Horace H. Underwood is the fourth generation of his family to live in Korea. His great-grandfather was one of the first Protestant missionaries to arrive in Korea in 1885, and later founded Yonsei University, where his family has continued to teach. Dr. Underwood first went to Korea in 1946 at the age of three; after earning a doctorate at SUNY Buffalo he served for 30 years as a professor in Yonsei’s English Department. During that time he also had various other posts in international education, including Director of the Division of International Education and Dean of the Graduate School of International Studies, and Executive Director of the Korean American Educational Commission (the Fulbright Commission.)

“In” and “Out”

Two of the most common first impressions that foreigners have of Koreans are that they are incredibly polite and that they are incredibly rude.

In fact, the courtesy and kindness of Koreans is legendary and attested to by thousands of people who are fortunate enough to have a Korean friend. Overwhelming meals, unexpected gifts, constant and almost embarrassing attention to your personal whims: all of this and more have been yours if you have been invited out. This is not a modern invention; traditionally, one of the names of Korea was the "Eastern Land of Courtesy." The obligations of a host are paramount; the obligation of the guest is to lap it up.

On the other hand, the discourtesy and rudeness of Koreans is legendary and attested to by thousands of people who are unfortunate enough to have to walk on a Korean street. Overwhelming crowds, unexpected shoving, constant and almost painful inattention to where other people are going: all this and more has been yours if you have gone outside. This may be a modern invention: nowadays, one of the names of Korea might be the "Eastern Land of Discourtesy." The intentions of the individual are paramount; the obligation of the victim is to get out of the way.

Westerners have rather a hard time reconciling these two images of Korea, these two different sets of behavior, both of them from the same people. Hosts are so friendly; taxi drivers are so nasty. Is Korea really composed of two totally different sets of people living on the same peninsula?
Actually, yes. For Koreans, the world is composed of two sets of people - those they know and those they don't know. If you know somebody, then you have a relationship, and are obliged, very obliged, to treat him or her politely, kindly, and with every courtesy. But if you don't know someone, if you've never formally "met" that person, then the person doesn't exist. Such people don't count, and you don't have to do anything.

Thus your friends will buy you meals forever. I was quite close to one Korean colleague in the Yonsei University English department for over 30 years, and I was hardly ever able to pay for lunch when I was with him. He would say he was going to the men's room but sneak off to pay the bill; he paid in advance; he called ahead to arrange to pay the bill later; he dropped off his credit card surreptitiously on the way in, etc. This could have a case of courtesy used as a means of putting you in debt (you'd better believe it can be used that way!) but in this particular case I think he just knew me and liked me and felt obliged. On the other hand, the people in the street in Seoul who push you and walk through you aren't actually being discourteous and rude, and certainly not anti-foreign; they simply don't see you. They bump each other just as much, and never notice it, whether they bump or are bumped. Other people don't exist.

It turns out that all sorts of things in Korean society are explained by this distinction between "in" and "out." For example, it is one reason why the ritual of exchanging name cards is so important. That formal introduction is the moment when the "other" ceases to be a non-person and becomes a person. "In and out" explains why Korean students are so clean in their homes and so likely to throw trash on the campus streets - the street is outside their area, the territory of non-persons. This distinction is reinforced by taking off shoes in a house; the house is clean space, while "out" is for shoes, dirty.

But I am an American. (Throughout this series of essays, I make comparisons to American culture not because I think it forms a world standard, but because it is the only non-Korean culture I know.) In contrast to this dual system, Americans tend to value a single standard of treatment for all people. In fact, equality of treatment is one of our most profound theoretical values. We should do things for people no matter who they are; we should be kind to strangers (even if we have to be wary of them nowadays). But this is not the only way to run a society.

American students assume that they will receive equality and fairness of treatment from public agencies, and are outraged when things are "unfair." Korean students have learned from their infancy that public agencies will treat them as "outsiders" and be unlikely to do what they ask. They know that the word
"no" only means they have not yet found the loophole, the back door, the personal connection who will treat them as "in."

When Koreans look at Americans, they tend to admire our public behavior: traffic courtesy, not pushing or bumping, standing in line, saying "Thank you for shopping at K-Mart," etc. Koreans often say that public behavior in Korea needs to be improved. But when they get invited out by Americans, they tend to think that we aren't that wonderful as hosts. We invite them over for what is announced as a "simple lunch," and instead of the massive spread that a Korean would provide after such an invitation, they arrive and it's really only a simple lunch! Americans just don't go "all out" the way Koreans would.

