Conceptualization of Jeong and Dynamics of Hwabyung

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Abstract

Jeong is an experience distinctive to those from a Korean heritage. Its definition is, as most things rooted deep within a culture, both simple and complex. In essence, jeong refers to the emotional and psychological bonds that join Koreans; it permeates all levels, dividing the world into different degrees of us/we versus them. The uniqueness of this phenomenon lies in its ubiquity and its source: the collective nature of Korean society. When this bond is broken, however, other culturally unique phenomena arise: haan and hwabyung. Haan is essentially the intense suppressed anger that arises from the violation of jeong. At times, haan can evolve to hwabyung or “anger syndrome,” which includes many somatic elements. Therefore, hwabyung cannot rise without the initial presence of jeong and is considered a Korean culture-bound disorder. Those with borderline personality disorder (BPD), in contrast, seek relationships pathologically in “Western,” individualistic societies where autonomy, independence, and privacy are highly valued. A comparative analysis of the socio-cultural dynamics of hwabyung, directly tied to Korea’s jeong-based collective culture, and BPD, a mal-adaptation to a Western autonomy-emphasized culture, can provide insight into the nature of these respective societies and in developing treatment strategies for these contrasting disorders.

Key words: Jeong, Haan, Hwabyung, Anger syndrome, Borderline personality disorder.

Introduction

Hwabyung (HB) is classified as a culture-bound syndrome by the DSM-IV\cite{1,2,3,4,5} and considered unique to the Korean population. In brief, hwabyung is an “anger syndrome” with many somatic/anxiety symptoms, such as feelings of a mass in the epigastrium, fear of impending death, dyspnea, aches/pains, and palpitations. Although there have been a number of hypothetical speculations for the dynamics of HB, especially causative factors such as the suppression of anger, existence of inescapable situations, the hardship of Korean women’s lives, and national hardship throughout Korean history\cite{4,6,7,8} none of these factors can be considered culture-specific. They are, rather, culturally general issues and are ubiquitous in many other societies throughout world history, existing even in the contemporary world.

It has been reported repeatedly that there is a close relationship between the Korean indigenous emotion, haan, and hwabyung\cite{2,3,5,9,10}. Haan’s characteristic is
also primarily anger but without somatic/anxious expression. To our knowledge, the reason for haan existing in such a profound form only in Korean culture has never been addressed. While the Chinese character for haan (憤) exists with its different linguistic nuances in Korea, Japan, and China, it seems that unique to Korean culture, the concept of haan is so significant and intense as to produce psychopathology itself, as well as evolving at times to hwabyung. The previously described extrinsic etiologic factors for haan and hwabyung, such as abuse, loss, hardship, and trauma in life, may exist in any culture and cannot be regarded as Korean culture-specific. We speculate there are intrinsic and culture-specific factors, beyond haan, contributing to the development of hwabyung. In reviewing the literature and exploring the culture-specific nature of this phenomenon, we propose that jeong/jeong-violation likely plays an important role in the development of such intense haan, and eventually hwabyung, in Korean culture.

In this paper we will explore the concepts of jeong, woori, haan, and hwabyung. The development of jeong and woori, the violation of jeong, the formation of haan, and the rise of hwabyung (HB) seem to be aligned in a sequential process. In addition, borderline personality disorder (BPD) is examined from a socio-cultural context. Authors believe the socio-cultural dynamics of BPD and HB are comparable, although these conditions may not originate from similar genetic or biologic constitutes. The comparative analysis of borderline personality disorder and hwabyung render insight into conceptualizing their culture specific-dynamics and symptom manifestations.

### Conceptualization of Jeong

*Jeong* refers to mixed feelings of fondness, caring, bonding, and attachment that develop within interpersonal relationships. Although this expression can be found in the three languages of Korea, Japan, and China, which all use the same Chinese character (情), what this word means in the Chinese language differs significantly from how it is defined in the Korean language. Jeong is not a word that describes a certain cognitive state; rather, it is used to describe an emotional state. Whereas words in “Western” languages that express emotional manifestations, such as depression, uneasiness, or happiness, describe feelings personal to an individual, jeong is a “emotion” involving two or more individuals.

