
Shame and Guilt Mechanisms in East Asian Culture

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Explores the concepts of shame and guilt and compares Western understanding of shame and guilt with Asian understandings. Claims that Asian culture is integrated more by shame than guilt. Presents a unique phenomenon in Korean culture which reflects the shame sanction. Draws attention to the need to value the feeling of shame in dealing with Asian populations when delivering pastoral care and counseling.

Some researchers and scholars differentiated between shame-based cultures and guilt-based cultures using the criteria of external and internal sanctions. According to these thinkers, the feeling of shame originates from external sanction, while guilt arises from an internalized value system. Shame-based culture is labeled "primitive" and guilt-based culture is termed "developed." Shame-based culture reflects primitive and static characteristics, and therefore the capacity of Western culture to understand the concept of shame is limited.

However, it is dangerous to define one culture as shame-based and another as guilt-based, for we may see both characteristics in one culture. It is a matter of which is more dominant, and shame and guilt must not be defined in a hierarchical way. In this article, I will review and critique certain theories on shame and guilt. Then I will address a specific cultural understanding of shame and guilt and the phenomenon of shame in socio-cultural life, using Korea as the example.

Brief Review of Theory

One of the theorists who differentiated shame and guilt was Ruth Benedict, who juxtaposed shame and guilt cultures in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. She analyzed the dynamics of shame and guilt while researching how to recover honor in a different culture. After the research, she concluded that Japanese culture is shame-based. "The shame cultures," she observed, "rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as true guilt cultures do, on internalized conviction of sin. Shame is a reaction to other people's criticisms...."¹

However, Takeo Doe condemns Benedict for her supposed inability to recognize that guilt can be found in Japanese people. "What is characteristic about the Japanese sense of guilt, though," she remarks, "is that it shows itself most sharply when the individual suspects that his action will result in betraying the group to which he belongs."² Benedict's theory employs a simplistic

The Journal of Pastoral Care, Spring 1997, Vol. 51, No. 1

¹ Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (New York, NY: Meridian Books, 1946), p. 222.

² Takeo Doe, *The Anatomy of Dependence* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1973), p. 49.

typology which defines an outer-directed culture as shame-based and an inner-directed culture as guilt-based. But in the same culture, there may be a person who internalizes some of the norms and another person who does not. Persons in a society may be more oriented by shame or more directed by guilt, but both are present to some degree in the culture and its people.³ Feelings of shame have both internal and external origins. One feels shame before the ego ideal as well as before the community ideals.

Spiro differentiates between shame, where the individual fears other people's disapproval, and guilt, where the socializing agent is introjected. It seems that shame requires an audience because the shame-based culture has not the opportunity to internalize the external authority. But Piers and Singer suggest that it does not require an audience. Both shame and guilt may be experienced in the actual presence of an audience or when the audience is present only as an internalized other.⁴

Miller Creighton defines shame as the awareness of inadequacy or failure to achieve a wished-for self-image, accompanied by or originally arising from the fear of separation and abandonment.⁵ Feelings of guilt are generated whenever the boundaries of negative behavior, as established by the superego, are touched or transgressed. The unconscious threat in guilt anxiety is not abandonment, but punishment or retribution.⁶ The difference here is that between the internalized norm being violated and the unconscious threat being activated. Unconscious shame is aroused by a failure to live up to the internalized ideals of loving parents, and the unconscious threat is abandonment. Unconscious guilt is aroused by impulses to transgress the internalized prohibitions of punishing parents, and the unconscious threat is mutilation.

Among the many definitions of shame and guilt, David Augsburger's definition of shame is the most similar to the understanding of Asian populations. According to him, both shame and guilt have their own bipolar system: they both separate and press for reunion; they are an impulse to conceal and a yearning to be accepted; they create responsibility toward others and personal recognition of a need to respond in more acceptable ways.⁷

Shame and Guilt Mechanism in Korean Culture

From this review of different theories of shame and guilt, it is clear that there are distinctions between them. But it is dangerous to use these distinctions to label specific cultures. As in an individual, both characteristics are present in each culture simultaneously. It is a matter of which is more dominant. As we will see, Asian culture is integrated more by shame than by guilt. Figure 1 shows how shame and guilt cultures can be differentiated by two variants, the locus of responsibility and the locus of control. This theoretical diagram, drawn from Derald Sue, represents a different worldview or orientation to life.⁸

David W. Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1986), p. 120.

Gehart Piers and Milton Singer, *Shame and Guilt* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1953), p. 51.

