

# Conceptualization of Jeong and Dynamics of Hwabyung

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## Abstract

*Jeong* is an experience distinctive to those from a Korean heritage. Its definition is, as most things rooted deep within a culture, both simple and complex. In essence, *jeong* refers to the emotional and psychological bonds that join Koreans; it permeates all levels, dividing the world into different degrees of us/we versus them. The uniqueness of this phenomenon lies in its ubiquity and its source: the collective nature of Korean society. When this bond is broken, however, other culturally unique phenomena arise: *haan* and *hwabyung*. *Haan* is essentially the intense suppressed anger that arises from the violation of *jeong*. At times, *haan* can evolve to *hwabyung* or “anger syndrome,” which includes many somatic elements. Therefore, *hwabyung* cannot rise without the initial presence of *jeong* and is considered a Korean culture-bound disorder. Those with borderline personality disorder (BPD), in contrast, seek relationships pathologically in “Western,” individualistic societies where autonomy, independence, and privacy are highly valued. A comparative analysis of the socio-cultural dynamics of *hwabyung*, directly tied to Korea’s *jeong*-based collec-

tive culture, and BPD, a mal-adaptation to a Western autonomy-emphasized culture, can provide insight into the nature of these respective societies and in developing treatment strategies for these contrasting disorders.

**Key words:** *Jeong*, *Haan*, *Hwabyung*, Anger syndrome, Borderline personality disorder.

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## Introduction

*Hwabyung* (HB) is classified as a culture-bound syndrome by the DSM-IV<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup> and considered unique to the Korean population. In brief, *hwabyung* is an “anger syndrome” with many somatic/anxiety symptoms, such as feelings of a mass in the epigastrium, fear of impending death, dyspnea, aches/pains, and palpitations. Although there have been a number of hypothetical speculations for the dynamics of HB, especially causative factors such as the suppression of anger, existence of inescapable situations, the hardship of Korean women’s lives, and national hardship throughout Korean history<sup>4,6,7,8</sup> none of these factors can be considered culture-specific. They are, rather, culturally general issues and are ubiquitous in many other societies throughout world history, existing even in the contemporary world.

It has been reported repeatedly that there is a close relationship between the Korean indigenous emotion, *haan*, and *hwabyung*.<sup>2,3,5,9,10</sup> *Haan*’s characteristic is

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also primarily anger but without somatic/anxious expression. To our knowledge, the reason for haan existing in such a profound form only in Korean culture has never been addressed. While the Chinese character for haan (恨) exists with its different linguistic nuances in Korea, Japan, and China, it seems that unique to Korean culture, the concept of haan is so significant and intense as to produce psychopathology itself, as well as evolving at times to *hwabyung*. The previously described extrinsic etiologic factors for haan and *hwabyung*, such as abuse, loss, hardship, and trauma in life, may exist in any culture and cannot be regarded as Korean culture-specific. We speculate there are intrinsic and culture-specific factors, beyond *haan*, contributing to the development of *hwabyung*. In reviewing the literature and exploring the culture-specific nature of this phenomenon, we propose that *jeong/jeong*-violation likely plays an important role in the development of such intense *haan*, and eventually *hwabyung*, in Korean culture.

In this paper we will explore the concepts of *jeong*, *woori*, *haan*, and *hwabyung*. The development of *jeong* and *woori*, the violation of *jeong*, the formation of haan, and the rise of *hwabyung* (HB) seem to be aligned in a sequential process. In addition, borderline personality disorder (BPD) is examined from a socio-cultural context. Authors believe the socio-cultural dynamics of BPD and HB are comparable, although these conditions may not originate from similar genetic or biologic constitutes. The comparative analysis of borderline personality disorder and *hwabyung* render insight into conceptualizing their culture specific-dynamics and symptom manifestations.

