



**NATIONAL INFERIORITY COMPLEX OF KOREA: THE INFLUENCE OF
HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE AND HAN ON THE NATIONAL INFERIORITY
COMPLEX**

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1. Introduction

As the economy has grown, Korea has become a minor global power that has gained international recognition in many fields. They have some of the largest multinational corporations in the world such as Samsung and Hyundai, and their cultural exports such as K-pop or K-dramas have become globally famous. Recently, Korea has been the focus of international attention for their competence in their response to Covid-19 through public health policy, novel contact tracing methods and pioneering the drive-through testing method (Sumin, L., 2020). Despite these achievements and recognition around the globe, there is still a sense of national inferiority complex in Korea. Koreans demonstrate a consistent tendency to pursue Western culture, especially American culture, and they desire to be recognized in the West. Sang-jip Kwon (2020) criticized the Korean media for giving too much attention to the movie "Parasite" when it won the Oscar. He asserted that the news of Taeji Seo, a famous Korean singer's retirement, or the Blue Dragon Film Festival, the biggest film award in Korea, did not receive much attention compared to "Parasite" winning the Oscar, but Korean media are too hungry for attention from the United States. He also said that Korea's cultural industry had undergone trial and error for long enough to enter the U.S. Billboard top 100 or the Hollywood film scene. For example, some K-pop groups select foreign members or sing songs only in English to enter the Billboard chart.

The Korean inferiority complex extends beyond cultural exports and penetrates education as well. According to the Office of Education Statistics in Korea (2019), of the eight countries where the largest number of Korean students study abroad, six were Western countries. Except for China, where demand has increased recently, demand for the United States and Australia has been steadily high. This indicates that Korea shows a high preference for Western countries, including the United States, in studying abroad. Their preference for America is also seen in technical products such as smartphones. According to the survey of 1,004 people, conducted by Gallup Korea in 2016 (KHdigital2, 2016), 41 percent of the respondents who are from 20 to 29 years old used iPhone, which means the younger generation in Korea, the leading generation using smartphones, prefer iPhone to Samsung. This should be surprising due to the ubiquitous presence of the Samsung brand. Thus, it is common in Korean society to accept and pursue American culture, education, and products.

The problem is not just about pursuing American culture. Koreans tend to underestimate their global position, even though their international status has changed from the past. According to the ODA Survey Report of the National Recognition in 2016, 47.6 percent of the respondents answered "not yet" when asked if Korea is an advanced country (Dongmin, S., 2020). About this,

reporter Dongmin Shin (2020) of eToday said, in 2019, the government declared that South Korea is an advanced country, but few people agree. The cause of this social phenomenon is the national inferiority complex of Korea, which is deeply related to Korea's historical background.

The national inferiority complex is negative emotion formed by trauma in colonial experience or history (Yong-hwa, C., 2004). Especially, the inferiority complex in Korea is Koreans perceiving themselves as inferior due to the coercive colonial policies in the Japanese colonial era, and intervention of U.S. military power after liberation (Seungpyo, H., 2010). As Japan colonized Korea for decades coupled with U.S. intervention in the peninsula during the Cold War, Koreans still tend to think of themselves as victims, and underestimate their global status and potential. In other words, Koreans tend to think themselves as a victim as they experienced oppressive colonial rule such as culture and language annihilation policy during the Japanese occupation, and the powerful military intervention and cultural impact of the U.S. on the Korean society (Hong Seung Pyo, 2010).

So, in this study, the national inferiority is defined as the feelings that Koreans underestimate their status or potential, and feel relatively inferior to other countries' global positions, due to historical backgrounds such as past colonial experiences and external military intervention.

