

POWER DISTANCE IN THE KOREAN CULTURE AS IT EMERGES FROM A K-DRAMA

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Abstract: *Real immersion into the Korean society is not that feasible for a European, given the huge cultural and spatial distance between Europe and Asia. Despite the tremendous economic and social development of Korea, this country's culture (as well as the entire Asian culture) is still very much influenced by the teachings of Confucius, the famous ancient Chinese philosopher, who preached on filial piety, respect towards elderly people, loyalty, personal morality, and courage. Real immersion into the Korean society is not that feasible for a European, given the huge cultural and spatial distance between Europe and Asia. Despite the tremendous economic and social development of Korea, this country's culture (as well as the entire Asian culture) is still very much influenced by the teachings of Confucius, the famous ancient Chinese philosopher, who preached on filial piety, respect towards elderly people, loyalty, personal morality, and courage. Understanding some differences between the Korean and the European cultures will help us avoid any misunderstandings or tensions once we have the chance of meeting 'the other' face-to-face, and, in the long run, become better citizens of the world.*

Keywords: *K-drama; cultural dimensions; power distance; cultural differences*

1. INTRODUCTION

For many foreigners, South Korea seems a country full of contrasts: on the one hand, there are technological achievements that outrank the American ones (most of the mobile phones in the world are produced by Samsung, while the Korean cars – Kia, Hyundai or Ssangyong - are exported all over the world). At the same time, Korea's architecture is comparable to that of many American cities. On the other hand, this country is still very much influenced by the teachings of Confucius which are full of rules, ceremonies and rituals, veneration for the ancestors, filial piety, and advice for proper behaviour between people of unequal status or rank. Of the four philosophical or religious systems (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Christianity) currently operating in South Korea, Confucianism seems to have had the strongest influence on the lives of the people in this country. It has not impacted only their spiritual life, but all aspects of society to the extent to which the history of Korea cannot be understood without Confucianism. In the many difficult moments along the recent history of the peninsula (the Korean War between 1950 and 1953 and the economic crisis of the mid-1990s), the Confucianist values gave the Korean people a certain stability and provided them

with the motivation to make this country what it is today. Until the mid-1960s, South Korea was one of the poorest, least developed countries in the world. Under these circumstances,

no one expected the 'economic miracle' that would enable Korea to become the first of the 'Four Little Dragons' (Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) (...) of Asia and to develop into a major world economy (Kohls, 2001:4).

Despite the progress South Korea has made in the past 50 years, people in the West still know very little about this country. On the one hand, this lack of knowledge is due to the geographical distance between Korea and the countries of Europe or America. On the other hand, this state of affairs could also be attributed to the rather limited literature available. This may prove both a curse and a blessing, in that it may motivate people who took a liking in this Asian peninsula to explore it by whatever means they can, using all the sources its culture offers. This is exactly what I am going to do in this paper, namely to bring to the fore some aspects of the Korean culture which reveal its hierarchical, authoritarian structure. All this will be done on the basis of a recent K-drama series, *Descendants of the Sun* (2016), which, though not a genuine reflection of the Korean reality, does

capture many aspects that a non-Asian perceives to be different from his/her own culture.

The paper is structured as follows: section (2) briefly describes the framework (Hofstede's *cultural dimensions*) employed for the analysis of the data. Section (3) introduces the reader to the phenomenon of *Hallyu* ("The Korean Wave"), which was initially led by K-dramas (to be followed by K-Pop and Korean films) and which contributed greatly to the global circulation of the South Korean culture. Here I will also touch upon the plot of the *Descendants of the Sun*, the drama series subjected to the analysis in terms of power distance, which will be carried out in section (4). The last part of the paper (5) contains some conclusions.

2. HOFSTEDÉ'S CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

In being confronted with people of a different culture, we tend to judge them according to patterns of thinking and behaving that are typical of our own culture. In such situations, Ting-Toomey (1999) recommends "mindfulness", which she defines as follows:

Mindfulness means being particularly aware of our own assumptions, viewpoints, and ethnocentric tendencies on entering any unfamiliar situation. *Simultaneously*, mindfulness means paying attention to the perspectives and interpretive lenses of *dissimilar others* in viewing an intercultural episode. (Ting-Toomey, 1999: vii, emphasis in the original).

Given that there are so many cultures in the world, each with its own set of "shared perceptions about beliefs, values, and needs that affect the behaviours of relatively large groups of people (Lustig & Koester, 1999, quoted in Andersen, 2003: 241) and given the process of globalization which brings more and more cultures together, the need to explain and organize the possible problems in intercultural communication emerged. One solution in this respect was provided by Hofstede (1980) and Hofstede *et al.* (2010), who suggested that many of the cultural differences displayed verbally, as well as nonverbally in organizations¹, can be analysed along 6 dimensions: individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, indulgence vs. restraint, power distance, and long-term orientation. Out of

them, only power distance will be summarized below, as it is important for the analytical part of the paper.

