UNDERSTANDING KOREAN CULTURE: SYMBOLS, LANGUAGE AND NORMS
• LECTURE OUTLINE

• 1. Definition of culture
• 2. Key elements of culture
• 3. Korean Symbols
• 4. Korean Language
• 5. Korean Norms
INTRODUCTION

What is culture?

Culture is a system of ideas, art, morals, laws, symbols, language, values, beliefs, norms, customs, organizations, and technology shared by people in a particular society.

Culture includes all learned behavior; it consists of both the **nonmaterial aspects** of a society such as language, ideas and values, and the **material aspects** such as houses, foods, clothes and tools.
Out of the vast array of elements that constitute culture, the most important ones in understanding a new culture are:

- 1) symbols;
- 2) language;
- 3) norms; and
- 4) values.
The question is:

1) What are the representative symbols of Korean culture?

2) What are the distinctive aspects of the Korean language?

3) What are the most important Korean norms and values?
I. SYMBOLS OF KOREAN CULTURE

A symbol is something that is used to represent something else (e.g., words, numbers, flags, and kisses are symbols).

- We use symbols to understand reality, transmit messages and store complex information.

- The operation of culture is dependent on people’s ability to create and understand symbols.
Question: Can you think of any Korean symbols?

Korean people have created beautiful cultural symbols that are found almost everywhere you look in Korea, from the Taegeuk in the national flag to animal designs on chopsticks in restaurants.

Many Korean symbols pertain to their wish for luck, fortune, longevity, and fertility.
• **Example 1:**

• **Taegeuk: Ultimate Existence**

• The ultimate existence has its origin in basic value and existence.

• In Buddhism, this pattern means the ultimate equality and balance.

• Embodying the Dual Principle of Yin and Yang, it also represents the continuous cycle of life.
Example 2:
Taegeukgi: Korean flag

- The flag depicts the balancing philosophies of Yin and Yang.
- In the central circle, the upper red portion represents positive Yang, while the lower blue portion represents negative Yin.
The combination of bars in each corner also symbolizes opposites and balance.

The set in the upper left corner (☰) embodies heaven, spring, east, and gentility.

The lower right corner (☷): the earth, summer, west, and justice.

The upper right corner (☳): the moon (water), winter, north, and wisdom.

The lower left corner (☴): the sun (fire), autumn, south, and courtesy.
• Example 3:
• Mugunghwa: Rose of Sharon
• The national flower of Korea is the *mugunghwa*, rose of sharon.
• Unlike most flowers, *mugunghwa* is remarkably tenacious and able to withstand both blight and insects.
• The flower’s symbolic significance stems from the Korean word *mugung*, meaning immortality.
• This word accurately reflects the enduring nature of Korean culture, and the determination and perseverance of the Korean people.
• Example 4:
• Bujok (talisman; amulet) for good luck and protection from evil spiri
• Talisman comes in two types:
  1) one acts as a good luck charm; and
  2) the other works to protect from evil or bad luck.
  ◆ It commonly has a yellow background with red symbols or characters.
  ◆ It is believed that evil spirits dislike the colors of gold and yellow.
  ◆ Red represents blood or fire, and psychologically it means the color of life and emotion.
Example 5:

Fish: Diligent Self-discipline

Since fish does not close its eyes when it sleeps or even when it dies, an ascetic devotee in Buddhism was expected to reach Nirvana with continuous effort like fish.
• Example 6:
• Tiger: Represents vigor, chivalry
Example 7:
Lotus (Water Lily): Creation, Birth

A Buddhist story tells that the lotus came from the belly of a God who slept under water.

For this reason it symbolizes birth and creation.
Example 8:

Bat: Good Luck

The Chinese character for bat is pronounced the same as the character for good fortune.

This led to bat images being used on pillow ends and in paintings as well as in furniture and architectural designs as a symbol of good fortune.

As bats were supposed to live 1,000 years, their image was also used as a symbol of longevity.