## Conceptualization of *Jeong*

*Jeong* refers to mixed feelings of fondness, caring, bonding, and attachment that develop within interpersonal relationships. Although this expression can be found in the three languages of Korea, Japan, and China, which all use the same Chinese character (情),

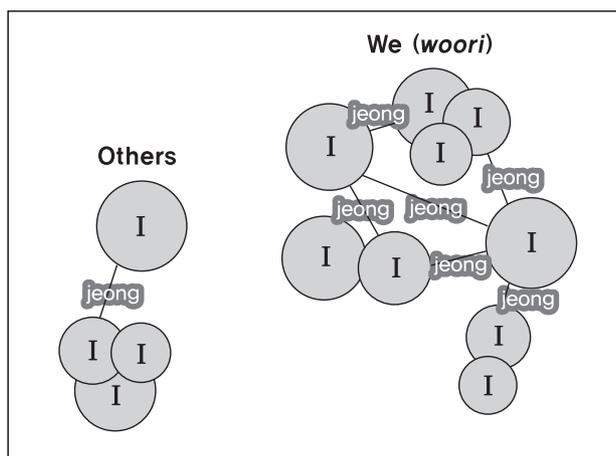
what this word means in the Chinese language differs significantly from how it is defined in the Korean language. *Jeong* is not a word that describes a certain cognitive state; rather, it is used to describe an emotional state. Whereas words in “Western” languages that express emotional manifestations, such as depression, uneasiness, or happiness, describe feelings personal to an individual, *jeong* is a “emotion” involving two or more individuals.

Defining *jeong* is not an easy task. In some sense, it is an ambiguous and amorphous concept. However, it would be meaningful and invaluable as a psychiatrist to study how this concept came to take root as one of the most significant facets in the emotions and thoughts of Korean people and how it influenced social consciousness. *Jeong* influences Koreans’ decision-making and social structures in Korean society. Furthermore, *jeong* causes conflicts when Koreans deal with the transition toward more individualized, modernized societies nowadays.

We will approach *jeong* in comparison to love in order to help construct its function and role (Table 1), rather than developing a literal definition. Luke Kim<sup>11</sup> stated, “*Jeong* appears to have a different affective quality than that of love... It seems that *jeong* represents a more primordial and primitive way of relating than love.” He further compared *jeong* to love, stating that “the concept of love in its prototype in Western culture is characterized by the love between man and woman.” In contrast, *jeong* is similar but more embracing and qualitatively different in concept than the

**TABLE 1.** Comparison of *jeong* and love

<i>Jeong</i>	Love
Inter-Individual	Intra-Individual
Centrifugal	Centripetal
Gender-neutral	Gender-oriented
Temporal factor: slow	Temporal factor: instant to slow
Pre-Oedipal	Oedipal
Passive	Active
Opposite emotion: <i>haan</i>	Opposite emotion: hate



I - individuals

FIGURE 1. We (woori) vs. Others

Western sense of love.

### 1. Location of *jeong*

The “location” of *jeong* seems to be between individuals; this seems to be the major difference in comparison to anxiety and depression.<sup>12,13</sup> As the linguistic expression for human being in Korean/Chinese is “in-gan” (人間), which literally means “between men,” so exists *jeong* (the most fundamental Korean emotion) becoming an extra-psychic and inter-psychic emotion. It is difficult for anyone to imagine from an individualistic cultural perspective that an emotion exists outside of oneself. In an individualistic culture, where reasonable inter-individual distances and boundaries are expected, such phenomena as extra-psychic *jeong* may not be conceivable. Yet, in Korean collective culture, the inter-individual location of *jeong* is keenly felt and plays an important role in bonding.

### 2. Permeation of *jeong*: Centrifugal movement

The common Korean *jeong* related expression is, “*Jeong* permeates me” (*jeong deul-da*). Typically *jeong* acts through passive permeation; it is not “I feel *jeong*” but *jeong* permeates oneself.<sup>12,13</sup> This seems to match the description of it being more primordial, less artificial, and not necessarily a matter of choice. This phe-

nomenon is comparable to the development of *haan* during inescapable situations or entrapment. It is also true that one can be entrapped in *jeong*. Choi<sup>14</sup> described the characteristics of *jeong* as being associated with sacrifice, unconditionality, empathy, care, sincerity, shared experience, and common fate. He further stated, “*Jeong* is least related to interest-pursued, business-like, social relationships... Rationality, contract, fairness, and commercialism are the ultimate anti-theses of a *cheong*-based [*jeong*-based] social relationship.” Because of its “location” and its nature to permeate, *jeong* appears to be a more collective emotion.