Power distance refers to "the degree to which power, prestige, and wealth are unequally distributed in a culture" (Andersen, 2003:242). This dimension varies considerably among cultures. Thus, cultures characterized by high power distance indexes (PDI) accept an unequal distribution of power (power is concentrated in the hands of a few people, rather than being distributed equally through the population) and the hierarchical role relationships. At the same time, in such cultures, rewards and punishments depend on the people's age, rank, social status or title. Moreover, in large power cultures, people show deep respect for power hierarchy, both in organizations and in institutions. In low power cultures, power is distributed equally among its members, who are rewarded according to their performance and who are consulted by their superiors/managers in important issues. On this dimension, South Korea scored 60 (Country comparison, *Hofstede Insights*, 2019), indicating that it is a rather high power distance culture.

I chose to focus on this dimension for the following reasons: (1) it is a robust dimension that stands the scrutiny of time, especially for a country like South Korea; (2) it is a dimension that people belonging to many cultures and ethnic groups will be able to understand.

The next section will introduce the reader to a cultural phenomenon, *Hallyu* or the Korean Wave, which transgressed the borders of South Korea and contributed greatly to the economic development of the country.

3. HALLYU AND K-DRAMAS

.1 Korean dramas, which initially led the Korean Wave, have stretched beyond Asia to enthrall audiences all over the world, transcending language and cultural barriers. The surprising fact is that these drama series, produced in such a small nation in East Asia changed rapidly from a local into a regional and a global phenomenon.

The birth of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*)² coincides with the financial crisis that hit many Asian countries in 1997, including South Korea. It was in this period that its president, Kim Dae-Jung

¹ *Organizations* are defined as 'work places', as opposed to *institutions*, which cover schools and the family (Hofstede, 1980).

² The *Korean Wave* is the literal translation of the term *Hàn-liú*, which originated in China. The first syllable refers to "Korea" and the second usually evokes "flow" or "current," signifying "style" (Lie, 2012: 339).

realized that apart from the information technology, drama, film and pop music could get the country out of the critical situation. Consequently, a lot of effort has been invested in creating cultural ‘products’ aimed at both entertaining the Korean audience, as well as at being exported to the neighbouring countries.

Starting with mid-1990s, after South Korea established diplomatic relations with China, Korean dramas and pop music have been broadcast in this country. In time, a number of K-dramas have had a strong impact on audiences in different parts of Asia: *What is Love?* (MBC, 1992) was broadcast in Hong Kong, *Fireworks* (SBS production, 2000) in Taiwan, *Autumn in My Heart* (KBS, 2000) was shown in the Philippines, while *Winter Sonata* (KBS, 2002) was aired in Japan. The reason why K-dramas are quickly assimilated by other Asian peoples is that they promote values that are common among the cultures influenced by Confucianism.

Recent years have witnessed the expansion of the Korean wave in new areas, such as the United States, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Cha & Ma, 1996 (cited in Marinescu, 2014:90) are of the opinion that:

in the extra-Asian areas, the impact of this type of cultural industry on consumers was especially connected to the reception of *hallyu* within large Asian communities living in America, and, to a lesser extent, in western Europe.

Ju (2014: 35) reported that the drama *Jewel in the Palace* (MBC, 2003) has been exported to “more than thirty countries, including Australia, Canada, Iran, Israel, Mexico, Russia, and Romania”, while Nam (2014) stated that the screening of this particular television series (original title *Dae Jang Geum*) saved the Romanian public station TVR from financial crisis.

3.2 “Descendants of the Sun”. A very recent and successful drama series (16 episodes) that has transcended the Asian barriers is “Descendants of the Sun”, directed by Lee Eung-Bok and Baek Sang-Hoon, produced jointly by Korea and China in 2015 and aired by *Korean Broadcasting System* (KBS2) between the 24th of February and the 14th of April 2016. Unlike most of the K-dramas, which are filmed just a couple of hours before being broadcast, *Descendants of the Sun* was fully pre-produced. This contributed to a smooth flow of the episodes and of the plot, making the viewers wait impatiently for the next episode.

For a better understanding of the analytical part, a brief presentation of the plot would be in

order at this point. The drama focuses on the love story of two couples, Captain Yoo Si-Jin and doctor Kang Mo-Yeon, on the one hand and Master Sargent Seo Dae-Young and First Lieutenant (and military doctor) Yoon Myung-Ju, on the other hand, whose feelings are tested in a number of extreme situations (various secret missions of the soldiers, an earthquake in a distant (imaginary) country Uruk, the epidemic that breaks after an earthquake). Both couples fight for their love, but for different reasons: the former realize that their lives are too different to be able to make ends meet – Si Jin has to kill to save innocent people, while his girlfriend, dr. Kang has to save lives, even those of wrongdoers; the latter have to face the prejudice which is very much present in the Korean society: Seo Dae-Young has a lower social standing than his girlfriend, something that her father finds difficult to accept.