A design of 5 bats represents five fortunes: longevity, wealth, health, love of virtue, and natural death.
• Example 9:
• *Dancheong*: Enlightenment

- As one of the most recognizable arts of Korean Buddhism, the brightly colored patterns of *dancheong* adorn the ceilings, eaves, support pillars, and walls of temple buildings.
• The combination of certain colors (blue, red, yellow, white, and black, based on the Dual Principle of Yin and Yang and the Five Elements of Eastern philosophy—metal, wood, water, fire, and earth) symbolize the bright enlightenment of the next world.

• Round patterns mean people’s lives are supposed to transmigrate: when someone reaches Nirvana, he or she can obtain the wisdom of Buddha.
The doctrine of five elements describes two Cycles of Balance, a generating or creation (生) cycle and an overcoming or destruction (克) cycle of interactions between the phases.

**Generating**
- Wood feeds Fire;
- Fire creates Earth (ash);
- Earth bears Metal;
- Metal collects Fire and Water; and
- Water nourishes Wood.

**Overcoming**
- Wood parts Earth;
- Earth absorbs Water;
- Water quenches Fire;
- Fire melts Metal and burns Wood; and
- Metal chops Wood.
• Example 10
• Crane: Longevity and Elegance
• Example 11:

• **Buddhist Swastika: Auspiciousness**

• The Buddhist symbol (卍) represents an auspicious sign in Buddhism.

• It is considered to have omnipotent godly power, as well as the meaning of the whole universe.
Example 12: The Cross

Out of these symbols, the most important cultural symbols are those of Buddhism and Christianity, which are two largest religions in Korea.

According to 2005 census, Buddhism is the largest religion with nearly 11 million adherents.

There are 39 Buddhist orders, more than 11,000 temples, over 26,000 monks, and a large number of Buddhist-run media outlets, including a cable television, a radio network, and newspapers.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Population in South Korea (in thousands; percentage of total population)</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>10,321 (23.2)</td>
<td>10,726 (22.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>8,760 (19.7)</td>
<td>8,616 (18.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>2,951 (6.6)</td>
<td>5,146 (10.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confucian</td>
<td>211 (0.5)</td>
<td>105 (0.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Won Buddhist</td>
<td>87 (0.2)</td>
<td>130 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religions</td>
<td>268 (0.6)</td>
<td>247 (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Rel. Affiliation</td>
<td>21,953 (49.3)</td>
<td>21,865 (46.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Protestantism
Since its introduction in 1884, Protestantism has proceeded to become the second largest religion in Korea.
Nearly nine million Koreans or about 20 percent of the country’s 49 million people are Protestant.
The growth of Korean Protestantism had been particularly pronounced from the early 1960s to the end of the 1980s, the period of the country’s remarkable modernization.
• Since the early 1960s, when South Korea’s Protestants scarcely topped the one million mark, the number of Protestant Christians increased faster than in any other country, nearly doubling every decade (see Table 2).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th># of Members</th>
<th>Growth Rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>500,198</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>623,072</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>3,192,621</td>
<td>512.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>5,001,491</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>6,489,282</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>8,037,464</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>8,760,336</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>8,616,438</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Five of the ten largest churches are found in Seoul, the “city of churches.”
• Korea became the world’s second largest source of Christian missionaries. As of
  2003, Korea had 12,000 missionaries in more then 160 countries, second only to
  the U.S., which had 46,000 missionaries worldwide. Britain was third with 6,000
  missionaries.
Catholicism

Although Catholicism was severely persecuted in the 18th and 19th centuries, during which nearly 10,000 Catholics were martyred, there are now 5.1 million Catholics in Korea, which amounts to about 11 percent of the population.

In fact, Catholicism has enjoyed the largest increase in membership of all the religions in the last decade, soaring from 2.9 million in 1995 to over 5 million in 2005.
In May of 1984 during the bicentennial commemoration of Korean Catholicism, Pope John Paul II canonized 103 of the martyrs, making Korea fourth in the world in the total number of saints.

Together, Protestant and Catholic Christians comprise roughly 30% of the population, and Christianity as a whole is the largest religion in Korea.