Moreover, it is explained that the unique emotion of Koreans, Han, has been exacerbated through this historical background. Han is defined as the traditional sorrow of Koreans, which cannot be accurately described in other cultures or languages. In other words, Han is a deeply resentful, unjust, sad, and sorrowful sentiment as diverse and complex meanings inherent in Korean culture (National Institute of Korean Language, 2020). Hyunbaek Lim (2016) said Han refers to feelings of pain, frustration, or grief caused by adverse events. An additional component to this definition from researchers (Eunshim, K., Hangja, B., 2000) argued that Han is psychological wounds deep in unconsciousness caused by the unfortunate events of the past and external forces suppressing one's life. Thus, although the current global position of Korea has changed a lot, Koreans themselves do not realize their country as an advanced country, and they still unconsciously prefer other cultures due to the painful past and Han (Chang-sup, L., 2011).

Thus, in this study, Han is defined as a universal emotion of sorrow inherent in Koreans, which encompasses anger, despair, injustice, pain, lethargy, resentment, frustration, sorrow, and grief, that has not been resolved by an irresistible and unintentional experience over the years.

Accordingly, the purpose of the study is to demonstrate the need for Koreans to be proud of their country and aware of its changed status. Therefore, by analyzing the causes and the background which formed the inferiority complex, the paper aims to prove the correlation between the national inferiority complex of Korea, Han, and historical experience.

The first hypothesis of the study is that the more Koreans have war experiences, the more they will have Han.

Second, the more Koreans have war experiences, the more they will have an inferiority complex.

And lastly, the more Koreans have Han, the more they will have an inferiority complex.

2. Method

2.1 Research Method

This study was conducted by analyzing related data based on the keywords ‘Han’ and the ‘national inferiority complex. Through searching academic papers and newspaper articles on the Internet, 50 sources were found for the first time, and from these 20 papers were selected that correspond to this study. Through the analysis of academic journals and articles, I would like to examine the research data according to the times and analyze the tendency of research. Therefore, database search sites such as DBPIA and RISS, which hold several Korean academic journals, were used to collect academic papers. The search terms were chosen based on ‘Korean complex,’ and ‘Han.’ Additionally, newspaper articles on the internet websites were published in major newspapers such as ‘Kookmin Ilbo,’ and ‘Busan Ilbo,’ and search terms were selected based on ‘Korean complex,’ and ‘Han’ as well. On the other hand, ‘historical experience’ was not included as a search term because the papers that discuss historical experiences together were selected by searching the inferiority complex or Han.

2.2 The Scope

The time range of this study was set for about 30 years from 1990 to 2020. The reason for selecting the time range since 1990 is because interest in the history and the identity of Korea have been highlighted after democratization and globalization of Korea through the June 1987 Democratic Uprising Movement and the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Furthermore, as the research in the journal of professional studies has been active since 1990, from 1990 to 2020 is an appropriate time range to collect professional and systematic data on ‘Han’ and ‘Korean complex.’ Therefore, to see how Han, the national inferiority complex, and historical experiences are related over 30 years, I classified academic journals and articles according to the times.

2.3 Procedure and Measures

1) The units

In this study, the content analysis units are ‘themes.’ There are three themes as units; ‘Han,’ the ‘national inferiority complex,’ and ‘historical experience.’

2) Categories

The category of the theme is the subject matter. The subject matter is for analyzing what the theme wants to say. First, Han was analyzed by subdividing it into ‘suppression,’ an ‘irresistible force,’ ‘self-downing,’ and ‘despair.’ Secondly, the national inferiority complex was classified as ‘anti-Japanese inferiority complex and ‘Western inferiority complex.’ Lastly, historical experience was identified focusing on the biggest impact in modern history of Korea, Japanese colonial era, and the occupation of the U.S. government after the Korean War.

3) Systematization of quantification

The study was quantified based on whether there were ‘Han,’ the ‘national inferiority complex,’ and ‘historical experience’ in each category in academic journals and newspaper articles.