In traditional Korean society everyone lived in a village and knew everyone else and had to be polite; thus, "Eastern Land of Courtesy." Perhaps only with modern urban life has the "non-person" problem become so evident. Most foreigners who are in Korea or who interact with Koreans are in a small "village," a group of people properly introduced who know each other. Most of the time, things are fine. But if you go out in downtown Seoul, look out!

**No Men Are Created Equal**

The problem of "in and out" is only a small part of a larger pattern: Korea is fundamentally not an egalitarian culture, not one that values equality of treatment, but one that makes distinctions between people, one that is hierarchical.

Well, you knew that Korean culture was hierarchical. But do you know what that really implies? I mean, it's arranged vertically!

Just as one clue, there is no word in Korean for "brother." There is no such word. There is a Korean word for "elder brother" ("hyong") and a Korean word for "younger brother" ("tongsaeng") but no word for brother. American brothers are generally equal to each other, but Korean brothers are not equal; the elder brother has what we would call the responsibility of a father toward his younger brothers. The relationship is different, so the word is different. My Korean friends always consider me slightly immoral in that I do not tell my younger brother what to do.

Koreans have separate words for elder sister and younger sister, too. In fact, they have different words for a man to use for his elder sister and for a woman to use for her elder sister. The words are different
because the roles are different and the relationships are different and the responsibilities are different and not equal.

Korea is a Confucian society. Everyone is Confucian, including the Christians. Confucianism is primarily a system of ethics, not religion, and within ethics, even more a system of social relationships. The very center of Confucianism is the "Five Relationships" of "king to subject, father to son, elder brother to younger brother, husband to wife, and friend to friend." Note that four out of five of these are hierarchical. That's about right; Korea is at least 80% hierarchical. (And even "friends" only applies if the two were born the same year, and are thus the same age and capable of being roughly equal. And even then not quite, because the one born a month or a day or an hour ahead is senior. Even twins: like Esau and Jacob, the twin born first is the elder brother. Koreans are very confused when Americans claim that someone clearly not their own age is their "friend.")

Language reinforces inequality not only in things like the words for "brother" but in every sentence. The "levels" of spoken Korean are controlled by and also define the relationship of the two speakers. Even if you know no Korean you will notice that younger people use a lot of long sentences ending with "-imnida," while older people talking to younger people end their sentences with short cutoff endings. Two people can't even talk to each other until they have defined their mutual relationship, hierarchically, by position or age.

Teachers, particularly senior teachers, maintain a certain dignity. Americans may think such teachers are putting it on, but in their minds they are simply being senior, acting as a teacher ought to act. Granted that Koreans treat Americans as somewhat outside the Korean hierarchical system (my "honorary" age for a long time has been about 10 years greater than my real age, though the gap has now disappeared), and granted that Koreans take things from foreigners that they would never take from other Koreans, still, hierarchy is the whole world, and being aware of one's relative place in the world is a way of making life easier in dealing with Koreans anywhere.

**Honesty vs. Loyalty: Which is More Important**

In Korea as in the West, honesty and loyalty are both virtues. In the West, in general, honesty is the higher virtue. In a Confucian society like Korea, loyalty is the higher virtue. Who is to choose? The difference is deeply rooted in Korean culture and has deep implications for Korean society and for those
I had a terrible time in my classes when I was teaching at Yonsei because my students kept cheating on tests and plagiarizing homework. I had to watch them all the time. When I caught them, they were embarrassed, yes, and they knew they had done wrong, yes, but they said, "My friend asked me," as if that were a complete explanation. I know we have cheating in colleges in the U.S. and other countries, too, but sometimes I really got disgusted with their lack of honesty, their unwillingness to play by the rules.

It is not the case that Koreans are dishonest. It is not the case that honesty is not a value in Korea. Korean culture has a strong sense of honesty. The problem is the hierarchy of values. Honesty is a value, but there is a higher value, and it is loyalty.

Of course, loyalty is a value for Americans, too. Those of us in academia are less regularly conscious of it than some Americans, perhaps, but when something comes which demands loyalty, Americans have it, whether to the nation, to a friend, or to a family member. But for us it is not usually a higher value than honesty.