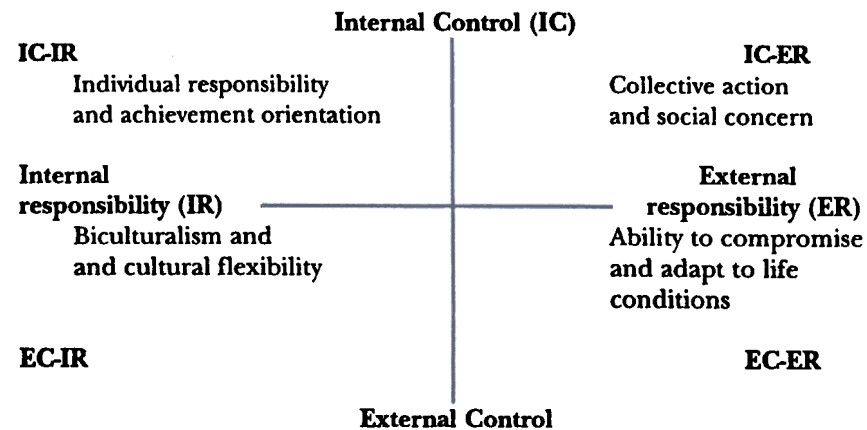
Miller R. Creighton, "Revisiting Shame and Guilt Cultures," *Ethos*, 1990, Vol. 18, No. 3, p. 85.

Ibid., p. 286.

Augsburger, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

Derald Sue, "Counseling Across Cultures," *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 1981, Vol. 56, p. 51.

Figure 1



I would say that the person who falls into the categories on the left (IC-IR or EC-IR) is prone to feel guilt, while the person who is in a category on the right (EC-ER or IC-ER) is more likely to feel shame. In every culture, personality type is an important determinant of which mechanism, shame or guilt, is utilized. Helen Lewis claims a similar theory with the criteria of field-dependent *vs.* field-independent mode: "A field-dependent mode of superego functioning would be shame, while a field-independent mode of superego functioning would be guilt."⁹ Then we may ask, Why are there so many EC-ER or IC-ER types in Asian culture? What makes Asians more oriented toward shame? I will address some of the cultural phenomena and socialization processes which make Korean peoples' personalities oriented towards shame. I will utilize the term Korean and Asian interchangeably because the people they refer to have many cultural similarities.

Group Orientation

Asians (Koreans) put high value on the harmonious integration of group members. So shame, possibly evidence by its emergence during the bonding stage, is more profoundly associated with the fear that one's inadequacies will result in the loss of union with or expulsion from the group.¹⁰

It is extremely difficult for an Asian or Korean to transcend the group and act independently. The reason seems to be that Asians have a vague sense that it is treacherous to act on their own without considering the feelings of the group to which they belong, and even feel ashamed at doing something on their own.¹¹ If Asians go to a restaurant and are asked to order, they have more of a tendency to order the same meal. They do not feel comfortable with the Western style of ordering. The self-concept of an Asian cannot be said to equal the group to which he or she belongs, but it includes the context of relevant social relationships. Even the concept of competition is different from Westerners'. Competition for an Asian comes not from standing out, but from

⁹Helen B. Lewis, *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* (New York, NY: International University Press, 1971), p. 51.

¹⁰Creighton, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

¹¹Doc, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

not falling behind others. Living up to the group's norms and values is important.

For *Sakuta*, public shame corresponds to the fear of losing face before others; private shame involves the internalization of this code; and internal shame (*suchi*) arises in circumstances when people cause harm to a group member or to others upon whom they have relied.¹² In Western understanding, internal shame arises when one feels he or she has not lived up to his or her own expectation of the self. However, internal shame in Korea comes when a person has not lived up to the community's rules and expectations. This internal shame is very prevalent among Asians and Koreans. It functions to build group harmony and unity.

Family Dynamics

This group orientation is best reflected in the family system. Specifically in terms of rearing a child, it is designed to create an individual who is in harmony with the community. The child is under constant observation, supervision, and control. External authority is always present in every sphere of life. The need for internalizing what is reliably constant in the context is thus very low. The lack of separation, distance, or privacy creates no opportunity for the construction of a conscience, but the group ego ideal is assimilated in both the actuality of daily interaction and the high value placed on acceptance, conformity, and belonging.¹³

If a parent has instilled in a child an understanding of his or her capacity to cause hurt to others by failing to carry out an obligation expected of him or her as a member of a family, any such failure can make the child feel extreme shame. The child who was raised in an extended family doesn't feel the necessity to internalize the external norms because every authority is always present among the family members. He or she may receive counsel and guidance from family members at all times.

