in China, 700,000 in Japan, and well over one million in the USA.

In America, Koreans have attained visibility well beyond their numbers, particularly as factory workers, businessmen, students, and scholars. As Korea's political, economic, and cultural relationships with the

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West become closer, Americans must achieve better understanding of Korean people. This is not easy, for the deeply rooted Korean consciousness is unique and remote, and the Korean mentality is complex and often unfathomable.

The task of understanding Koreans challenges the best of minds. Native Chinese and Japanese have difficulties understanding Koreans, and often reject them altogether. Americans seem to have done better as suggested by the frequency of Korean-American marriages, though a broader, deeper understanding is needed, judging by the number of these marriages that fail. Koreans newly introduced to American culture tend to embrace some elements, but reject the rest, for in truth, Korean and American cultures clash, and in some ways they are incompatible. Clearly, Americans need to employ more effort and new approaches toward fathoming and understanding the Korean mentality.

Over the ages, the flourishing Korean culture has distilled its peculiar wisdom, and forwarded it to succeeding generations in the form of hundreds of rich proverbs, designed to instruct morally with greater meaning than if spoken in plain language. Often these proverbs define significant truths, and become golden sayings that reveal essential Korean qualities. This study focuses upon a few of these simple, yet profound native proverbs, which illustrate Korean culture, and which reveal key aspects of the Korean mentality as the writer has perceived it.

Within the scope of global business language, this study examines selected proverbs from five areas of thought: (1) Food and drink; (2) Judging appearance; (3) Analyzing behavior; (4) Defining character; and (5) Reflections upon life.

As poetry is condensed prose, so proverbs are condensed culture. Moreover, their interpretations by native Koreans, ranging from the layman to the professional, reveal characteristic Korean thinking. Korean proverbs contain intellectual surprises, and they provide continuing pleasure. Therefore, the reader is urged to be more human than critical, for herein lies delightful discovery, and an understanding of the Korean heart.

#### *Food and Drink*

Koreans have suffered food shortages during their history, and they tend to value food more than Americans do. Koreans also tend to eat larger portions in order to maintain their high energy levels. When they

are hungry, they want food immediately, and restaurants and housewives respond to this demand with spirited service. Consider the following:

### 먹은 죄는 없다

As for eating there is no guilt.

One cannot be blamed for eating, for everyone must eat. There is no need to excuse oneself to get something to eat. The hungry person who steals food in order to survive deserves some understanding for his behavior.

### 먹는 것이 하늘 이다

As for eating, it is a heavenly thing.

Once again, Koreans express their reverence for food, which sustains life and banishes evil.

### 반잔 술에 눈물나고 한잔 술에 웃음난다

A half-cup of wine brings tears; a full cup brings laughter.

This proverb illustrates the subtle nuance between courtesy and offense. Offering a half-cup of wine to a guest will hurt that guest's feelings, for it is so meager, while a full cup will warm the body and lift the spirit. Here, a half-cup of wine makes the difference between success and failure with respect to making someone happy. Koreans' feelings are easily hurt, and these words call attention to the perils of withholding generosity for the sake of economy.

### 취중에 진담 나온다

A drunken man speaks the truth.

Koreans characteristically speak their minds when inhibitions are removed. Korean businessmen often share drinks during breaks from negotiations, for they gain better understanding of one another.

두사람이 먹다가 한사람 죽어도 모른다

Two men are eating, one man dies, the other doesn't notice.

This popular expression portrays two men sharing a meal so delicious that when one man suddenly drops dead, his companion does not notice and continues eating. Good food totally absorbs the attention of the eater. Koreans sometimes use these words to praise a host's cooking.

금강산도 식후 경

*Kumgangsan* after a hearty meal.

Koreans regard their mountain, *Kumgangsan*, as the most beautiful place in the world. Located in North Korea, and inaccessible to South Koreans, *Kumgangsan* remains a paradise of unspoiled nature, resplendent with unique plants and flowers, and sustaining birds, deer, and tigers in their natural state. All Koreans aspire to visit *Kumgangsan*, but few have ever seen it, for South Koreans have been kept from the North since 1953, and North Koreans have been restricted in their travels. This proverb means that the world's most beautiful sight needs the support of a full stomach to be appreciated, and that people first need food for the nourishment of their bodies before they can behold things aesthetic and spiritual.