### 3. Evolvement and expansion of *jeong*: Temporal aspects

The earliest exposure to *jeong* is when an infant is held and carried by the mother on her back. As the mother’s warmth permeates to and is felt by the infant, so does *jeong* flow to its heart. This type of *jeong*, called *mo-jeong*, is considered the prototype. The mother also reads the baby’s desires and needs. This bi-directional sharing is the experience of *jeong* which ultimately leads to feelings of security and comfort. This expands and evolves throughout one’s life to the father, friendships, husband/wife, nature, and even inanimate objects. Expectations from these bonds are not communicated through verbal requests, logic, communication, or contracts but rather through non-verbal means or “mind-reading,” commitment, and loyalty that is learned early in life. In personal communication, Hae A Kim stated that Koreans’ *jeong*-based relationship mode is pre-Oedipal, while “Western” love is Oedipal.

### 4. *Jeong*-based “we-ness,” (*woori*): Development of Korean self-image

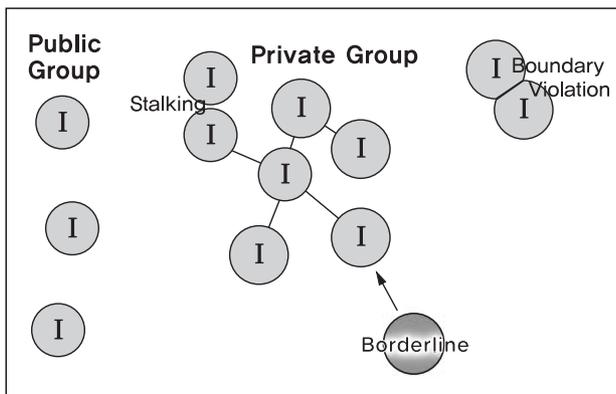
As *jeong* expands, a Korean culture-specific “we-ness” (*woori*) develops. Grammatically, “we” is simply the plural of “I.” However, among Koreans, “we” or *woori* is not just a plural pronoun. Rather, it is another singular form of a collective “I.” Perhaps the plural form

**TABLE 2.** We-ness vs. I-ness Orientations

We-ness ( <i>woori</i> ) Orientation	I-ness Orientation
Interpersonal bond/bondage	Autonomy
	Privacy
Role boundaries (class boundaries)	Individual boundaries
We vs. others	Private vs. public
Loyalty to the in-circle	Individual freedom
Commitment	Contractual relationships
Contextual orientation	Content orientation
“Rapport” talk	“Report” talk
“Mind-reading” and hidden meanings	Communication at face value
Virtues	Laws, protocols

would actually be “*woori-deul*.” The I’s are bonded to one another by *jeong*, becoming *woori*. Often, “we” (*woori*) is used in place of “I” in many common Korean expressions, for example, “our wife,” “our husband,” and even an only child calling his/her parents “our parents.” The strongest, most essential bond among Koreans is this we-ness mediated by the emotional glue of *jeong*. The equation for Korean “we-ness” (*woori*) is therefore “I + *jeong* + I + *jeong* + I... = *woori*.”

The development of *woori* imparts a significantly different self-image and world view<sup>13</sup> than that of Western “I-ness.” “We-ness” groups become the only source of developing an identity of “self” and are the primary means of protection from the hardships of life.<sup>15</sup> The contrast of these differences is important to understand-



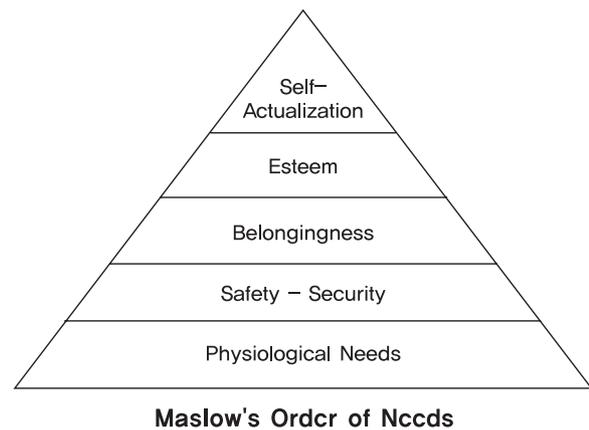
**FIGURE 2.** Public vs. Private Groups

ing the Eastern/Korean mind and, especially, the natures of *jeong*, *haan*, and *hwabyung* (Table 2).

