

# MESSICK'S KOREAN CULTURE LESSONS

Lesson #7 HORIZONTAL RELATIONSHIPS JUNE 19, 2024



## MESSICK'S KOREAN CULTURE LESSON #7: HORIZONTAL RELATIONSHIPS, DURE, PUMASI, AND JEONG

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Korean personality stems from Korea being a peninsula. It is a location that is key for sea access but is also land-locked, so the history of Korea is a history of constant attack. Depending on who you ask and how you define the terms, estimates for how many times Korea has been invaded differ from 900 to over 3,000. Their history is largely a history of struggle in trying to survive foreign aggressions. Sharp survival instincts, pride, and an unyielding spirit characterize the Korean people. Whereas many countries have inner struggles for power that focus on the ruling class, Korea is an area attacked by outsiders, so civilians were regularly massacred on a broad scale. They are wars against the people, instead of the ruling class. Due to this, the ruling class historically prioritized the survival of themselves and their families, so they would abandon the people in times of war when the outcome looked disadvantageous. As a result, Korean people lost faith in their rulers. To stay alive, they united with their neighbors, and this birthed a strong communal spirit that still continues today (as well as a continued distrust of politicians/leaders). They're tough and distrust the ruling class. Major government officials, even in modern times, have been dishonored and exiled. This led to two examples of Korean community spirit that date back to the Joseon period: dure (Korean: 두레) and pumasi (Korean: 품앗이).

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A *dure* is a system of collective labor within small farming communities. Starting a *dure* (teamwork) was when local farmers would work together to maximize all of their output and efficiency. Everyone in the village would plant and harvest together, then divide the profits based on the size of the farm and the number of workers. *Pumasi* is the exchange of helping hands during difficult times triggered by affection for one's neighbors. *Pumasi* is bonding with one's neighbor but it is limited in scope compared to *dure*. Whereas *dure* is mandatory, *pumasi* is voluntary, and *pumasi* is generally smaller groups that personally know one another. *Dure* and *pumasi* reflect Korean people's sense of community that was needed to survive difficult times. They came together and saw one another as equals. As I've reiterated in other of these lessons, the major value in their competition isn't to be better than others, but not to fall behind others. It is to maintain their high standard at the same level, and in difficult times, that means helping each other out. Someone that is seen as rising above the equality of the group would be pushed out, and then the derogatory and distrustful view towards the upper class would also apply to their former neighbor. It is difficult to maintain friendships among people that are not within the same status or category. 'Horizontal' relationships are crucial. As a very proud people, falling behind is unacceptable and Korean people are fearful of falling behind those close to them. Korea has a proverb that illustrates this that goes, "When my cousin buys land, I get a stomachache." Any move from horizontal status – above or below – can compromise a relationship. If your neighbor does well, then

you may fear that you are falling behind, so it isn't a statement purely about jealousy. Falling behind attacks one's own pride. As a country that has had to fight for its very survival, Koreans are a very proud people and they will fight to maintain their identity as Koreans, and that identity is characterized largely by horizontal friendships and trying not to fall behind. This pride can manifest in different ways, like Koreans fighting over who pays for a restaurant check if there isn't a higher ranking individual that it would go to by default. At the same time, it's expected that that group of individuals takes turns paying the bill since equality is important, and if someone pays the bill less often they might get kicked out of the group. To reiterate, the strong community spirit largely stems from the survival instinct common among those living in a peninsula country. Protect what you have, don't compromise, and make sure that you and your neighbors maintain equal status were the keys to survival, and those are traits that continue today. Fights shouldn't come from within the community when they so frequently come from outside.

This community affection is called *jeong* (정/情), and it's a differentiating trait of Koreans. *Jeong* is a concept that has been a part of Korean culture for over 2,000 years and it has to do with attachment felt between people with a close relationship. Koreans are close and don't have rigid boundaries

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between people like what is seen in Japan, where conflict would historically come from within the group instead of outside it. This overlap can be shown in different behaviors, like neighbors, friends, and coworkers borrowing food, office supplies, and music from one another. Korean communities exist to protect its members, so the more communities one belongs to, the more protection is available to the community member and it makes them a more competitive member of society with a wider sphere of influence. The downside is that the communities become cliquish and are exclusionary towards outsiders. Communities can include school ties, blood ties, and hometown ties. This can result in things like regionalism in politics, where politicians only bring in other people from their region, which prompts more distrust from the working class.