Descendants of the Sun has enjoyed immense popularity both locally and also internationally, sparking global interest in Korean products (the ones advertised for in the drama), culture, and language. At the same time, it contributed to a revival of the *Hallyu* phenomenon, which seemed to have been in decline for some time. In Romania, this drama series is available to stream on Viki, with English subtitles.

4. POWER DISTANCE IN “DESCENDANTS OF THE SUN”

The research questions that guided the analysis of the power-related scenes in the K-drama are the following:

- a) How is power distance displayed verbally and nonverbally in each of the three organizations (military life, medical life and Uruk electric power plant) that appear in the movie?
- b) How is conflict between people of the same social rank handled in those instances when the three organizations have to interact?
- c) Are there signs of a decrease in power distance in the Korean culture?

With these questions in mind, let us proceed to the analysis of the power relations in the Korean drama *Descendants of the Sun*.

2.3 Power distance in the medical area (Haesung hospital in Seoul & Medicube in Uruk). I shall first focus on how people in high position in the medical field make use of their power, starting from the Confucian idea that there is no such thing as equality among people. The K-drama clearly shows that social superiors are

granted power and privilege, while those who have a lower status are obligated to defer to social superiors and comply with their requests.

At Haesung Hospital in Seoul, Dr. Kang Mo-Yeon has to see the chief doctor who had asked her to organize a research paper for him. From the dialogue between them, it is obvious that the help provided by Dr. Kang is in exchange of the chief doctor's help in her promotion:

- (1) Chief doctor: "You worked hard. Was it of any help to your studies?"
 Dr. Kang: "Yes. It helped me a lot with my studies."
 Chief doctor: "You did a nice job with the charts as well. You only have the interview portion left in your path to become a professor, right?"
 Dr. Kang: "Yes, I've been getting ready." (17:42 – 17:54/1³).

But on the day of the interview, Dr. Kang had to face the harsh reality in South Korea's hospitals. Although she had been pretty much living inside the operating room since her graduation from the medical school, she lost the professor position to her counter-candidate, Dr. Kim Eun-Ji, not because the latter is better or more competent, but because she is socially more powerful: her family is a big shareholder of Haesung Group which finances the hospital. It seems that Dr. Kang was not unfamiliar with these practices, only that she hoped that among the numerous cases of nepotism, which seems to be "endemic in Korea" (Kohls, 2001: 179), there would be one exception in which people like her would be hired for their true skills, as it usually happens in most European cultures. This emerges from an answer-question she addresses the chief doctor after she found out that she was passed over:

- (2) Dr. Kang (to Chief doctor): "Having connections is a skill. Of course, I know that. So who is it next time? The minister's son-in-law? The hospital director's nephew? In at least one out of three times, shouldn't true skills be honoured?" (23:38/2).

One of the netizens, who apparently is not Korean, expresses her indignation at this state of affairs by writing:

³ Dialogues and print screens from the movie will be accompanied by the exact moment followed by the number of the episode in which they occur. Thus, 17:53/1 means that the line was uttered at 17 minutes and 53 seconds in episode number 1.

Bianca Bella: "How sad! How can that be? Doctors need skill." (22:51/2).

The other doctors in the hospital, who work with both candidates for the professor position, know that promoting Kim Eun-Ji is a mistake (since her operating skills leave a lot to be desired), but at the same time they are also aware of the fact that the system is so deeply rooted that they cannot change it.

Hardly had Dr. Kim been promoted to professorship that she started bossing Dr. Kang around. As the latter was a bit older than the former, she refused to do some of the most difficult tasks assigned to her by Dr. Kim. But this would always remind Dr. Kang:

- (3) Dr. Kim: "You are supposed to do the things that a professor tells you to do!" (24:15:2).

What she meant was to have Dr. Kang's help in the OR when she realized she was not able to perform the surgery. Dr. Kim's insolence stirred Dr. Kang's rage and, given the fact that she was a *sunbae*⁴ to the former, she retorted:

- (4) "You are not a doctor. You are just the daughter of your father." (42:41/2).



Fig. 1. Haesung Hospital Chairman's invitation for dinner addressed to Dr. Kang (49:40/2)

Losing the chance to get the professorship was not the only mishap that Kang Mo-Yeon had to face at Haesung Hospital. As she was a beautiful single woman, the chairman of the hospital (who was a divorcee) seemed to fancy her to the extent that one day he came to the office she shared with some of her colleagues and told her:

⁴ *Sunbae* translates as one's superior in status and rank.