3. Analysis and Result

3.1 Correlation between historical experiences (Japanese colonial era, the Korean War, and

U.S. Military regime after the Korean War) and ‘Han’

To identify the correlation between historical experiences (Japanese colonial era, the Korean War, and U.S. Military regime after the Korean War) and ‘Han,’ I analyzed the contents of 20 sources. As a result, it was found that ‘Han’ related to historical experiences was derived under the themes of ‘anger,’ ‘despair,’ ‘resentment,’ ‘pain,’ and ‘incompetence.’ And the results are as follows.

A) ‘Han’ as an ‘anger’ for being trampled of life during the Japanese colonial period

During the Japanese ruling era, Koreans expressed the pain of violent repression, burning anger at those who trampled on their daily lives, cries for a life that was not free, and appeals to let them live a decent life. Therefore, rebellion and hatred against Japanese, who had repeatedly invaded. The insatiable ‘anger’ of Japan's evil forces that trampled on their lives has unconsciously become the Han of Koreans (Yoon, E. J., 1995).

The Koreans, who have lived under oppression with little hope for a long time, have accumulated collective anger in their subconscious, and that has been expressed as ‘Han’ as the national ‘anger.’ (Shin Jeom-sik, 2004).

Soldiers forcibly taken into the force during the Japanese occupation described themselves as the insects and slaves and expressed ‘Han’ as an ‘anger’ that cannot forgive. (Jeong, M. J., 2019).

B) ‘Han’ as a ‘despair’ for being oppressed in the Japanese colonial era

During the Japanese occupation, many people were not treated as human beings and were subjected to exploitation under pressure. And yet, as they were not easy to resist against, they developed deep depression, which is served as ‘Han’ as a ‘despair.’ (Yoon Eun-jung, 1995)

Due to the constant feelings of loss for 36 years of Japanese occupation, Koreans felt ‘Han’ as a ‘despair.’ (Jeong, M. J., 2019).

C) ‘Han’ as a ‘resentment’ for being exploited as Japanese military sexual slavery

During the Japanese colonial period, Korean women who had experienced enforced sex slaves continued to appeal their ‘Han.’ Grandmothers who were forced to be sex slaves, declared that they do not need any material compensation. Instead, they demanded Japan’s apologies for exploiting them in the past. This is a psychological demand stemmed from Korean’s Han. Women who had experienced enforced sex slaves expressed their Han by saying “How dare you express those years?” They explained the experience during the Japanese colonial period with ‘Han’ as a ‘resentment.’ (Choi, S. J., 1993).

The hardships of Korean women stemmed from the experience of enforced sex slaves during the Japanese colonial period. About 100,000 to 200,000 young women had lived a humiliating life as sex slaves during this period, and after the war, victims died due to sickness, and created 'Han' as a 'resentment' deep in their mind. Unlike men taken by the Japanese army, women who were exploited as sex slaves were forced to live in hiding (Yoon, E. J., 1995).

D) 'Han' as a 'pain' according to the division after the Korean War

After the Korean War, the pain of losing their hometown due to the division of Korea and living separated from family has made 'Han' as a 'pain.' In addition, the experience of many people living in Siberia after losing the country during the Japanese colonial period created 'Han' as a 'pain' as well. (Lee, C.J., 1998).

The history of the division was caused by the Korean War, and the sacrifices caused by the Korean War gave us 'Han' as a collective 'pain.' (Hong, K. W., 2009).

In the Korean War, the death of a loved one, separation, and the loss of property gave 'pain' to people. This is not because of one's fault, but because of the unavoidable circumstances, and emotions aroused in an unintentional situation became 'Han' as a 'pain.' (Min, S, G., 1998).

The experiences of being exploited and oppressed by the Japanese during the colonial era left Han in the unconscious of Korean people through the experience a 'pain.' (Hong, K. W., 2009).

E) 'Han' as an 'incompetence' in the U.S. army regime period

The experience of the U.S. military regime has created an ethnic 'incompetence.' After the Korean War, the relationship between Korea and the States became a hierarchical relationship with the U.S. dominating. South Korea was forced to receive aid from the United States as it was in the economic position of a poor country. This situation has created a sense of 'Han' as an 'incompetence' to Koreans. (Chung, Y. H, 2004).