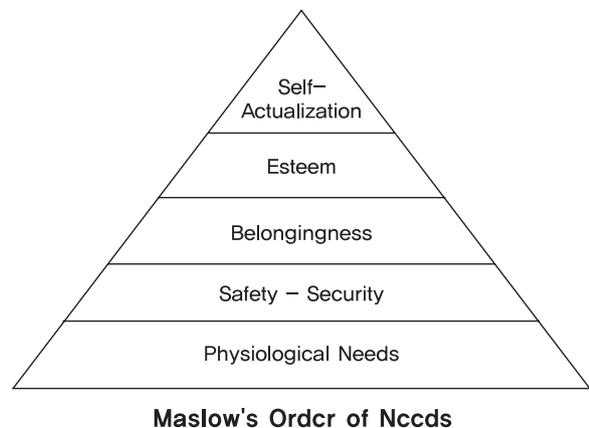
**5. Belonging: Higher priority**

*Woori* has strong nuances of relatedness, friendliness, affection, commonality, homogeneousness, and ultimately belonging. This *jeong*-based “we-ness” is characterized as unconditional, non-contractual, non-calculable, non-pragmatic, unrealistic, and illogical. In turn, dependence is at the core of the “we-ness,” arising spontaneously in this cultural context. Thus, in Korean culture, belonging<sup>12,13</sup> becomes the first priority in Maslow’s triangle of priorities (Figure 3 & 4).

Belonging provides security and often easier access to fulfilling physiological needs in Korea’s collective culture. So it is natural for one to seek belonging and



**FIGURE 3.** Maslow’s Order of Needs



**FIGURE 4.** Modified Order of Needs for Korean Society

abide social and cultural norms to ensure attachment to an in-group, such as a large family unit, a workers' union, a circle of friends, etc.

## 6. Koreans' world view: We or others, in-group vs. out-group

The "we vs. others" view (Figure 1) that develops from *woori* can be contrasted with the "private vs. public" (Figure 2) structure that arises in Western, individualistic cultures.<sup>16</sup> *Jeong* binds individuals into tight clustered groups in which even overlapping boundaries are considered "normal" and appropriate, whereas in the "private" group some distance and individualism is still maintained.

Others (*nam*) is opposite to *woori*. In order to have a clearer understanding of *woori*, one can also examine the context in which *woori* and *nam* are often used, such as in the expression, "*Woori ga nam ee ga?*" The literal translation is, "Are we others?" A more linguistically accurate interpretation would be, "Are we unrelated?" Again, the central theme of *woori* is relatedness and belonging.

## 7. Jeong-driven or jeong-based values and behaviors in Korean collective culture

There are a number of other *jeong*-based values and behavioral norms, such as the concept of "mind-reading" (from mind-to-mind; *ee shim jeon shim*), *noonchi*, group loyalty, and face-saving. Among these, perhaps group loyalty is most closely interconnected with our topic, *hwabyung*.

Unquestioning loyalty is a major rubric of Korean society. Not unlike in individualistic cultures, loyalty plays an important role in interpersonal relationships. However, because of the pervasiveness of *jeong*, this type of loyalty can extend to all aspects of one's life, rather than being limited to one-on-one or "private" relationships. Hofstede's<sup>15</sup> description of unquestioning loyalty in a collective culture seems to fit with Koreans' *jeong*-based "we-ness": "People from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups,

which throughout people's lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty." Therefore, the violation of this loyalty can cause the worst psychological and practical trauma to an individual.

## Haan and Hwabyung

*Jeong* is considered an essential component of the relational mode in Korea.<sup>11</sup> *Haan*, which occurs in response to the violation of *jeong*, is key to the pathological process of the development of *hwabyung* (HB). The warmer and more tender the *jeong*-based relationship, the more bitter and profound the agony of *haan* which arises when *jeong* is broken and *jeong*-based loyalty is betrayed. Thus, *haan* can only occur among those in a culture where interpersonal, *jeong*-related bonds (one might even say "bondage") are established.