- (5) “Doctor Kang! Please leave your schedule open this evening. Have dinner with me!” (49:40/2).

The chairman’s body posture (hands stuck in the trousers pockets), the direct gaze, as well as the intonation and rhythm of his speech made this invitation sound more like an order, so that even Dr. Kang had doubts related to his intentions:

- (6) Dr. Kang: “By any chance, did I just get a date request from the chairman?” (49:51/2)

In the evening, much to Dr. Kang’s surprise, she was not taken to a restaurant for dinner, but straight to a hotel, where the chairman wanted to make use of his power and take advantage of his employee in a very blunt fashion:

- (7) Chairman: “We can order food here. Do you want to go wash first while the food comes? Or should I first?” (51:25/2).

Two netizens sided with Dr. Kang:

glacialemluna_944: “waaaaooow. girl get the heck out, you don’t need that.” (51:25/2).

broccoli⁵: “girl slap him he’s a disgrace to all men out there” (51:48/2).

As if hearing the advice of the two online commentators, Dr. Kang slaps her boss, a gesture that will attract his rage and vengeance, especially due to the fact that, in his presence, she was expected to show deference both as a woman, and as a subordinate. This attitude is imposed by Confucianism, “one of the basic tenets [of which] is that women should be subordinate to men and should defer to them at all times” (Kohls, 2001: 108). Even if her social position was lower than that of the chairman, she would not let herself be humiliated by him, though for many women like her, he could have made a good marriage partner. His revenge came soon, when the Haesung Group, which was building an eco-friendly power station in Uruk (an imaginary country in the Balkans), asked the hospital to send a group of doctors to that geographical area, to look after the health of the people working on the construction site. Dr. Kang is appointed the leader of the group to depart for Uruk, which, except for one person, was composed of medical staff (doctors and nurses) who had no money or connections. This shows that people in

⁵ Online commentators post comments under a pseudonym.

key positions in an organization can use their power to take revenge on those who do not comply with their wishes, be they professional or personal.

Another way in which power distance is manifested in the Korean culture is in the use of various *terms of address* for people who are higher up in the social hierarchy and who are also older. In Korea, one’s status is determined, among other things, by “one’s age and one’s title and seniority at work” (Kohls, 2001: 107). Consequently, the persons of a lower social rank have to address the ones higher up by using their title or their title and surname. When this linguistic etiquette is not complied with, Koreans will react to it. There are a number of situations in the K-drama under investigation that illustrate the misuse of the linguistic etiquette. One such situation occurred in episode 5, when two of the main characters, First Lieutenant Yoon Myung-Ju (who is a military doctor) and Captain Yoo Si-Jin have a short conversation in Uruk.

- (8) YMJ: “Did you meet Kang Mo-Yeon here coincidentally?
YSJ: “Why are you calling her *Kang Mo-Yeon*? She’s your unni⁶ and sunbae”. (40:52 – 41:02/5).

Although the two of them had been friends since childhood, the captain requires of the military doctor due respect for his girlfriend, Dr. Kang, who is slightly older than Yoon Myung-Ju and is also professionally in a higher position in the medical field (*sunbae*). As a reaction to this scolding, in another episode, Yoon Myung-Ju (who happened to be in the same room with Dr. Kang at MediCube) while talking on the phone with Yoo Si-Jin, referred to her colleague as:

- (9) “Kang Mo-Yeon-**si** (referring to her as an equal), Kang Mo-Yeon-**nim** (as a superior), Kang Mo-Yeon-**yang** (as someone younger). Our family tree hasn’t been settled, so I’m not sure what to call her.” (25:12 – 25: 15/6).

As Song (2005: 100) puts it, “Korean sentences do not merely describe events or situations but are also embellished with various expressions of social or interpersonal relationships between the speaker and others, including the hearer”. The subber of the movie provided an indication of the meanings/functions of the bolded honorific particles in the example above. But there is more to

⁶ *Unni* is a term used by females to address older sisters, while *sonbae/sunbae* is used when addressing someone higher up in the social/professional hierarchy.

that: with respect to the ending *-si*, this is basically attached to terms denoting family relations and also to proper nouns. In the example above, the use of this particle indicates that the subject of the sentence (i.e. Dr. Kang) is considered to be superior to the speaker (i.e. the military doctor Yoon Myung-Ju) (Ihm *et al.* 2001). As far as the other particle *-nim*, by means of which Korean speakers show deference to their interlocutor, is concerned, this is usually attached to job titles. When attached to full names without an accompanying title, the level of politeness decreases. If we compare the two honorific suffixes, *-si* “is significantly lower on the scale of politeness. (...) It would be used in the same workplace to address a person not very different in age, in a similar job position, but of somewhat lower rank, with whom one is not close enough to leave off formalities” (Lee and Ramsey, 2000: 232). The level of politeness of proper names accompanied by the suffix *-nim* is higher than that of proper names followed by *-si*.