With the memory of past Korea, Korea is still remembered as a small and weak country which received aid from the United States after the Korean War. The United States is recognized as a strong country in politics and economics and created Han to Korean which made them believe that the relationship between Korea and the States is not equal. (Lee, H. J., 2020).

3.2 Correlation between historical experiences (Japanese colonial era, the Korean War, and U.S. military period) and the national inferiority complex

In this study, 20 papers and articles were analyzed to identify the correlation between the historical experiences (the Korean War, the U.S. military regime after the Korean War) and the national inferiority complex related to the history. As a result, the national inferiority complex

related to historical experiences was classified into 'anti-Japanese inferiority complex' and 'Western inferiority complex'.

A) The experience of the Japanese colonial period and 'Anti-Japanese inferiority complex'

The sense of inferiority to Japan is different depending on generations. Older generations who were born in the Japanese colonial era, and were educated and studied abroad in Japan, are classified as 'Pro-Japanese.' While they are very few Koreans, most of the elders had lived a painful life ruined by the Japanese military. And the pain has been passed down to the next generations, and became like Koreans' genes, and their dislike of Japan has hardened. The degree of national inferiority toward Japan is different depending on generations. Older generations who experienced Japanese occupation have more of a sense of inferiority toward Japan due to the combination of inferiority, defeat, and hostility in their minds (Jung, M. J. 2019).

The Japanese occupation period was embedded in Koreans as a deep sense of inferiority that is still unresolved. Compared to other non-Western countries, Koreans' colonial experience is a short period of 36 years, but as Japan used assimilation policies, this led to a deeper sense of inferiority. In other words, during the Japanese colonial period, Japan abolished all Korean language, script, and cultural history, and tried to replace those with Japanese language, culture, and history. Moreover, they even forcibly abolished the Korean family name system. In this process, Japan continued to instill in the Korean consciousness that Korean language, script, culture, and history are inferior, resulting in an 'anti-Japanese complex.' (Hong, S. P., 2010)

The war with Japan, and the sense of collective damage created the complex against Japan. The oppression, wounds, hatred, and anger of the colonial era created a complex against Japan made Koreans unconditionally view Japan as bad. The colony's experience has created a sense of anti-Japanese complex (Nam, S. W., 2009).

Longing for escaping from the colonial experiences during the Japanese occupation often appears as decolonization in sports nowadays. In other words, the idea that Korea must unconditionally win in Korean-Japanese sports games is seen as a symbol of decolonization. (Cho, J. S, 2009).

B) The experience of the U.S. military period after the Korean War and 'Western complex'

After liberation from the Japanese colonial period, Korea was greatly influenced by the States in the process of establishing the US military regime and the independent South Korea government. From the standpoint of the United States, the American system of liberal democracy and American values were disseminated to South Korea, and poor Korea accepted America's aid role. This historical experience led to a 'Western complex' of Koreans divided into "pro-American" and "anti-American" (Ko, K. S., 2012).

Korean society has a strong interest in early study abroad, especially studying in the United States.

As studying abroad especially in western countries has become popular, the new word “father of geese” has emerged and family breakdown due to the early study abroad. In addition, the obsession with luxury goods and the Western-style appearance supremacy are emphasized in Korea, which shows the inferiority toward America. Moreover, this sense of inferiority can be found in Koreans’ historical experiences that originated from the presence of US troops after liberation (Hong, S. P., 2010).

After liberation from the Japanese colonial period, the US military occupied the South Korean region, and there was an influx of American culture. The United States spread Western thoughts in all areas of Korean clothing, music, art, philosophy, education, politics, and medical care, based on its strong military and economic power, and the traditions of Korea started to be disappeared. In this process, the dualism of superior America and inferior Korea took root in Koreans’ hearts (Hong, S. P., 2010).