Comparisons with China and Japan.
II. KOREAN LANGUAGE

- Language is the most important set of symbols.
- Languages influence people’s thought and experience more than we recognize.
- Question: How many languages other there in the world?
- There are 6,800 languages in currency in the world today, but 50~90% are expected to be extinct within the next 50 years.
- That is because half of all languages are spoken by fewer than 2,500 each, but languages need at least 100,000 speakers to pass on from generation to generation.
The most important fact about language is that people’s worldview is shaped and reflected by the language they speak.

That is, people see and interpret the world through the grammatical forms, labels, and categories provided by their language.

What this means is that societies with different languages actually perceive the world differently; that is, they use a different set of labels to describe and interpret the same thing.
• It is also true that the language reflects the core values of the speakers in society, e.g., Eskimo’s terms for “snow” and Philippino’s terms for “banana.”
• Korean terms for wife and unmarried woman.
• Koreans’ use of the term “rice.”
• Koreans use the phrase "eat rice" or “bap meokda” in the common greeting “Bap meokeotnya?” to mean literally "Have you eaten rice?", and by extension, "How are you doing?".
• Around lunch and dinner time, Koreans greet each other by asking “Have you eaten?”
• Likewise, the Chinese use the phrase "eat rice", "chi fan", in the common greeting "Ni chi fan le ma?" to mean literally "Have you eaten?", and by extension, "How are you doing?".
• The expression for eating a meal in Burmese, "Htamin Sar" means to eat rice.
• Vietnamese use the phrase "ăn cơm" in the same way.
• It is similar in the Thai "gin kow."
• Laotian culture has a saying, "annokao bin biao", literally "grains of rice", which is a metaphor for great effort or exertion.
• “Eating” figures prominently in Korean popular sayings:
  - “Geumgangsan gugyeongdo shikhugyeong” (See the Diamond Mountains on a full stomach)
  - “The back of the head of the departing guest is beautiful”
  - “Shikeunjuk meokgida” (It’s as easy as eating cold porridge)—It’s a piece of cake
  - “Nuweoseo ddeokmeokki” (Eating rice cake lying down).

• Also, Korean terms for “morning” and “breakfast” are the same, as are “afternoon” and “lunch,” and “evening” and “dinner”
• Many popular expressions also pertain to eating, with the verb “meokda” added as a suffix:
• The family in Korean is “shikgu” literally meaning “eating mouths,” i.e., family comprises of members who eat together or, from the perspective of the parents, family means the “mouths to feed.”
• Naimeokda, literally meaning “eat age,” means “to age.”
• Deowimeokda (“eat heat”)
• Yokmeokda (“eat blame”): to be blamed.
• Noemulmeokda ("eat a bribe"): accept a bribe
• Geopmeokda ("eat a scare"): get scared
• Maeummeokda ("eat a mind"): make up one’s mind
• Maeumeulgocheomeokda ("change a mind and eat"): change one’s mind
• Gamdongmeokda ("eat an emotion"): to be inspired or emotionally moved
• Championmeokda ("eat a championship"): win a championship
• Golmeokda: to be fooled
• Aemeokda: to suffer
• Ijeomeokda: to forget
• Mulmeokda h: to be fooled
• Gwimeokda ("eat an ear"): not hearing well
• Nampyeon(buin) jabeomeokda ("eat a husband"): to mistreat husband or wife
• Sexiest terms in Korean:
• Cheonyeo, literally meaning “a virgin” to refer to unmarried woman.
• Anae, ansaram, jipsaram
• Sijipgada
• Mimangin
• Bumo
• Bubu
• Namnyeonoso
• Oesachon, oehalabeoji, oehalmeoni, oesamchon, oesukmo, oegajok, oegatjip, oemo.
• Americans
• World Series
• Use of the expression of “World champions”
• The fact that languages influence people’s thought is exemplified by the fact that bilingual speakers seem to think differently when they change languages.