In a later episode, after “the family tree” has apparently been settled between the two female doctors, they have an argument about the necessity of bringing a large amount of medical supplies from Korea to Uruk. After explaining that these supplies were to be handed over to the UN military force, Dr. Kang retorts:

(10) “Any other questions, *hubae-nim*?”

Despite the tense relationship between the two females, Dr. Kang uses an appellation that shows respect to her interlocutor, even if the term of address (*hubae*) indicates a person of a lower status. This attitude was also sensed by the online commentator, [sharonolukoga](#), who wrote: “first time I’ve heard *hoobaenim*, respect.” (49:65/5)

Power is reflected not only in the use of various suffixes, like the ones discussed previously, but also by employing the humilific interjection *ja* ‘hey’. As we shall see, this interjection is not confined to the medical field only, but also occurs among the people working in various other fields (see section 4.4.). At Haesung Hospital in Seoul, news has arrived related to an earthquake that occurred in Uruk. The mother of one of the doctors (Lee Chi-Hoon) who had volunteered to go to this area comes to the hospital and asks the chairman to make a phone call to Uruk, to find out if her son is alive or not. When the chairman tells her that this is not possible, she starts screaming at him:

(11) “**Hey!** I contributed to that satellite. Connect me right away!” (38:47/7)



Fig. 2. Lee Chi-Hoon’s mother shouting at the Haesung Hospital’s chairman. (38:47/7)

The print screen in figure 2 captures the astonishment (eyes wide-open, open mouths) on the faces of the medical staff on hearing the appellation ‘Hey!’. The reason why the doctor’s mother made use of the interjection emerges in the short dialogue between the nurse in the wheelchair (right behind Lee Chi-Hoon’s mother) and his wife (seated on the left of the photo):

(12) Nurse: “Your mother-in-law called chairman ‘Hey!’”
Chi-Hoon’s wife: “Well, the land of this hospital is all Chi-Hoon’s”. (38:57-39:00/7)

This means that wealth outranks social or professional power in certain circumstances and entitles one to use humilifics. This is in line with Kohls’s statement that a Korean person’s status is first and foremost dictated “by the family in which one was born” (2001: 107).

Let us not have a look at how power distance is manifested in the military life.

4.2 Power distance in the military life. Linguistic etiquette is also encountered among the soldiers, who, besides using the ranks when addressing each other, are also expected to indicate their social status by using various terms. An example in this respect is provided by one fresh soldier, Kim Ki-Boon, who used to be a robber and whose life was put on the right track by the Alpha Team member, Seo Dae-Young. In the first episode of the K-drama, when he was taken to Haesung Hospital after having been beaten by the members of his gang for not being able to steal anything and after having been saved by Seo Dae-Young, he tells Dr. Kang, who wrongly assumed that the soldier had mistreated the boy:

(13) Kim Ki-Bun: “No, this *hyung-nim* saved me.” (31:55/1)

Ki-Bun shows respect to the soldier by calling him *hyung*, i.e. ‘older brother’ and by attaching the honorific particle *-nim* to the noun. According to

Lee and Ramsey (2000: 231), this more polite form (i.e. *hyungnim*) is used “when the siblings reach a fairly mature age (after about their thirties or forties) and (...) when there is a relative large difference in age”. What is interesting to notice is the fact that this form of appellation can apply no matter if the ‘sibling’ is a member of the same household or not. In the above example, there is no kinship between the thief and the soldier, but the relationship that develops between them as the K-drama unfolds can be paralleled to one between siblings.

Rank titles and honorifics are employed even by military people who form a couple. This is the case of First Lieutenant and army surgeon Yoon Myung-Ju and her lover Seo Dae-Young. As the latter is inferior in all respects to his girlfriend, he addresses her all the time formally. Due to his status, he is aware that he could never be a perfect match for Myung-Ju and tries, by all means, not to disclose his warm affection for her.

- (14) Yoon Myung-Ju: “When will we be able to speak without ranks and honorifics? If there weren’t any ranks, would you just ignore me completely?”
Seo Dae-Young: “Yes, that’s right.” (35:36/1)

After this exchange, Seo Dae-Young turns around to leave, but his first lieutenant girlfriend orders him to stop, just by calling out his name. Seeing that he does not comply with her request, she commands him by using the formal style of address:

- (15) Yoon Myung-Ju: “Sergeant First Class Seo Dae-Young, you are leaving without saluting your superior?” (36:55/1)



Fig. 3. Seo Dae-Young saluting his military girlfriend, who abuses her power by ordering him “to hold on like that until he dies.” (37:40/1)

As he was addressed by his military superior who, on the second appellation, employed the military rank as well, Seo Dae-Young had to obey the order: he turned over and saluted her like a soldier, despite the fact that he was not wearing his uniform⁷ (see photo in Figure 3).