### 1. Jeong violation to haan: A reaction to intolerable betrayal

If there were no trust, loyalty, or commitment, there would be no betrayal. Betrayal that becomes the intense psychological trauma of *haan*, and eventually *hwabyung*, occurs where unquestionable loyalty and trust is expected and mandated. Therefore, only where *jeong* has been strengthened and cultivated (in Korean terms, "*jeong eel dondok hee ha da*") does *haan* result as a reaction to its violation; *jeong* is a basic Korean culture-specific emotion and a prerequisite to *haan*.

### 2. Trauma/loss to haan vs. PTSD: Separation from PTSD

It is more likely that human-made traumas will result in *haan* and *hwabyung*, since the psychological perception required is *jeong* violation and betrayal. However, when facing natural disasters or unavoidable traumatic situations, Koreans often say, "Even heaven [meaning God] is so careless" ("*Ha neul do mu shim ha si ji*"). The implication is abandonment by God or nature. Rather than taking trauma or loss at face value, emo-

tional meaning or intent is added, which can again lead to the development of *haan*.

In this regard, *haan* not only arises from interpersonal *jeong* violation but also from perceived violations during man-made disasters, such as the Los Angeles riots<sup>17,18</sup>. After the riots, it appeared a significant number of subjects met the criteria for both *hwabyung* (HB) and PTSD. Among the riot victims, 40% met the criteria for PTSD, and 16% also met the criteria for *hwabyung* at the same time. With these results, Chung<sup>18</sup> took a culture-general approach in assessing *hwabyung* and posed the question, “Is *hwabyung* a subtype of PTSD?”, proposed again later by Min.<sup>10</sup> It seems obvious that trauma and loss are factors for *hwabyung*, yet they are not sufficient. PTSD + *x* = HB. The *x* seems to include the accumulation of *haan* and any meanings attached to *haan*.

### 3. Attached meaning: *uckwool*

*Haan* not only exists as a state of resentment, suppressed anger, and indignation in personal lives but also within the collective subconscious of Koreans. In this form, it is related to loss, trauma, and tragedy experienced at the national level. One of the important inherent cognitive aspects of *haan* is *uckwool*; *haan* carries with it the attached meaning of “unfairly victimized,” i.e. “*uckwool*.”

It should be noted that suffering from this belief of

unfair victimization is central to the theme of *haan*. Anger from loss, trauma, or abuse may cause PTSD, but the anger within *haan* and its cognitive association of *uckwool* is what results in *hwabyung*.

Therefore, *haan* includes both emotional (chronic anger) and cognitive (belief of being victimized) facets. One may as well cognize *haan* as feel it. It seems safe to assume that the intensity of anger and its related symptoms would be more severe when deeply embedded meanings/beliefs are tied to them. This seems to be supported by a study of the characteristics of *hwabyung* patients that indicated significantly high scores on obsession on the MMPI.<sup>19</sup>

## Socio-Cultural Dynamics of *Hwabyung* and Borderline Personality Disorder

In order to explain the dynamics of *hwabyung* (HB), an analogy to borderline personality disorder (BPD), which might be viewed as a “Western” culture-bound syndrome<sup>20</sup>, would be useful (Table 3).

Those with BPD are known for their frantic pursuit of attention from others, sometimes demonstrating destructive behaviors in that pursuit. The typical features of BPD include: 1) frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment, 2) a pattern of unstable and intense relationships, 3) a markedly and persistently

TABLE 3. Borderline Personality Disorder vs. *Hwabyung*

BPD	HB
Individualistic, masculine cultures	Collective, feminine cultures
Symbiosis	<i>Jeong – haan</i>
Trauma & loss	Trauma & loss
Social disintegration	Negative relationships with social disintegration
3-5% prevalence	4% prevalence
Anger, depression, anxiety	Anger, depression, anxiety
Individual identity crisis	Betrayed from expected collective identity; <i>jeong</i> violation
Biological factors	Probable biological factors (Chung et al, 1997)
Somatic symptoms	Somatic symptoms
High co-morbidity	High co-morbidity

unstable self-image or sense of self, and 4) impulsivity in many areas with irresponsible behaviors.<sup>1</sup> HB displays comparable symptoms, consisting of: 1) real or imagined violation of *jeong*, commitment, or loyalty, 2) suppression or explosiveness of emotion over the loss or betrayal of *jeong*, 3) damage of the “we-ness” (*woori*) self that causes anger, and 4) multiple somatic symptoms (lumps in the chest or epigastrium), panic-like symptoms, anxiety, and depression.<sup>2,5,9,18</sup>