Defining jeong is not an easy task. In some sense, it is an ambiguous and amorphous concept. However, it would be meaningful and invaluable as a psychiatrist to study how this concept came to take root as one of the most significant facets in the emotions and thoughts of Korean people and how it influenced social consciousness. Jeong influences Koreans’ decision-making and social structures in Korean society. Furthermore, jeong causes conflicts when Koreans deal with the transition toward more individualized, modernized societies nowadays.

We will approach jeong in comparison to love in order to help construct its function and role (Table 1), rather than developing a literal definition. Luke Kim\(^1\) stated, “*Jeong* appears to have a different affective quality than that of love… It seems that jeong represents a more primordial and primitive way of relating than love.” He further compared jeong to love, stating that “the concept of love in its prototype in Western culture is characterized by the love between man and woman.” In contrast, jeong is similar but more embracing and qualitatively different in concept than the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jeong</th>
<th>Love</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inter-Individual</td>
<td>Intra-Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrifugal</td>
<td>Centripetal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender-neutral</td>
<td>Gender-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal factor: slow</td>
<td>Temporal factor: instant to slow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Oedipal</td>
<td>Oedipal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposite emotion: haan</td>
<td>Opposite emotion: hate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Western sense of love.

1. Location of jeong

The “location” of jeong seems to be between individuals; this seems to be the major difference in comparison to anxiety and depression. As the linguistic expression for human being in Korean/Chinese is “in-gan” (人間), which literally means “between men,” so exists jeong (the most fundamental Korean emotion) becoming an extra-psychic and inter-psychic emotion. It is difficult for anyone to imagine from an individualistic cultural perspective that an emotion exists outside of oneself. In an individualistic culture, where reason-able inter-individual distances and boundaries are expected, such phenomena as extra-psychic jeong may not be conceivable. Yet, in Korean collective culture, the inter-individual location of jeong is keenly felt and plays an important role in bonding.

2. Permeation of jeong: Centrifugal movement

The common Korean jeong related expression is, “Jeong permeates me” (jeong deul-da). Typically jeong acts through passive permeation; it is not “I feel jeong” but jeong permeates oneself. This seems to match the description of it being more primordial, less artificial, and not necessarily a matter of choice. This phenomenon is comparable to the development of haan during inescapable situations or entrapment. It is also true that one can be entrapped in jeong. Choi described the characteristics of jeong as being associated with sacrifice, unconditionality, empathy, care, sincerity, shared experience, and common fate. He further stated, “Jeong is least related to interest-pursued, business-like, social relationships… Rationality, contract, fairness, and commercialism are the ultimate anti-theses of a cheong-based [jeong-based] social relationship.” Because of its “location” and its nature to permeate, jeong appears to be a more collective emotion.

3. Evolvement and expansion of jeong: Temporal aspects

The earliest exposure to jeong is when an infant is held and carried by the mother on her back. As the mother’s warmth permeates to and is felt by the infant, so does jeong flow to its heart. This type of jeong, called mo-jeong, is considered the prototype. The mother also reads the baby’s desires and needs. This bi-directional sharing is the experience of jeong which ultimately leads to feelings of security and comfort. This expands and evolves throughout one’s life to the father, friendships, husband/wife, nature, and even inanimate objects. Expectations from these bonds are not communicated through verbal requests, logic, communication, or contracts but rather through non-verbal means or “mind-reading,” commitment, and loyalty that is learned early in life. In personal communication, Hae A Kim stated that Koreans’ jeong-based relationship mode is pre-Oedipal, while “Western” love is Oedipal.


As jeong expands, a Korean culture-specific “we-ness” (woori) develops. Grammatically, “we” is simply the plural of “I.” However, among Koreans, “we” or woori is not just a plural pronoun. Rather, it is another singular form of a collective “I.” Perhaps the plural form
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would actually be “woori-deul.” The I’s are bonded to one another by jeong, becoming woori. Often, “we” (woori) is used in place of “I” in many common Korean expressions, for example, “our wife,” “our husband,” and even an only child calling his/her parents “our parents.” The strongest, most essential bond among Koreans is this we-ness mediated by the emotional glue of jeong. The equation for Korean “we-ness” (woori) is therefore “I + jeong + I + jeong + I… = woori.”