To know Koreans is to appreciate food, and the importance of sharing it as a foundation for any relationship. The wise American will invite his Korean counterparts for a meal before undertaking discussion of other matters. Remember, though, that Korean custom requires the person who does the inviting to pick up the check.

#### *Judging Appearance*

In Western culture, appearance is important, and no one receives a second chance to make a good first impression. Like the West, Korean culture places high value on appearance, and perhaps more so. Consider the following:

입은 거지는 얻어 먹어도 벗은 거지는 못 얻어 먹는다

A dressed beggar can get food; a naked beggar cannot.

A person's dress determines success or failure. Though a beggar is a beggar, the one with an acceptable appearance will prevail. This substan-

tial proverb extends to different levels, for example, anyone in a position of having to ask, in essence must beg, and again one's appearance, outside and within, determines success.

### 옷이 날개

Dresses are wings.

With suitable dress, one can reach and mix with all levels of society, and without it one cannot ascend to such higher aspirations. This proverb has abstract meaning, for example, one's words and deeds can also be "dressed."

### 플 갈지 얇은 말은 이도 들쳐 보지 않는다

No need to look in the mouth of a lean horse.

In the old horse-trading days, a buyer looked at a horse's teeth to determine its age. In this case, one sees a lean horse, and assumes it is old, without bothering to look in the mouth. Here, a person with talent is overlooked because of a shabby appearance.

### 작은 고추가 더 맵다

A small pepper is hotter than a large pepper.

This proverb cautions respect for people of smaller stature. Koreans perceive small, short people as smarter and more energetic than big, tall people. Often one discovers within a Korean company that the smallest man is the chairman. Americans meeting with Korean negotiating teams often discover, to their surprise and delight, that the smallest Korean man is the leader. The same holds true in Korean colleges and universities, where a department chairman is often physically smaller than his colleagues. Japanese culture also has proverbs respecting smaller people. One Japanese expression describes the brain of a large person as having insufficient power to control the entire body. Americans, therefore, must take heed to give smaller Koreans equal, if not greater, respect. The wise American will also notice that smaller Korean men and women are more hot tempered, and need to be treated appropriately.

*Analyzing Behavior*

Koreans scrutinize behavior of themselves and others, and they maintain high standards of social refinement, usually according to traditional Confucian ideals.

### 놓아 먹인 말

A free-grazed horse.

If a horse is turned out to graze where it pleases, it will become wild and unmanageable. Koreans use this expression to describe an ill-bred person who breaks rules of etiquette, for not having been taught manners.

### 겨울 바람이 봄바람 보고 춥다한다

Winter wind says “cold” to spring wind

Here, the cold winter wind tells the warm spring wind that it blows too cold. This expression describes a rude, unpolished person who criticizes someone with better manners and refinement.

### 절하고 뺨 맞는 일 없다

One who bows doesn't get his cheeks slapped.

Koreans dislike arrogant, disrespectful people, and in times past would return insults with a slap on the cheek. To bow is to humble one's self, and give respect to others. The humble, respectful man does not invite bad responses. Korean children are taught by the second grade to replace “I” with “we” in their speech, thereby shifting their thinking from self-centeredness to a focus on others. Few Americans ever make this transition, and they tend to make statements from egocentric positions. Koreans view this behavior as childish and backward. Koreans feel most comfortable talking about others, or about ideas, whereas Americans prefer to talk about themselves.

### 길이 아니면 가지 말고 말이 아니면 답하지 마라

No road, don't go; no word, don't respond.

This profound statement defines an essential quality of Korean character. It cautions not to argue with fools, where no avenue of logic will be effective; moreover, it is better not to respond to verbal nonsense. In-

deed, Koreans characteristically remain silent when listening to foolish talk, whereas Americans tend to voice opinions on any subject, no matter how trivial.

### 소리 없는 고양이 쥐 잡는다

Quiet cat catches rat.

The silent cat hunts rats successfully, for the rats will flee if they hear it. The quiet, deliberate man overcomes challenges with greater success than one who is noisy and impetuous. Koreans hold more respect for quiet people than for talkative ones, and Americans should understand this cultural difference.

### 눈치 코치도 모른다

Ignoring signs of eye and nose.

This expression describes one who ignores obvious signs of disapproval while behaving with no thought to what others think. Koreans consider the eyes as the mirror of the heart, and the nose as the pivot of the mind. Thus the eyes and nose are key indicators of someone's thoughts, and the sharp-witted, perceptive person knows how to read these signals.