In a later episode, when the relationship between these two soldiers is still tense, Myung-Ju calls her boyfriend, who is deployed to Uruk, and she speaks her heart out, but he does not utter a sound. Again, she makes use of her higher status and orders him:

- (16) Yoon Myung-Ju: “If you are listening, at least be *respectful* and let me hear you breathing.” (15:47/6) (my emphasis).

The same formality is encountered in the relationship between the two Alpha Team⁸ members, Yoo Si-Jin (Big Boss) and Seo Dae-Young (Wolf), who are as close as brothers given the many dangerous situations that they had fought in together. Even in informal situations, they talk to each other formally due to the fact that Big Boss enjoys a higher military rank and status, which blend together so well in the Korean culture. In one particular example (17), it was the lexical item that revealed this level of formality, in the other it was the exchange between some netizens that pointed this out. In episode 3, Seo Dae-Young gets a package delivered by his friend, Yoo Si-Jin, who came from Korea to Uruk and who hoped that the package contained chocolate pies. Knowing who the parcel came from (his girlfriend), the former replies to his friend, by calling him ‘sir’:

- (17) Seo Dae-Young: “It’s more likely a terrorist bomb, *sir*.” (7:37/3) (my emphasis).

For a non-Korean, the use of such a term is quite unnecessary, especially in the military field where people are tempted to disregard ranks in informal situations like the one presented above.

In episode 6, the two Alpha Team members are in Korea and are chased by some soldiers whom they had trained and who wanted to take revenge

⁷ In the Romanian military life, the rule stipulates that soldiers must use the hand salute only if they are wearing their military uniforms, but it seems that in Korea - at least as it emerges from the K-drama-, you can salute or can be saluted if you are wearing civilian clothes. It seems that at least one of the persons involved in the salutation needs to be clad in the military uniform.

⁸ Alpha Team = a fictional elite special forces unit in South Korea.

now for the hardships they had to endure during the training period. The fact that these special force professionals talked to each other formally was captured by some netizens:

Slimane: “Are they talking to each other formally? It’s so weird.” (12:32/6)

Cessanz: “They speak formally, but they do it in an informal way, since they are friends.” (13:39/6)

The last comment, though a little contradictory, leads a foreigner to the understanding that there are at least three levels of formality when addressing somebody higher up: high formal, low-formal, and informal speech.

Power distance in the army is not revealed only by the level of speech formality, but also by the way in which people in power can manipulate the less powerful ones. An example worth discussing is the one in which Yoon Myung-Ju’s father, the commander of the army, first tries to separate his daughter from her lover, Seo Dae-Young, on grounds of status difference: he was a high-school drop-out and a non-commissioned officer⁹, while she came from a better-off family and also had benefited from higher education. Though Seo Dae-Young’s presence in Uruk is very much needed, the 3-star general orders him to return to Korea, knowing that his daughter had decided to fly to Uruk as a volunteer. To the father, this seems to be the most sensible solution:

- (18) General: Staff Sergeant Seo Dae-Young. You are dating my daughter, right?
 Seo Dae-Young: “Yes, that’s right.”
 General: “I worry about my daughter’s future. So I wish you’d consider my daughter’s future, too. I believe that you know the method well. By that, I mean the most sensible method.”
 Seo Dae-Young: “Is it a command?”
 General: “I hope it does not have to be, but if it has to be, then I’m thinking of making it so.” (33:20 – 34:05/3)

The problem here is that the order, which to my mind is unfair, does not come from the general in the army, but rather from a father who tries to find the appropriate match for his daughter. My feeling, as a member of a different culture, is that

⁹ “The greatest difference between commissioned officers and the army’s non-commissioned officers lies in the level of authority. A commissioned officer can command all enlisted personnel and other officers under his command. A non-commissioned officer cannot command commissioned officers except those placed under his command for training” (Sherman, 2018).

personal and professional lives should be kept distinct, especially in a domain like the military. Seeing that this measure did not have the expected outcome and knowing well that Alpha Team soldiers’ lives are in permanent danger, the general orders this time Seo Dae-Young to quit the military life and enter his girlfriend’s maternal family’s company to learn business, so that, in case Yoon Myung-Ju (i.e. the general’s daughter) still wants to marry her boyfriend, she should not run the risk of becoming a young widow.