But not so for Koreans. Loyalty is higher than honesty. Thus my students will engage in behavior that I call cheating in order to be virtuous. Consider yourself in such a situation. First, the Confucian drive to success through education means your parents have impressed on you from birth the absolute importance of excellent grades. An "A-" is a failing grade. (The parents are right, by the way. If you do not have absolutely top grades you will not get into a top university. Since hiring at the top companies is based on what university you attended rather than on personal achievement, an "A-" in high school could seriously damage your life prospects.) If you are an obedient child, you want to please your parents. Of course, it's best to have studied and to know all the answers on a test. But if you don't, you know it is morally unacceptable to bring home a low grade. So, being an obedient child, you ask your friend for help. If you do not ask, you reveal yourself as lacking in fundamental virtue. If you have been well socialized, there is no conflict. Similarly, if your friend asks you for help on an exam or to copy your homework, you must help your friend or show yourself to be inhumane, disloyal, not a friend, lacking in virtue.

In a small country and a small society where human relationships are extremely important, more important than structural and official relationships, where the whole world works by the old boy network, it is not so surprising that loyalty is the top value. Looking at it another way, we should ask
just what is the relationship between, for instance, father and son. If you ask a Korean what one value summarizes the correct relationship between the pairs of the Five Relationships in Confucianism, the answer will be some version of "loyalty." If you ask a Korean what one word expresses the most important ideal in Korean culture, the way "love" is often considered the ultimate ideal in Western culture, the answer will be "loyalty."

The tough thing in cultural conflict is not the conflict of good against bad. The tough thing is when it's good against good. There's a fine book on Korean culture, which says it right in the title; it's called Virtues in Conflict. (The book is actually about women's roles - I'm just borrowing the title.) Which should be more important, honesty or loyalty? Why do Americans say that honesty is a higher value than loyalty? Why not the other way around? Who decides?

If there are events in your experience with Koreans in which their behavior seems to be in conflict with your values, then it's time to remember the fundamental and obvious principle that the Koreans are playing by their own quite functional set of values. They are probably wondering why your values are so screwed up. As for me, rather than blaming Korean culture or trying to change it (a fruitless task!), I usually try to set up some system, which forces things to be done "right," i.e. the way I want. In class and on tests, I watch very closely and never assume the honor system will work. I always double-check abilities shown on homework assignments by giving in-class assignments as well. On the other hand, I can only do that in areas where I am in control, like the classroom (or when I was at Fulbright, selecting Fulbright grantees). Just as often, I have no control and must learn to be satisfied with understanding what's going on. Korean culture is certainly not going to change in my lifetime, or yours. But your interactions with Koreans will certainly be more pleasant when you understand why they act the way they do.

**Heredity and Environment**

Lots of Korean children are adopted overseas each year. This has become a big issue in Korea lately, as some Koreans consider it embarrassing to their nation. I, on the other hand (partly because I have two adopted children who used to be Korean) consider it one of the finest things that Koreans do, allowing their children to be adopted by people who really want them. The fact is that Koreans do not adopt children very much, and many Koreans cannot understand that my wife and I really love our adopted children.
Traditionally, Koreans did adopt occasionally. If one did not have a son, one might adopt the second son of a relative (a "spare") to carry on the family line. The adoptee need not be young; often the adoptee would be in his teens or older before the need to adopt would be recognized. But the person to be adopted had to be related to you, and in the correct generation (the next generation after yours in the clan register).

Americans don't care very much about being related to the adopted child, but they want to adopt young. My elder daughter came to my house when she was five days old - that's the way to do it, no? Americans and Koreans are equally crazy in our view of the world. In the makeup of any human being there is a mixture of heredity and environment. But we Americans tend to believe only in environment. Look at that adoption pattern - get 'em young and they can become anything, right? We want to adopt infants! Then there will be no problems! Koreans, on the other hand, tend to believe only in heredity. Look at that adoption pattern - get 'em from the family and we know what we're getting, right? We want to adopt relatives! Then there will be no problems!

Of course, heredity determines much of my height, aptitudes, even diseases. Environment determines much of my behavior, achievement, even diseases. Thus both Koreans and Americans are wrong. But being wrong never affected a good solid social attitude (theirs or ours).