The development of woori imparts a significantly different self-image and world view than that of Western “I-ness.” “We-ness” groups become the only source of developing an identity of “self” and are the primary means of protection from the hardships of life. The contrast of these differences is important to understand-

**TABLE 2. We-ness vs. I-ness Orientations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>We-ness (woori) Orientation</th>
<th>I-ness Orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal bond/bondage</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role boundaries (class boundaries)</td>
<td>Individual boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We vs. others</td>
<td>Private vs. public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty to the in-circle</td>
<td>Individual freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Contractual relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual orientation</td>
<td>Content orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Rapport” talk</td>
<td>“Report” talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Mind-reading” and hidden meanings</td>
<td>Communication at face value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtues</td>
<td>Laws, protocols</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Belonging: Higher priority

Woori has strong nuances of relatedness, friendliness, affection, commonality, homogeneity, and ultimately belonging. This jeong-based “we-ness” is characterized as unconditional, non-contractual, non-calculable, non-pragmatic, unrealistic, and illogical. In turn, dependence is at the core of the “we-ness,” arising spontaneously in this cultural context. Thus, in Korean culture, belonging becomes the first priority in Maslow’s triangle of priorities (Figure 3 & 4).

Belonging provides security and often easier access to fulfilling physiological needs in Korea’s collective culture. So it is natural for one to seek belonging and

**FIGURE 2. Public vs. Private Groups**

**FIGURE 3. Maslow’s Order of Needs**

**FIGURE 4. Modified Order of Needs for Korean Society**
abide social and cultural norms to ensure attachment to an in-group, such as a large family unit, a workers’ union, a circle of friends, etc.

6. Koreans’ world view: We or others, in-group vs. out-group

The “we vs. others” view (Figure 1) that develops from woori can be contrasted with the “private vs. public” (Figure 2) structure that arises in Western, individualistic cultures. Jeong binds individuals into tight clustered groups in which even overlapping boundaries are considered “normal” and appropriate, whereas in the “private” group some distance and individualism is still maintained.

Others (nam) is opposite to woori. In order to have a clearer understanding of woori, one can also examine the context in which woori and nam are often used, such as in the expression, “Woori ga nam ee ga?” The literal translation is, “Are we others?” A more linguistically accurate interpretation would be, “Are we unrelated?” Again, the central theme of woori is relatedness and belonging.

7. Jeong-driven or jeong-based values and behaviors in Korean collective culture

There are a number of other jeong-based values and behavioral norms, such as the concept of “mind-reading” (from mind-to-mind; ee shim jeon shim), noonchi, group loyalty, and face-saving. Among these, perhaps group loyalty is most closely interconnected with our topic, hwabyung.

Unquestioning loyalty is a major rubric of Korean society. Not unlike in individualistic cultures, loyalty plays an important role in interpersonal relationships. However, because of the pervasiveness of jeong, this type of loyalty can extend to all aspects of one’s life, rather than being limited to one-on-one or “private” relationships. Hofstede’s description of unquestioning loyalty in a collective culture seems to fit with Koreans’ jeong-based “we-ness”: “People from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups, which throughout people’s lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.” Therefore, the violation of this loyalty can cause the worst psychological and practical trauma to an individual.

Haan and Hwabyung

Jeong is considered an essential component of the relational mode in Korea. Haan, which occurs in response to the violation of jeong, is key to the pathological process of the development of hwabyung (HB). The warmer and more tender the jeong-based relationship, the more bitter and profound the agony of haan which arises when jeong is broken and jeong-based loyalty is betrayed. Thus, haan can only occur among those in a culture where interpersonal, jeong-related bonds (one might even say “bondage”) are established.