In addition to this environment, the interdynamic with the mother has been a source of great shame. The child rearing method makes children extremely dependent on mothers, and Asians express extreme bonding with their mothers. This strong bonding with the mother make it possible for parents to use maternal ostracism as a method of punishment for discipline. If a child does something wrong, the mother may lock the door and not let the child come in for a while.

As a result of this child rearing or socialization, children feel shame and guilt toward their mother when they commit a sin or crime. Interviews with prisoners indicate that most of them feel more severe shame and guilt toward their mothers rather than toward the victims of their wrongdoing.

Ancestor Veneration

Veneration of ancestors is an expression of the ritual harmony which should pervade all life.¹⁴ For the Confucianist, the cult of the ancestors is not so much a search for personal immortality as a means to establish a stable society and continuity in the family line. For the Korean people who practice the popular religious cults, blending Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religions, there

is a fear of spirits and concern to serve them properly. This practice implies anxiety. This anxiety can be discerned in the prevalent fear of ghosts and out of a concern to provide for ancestral spirits lest they become angry.¹⁵ If one does not follow the established rule in observing the veneration of ancestors, he or she is apt to feel shame. In a monotheistic culture, guilt is more generalized in terms of ubiquitous and unlimited debt to the single, universal creator. But in sociocultic culture it is shame that is generalized and guilt that is specific in defining the Alter. Korean society is a sociocultic culture. There is no one powerful god. Because of this religious background, the concept of morality is different.

I recall one story of a murderer. He had committed murder about ten years earlier. But he went to the police station on his own ten days before the statute of limitations ran out. He could have lived a life free of any punishment from the legal system if he had hidden himself ten days longer, but he reported his previous crime to the police after he had a car accident. He thought the dead spirit of the victim he murdered ten years earlier was haunting him and causing him many misfortunes, including the car accident.

Koreans have a concept known as *Up (Darmah)*. They connect the origin of disaster with a spirit. They think illness has a connection with the dead spirit. The belief in nonhuman agencies which judge and punish human actions, common among the Native American cultures in the United States, is similar to Asians' fear of spirit. Koreans reflect this fear of spirits when they are confronted with a shameful experience.

Social Status

Lebra pointed out that shame relates to the asymmetric dimension of social structures.¹⁶ Shame results from whatever happens to undermine or denigrate the claimed status by revealing something. The higher the status, the more vulnerable the person tends to be to feel shame. In this sense, shame is generated in conjunction with occupying a position of status. If someone does something which is inconsistent with their status, they lose face and live their life with injured face. Many Asians are addressed by their titles, and their social status and group identity are important factors for living to fulfill reciprocal obligations.

Reciprocal Obligation

The initial emphasis on interdependent unity with the mother is later transferred to the membership group to which the person belongs. In this dynamic of relationship, the key fact is reciprocity.

Reciprocity is the rule by which two actors in interaction, ego and alter, expect each other to maintain a balance between mutual rights and duties, social assets and liabilities, debt and payment, give and take. Shame and guilt emerge when such a balance collapses; that is, when the ego has over-exercised its rights *vis-a-vis* the alter without fulfilling corresponding obligations, when the ego is in debt beyond the capacity to repay or has received a benefit which is undeserved or for which there are no means to reciprocate.¹⁷

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹⁴Takie Sugiyama Lebra, "The Social Mechanism of Guilt and Shame: The Japanese Case," *Anthropological Quarterly*, 1973, p. 256.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 243.

¹²*Ibid.*, 288.

¹³Augsburger, *op. cit.*, 129.

¹⁴Frederick Hoick, *Death and Eastern Thought* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 34.

In order to understand the shame mechanism in Korea, it is necessary to review the Confucianism which strongly shaped premodern Korean society, for the Confucian view is different from the Western view. This approach insists that Korean people consider the human dignity that is found in relationships with each other. It emphasizes appropriate human relationships and provides Koreans with expected models of behavior. This accepted mode of being results in a particular system of values, such as reverence for others, harmony, proper order in society, and a keen awareness of what others do for each other and what one should do in return.

This value system plays an important role in the Korean attitude toward others as they participate in weddings, funeral ceremonies, and other big events. As an example of a typical funeral custom, guests and friends put money in an envelope and give it to the family of the deceased person. The mourners keep a record of the names and amounts of money so that they can repay this debt of gratitude whenever a fitting occasion arises.¹⁸

What makes this system reciprocal? It is expressed clearly in the very first lines of the *Tongmong sonsup* (*First Exercise of Youth*), a primer often used during the Yi dynasty for beginning students: "Of all creatures between a Heaven and Earth, man alone is most noble, and what is noble in man is that he possesses the Five Relationships." This norm of reciprocal relationship is also derived from one of the most valued of the Confucian classics, the *Menchus*,¹⁹ which gives the earliest complete formation of the Five relationships:

According to the ways of men, if they are well fed, warmly clothed and comfortably lodged but without instruction, they will become like animals. The Sage [Emperor Shun] was concerned with this and appointed Hsieh to be Minister of Instruction and teach people human relations: that between father and son there should be affection, between ruler and minister there should be righteousness, between husband and wife there should be proper distinction, between elder and younger there should be proper order, and between friends there should be faithfulness.²⁰

The Five Relationships teach that there is a distinctive human level or manner of relating to others, and only by learning to relate on a certain level does one act in a way worthy of being human. The Confucian tradition sees self-centeredness or selfishness as a primary root of evil and disorder. The special dignity of humans is based on the degree to which they can rise above self-interest in relating to others.

Confucianism emphasizes human relationship and models what is expected in our behavior toward others. This leads to various sets of values, such as the concept of honor, reverence for others, harmony, proper order in society, and a keen awareness of what others do for us and what we should do in return. If Koreans fail to do this, they feel fatal shame and disconnected in the relationship.

The Concept of *Unhae*

The Five Relationships are shown in the concept of *unhae*. Its meaning is "gracious favor," which is parallel to that of rights and duties in the society of the West. One hears the term mentioned most often in contexts where a person feels indebted to someone. Michael Kalton analyzes this concept:

Closer analysis reveals that the concept implies a twofold obligation: those in superior positions should grant assistance, *unhae*, to those who depend upon them and need their help; the recipients of this favor in turn owe a debt of gratitude which can be repaid whenever a fitting occasion arises. The kind of obligation involved in this is not so much a matter of duty in the strict sense as it is a matter of simply behaving in a fitting, human manner.²¹

The gift of life and nurture one has received from one's parents is considered the most fundamental *Unhae* of all. It is traditionally described as being "as vast and boundless as Heaven" and is beyond the possibility of adequate repayment. The character *Un* is made up of three other characters which when joined literally mean, "The grace of feeding to the mouth" When we were babies, our mother fed us. So, it is the greatest grace. *Un* is a favor or benevolence which makes the receiver morally indebted to the donor.

This concept is expressed in filial piety. Even though modern society has modified this concept, filial duty penetrates politics, religion, business, rituals, and so forth. In 1996, the Korean government pronounced that filial duty is a major moral principle that Korean people must instill in their youth. This filial duty has provided a basis for all other virtues, and its practice touches all aspects of life.

This awareness extends beyond the family circle to encompass all sorts of relationships in society. One cannot survive in life without the help one receives from family, teachers, friends, elders, superiors, and various sort of officials. One cannot expect to receive without also giving.

In comparison with the Western focus on independence, the Korean or Asian people have valued interdependence based upon the concept of *unhae*. This concept has played an important role in Asians feeling shame. If someone doesn't payback grace, he or she feels shame.

Concluding Remarks

I pointed out that a person or culture may be more oriented toward shame or guilt, but both are present to some degree in a culture or person. Shame and guilt are not separate entities; they are different sides of the same coin. Among the two dynamics, I would argue that shame has more psychodynamic processes than guilt does. We have avoided admitting our feelings of shame, for we have understood that feeling as bad. But it has a therapeutic function. Through recovery from shame in the past, one comes to assume personal responsibility. One learns how not to hold onto the past feeling of shame and to let it go. This is a therapeutic moment.

Bonhoeffer said shame is grief over estrangement. He wrote, "Shame is man's ineffaceable recollection of his estrangement from the origin; it is grief for this estrangement, and the powerless longing to return to unity with the

¹⁸S. A. Solberg, *The Land and People of Korea* (New York, NY: J. B. Lippincott, 1973), pp. 107-16.

¹⁹This book contains a collection of Confucius' sayings and dialogues collected by his disciples after his death.

²⁰Michael C. Kalton, "Korean Ideas and Values," *Philip Jaison Memorial Paper*, 1979, Vol. 7, p. 3.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 12.

origin....Shame is more original than remorse."²² We cannot escape feeling shame once we live in the limited world. However, shame is a great opportunity to know who I am in front of God. In other words, this feeling gives us insight to acknowledge our human condition and limits. In this sense, shame is a process of reconciliation. For this process, a ritual format from a pastoral care perspective is required. In many worship forms, there are many words of judgment about sin, but these forms spend very little time, if any, helping people recover from shame. The church needs to address the positive aspect of shame and provide a framework to restore trust within the person who has the shame experience and help achieve an integrated self. Exploration of the feeling of shame will contribute to finding resolution in authentic forgiveness and the experience of grace. ✠

²²Doe, *op. cit.*, p. 55.