Both HB and BPD involve interpersonal relationship issues. It is intriguing to find that HB occurs in a culture in which collective and “feminine” values prevail,

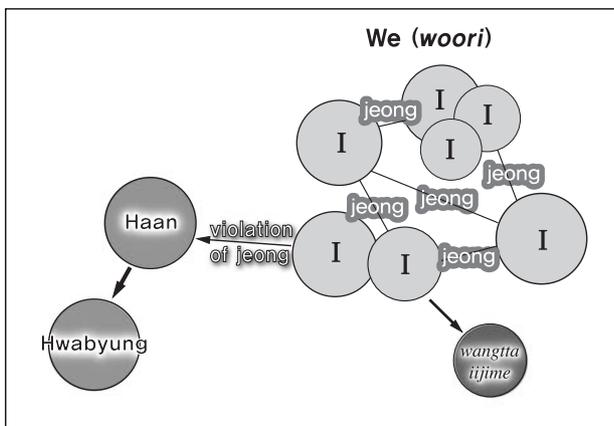


FIGURE 5. Violation of *Jeong* and Rise of *Hwabyung*

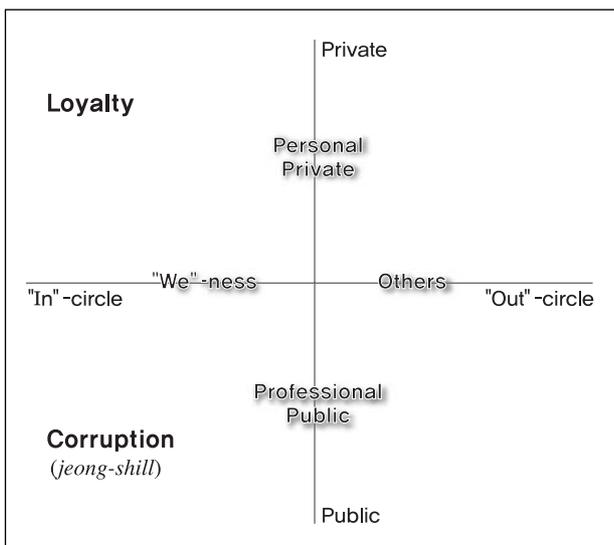


FIGURE 6. In-Circle vs. Out-Circle

while BPD exists in a culture with more individualistic and “masculine” values (Figure 5 & 6).

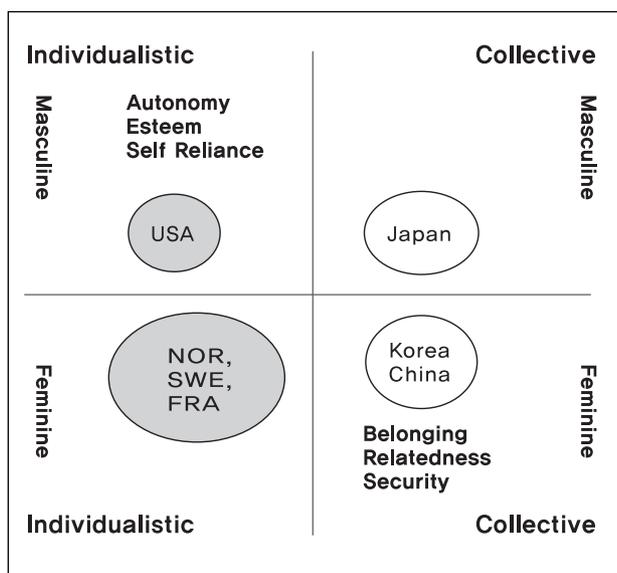
### 1. Borderline personality disorder in an individualistic and masculine culture

Individualism “pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose; everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family.”<sup>15</sup> Triandis<sup>8</sup> stated the essence of individualism “entails giving priority to personal goals over the goals of the in-group.” A different dimensional look into cultural values illustrates the difference between feminine and masculine cultures. Feminine cultures value relationships, caring, and nurturing, while masculine cultures value competition, assertion, accomplishment, and toughness<sup>21</sup>. From this perspective most “Western” cultures are masculine, and many Asian cultures, including Korea, follow more feminine ideals (Figure 7).