After liberation from the Japanese colonial period, the political influence of the United States became stronger during the period of the U.S. military government. At the same time, the spread of American contemporary art was unilaterally transmitted to Korea, which Korea accepted uncritically. Even today, because of unconsciously accepted American art, Korea fell into inferiority toward the States that Korean art is inferior to American art (Nho, H. S., 2009).

In modern history, the US military occupation experience has instilled a sense of inferiority toward the United States to the Korean people who were in a low economic and political position. This ‘inferiority toward the United States’ remains a consciousness that Korea is inferior to the United States (Louie, S., 2015).

3.3 Correlation between ‘Han’ and the ‘National inferiority complex’

In this study, 20 data were analyzed to identify the correlation between ‘Han’ and the ‘national inferiority complex’, and the result was that the correlation between those two was based on the historical events(Japanese colonial era, the Korean War, and the post-Korean War period) experienced in modern Korean history.

In modern history, as Korea went through difficult historical experiences such as the ordeal due to the Japanese occupation, the Korean War, division by the powerful nations, the U.S. military period, and the period of military dictatorship afterward, complex negative emotions such as have been piled up as ‘Han.’ This ‘Han’ has become a social and cultural product that has been accumulated as an unconscious collective experience. In other words, the sentiment of ‘Han’ has been embodied and passed down as a kind of gene and passed down through the generations. And it became the core emotion of Koreans. This ‘Han’ was deeply engraved in our collective unconscious and controlled Korea’s current state and future direction. ‘Han,’ which is like a fatal tragedy in the unconscious world, dynamically created a ‘national inferiority complex’ (Shin, J. S., 2004).

As living in the Japanese colonial era, the Koreans had had to live without resolving Han, and this Han finally was expressed in many ways such as a lawsuit filed against Japanese companies or voluntary product boycott against Japan. In addition, Koreans have dichotomous thinking to believe that Japan is superior in economics or culture, but they are inferior in morality to Korea. This is the result of the 'anti-Japanese complex.' (Jeong Mi-jin, 2019).

During its colonial era, the oppression and plunder of Japan have internalized the 'feeling of inferiority' to Koreans. During the Japanese occupation period, the loss of autonomy and rebellion against Japanese imperialism had led to Han, which resulted in 'national inferiority' of Koreans. (Nam Sang-woo, 2009).

During the U.S. occupation, there was political and cultural intervention in Korea, and Koreans could not be subjected to such interventions and were forced to be others. And when Korean singer PSY's Gangnam Style was on the Billboard chart, the media introduced the news using words conveying the world's conquest. This is a desperate desire to get recognition in the West, and a complex against Whites. (Kyungseok Ko, 2012)

After the Korean War, with the influx of American culture, Korea internalized and indiscriminately accepted American culture in a state of helpless Han. And this process became a sense of national inferiority in Korean social culture. Korean athletes usually have the American dream of entering the US, and it is related to the process of internalizing the complex for the US. Longing for entering the major leagues, PGA, and LPGA is related to the complex as well. In addition, the popularity of American-style fitness centers, preference for American fast-food chains, or preference for American popular music in Korea all happened after the U.S. military regime, and this is called 'Americanization' in Korea. In other words, the cultural heritage of the preference for U.S. cultures is served as a 'Western complex,' and this inferiority stems from the self-consciousness that Korea is inferior to the U.S. (Lee, D. Y., 2009).

Generations who have experienced the Korean War believe that Korea's current development was made with the aid of the United States. Because of this perception, Koreans still show a sense of national inferiority that considers themselves as underdeveloped country and want to be recognized by the United States (Kookmin Daily, 2020).

As the underdeveloped country has achieved rapid economic growth, the sense of national inferiority, which was latent in the historical experiences of hardships, is expressed as arrogance when Koreans face people from vulnerable countries such as Southeast Asian countries. However, when meeting white people, they show excessive kindness (Joongang News, 2019).