In the army, just like in the medical field (as we have seen in section 4.1, above), if you have no connections, getting to a higher rank is not that easy, even if one proves to have excellent skills. This situation is valid for Yoo Si-Jin, who despite his remarkable deeds of saving his compatriots and foreign politicians in various extreme situations, is condemned to remain a First Lieutenant for a long time, due to the fact that in doing what he thought was right for his people, he disobeyed the orders of his superiors. His father, also a military man, is worried about Yoo Si-Jin’s career and tries to make him aware of the fact that he might have to wait longer than he expected in order to be promoted:

- (19) Yoo Si-Jin’s father: “Who says they’ll put stars on someone like you without any influential support?” (5:10/6)

As the father has just retired from the army and as he did not have a very high rank, he is aware that he won’t be able to help his son get a promotion, especially after Si-Jin broke the military rules, but he secretly hopes that Si-Jin will climb up ranks in the military hierarchy if he marries the Taebaek commander’s daughter, First Lieutenant Yoon Myung-Ju. Given that this girl’s father had a higher rank and that Myung-Ju has also received more education than Si-Jin (she was a military academy affiliated officer and an army surgeon, while he only took the qualification exam instead of going through high school), such a match would propel the Special Forces officer to a higher position. This is in line with Kohls’s opinion that “finding people who will give you a ‘pull’ (*yongul*)” (2001:146) is very important, especially for those who lack powerful relatives or who have not graduated from the best universities.

4.3 Power distance in the Uruk electric power plant. In the third organization presented in the drama series, the Uruk Electric Power Plant construction site, the scenes depicting power distance are rather scarce, as this place was only

meant as a ‘meeting point’ for the main heroes. Still, one can notice the behaviour of Manager Go, who is quite authoritarian with one of the young apprentices working on the site, who is not willing to work extra hours, as it is customary among the Koreans. In photo (4), we see the manager corporally punishing the apprentice for taking a nap instead of working. He would have accepted such a behaviour only on the part of his superiors (his boss or the president), but not from someone younger and less skilled, who, moreover, is supposed to be deferential and modest in the presence of his instructor.



Fig. 4. Manager Go punishes his apprentice for taking a nap (30:11/5)

Hierarchy on the construction site “is demonstrated by the adjustment of voice tone and pitch to fit the speaker's position of junior or senior” (Morsbach 1973, quoted in McDaniel, 2003: 257). Thus, when scolding the apprentice, Manager Go raises the pitch of his voice and also increases the speech rhythm, while when he addresses his superior, the Chief Manager Jin Young-Soo, he adopts a milder, more polite tone, and employs flattery.



Fig. 5. Manager Go smiling at his boss (30:34/5)

At the same time, he also smiles at his boss (figure 5) and bows deeply. In Korea, the bow is both a sign of submission and a ritual that conveys respect and denotes hierarchical status. Andersen and Bowman (1999) reported that in power-discrepant circumstances, many Asian subordinates smile more in an effort to appease superiors and appear polite. Such behaviour complies with cultures characterized by high power distance.

4.4 Power distance in the interaction between the three organizations. An earthquake in Uruk brings together the three Korean organizations deployed there: the medical staff, the military forces, and the staff of the construction site. The disaster requires that all three organizations should cooperate for the sake of rescuing the persons who got trapped under the rubble of the power plant and for treating their wounds. The problem that emerges is who should be in charge of these operations

According to Kohls (2001:103), the hierarchical structure of current Korea is the following (my emphasis):

Table 1. Modern class structure in South Korea (cf. Kohls, 2001:103)

High	Professors, bureaucrats, landlords, upper class (through family inheritance), business executives, judges, lawyers, medical doctors, famous television personalities, movies stars.
Middle	Teachers, business managers , artists, blue-collar workers, military officers , farmers.
Low	Construction workers, day labourers, beggars, prostitutes, the handicapped, criminals.

Despite this well-established status/power structure, the person who is the least entitled to get control of the rescue operations, namely the Chief Manager of the Uruk power plant, Jin Young-Soo, is the one who wants to exert his power over the leaders of the other two organizations.

- (20) Chief Manager Jin: “The person in charge of this site is me, the Uruk Power Plant manager!. ME! So do what you are told!” (5:41/7).

The verbal message is reinforced by non-verbal elements such as high speech volume (shown by the capitalized ME) and rate, as well as gestures, such as pointing the finger at this interlocutor or touching him, which clearly indicate his use of power, as shown in figures (6) and (7) below.