The American attitude to environment and heredity may come from the American experience, where everyone was an immigrant and the new land determined what you were; anyone could become anything, and the past was left behind (in theory, and never mind the marginalized). The Korean attitude to heredity may come from the Korean experience, where everyone was in the same place for 5000 years and family determined what you were; no one could become anything (in theory, and never mind actual social mobility).

Of course, modern Korea is built on a denial of all the resignation and fatalism implicit in this attitude. Now everything changes; everything can be changed. But both attitudes are strong in Korea - yes, everything changes, must change; but at the same time in some ways nothing changes, particularly in people and relationships. Old attitudes to adoption have not changed. People without sons still adopt, but instead of adopting relatives, they sometimes conceal the adoption not only from the child, but even from the neighbors, the wife getting progressively more "pregnant," then going to the hospital and bringing home the adopted newborn publicly as her own. A child known to be adopted may be bullied or (worse) pitied by neighbors and classmates.
While the Korean attitude toward heredity may be of only academic interest to that majority of people who have not adopted, it affects a large group of people whom I deal with as an international educator. These are the hyphenated Koreans, most often Korean-American. The typical experience in Korea of Korean-Americans can be quite negative. Their first introduction to Korea is in the taxi from the airport, where the taxi driver scolds them for not speaking Korean well. They have often felt varying degrees of isolation in their home countries, and had expected that in Korea they would feel at home. But they are soon disabused of that notion.

A survey was conducted some years ago among the summer session students at Yonsei's International Division, 95% of whom are Korean-American, about their ideas of Korea and Koreans. The results were much as expected - it's a beautiful country, they like the food, they don't like the traffic, Seoul is bigger and more modern than they expected, they feel satisfied with their study experience, etc. But one figure stood out. When asked about the basic character and attitude of the Korean people, 64.8% of these young Korean-Americans replied that Koreans were an unkind people, and only 25.4% that Koreans were a kind people (plus 9.8% "other").

The problem is heredity and environment. If a student was born in New York, went to high school in California, speaks only English, and is a student at the University of Michigan, I, speaking as an American, know that that student is an American. But the average Korean will believe such a student is a Korean - but a "bad" one. If your parents were Korean, then you are too! If I can say "Ann-young-hash-im-niker" ("hello"), no matter how badly, Koreans will say how impressed they are by my Korean language skills. If one of those students makes even a slight error in grammar, particularly in the small suffixes that indicate politeness and relative place in society, they are criticized severely - because they are Korean, and Koreans don't make those mistakes.

Among the students on American campuses are growing numbers of students who look Korean but aren't. As Americans, they don't accept their "place" in the Korean hierarchy. Meanwhile, the Koreans among your international students do accept hierarchy. The Koreans are often graduate students, who think they are in charge. The Korean-Americans are often undergraduates - nobody is in charge of them. So you have two Korean student associations, not always talking to each other. All because of heredity and environment.
Conclusion

Korea is said to be the most homogeneous nation on the face of the earth. Among South Korea's 48 million people, the largest, in fact the only, resident minority group is the 10,000 Chinese. They are scattered around the country - Korea is the only country in Asia without a Chinatown. Only one out of every 4800 people is from an ethnically different group.

One of the greatest assets of Korean society is its homogeneity - all one language, one culture, one race, one nation, allowing mass education, communication, and understanding within the boundaries of the country.

One of the greatest liabilities of Korean society is its homogeneity - no experience of diversity, no openness to difference, sometimes a bit of racism and xenophobia thrown in, with these negative points not merely a sad reality which exists despite inclusive ideals, as in the U.S., but part of an ideology of purity and uniqueness and exceptionalism which is reinforced by government, education, media, and family.

It is the homogeneity of Koreans which makes it possible to begin to describe something called "Korean culture." I always remind myself that individual variation can be very great. Nonetheless, many Koreans I meet and work with seem to fit the patterns I have described, and others, including Koreans themselves, have recognized these patterns as forming something "Korean."

All these characteristics from all these sections fit together - hierarchy, personalized loyalty, group orientation, nationalism, and heredity - to produce a cultural group that has survived a long time. Korean culture is changing, but slowly, and these characteristics will not disappear in our lifetimes. As we try to understand Koreans, so they also try to understand us. Maybe we can use the opportunities now open for those of us in international education, Koreans and Americans, to meet each other in the middle.