

MESSICK'S KOREAN CULTURE LESSONS

Lesson #3

SKINSHIP

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MESSICK'S KOREAN CULTURE LESSON #3: PERSONAL SPACE & 'SKINSHIP'

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Here I want to draw some distinctions between Koreans and the Japanese (and also Americans). Japan is an island nation, so its primary historical conflicts were internal. This resulted in unity being a top value, and they address this through conflict avoidance. Japanese individuals are big on personal space, formality, and phrasing thoughts in a way that can't be interpreted as harsh or that would promote conflict. People maintain distance between one another. Greetings use a bow, but not a handshake. This is different from Korea, where many individuals would find it cold and unusual to say good-bye to someone they knew with only a bow. They're much more intimate, and greetings may include a handshake for strangers and a hug for someone they know. Korea is a nation built on a peninsula, so historically they've

been under endless siege by foreign parties. That made Korean people close, tough, resilient, and stubborn, since those were often important qualities for survival. It is normal and expected that Korean individuals will encroach on one another, even physically bump into one another. Friends may hug and exchange playful body-shots, which is very different from the Japanese. Vulgar language is also commonplace in everyday conversation depending on the setting and region. Physical contact between opposite-sex individuals is more taboo, but same-sex friends will have strong "skinship", which might include behaviors like holding hands, sitting in each other's laps, stroking each other's hands and arms, putting their arms around each other's shoulders, and hugging (i.e., those behaviors are not indicative of a romantic interest in the Korean context like they might be interpreted in the United States). 'Skinship' is a word used in Korean culture to describe nonsexual, physical affection between family and friends. In this regard, there is a lot more physical contact that is normative in Korea compared to cultural norms in either the United States or Japan.

These differences can also be seen in video games too. Japan's video games focus on single player. Korea has thousands of internet cafes that are used for multiplayer gaming, although internet cafes have drastically decreased in the last decade.