Fig.6 Chief Manager Jin’s pointing gesture (5:51/7)

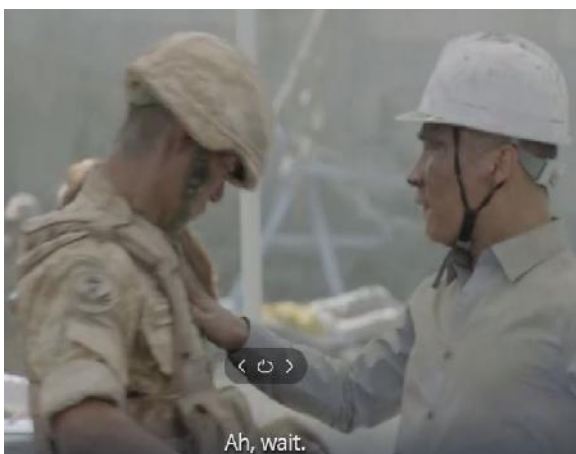


Fig.7. Chief Manager Jin’s touching behaviour (46:02/ 7)

Both gestures employed by the manager of the power plant, namely pointing with his index finger at Yoo Si-Jin, the Alpha Team leader and touching the latter’s chest in an attempt to stop him from starting the rescue operations are indicators of lack of manners among ordinary South Koreans. In this particular context, the rude behaviour is the prerogative of a person in power. The chief manager exploits his power even further, by using humilifics when addressing the military officer, as shown in excerpt (21) below:

(21) Chief Manager Jin : “**Hey**, you, **piece of rice**. You understand me, **bastard?**” (6: 03/7) (my emphasis)

In this utterance, he violated the Korean etiquette three times: first, by using the humilific interjection “hey”, secondly by addressing a person of an equally powerful status with the derogatory slang expression “piece of rice”¹⁰, and thirdly by

¹⁰ “Piece of rice” is a derogatory slang term for a captain This information was provided by one of the subbers of the movie.

making recourse to the literal meaning of the word “bastard”, namely that of an illegitimate child, which in Korea is considered an “unperson”. The stigma of being an illegitimate child is still very strong in the current Korean society. Thirst for power makes the same power plant manager address Yoon Myung-Ju in an inappropriate manner:

(22) Chief Manager Jin: “And you! You **wench**, you think you’re all that because you wear a uniform and because of your rank! **Lower your eyes!** (33:07 – 32:12/9). (my emphasis)

As a woman abiding to Confucianist teachings, Yoon Myung-Ju is supposed to be submissive to men (this is the reason why she is ordered to lower her eyes). But her military rank and her medical education confer a much higher status on her than that enjoyed by Manager Jin.

The power distance problem in the interaction between the three organizations is solved by the Alpha Team leader, Yoo-Si-Jin, who seems more familiar with the changes in power position in cases of emergency. Even if he was much younger than the power plant Chief Manager and despite his lower degree of education as compared to the doctors of MediCube, as a military officer he was bestowed with maximum power:

(23) Yoo Si-Jin “At a disaster site, the commander of the rescue team has the final authority, and that’s ME!”

5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis has demonstrated that, despite the economic and technological development, the South Korean society is still vertically structured, with clear status demarcations and respect paid to the elderly people and to the ones in higher positions. This rigid stratification still prohibits interclass dating or marriage, as we have seen in the case of couple formed by Master Sergeant Seo Dae-Young and First Lieutenant (and military doctor) Yoon Myung-Ju.

The excerpts from the movie showed that the people in power can control the lives of their subordinates (Haesung Hospital Chairman and Dr. Kang), can grant favours to the persons they consider socially higher up than others (the professor at Haesung Hospital who despite getting a lot of help from Dr. Kang, chooses to promote someone less skilled, but richer than her), may get various favours (Chi-Hoon’s mother is enabled to talk to her son in Uruk, in spite of the military restrictions). A social system with large power

discrepancies like South Korea's also produces unique nonverbal behaviour. Thus, powerful people are expected to be shown only positive emotions, whereas negative emotions are shown to low-status persons. The smiles employed by the Koreans are meant to flatter or appease a superior and to smooth the social relations. At the same time, the persons at the top of the social hierarchy may adopt a certain posture (hands in the pocket), a certain gesture (finger-pointing), or a certain interpersonal distance (very close, as was the case of Haesung Hospital chairman and Dr. Kang) to exert power over the others.

As far as the answer to the last research question is concerned, the K-drama provides evidence that some characters seem to make progress in breaking the old Confucianist tradition. One of them is the female military doctor, Myung-Ju, who unlike many women in the current Korean society, knows what she wants and is not afraid to fight for it. She is not afraid to openly and bluntly confess her love to her boyfriend (unlike Dr. Kang), who is inferior to her in terms of status and military rank, and she is not afraid to fight for her love, even if this means going head to head with her father, who also happens to be her and her boyfriend's Commanding Officer. The other person who adopts a similar attitude is the Alpha Team Captain, Yoo Si-Jin, who has been taught honesty and righteousness by his father and who acts on the basis of these values, refusing to submit to his superior's command, triggered by personal interest. This may be proof that the Korean culture is undergoing change in the direction of less power distance.

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