1. Jeong violation to haan: A reaction to intolerable betrayal

If there were no trust, loyalty, or commitment, there would be no betrayal. Betrayal that becomes the intense psychological trauma of haan, and eventually hwabyung, occurs where unquestionable loyalty and trust is expected and mandated. Therefore, only where jeong has been strengthened and cultivated (in Korean terms, “jeong eel dondok hee ha da”) does haan result as a reaction to its violation; jeong is a basic Korean culture-specific emotion and a prerequisite to haan.

2. Trauma/loss to haan vs. PTSD: Separation from PTSD

It is more likely that human-made traumas will result in haan and hwabyung, since the psychological perception required is jeong violation and betrayal. However, when facing natural disasters or unavoidable traumatic situations, Koreans often say, “Even heaven [meaning God] is so careless” (“Ha neul do mu shim ha si ji”). The implication is abandonment by God or nature. Rather than taking trauma or loss at face value, emo-
tional meaning or intent is added, which can again lead to the development of *haan*.

In this regard, *haan* not only arises from interpersonal *jeong* violation but also from perceived violations during man-made disasters, such as the Los Angeles riots\(^1\)\(^7\)\(^,\)\(^8\). After the riots, it appeared a significant number of subjects met the criteria for both *hwabyung* (HB) and PTSD. Among the riot victims, 40% met the criteria for PTSD, and 16% also met the criteria for *hwabyung* at the same time. With these results, Chung\(^1\)\(^8\) took a culture-general approach in assessing *hwabyung* and posed the question, “Is hwabyung a subtype of PTSD?”, proposed again later by Min.\(^10\) It seems obvious that trauma and loss are factors for hwabyung, yet they are not sufficient. PTSD + \(x\) = HB. The \(x\) seems to include the accumulation of *haan* and any meanings attached to *haan*.

3. Attached meaning: *uckwool*

*Haan* not only exists as a state of resentment, suppressed anger, and indignation in personal lives but also within the collective subconscious of Koreans. In this form, it is related to loss, trauma, and tragedy experienced at the national level. One of the important inherent cognitive aspects of *haan* is *uckwool*; *haan* carries with it the attached meaning of “unfairly victimized,” i.e. “*uckwool*.”

It should be noted that suffering from this belief of unfair victimization is central to the theme of *haan*. Anger from loss, trauma, or abuse may cause PTSD, but the anger within *haan* and its cognitive association of *uckwool* is what results in *hwabyung*.

Therefore, *haan* includes both emotional (chronic anger) and cognitive (belief of being victimized) facets. One may as well cognize *haan* as feel it. It seems safe to assume that the intensity of anger and its related symptoms would be more severe when deeply embedded meanings/beliefs are tied to them. This seems to be supported by a study of the characteristics of *hwabyung* patients that indicated significantly high scores on obsession on the MMPI.\(^19\)

**Socio-Cultural Dynamics of *Hwabyung* and Borderline Personality Disorder**

In order to explain the dynamics of *hwabyung* (HB), an analogy to borderline personality disorder (BPD), which might be viewed as a “Western” culture-bound syndrome\(^20\), would be useful (Table 3).

Those with BPD are known for their frantic pursuit of attention from others, sometimes demonstrating destructive behaviors in that pursuit. The typical features of BPD include: 1) frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment, 2) a pattern of unstable and intense relationships, 3) a markedly and persistently
unstable self-image or sense of self, and 4) impulsivity in many areas with irresponsible behaviors. HB displays comparable symptoms, consisting of: 1) real or imagined violation of jeong, commitment, or loyalty, 2) suppression or explosiveness of emotion over the loss or betrayal of jeong, 3) damage of the “we-ness” (woori) self that causes anger, and 4) multiple somatic symptoms (lumps in the chest or epigastrium), panic-like symptoms, anxiety, and depression.

Both HB and BPD involve interpersonal relationship issues. It is intriguing to find that HB occurs in a culture in which collective and “feminine” values prevail, while BPD exists in a culture with more individualistic and “masculine” values (Figure 5 & 6).

