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The Anger Syndrome of Korea

In class, we were taught that anger evokes a powerful and passionate emotion, which usually arises from pending of event. Anger can block perception, evokes increased blood and adrenaline flow, and even the “red face”! Many expressions that are associated with anger can include “anger is heat,” “anger is fire,” and “anger is a dangerous animal,” but with the case of my language, Koreans use its unique words that evoke anger than what Americans typically use. Furthermore, there are different Korean words to describe a form of anger depending on the situation one is going through, along with the multiple degrees of anger. It may be especially interesting to learn that one word that evokes anger can also be described as an illness in Korea. To bring the expressions in context with Korean culture, Koreans rather “like it hot not only in temperature, color, and taste, but also in temper, emotion and behavior” (Min 18).

Among several unique Korean words that describe anger, “Hwabyung” literally means “anger disease,” which is frequently seen in middle-aged or older women of the lower class of society (Min 12). In terms of the language of symptoms, the western counterpart to hwabyung is borderline personality disorder (Chung and Cho 51). To describe the illness even further, hwabyung can stem from feeling of unfairness, random thoughts, hatred, and the feelings of victimization in a stressful relationship, which happen to be the most common cause (Min 13). A person suffering from hwabyung can go through respiratory stuffiness, dry mouth, talkativeness,

and “a mass in the epigstrium/chest” to symbolize one is “becoming dense with anger” (Min 13). It is interesting to see that this word is used culturally across Korea, which is seen in many people belonging to lower class of the society, but in the United States, we have similar words that describe anger as a psychological illness, which is seen by anyone regardless of class or rank in society. It can be implied that if a Korean talks about the other person going through a “hwabyung,” it would be in line with talking about how another person is going through a physical disease (i.e. diabetes), as hwabyung causes pain to human’s psyche. Due to Korea’s interdependent culture, it may be possible that they would feel sorry for those that are going through the psychological disease and may take some action to cure it, as if the diagnosed person is considered a brother or sister to them. Through learning the definition of hwabyung, no wonder that this can cause quarrels between family members a lot in Korea, which can disrupt the harmony among family members.

The word “hwabyung” can be directly correlated to how Koreans culminate a culture of “Haan.” “Haan” consists of several emotions such as “missing, feeling of unfairness, and suppressed anger,” and English translation of the word means “grudge,” “grief,” and “hate” (Min 14). But to highlight the uniqueness of the word, on a group level, this mixed emotion is caused by painful, tragic national history and personal history such as poverty and war (Min 14). An individual would go through a failed romantic relationship, domestic violence, having no children, raising troubled children, and having lower educational status (Min 14). However, there are three words that sub-categorize the type of haan one goes through: “Jung-haan,” “Won-haan,” and “tong-haan” (Min 14). Won-haan is used to describe someone seeking revenge, jung-haan describes the loss of a loved one, and tong-haan describes how one laments for not trying his/her best, which are all based on the concept of anger (Min 14). Even though haan shares

similar causes of anger with hwabyung, it is actually has milder symptoms than the latter (Min 15). It can be seen from these information that painful historical events represent the uniqueness of the word; if I were to talk to a Korean that endured through the tragic history of WWII, I would have to watch out for their anger hearing about undesirable events occurring at that time. Due to the Japanese sentiment that occurred since the Korean colonization days, older generations of Koreans that lived during these periods still hold a grudge against the Japanese for their inhumane acts. Also, Korea is a country that is hyper-competitive academically; let's say that a high-school student tries to get a perfect mark on a college-admissions test to get to a top university in Seoul but then did not try his or her best on the exam. With so much pressure from parents for the examinee to get to the top school, along with not trying their best on the exam, it is a clear application of how an examinee would go through tong-haan.

Last but not least, to connect with the idea of "haan" mentioned earlier, there is the idea of "uckwool," which differentiates from "haan's" state of hatred and revenge. Furthermore, uckwool stems from unfair treatment from others; if such actions that trigger uckwool are repeated, this will lead to the symptoms seen in hwabyung (Min 13). In the example of Korean families and among friends, you may see a Korean being betrayed and abused repeatedly which can lead him or her to develop hwabyung at the end. Uckwool can be therefore seen as the fundamental stage to developing hwabyung; if both parties were to reconcile each other after the victim forgiving the offender's actions, the more severe hwabyung would not develop and depending on the situation, it could be easier to preserve the harmony of families and friends rather than putting it off until hwabyung.

By understanding the description of hwabyung and its related terms, it is considered as a poisonous emotion among Koreans as it can bring destructive consequences not only to the self,

but also to other people around them. Koreans are described as passionate, as they are rooting for their national soccer team, national pride, but especially in terms of their expressions of anger. For a foreigner that intends to live in Korea, for example, by working as an English teacher there, needs to be culturally and linguistically aware of such emotional terms before they start to work with other Koreans. Learning about hwabyung and its related terms can motivate the foreigner to understand their passionate demeanor and the harsh chemistry between co-workers, so this is something they need to be aware of when it comes to working with other Koreans. Or this could happen when he or she works in a Korean-American community, or “Korea Towns” across the United States.

Works Cited

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