3.5 Embitterment in Asia: Losing face, inequality, and alienation under historical and modern perspectives

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Eastern Asia is a geographic region encompassing China, Japan, South and North Korea, Mongolia and Taiwan. These countries are in close proximity to one another and share Confucian and Buddhism culture historically. However, each country is home to a different race and each has an independent history of its own, so the cultures, personalities and attitudes toward life in the countries differ greatly. Following World War II, Eastern Asian countries industrialized at a great pace. Rapid westernization, industrialization and urbanization might be said to characterize most Eastern Asian countries, which underwent remarkable economic growth over a relatively short period. However, improvement in the quality of people’s lives lags behind the rapid development and societal changes in the region. Man-made disasters, changes in familial structures, and economic inequality cause clinically significant depressed mood and adjustment problems. Traditional Asian culture may exert a significant influence on the profile of symptoms exhibited here.

Embitterment, a specific subtype of adjustment disorder, describes persistent feelings of having been let down, insulted or of being a loser, combined with a desire for revenge but also a feeling of helplessness (Linden et al. 2007). In Korea (South), social injustice during rapid industrial development and protracted unemployment associated with the Asian economic crisis might be leading causes of embitterment. North Korean defectors and victims of occupational injuries experience humiliation and feelings of injustice for various reasons.

3.5.1 Haan and Hwa-Byung in a cultural perspective

Haan (한 恨) is a traditional form of emotion found in Korean culture. The nature of haan is a condensed, crystallized feeling of remorse, of victimization, and the sense of having been a victim of unfairness. One scholar described haan as a “feeling of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against one, a feeling of acute pain in one’s guts and bowels, making the whole body writhe and squirm, and an obstinate urge to take revenge and to right the wrong – all these combined.” (Yoo 1988) It differs somewhat from the feeling of a desire for revenge in that it contains an element of waiving and renunciation. Haan is sometimes expressed as...
a disease or emotional turmoil in the form of depression or “hwa-byung” (火; fire disease).

Though the concept of haan has its origins in Chinese culture, the Korean use of the term denotes something distinct from its Chinese counterpart. The Chinese character for haan symbolized anger and revenge, and contained a sense of action and vengeance. The Korean use of haan is of a much more passive nature. Though the sufferer may feel the desire for vengeance, for Koreans haan dictates that those feelings be suppressed and left unexpressed (Somers 1998). It differs from Western “sorrow” in that Koreans do not perceive the condition as an individual state of being, but instead, as a condition that connects the sufferer to the group. Whereas Westerners typically think of sorrow as a deeply personal state that is highly individualized in each sufferer, Koreans see haan as a state of sorrow that connects the sufferer to deep, long-standing currents in Korean culture. It may be that Koreans are less likely to complain about haan in the kind of individual terms a Westerner would use because doing so would invalidate their connection to the larger society (Kuykendall 1994).

It has been theorized that haan evolved through Korea’s history of repeated invasions by peoples of neighboring countries, such as the Mongols, the Chinese and the Japanese. Others suggest that a hierarchical societal system, in which one’s social class was determined mainly by succession, contributed to the development of haan. The distinction between the elite class (yang-ban) and the peasants (sang-nom) also contributed to its development. The Japanese scholar Kimura suggests that the fact that Korea acquired its independence through Japan’s surrender to the Allied Powers rather than through the actions of Korean themselves, and the Korean War in combination with the subsequent division of the Korean peninsula also played a role in the absence of a glorious history and unresolved haan (Kimura 2004).

Haan permeates Korean cultural expression: it is reflected in traditional folk songs, stories (e. g., pansori) and plays, as well as in a Shamanist dance ritual (guut).

_Hwa-byung_ (literally meaning “fire disease”) could be translated as anger syndrome and has typically been viewed as the result of long-term life stress, endurance and the difficulty associated with ventilating that anger within rigid social, familial structure.

In various clinical settings, patients with hwa-byung syndrome report personal and social life stressors such as spousal infidelity, conflicts with a mother-in-law, familial troubles, or a child’s illness. Hwa-byung sufferers endure their pain by suppressing the strong feelings and experience a somatization process through which symptoms are physically manifested, and finally, an outburst of anger that attempts to release the frustration (Min and Suh 2009).