1. Borderline personality disorder in an individualistic and masculine culture

Individualism “pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose; everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family.” Triandis stated the essence of individualism “entails giving priority to personal goals over the goals of the in-group.” A different dimensional look into cultural values illustrates the difference between feminine and masculine cultures. Feminine cultures value relationships, caring, and nurturing, while masculine cultures value competition, assertion, accomplishment, and toughness. From this perspective most “Western” cultures are masculine, and many Asian cultures, including Korea, follow more feminine ideals (Figure 7).

Traditionally, social roles were not matters of individual choice; they were designated by the family or society. When traditional societies become modernized, values seem to shift more towards individualism, competitiveness, autonomy, and independence. Individuals who require more dependency and belonging would have greater difficulty adjusting to this change. BPD is the manifestation of unsuccessful efforts in seeking belongingness, relatedness, and jeong-like bonds in a culture where such characteristics are not primarily valued and can be viewed as pathologic if emphasized. To some degree, in societies where these strong bonds are norms, jeong may have a protective effect against the development of BPD and its behaviors.

2. Hwabyung in a collective and feminine culture

Hwabyung, on the other hand, occurs in collective, feminine cultures (Figure 7). Indulgence in jeong-filled relationships, with unquestioning loyalty, uninhibited attachments, and belonging being norms, provide members with feelings of security, identity, and protection. Once a jeong relationship is violated, by a hus-

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FIGURE 5. Violation of Jeong and Rise of Hwabyung

FIGURE 6. In-Circle vs. Out-Circle
band (most common), by a person in power, or even by nature, haan arises. Haan can also be interpreted as unsuccessful attempts at jeong-restoration. Recovery from haan, therefore, can result from haan resolution rituals or sublimation to a higher level of maturity and finding the “meaning of life.” Haan resolution rituals are designed to reconnect individuals to unfairly victimized dead persons, which can empower survival. Sublimation to a higher level of maturity is possible by helping haan-ridden individuals connect to different meanings or “higher” meanings of life through religious or artistic activities.

As proposed collective and feminine cultural values and practices can be protective against BPD, likewise individualism and masculinity probably serve against the development of HB. It is interesting to note that successful haan resolutions are often accompanied by accomplishments in academics, sports, or politics, which is of more masculine value.

Therefore, individualism and masculinity may become antidotes of HB, while collectivism and femininity are antidotes for BPD. If our hypothesis is correct, the prevalence rate of BPD in Korea will increase, and HB will diminish, as Korean societal values move rapidly toward individualistic and probably masculine characteristics.

Summary and Discussion

We would like to emphasize the bipolarity between enormous jeong and profound haan and ultimately understand the nature of hwabyung and develop treatment strategies in a cultural context. Haan may not arise or accumulate in a culture where there is no jeong. In addition to a real or perceived trauma, reaction to the betrayal or violation of jeong (the noxious psychological distress) results in haan and can develop into hwabyung.

In contrast, where jeong and even a pathological attachment (or bondage) exists, there is no need for borderline behaviors to defend against isolation. Even those biologically vulnerable to BPD may adjust relatively well or have their symptoms ameliorated in the setting of Korean or another collective culture.

It seems obvious that the Korean ethos is based in collective and feminine cultural values and emotions, evolving to the specific psychological patterns of jeong and haan. Where rapidly changing social norms and cultural values migrate from collectivism to individualism and from “traditional” beliefs to “Westernized” values, the prevalence of BPD seems to increase. In addition, it is likely that the prevalence of HB may diminish.

Although HB is beginning to receive growing attention for its symptom manifestation, there has been little research or publication regarding its dynamics and available treatments. As the underlying dynamics of HB are further studied, psychotherapeutic management strategies for HB can be established. In order to accomplish this, it is imperative to understand and conceptualize jeong, haan, and hwabyung in their cultural context, rather than generalizing HB as simply an anger syndrome. This paper explored the culture-specific nature of haan, which causes HB, and also the culture-specific indigenous emotion jeong, which brings haan to the surface. The reason why jeong is unique to Korean culture remains to be answered.
Lastly, we propose the use of “jeong” and “haan” as standardized spellings of these words since they give the closest approximations to the Korean pronunciations and to avoid confusion within the English literature (which has variously used the iterations cheong, ceng chong, jung, han, hahn, etc.).

References