

Significance of “Jeong” in Korean Culture and Psychotherapy

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Practicing in Los Angeles, California, I began to be aware of the differences in patterns of decision-making and of psychopathology among Asian Americans, especially within the Korean-American population. Working on their interpersonal problems, *hwa-byung* cases, and issues of marital discord, I began to realize the importance of understanding culture-specific emotions, i.e., *jeong*, *haan*, etc., in the psychotherapeutic setting.

Before I introduce the concept of *jeong*, I would like to emphasize that this must not be considered as just a stereotype of Koreans or Asian populations. I would rather view these findings regarding the significance of *jeong* as very useful to understanding the nature of human emotions and its role in family and social structures. Furthermore, the introduction of the concept of *jeong* to the Western world and Western psychiatry will contribute a great deal to the field of world psychiatry.

The concept of *jeong* exists in Korean, Japanese, and Chinese cultures, and the same Chinese character is used in these countries. However, it is very interesting for us to see that the meaning of the same character is subtly different for each of these countries. The Chinese emphasize the aspects of loyalty and reciprocity in relationships when using their *jeong* character. The Japanese equivalent, pronounced “jyo,” means sentimental feelings with the addition of another word, “nin jyo.” *Jeong* in Korean culture has much broader meanings and ambiguous nuances in the expression of emotions, and encompasses the Chinese and Japanese concepts.

It is interesting to note that many contemporary sculptures and abstract art exhibited in Korean national museums or art galleries are titled *jeong*. When I visited the Korean-American artists’ annual show, I noticed the same and found myself having great difficulty explaining or translating *jeong* into English. Rather than translating it into English, using the term *jeong* in English would be more appropriate. However, in English literature thus far there is much confusion in its use, even in its spelling, “cheong, ceng, jung, jeong.” I would like to propose using “jeong,” pronounced closest to the Korean word.

Jeong is difficult to define. One Korean-English dictionary defines it as “feeling, love, sentiment, passion, human nature, sympathy, heart.” Although it is complicated to introduce a clear definition of *jeong*, it seems to include all of the above as well as more basic feelings, such as attachment, bond, affection, or even bondage.

By introducing the characteristics of *jeong*, I may be able to better clarify the meanings of *jeong*. One of the important characteristics is its “location.” *Jeong* seems located not only inside of our hearts but also outside. In other words, the location of *jeong* is between individuals. It can be difficult to understand an emotion as being seated outside an individual’s heart, yet it may be related to the idea of collective emotion.

An even clearer understanding in this regard may come from *jeong*'s characteristics as a "centrifugal" tendency. The more common expression in Korean is "jeong deulda" rather than "I feel jeong." A literal translation would be "jeong has permeated." An even bolder translation would be, "I am possessed by jeong." It is important to understand this in comparison to the English expressions of love, depression, hate, or anxiety; "I love you," "I feel nervous," or "I feel depressed." If love has a centripetal effect, then *jeong* has the opposite, i.e., centrifugal effect. As I will explain later, *jeong* affects the individual's ego boundary; an individual's "cell membrane" becomes more permeable, so to speak, thinning the ego boundary.

Unlike other emotions, such as depression, anger, and anxiety, *jeong* is not entirely definable even in the Korean language; it is ambiguous and amorphous. The best description is that *jeong* has multiple faces.

The earliest time an individual is exposed to the experience of *jeong* is when a baby is held and carried by his or her mother. As the mother's warmth permeates to and is felt by the baby, so to the *jeong* permeates to the heart of the baby. This type of *jeong* is called "mo-jeong," which exists during the remainder of the person's life. This total trust of life and person without logic or reason starts from the earliest experiences of life. I would consider this comparable to the Freudian concept of basic trust during the oral stage. As a child grows older, the *jeong* experience will expand to include interactions between him/her and the father, friends or other relatives, neighbors, and members of the community. As *jeong* evolves through these different forms, it is alternatively called "bu-jeong," "in-jeong," and "woo-jeong." *Jeong* can exist not only in the interpersonal space between people but also between a person and objects, such as a house, book, or hometown. These are then expressed as a "jeong-deun" (*jeong*-layed) house, book, mountain, or stream.

The manifestation of *jeong* in a social structure and in social values is primarily through loyalty and commitment without validation, logic, or reason. This can be compared to the concept of *amae* in Japanese, which is an expectation of behaviors without validation. It is very interesting to see that interactions in Korean culture, whether formal or private, often carry the assumption of commitment. In Western culture, commitment is often contractual and defined, such as in a marriage, instead of being implicit. When commitments are made based upon contextual significance, for example, because of "jeong-related" affairs rather than logical interpretations of content, individuals easily become members of a cohesive group at home or work, bonded by *jeong* or perhaps even held in bondage by *jeong*. Interdependency and collectivism are highly valued, rather than autonomy, independency, privacy, and individualism.

Of course, there is a positive side to *jeong*. Warm, rich interpersonal relationships, nurturing, and caring seem common in the culture of *jeong*. Korean-Americans will often say that their lives in America are dry because of *jeong* deficiency. Bonded by *jeong*, collective efforts toward a common goal, overcoming crises, and survival are relatively frequent scenes among Koreans or Asians.

However, there are also negative aspects to *jeong*. The phenomenon of the "in-crowd versus out-crowd" seems ubiquitous in Korean culture. Academic, political, and geographic divisions prevail in the culture of *jeong*. The leaders of a group protect those within the circle of the in-

group and discriminate against outsiders. Many corrupt behaviors may surface, as I will mention in the next slide, when greater value and significance are placed in maintaining *jeong* and the loyalty in its relationships than in logic, reason, and the law. The expression “*jeong-shil*” is translated as “private circumstances; special and personal connections,” which can lead to actions that directly oppose “fairness and justice.” For example, promotions, entrance to colleges, and business contracts can occur out of these private circumstances or personal connections. This becomes a very serious social dilemma.

As the expectation for reciprocity of loyalty grows, if the connections formed by *jeong* are betrayed, tremendous hurt and anger can ensue. This may actually be an important factor in the etiology of *hwa-byung*. *Hwa-byung* is defined as a culture-bound syndrome in the DSM-IV; it is characterized by multiple somatic psychological symptoms, believed to be caused by repressed anger, and has an aspect of self-labeling.

Now let us examine the value structure in a society with *jeong*. As you see in this slide, greater emphasis seems to be placed on loyalty, *jeong*, and commitment than in logic, reason, or the law in many Asian countries. The opposite seems to be true in Western culture. There is no simple answer to which approach is better. It should be a matter of balance.

In the psychotherapeutic setting, inter-dependency or passive-dependency becomes a very important and difficult issue to deal with. Cognitive and educational therapy may have its limitations. In order to help a patient suffering from the betrayal of *jeong*, we need to first identify *jeong* and free them from its bondage. Naturally, the issue of ego boundaries blurring must be addressed. Koreans say “our husband” or “our wife” rather than “my husband” or “my wife.” The concept of “I” seems weakened for the sake of strengthening *jeong*. In other words, the “cell membrane” of the self is thin enough to be permeated by *jeong*. One may easily interpret this as symbiosis with borderline dynamics; however, this may well be a very healthy part of a collective ego. The margin between bond versus bondage seems very narrow, and the physiology or pathology of *jeong* may have to be assessed very carefully. In Korea, “we” often means “I, bonded by *jeong*, to you,” whereas in English, “we” just represents any multiple “I’s.”

I definitely urge the continuing study of *jeong* psychology to increase awareness of collectivism versus individualism and to increase understanding of patient’s in our population that are either *jeong*-deprived or *jeong*-intoxicated.