4. Conclusion

In this paper, 20 papers and articles related to the national inferiority complex, Han, and historical experiences (Japanese colonial era, Korean War, and the U.S. military period) were

analyzed. And subject matters of the theme were used as a unit of analysis, and the results were as follows.

First, in the correlation of historical experience and 'Han', it was concluded that Han was derived under the themes of 'anger', 'despair', 'resentment', 'pain' and 'incompetence.' In other words, the historical experience in modern history such as the experience of the U.S. military period after the Korean War, has given complex emotions of 'anger,' 'despair,' 'resentment,' 'pain,' and 'incompetence' to Koreans. And this Han was alive unconsciously in the deep subconsciousness of Koreans. For example, Han was expressed as a collective anger against the Japanese government, and Koreans still demand apologies for the Comfort Women issue, and express this issue as an injustice problem. In addition, there was 'pain' when families had split up after the division, and during the U.S. military period, Korea experienced internalization of the Han that had no choice but to accept American culture in its inferior position. Through these historical experiences, the feeling of 'anger', 'despair', 'resentment', 'pain', and 'incompetence' have been passed down from generation to generation, and still alive in unconsciousness.

Second, in the correlation between the historical experience and the 'national inferiority complex', 'national inferiority complex' was derived into 'anti-Japanese complex' and 'Western complex.' Anti-Japanese complex is that Korean people express inferiority against Japan caused by historical background, and it is still shown across Korean cultures, economics, and politics. That is to say, hostility and victim mentality due the repression and obliteration of Korean cultures, were still reflected in Korean sports, politics, and so on as 'anti-Japanese complex.' 'Western complex' is an inferiority complex caused by Koreans experiences in the U.S. military period, and is still shown throughout the culture, economy, and politics today. Especially, aid from the U.S. in military period gave the States superior position, and that position is settled in Koreans' unconsciousness. So, the unconscious sentiment that U.S. has superior position than themselves brought them 'Western complex.'

Third, in the correlation between 'Han' and the 'national inferiority complex', 'Han' based on modern historical experiences (Japanese colonial era, the Korean War, and the U.S. military regime) influenced the 'national inferiority complex.' Especially, the complex was shown as 'anti-Japanese complex' and 'Western complex.' The expression of 'anti-Japanese complex' or 'Western complex' itself does not affect Korean's national inferiority complex, but rather Han was made through historical background, and the special Han associated with this history has again affected inferiority complex toward certain targets, the United States and Japan. For example, Korean show racist superiority in underdeveloped countries such as Southeast Asian countries, while they show excessive kindness toward white people or unconditional anti-Japanese emotions.

Based on the results of this study, Han in modern Korean history was based on historical experiences, which affected the national inferiority complex as 'anti-Japanese complex' and 'Western complex.' And this 'Han' and 'national inferiority complex' are also seen in the younger generation, who have not experienced Japanese colonial era or the U.S. military. For example, in the image survey on 'Han,' 81% of college students responded that they had never experienced 'Han,' and yet thought 'Han' was a universal emotion of Koreans. (Ko Young-gun and Kim Jin-young, 2005). Given the result of the study, 'Han,' 'anti-Japanese complex,' and 'Western complex,' are being passed unconsciously through generations.

However, Korea has recently achieved external growth through rapid economic growth and democratization. Today, the status of Korea as a developed country is proven, including the development of K-pop culture, Korean education, the excellence of IT technology, and the advanced quarantine system in coronavirus situation.

Therefore, I understand the inevitable situation of Koreans having ‘Han,’ ‘anti-Japanese complex,’ and ‘Wester complex,’ but in order for Korea to develop as a better country, we should overcome these complexes and look at our changed national status from an objective perspective.

Lastly, this study has the following limitations; This study does not deal with ‘Han’ and ‘national inferiority complex’ in an individual level. Also, it is solely based on background in modern history. Therefore, it does not exactly address Han at an individual level, Korea’s Confucian values associated with Han, and historic experiences before modern times.

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