Traditionally, social roles were not matters of individual choice; they were designated by the family or society. When traditional societies become modernized, values seem to shift more towards individualism, competitiveness, autonomy, and independence. Individuals who require more dependency and belonging would have greater difficulty adjusting to this change. BPD is the manifestation of unsuccessful efforts in seeking belongingness, relatedness, and *jeong*-like bonds in a culture where such characteristics are not primarily valued and can be viewed as pathologic if emphasized. To some degree, in societies where these strong bonds are norms, *jeong* may have a protective effect against the development of BPD and its behaviors.

### 2. *Hwabyung* in a collective and feminine culture

*Hwabyung*, on the other hand, occurs in collective, feminine cultures (Figure 7). Indulgence in *jeong*-filled relationships, with unquestioning loyalty, uninhibited attachments, and belonging being norms, provide members with feelings of security, identity, and protection. Once a *jeong* relationship is violated, by a hus-



**FIGURE 7.** Collective/Feminine vs. Individualistic/Masculine Cultures (Modified and simplified from the concept of Hofstede.)<sup>21</sup>

band (most common), by a person in power, or even by nature, *haan* arises. *Haan* can also be interpreted as unsuccessful attempts at *jeong*-restoration. Recovery from *haan*, therefore, can result from *haan* resolution rituals or sublimation to a higher level of maturity and finding the “meaning of life.” *Haan* resolution rituals are designed to reconnect individuals to unfairly victimized dead persons, which can empower survival. Sublimation to a higher level of maturity is possible by helping *haan*-ridden individuals connect to different meanings or “higher” meanings of life through religious or artistic activities.

As proposed collective and feminine cultural values and practices can be protective against BPD, likewise individualism and masculinity probably serve against the development of HB. It is interesting to note that successful *haan* resolutions are often accompanied by accomplishments in academics, sports, or politics, which is of more masculine value.

Therefore, individualism and masculinity may become antidotes of HB, while collectivism and femininity are antidotes for BPD. If our hypothesis is correct, the prevalence rate of BPD in Korea will increase, and HB will diminish, as Korean societal values move rapidly toward individualistic and probably masculine

characteristics.

## Summary and Discussion

We would like to emphasize the bipolarity between enormous *jeong* and profound *haan* and ultimately understand the nature of *hwabyung* and develop treatment strategies in a cultural context. *Haan* may not arise or accumulate in a culture where there is no *jeong*. In addition to a real or perceived trauma, reaction to the betrayal or violation of *jeong* (the noxious psychological distress) results in *haan* and can develop into *hwabyung*.

In contrast, where *jeong* and even a pathological attachment (or bondage) exists, there is no need for borderline behaviors to defend against isolation. Even those biologically vulnerable to BPD may adjust relatively well or have their symptoms ameliorated in the setting of Korean or another collective culture.

It seems obvious that the Korean ethos is based in collective and feminine cultural values and emotions, evolving to the specific psychological patterns of *jeong* and *haan*. Where rapidly changing social norms and cultural values migrate from collectivism to individualism and from “traditional” beliefs to “Westernized” values, the prevalence of BPD seems to increase. In addition, it is likely that the prevalence of HB may diminish.

Although HB is beginning to receive growing attention for its symptom manifestation, there has been little research or publication regarding its dynamics and available treatments. As the underlying dynamics of HB are further studied, psychotherapeutic management strategies for HB can be established<sup>22</sup>. In order to accomplish this, it is imperative to understand and conceptualize *jeong*, *haan*, and *hwabyung* in their cultural context, rather than generalizing HB as simply an anger syndrome. This paper explored the culture-specific nature of *haan*, which causes HB, and also the culture-specific indigenous emotion *jeong*, which brings *haan* to the surface. The reason why *jeong* is unique to Korean culture remains to be answered.

Lastly, we propose the use of “*jeong*” and “*haan*” as standardized spellings of these words since they give the closest approximations to the Korean pronunciations and to avoid confusion within the English literature (which has variously used the iterations *cheong*, *ceng chong*, *jung*, *han*, *hahn*, etc.).

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