

From collectivism towards individualisation

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Korea is a country that has astonished many across the world for their remarkably fast economic development winning them a place amongst the “Asian tigers”.

Not only it has been able to build up its society from rumbles of the two consecutive wars, but it has developed not just a fast growing but also a sustainable economic structure. The basis of this growth has mainly been fuelled by the hard working culture of Koreans, with the highest average number of working hours in the world, and their unique way of working together. ‘Korean capitalism’ is characterized by several things but particularly by collectivism and militancy which is deeply embedded within the society. This is mainly due to the past historical legacies of Korea. Korea has a long tradition of being a collectivist society where group interests supersede the interest of the individual. This also means that the individuals, whether they may be in society or in a work place, do not try to be unique or stand out from the crowd. It was perceived that if you do stand out, you will be noticed and will have more chances of becoming a victim of some type of repercussion. It was a virtue to be ‘normal’ and average. The militant culture of Korea arose from the fact that it has been colonized by Japan for ap-

proximately 36 years up till 1945. The Japanese government developed a strong hierarchical militant society to rule and organize their colony easier. Within this society, rules were applied as if society was an extension of the military. Young people were socialized this way through the militant structures within the education system as well as work places and other societal gatherings. The militant dictatorship from the 1960s up to the late 1980s extended and re-enforced this tradition that still exists today. The two year (previously three years) compulsory army duty that all Korean men are obliged to, during their early-mid 20s, and the fact that Korea still is divided, enhance the militancy of society. Korean companies reflect these characteristics in the work places. From the collectivist characteristics, in the average Korean firms pay, working hours, benefits and other conditions are the same across the same level of workers. However, due to strict hierarchical characteristics, this differs across different levels of occupation. Thus a director will have very different pay and working hours from the department manager, and this will be different from the first year staff. For example, in the firm the department manager can only go home when the director has gone home, and then the executive manager, deputy manager

and then so forth, where the first year staff can only go home when everyone else has left. On the other hand, he or she will be the first on in the office while the rest come in later. Pay is strictly based on the years (seniority based pay structures) you've worked within the company and the level you are in. However, within the same rank you are treated completely equal which helps in bringing up the group mentality.

However there are discrepancies between companies in Korea. There are differences between big and small companies and between various 'jaebuls(재벌)': large agglomerations composed of companies with several sub-companies or establishments throughout various and very different sectors. Well known jaebuls are Samsung, LG, Hyundai, SK, and Daewoo. They employ mass groups of workers and have their own unique work culture. For example, even if Samsung's sub companies range from insurance firms, hotel chains up to food and beverage companies, all companies belonging to the Samsung group are noted for being strict and more militant than others. Another important characteristic of Samsung's companies is that not one of them has a union, due to the last wish of its founding president. Also as a worker of these agglomerations, you become a member of a group, i.e. a "Samsung man". This increases the boundary of the group mentality, thus the group is not only restricted to those within your department but also those within the bigger group/jaebul. The orientation and training which usually takes approximately two weeks to a month right before the work starts, is used not only to train workers, but to enhance the group loyalty of the workers. This is maintained by the weekly department 'group drinks', and monthly 'dongki(동기)'-meetings with the other employees you started work in the company.

Slowly this culture is changing as a consequence of globalisation, increase of foreign firms, and westernisation of social norms and values. The collectivist working culture is being more and more criticized of being ineffective and inefficient in rapidly or agilely adapting to fast changes occurring in modern society and business world. Due to this, contracts as well as work itself are becoming more individualized, working time is becoming somewhat more flexible and project or person based, and productivity based pay is increasing. This is especially true in foreign-based companies or new sectors such as IT- and consultancy companies. However, for the majority of the companies the old seniority based, group oriented structure still provides the basis for pay and working hours. For example, productivity based pay in several firms are given out not per person but per department or company, which reflects the prevailing collectivist characteristics of Korean firms.

All in all although this unique collectivist working culture of Korea can be accounted for being one of the reasons for the fast economic growth of Korea, now it is responsible for its slowdown as well. It is not clear whether individualization of work and contracts will be able to completely substitute the collectivist culture that existed before. However, what is clear is that there will be more individualisation in Korea work cultures in the future, whatever the future may hold.

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