### 지렁이도 밟으면 꿈틀 한다

Even an earthworm wiggles.

An earthworm has little significance, yet it responds to a single light touch. This expression cautions that anybody will react to an external stimulus, good or bad. The statement also underscores Korean sensitivity to the words and deeds of others. Again, Koreans have delicate feelings, which are easily hurt by careless talk and behavior.

### 개도 싸 다니면 몽둥이에 맞는다

A stray dog is beaten with a club.

These words predict the fate of someone who wanders from the mainstream of human activity, who without secure foundation or financial backing, moves about in different circles seeking fortune. Such a person is often disliked, and suffers many "hard knocks" during his or her difficult journey.

### 동에 번쩍 서에 번쩍

Flash in the east; flash in the west.

This keen perception describes one who tends to appear here, then there, without much consequence. The proverb takes a deeper meaning when considering that a person who is insignificant at one place will be the same somewhere else. Koreans use this method to calculate a person's substance, especially when evaluating strangers. American business people should be aware that Asians, including Koreans, label them as "quickness" who wish to finish their business and leave in as little time as possible, like a flash.

### 고기는 씹어야 맛이 나고 말은 해야 맛이 난다

Taste of meat comes from chewing, taste of words comes from speaking.

Just as a man chews his food, so he must speak his mind. This unique Korean expression encourages one to speak up in order to become verbally articulate.

### 말이 씨가 된다

Words become seeds.

As one of the most profound of all Korean proverbial expressions, this golden saying extends from the abstract to the metaphysical, and colors many dimensions of thought along the way. Words grow, like flowers, or poisonous plants, according to the speaker's wishes. One should not swear, or inflict evil words upon one's self or others, for words, good or bad, have lives of their own, and live on in the thoughts and minds of their creators and recipients. In the beginning was the word.

#### *Judging Character and Substance*

Koreans excel in judging their own character, and that of others, and their proverbs reflect unique perspectives.

### 고양이 달걀 굴리듯

A cat rolling an egg.

A cat demonstrates remarkable cleverness and skill when rolling an egg, using both paws. Koreans use this expression to describe a smart businessperson.

## 우물 안 개구리

A frog in a well.

A frog is an insignificant creature, and it cannot have learned much about the world by looking up from the bottom of a well. Koreans use these words to characterize a person of little substance, who holds a very narrow perspective. Americans, as well as Koreans, can easily think of such people.

## 약방에 감초 or 한약에 감초

Licorice in a pharmacy, or Licorice in *hanyak*.

Licorice, by itself has little value, yet it is an indispensable ingredient in traditional Korean medicine, or *hanyak*. Koreans use this expression to describe someone with no single great talent, who participates at a multitude of functions, for which he or she is truly indispensable. This person achieves success as part of a group.

## 제 흠 열 가진놈이 남의 흠 한 가지를 본다

A person with ten faults sneers at another for having one.

Criticizing one fault in a person reveals ten faults of one's own. Koreans use these words to caution against finding fault with others.

## 속다르고 겉다르다

Inside different from outside.

This phrase warns against taking things at face value, for example, a watermelon is undistinguished on the outside, but sweet on the inside. Conversely, something may appear sweet on the outside, though its inside is bitter. Koreans use this expression to describe tricky people who put on good faces to conceal bad thoughts and intentions.

## 늙은 말이 콩 더 달란다

Old horse wants more beans.

A horse is a horse, and as it ages it wants more beans, though it performs the same amount of work, and probably less. These words characterize an older person who wants increasing reward, which may not be justified.

### 한 일을 보면 열 일을 안다

If you see one deed, you can tell ten.

A person is told by their first deed. Every person's character has a theme, which appears in every act. Americans should know that Koreans are well aware of this, and that they scrutinize others very closely when first meeting.

### 수박 겉 핥기

Licking a watermelon skin.

This saying portrays the ridiculous image of someone licking the outside skin of a piece of watermelon, instead of eating the inside. Koreans use this expression to describe a foolish, shallow person who believes he is enjoying the real thing, when in fact he has touched only the surface, while missing a deeper, inner meaning.

### 산이 높아야 골이 깊다

The higher the mountain, the deeper the valley.

Here, a person with lofty ideals and sterling character will conceive deep thoughts in proportion to the degree of his or her consciousness and spiritual ascension. Most Koreans recognize this proverb immediately and affirm its truth.