• In one study, students in Hong Kong were asked to complete a values test and they expressed more traditional Chinese values when they answered in Cantonese than when they spoke English.
• In another example, North Americans value straight talk and grow impatient with “beating around the bush.” The idea of “Calling spade a spade” is valued.

• In many Asian cultures, in contrast, maintaining harmony is important, so communicators will avoid speaking clearly or directly if that would threaten the group’s harmony or another person’s face.
For this reason, Koreans and Japanese are less likely than North Americans to offer a clear “No” to an undesirable request.

Even when they have to decline an invitation, they don’t give a definitive response by saying they cannot go, but say rather that they probably won’t be able to go.

It is also considered polite to say “No” a couple of times before accepting any kind of an offer.
• **Korean Language**

Korean language is one of the eleven most spoken languages in the world.

There are about 80 million Korean speakers (49 million in South Korea, 23 million in North Korea, and 7 million expatriates).
• Like Japanese, the Korean language was influenced by the Chinese language in the form of Sino-Korean words.

• Native Korean words account for about 35% of the Korean vocabulary, while about 60% of the Korean vocabulary consists of Sino-Korean words.

• The remaining 5% comes from loan words from other languages, 90% of which are from English.
*Hangeul*, is recognized as one of the simplest and yet most sophisticated language systems in the world:

- The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has designated *hangeul* as a world cultural heritage in 1997.
- UNESCO has also established the “King Sejong Prize” in 1986 to award the prize annually to an individual or organization in recognition of the effort in lowering illiteracy.
Quiz 1: UNESCO conducted research on the most appropriate writing system for more than 2,900 languages that have only oral tradition. Which language received the highest score?

Quiz 2: In a study conducted by the linguistics department at Oxford University, which language received the highest score in terms of rational structure, scientific accuracy, uniqueness, and practicality?
That is one of the reasons why Korea enjoys one of the lowest illiteracy rates in the world.

On the computer keyboard, *hangeul* is the only language in which all the vowels can be typed from the right side while all the consonants are typed from the left.

*Hangeul* is believed to facilitate the maximum use of the limited keyboard capacities of cell phones, thereby making it the most efficient language in sending text messages via cell phones.
• Author Pearl Buck said that Hangeul is “the world’s simplest and most sophisticated language in the world.”

• Author John Mann said that it is the best alphabetic system that all other languages dream of becoming.

• A linguistics professor at the University of Chicago eats Korean food on October 9th every year to pay homage to the Korean alphabet (October 9th is designated as the Hangeul Day in Korea).
III. KOREAN NORMS

- Norms are rules, guides and standards of conduct; they determine acceptable behaviours.
- Prescriptive and proscriptive norms.
- Question: Do you know any Korean norms?
- Bow to greet each other, except with the same-aged friends.
- Subordinates must greet or bow to superiors first; subordinates have to bow deeper to superiors.
• Use honorific in speaking to strangers, older people, superiors, etc.
• Practically everyone is called by his or her title, including older siblings and cousins, except the same-aged friends.
• Do not use red ink in writing a person’s name.
• Tipping is welcomed.
• Pass or receive objects with both hands.
• When someone is lying down, don’t step over the person’s body, especially the upper torso. If you want to go around, do so around the person’s feet, not the head (you step over the head of only the dead people).
• Do not sit on the doorstep.
• Do not shake a leg while sitting.
• Do not sit at corners of the table.
• Do not hit someone in the head.
• Pillows should not be left standing (if you do, burglars may come).
• Young people don’t smoke in front of older people.
• Public display of affection is frowned upon.
• Women should not smoke in public.
• When drinking in a group, Koreans don’t fill their own glass; they fill each other’s glass and often offer their own empty glass to other members in the group.
• Turning sideways when drinking alcohol in front of an older person.
• Covering your mouth when yawning or laughing, especially for females.
• Don’t blow your nose in the presence of others (out of consideration for others).
• Do not leave a spoon or chop sticks in your bowl.
• Men pay.
• An older person pays.
• Subordinates are expected to stand up when a person of higher rank appears.
• Subordinates must not assume relaxed or cross-legged sitting.
• Graves should face the south.