### 남의 장단에 춤춘다

Dancing to a neighbor's drum.

This proverb characterizes an ingratiating individual who acts at the bidding of others, and who changes his mind to mirror whomever he meets. Having no personal values worth defending, he simply agrees with others to gain their favor. Koreans, who value resoluteness of mind and strength of character, despise such people. Koreans have a tendency to overextend their resolve to the point of rigidity, and are sometimes stereotyped as "hard headed" for clinging to their own ideas and positions, which they defend tenaciously.

#### *Perspectives on Life*

Korean thinking challenges American understanding; however, Koreans and Americans often arrive at identical conclusions, though by dif-

ferent thought processes. Of course, Koreans and Americans can easily arrive at different conclusions by their different thought processes. The following proverbs allow a brief glimpse into the kaleidoscope of Korean perception of life:

### 커도 한 그릇 작아도 한 그릇

One bowl of rice is enough, whether large or small.

Rich and poor alike eat only one bowl of rice per meal, regardless of their wealth. Koreans use this expression to describe the prideful poverty of having the same basics as the rich. Here, a poor person eats the same as a rich person, and the distinction between the two classes is diminished.

### 여름에 하루 놀면 겨울에 열흘 굶는다

One day's idleness in summer; ten days' hunger in winter.

This proverb has obvious meaning; however, it has deeper significance when referring to summer as one's productive years, and winter as old age. These words warn that one must work at all times during the productive years in order to provide old-age security. Here, Koreans behold an entire life, from beginning to end. This proverb also highlights the Korean work ethic, whereby native Koreans will not bypass opportunity to perform labor to enhance their retirement. First-generation Korean-American factory workers characteristically work all available overtime, or until they are exhausted.

### 비온 뒤 땅이 굳어진다

After the rain the ground becomes hard.

This reassuring favorite focuses on the positive changes that occur following strife or adversity. For example, after a quarrel, a new, firmer foundation for friendship emerges. Following long, challenging ordeals, a person's character is strengthened.

### 고목에 꽃이 핀다

An old tree blooms again.

Koreans use this proverb to describe an older person who has accomplished a significant feat, for example, an old man who has just fathered

a child, or who has suddenly written a great work, or an older woman who has finally given birth for the first time. The expression can also be used to describe a ruined family that has returned to prosperity.

### 하늘이 무너져도 솟아날 구멍이 있다

Though the heavens fall, there will be a hole to escape through.

This expression illustrates a fundamental Korean faith in redemptive solutions to adversity, even in the aftermath of disaster. It is uncharacteristic for Koreans to give up. They believe in persistence rather than failure, and that through persistence they will never fail.

### 쇠똥에 미끌어져 개똥에 콧방울 찡는다

Slip on cow dung; fall on face in dog dung.

Here we have poetry in motion. In the wake of one misfortune, one suffers a greater one. This expression instructs that bad luck does not come in single incidents, for when something goes wrong, other things follow.

### 대문 밖이 저승이다

Outside the door is Hell.

On one hand, this proverb warns of the many deadly accidents and demons that lurk outside one's comfortable home. On the other hand, the proverb cautions that the unknown world to which we travel after life, whether it be good or bad, is very near.

### 암닭이 새벽에 운다

Hen crows at dawn.

During the natural course of life and events, the rooster crows and flaps his wings in the early morning to announce the break of day. In this expression, the hen has usurped the rooster's position. Koreans use these words to describe an unbalanced home, where the wife dominates the husband. This is very bad.

### 암닭이 운다

Hen cackles.

As in the previous expression, the hen dominates the rooster. This proverb describes an aggressive, shrewish wife, who henpecks her poor, peaceful husband, and meddles in all his affairs in order to rule over him. Korean men declare that this kind of relationship is very rare in Korea, and possibly nonexistent, though there are many henpecked husbands in Japan.

### 호랑이 담배 피울때

When tigers smoked long pipes.

Koreans use this nostalgic expression to refer to “the good old days” which are always long gone, and greatly idealized. One can better perceive the substance of this rich proverb by imagining two tigers of long ago, relaxing and talking, and smoking long, thin, bamboo pipes, as humans once did.

This study has provided only a fleeting glimpse of Korean culture and mentality by analyzing a few of the many hundreds of native proverbs. Readers wishing to explore the subject further will not be disappointed, for Korean cultural and intellectual wealth is unlimited, and countless Korean treasures await meritorious consideration and thoughtful discovery.

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