

UNDERSTANDING KOREAN CULTURE

• **PRESENTATION OUTLINE**

- 1. Definition of culture
- 2. Key elements of culture
- 3. Characteristics of Korean culture
- 4. Korean culture: Changes and
continuities

◆ INTRODUCTION

◆ What is culture?

◆ Culture is a system of ideas, art, morals, laws, symbols, language, values, beliefs, norms, customs, organizations, and technology shared by people in a particular society.

◆ Culture includes all learned behavior; it consists of both the nonmaterial aspects of a society such as language, ideas and values, and the material aspects such as houses, foods, clothes and tools.

- Question: Out of all the elements of culture, what are the most important ones? To be more specific, name four.
- Out of the vast array of elements that constitute culture, the most important ones in understanding a new culture are:
 - 1) symbols;
 - 2) language;
 - 3) norms; and
 - 4) values.

- The question is:
- 1) What are the representative symbols of Korean culture?
- 2) What are the distinctive aspects of the Korean language?
- 3) What are the most important Korean norms and values?

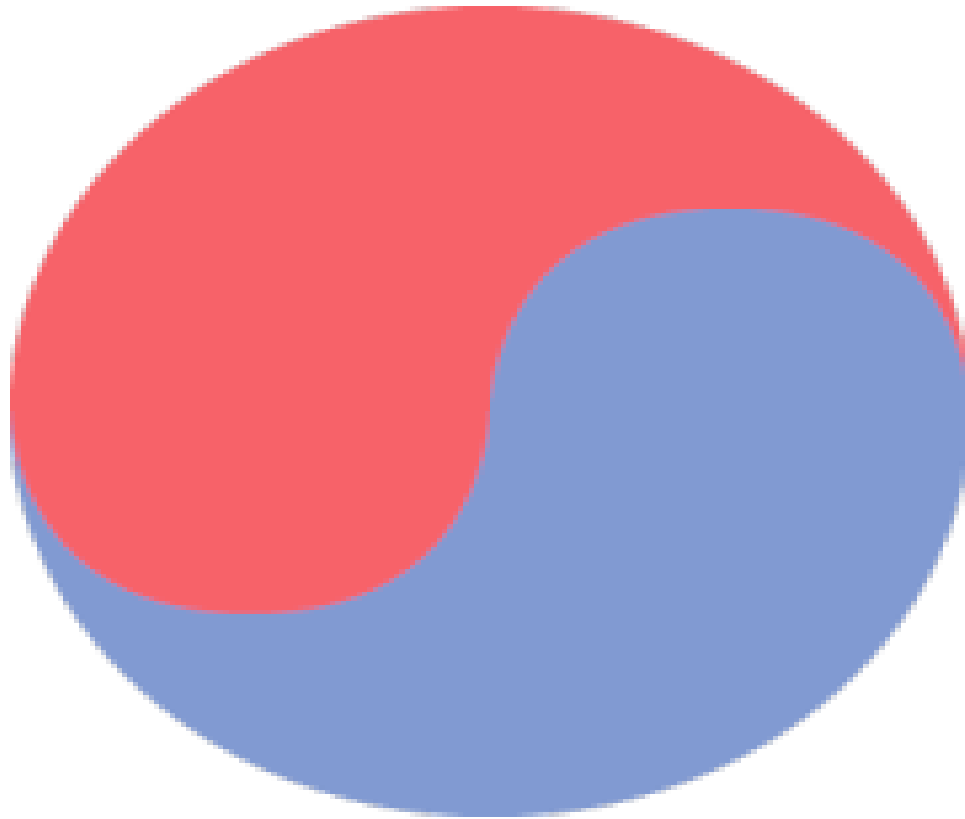
I. SYMBOLS OF KOREAN CULTURE

- ◆ A symbol is something that is used to represent something else (e.g., words, numbers, flags, and kisses are symbols).
- We use symbols to understand reality, transmit messages and store complex information.
- The operation of culture is dependent on people's ability to create and understand symbols.

- ◆ Question: Can you think of any Korean symbols?
- ◆ Korean people have created beautiful cultural symbols that are found almost everywhere you look in Korea, from the Taegeuk in the national flag to animal designs on chopsticks in restaurants.
- ◆ Many Korean symbols pertain to their wish for luck, fortune, longevity, and fertility.

Example 1

Taegeuk: Ultimate Existence



- The ultimate existence has its origin in basic value and existence.
- In Buddhism, this pattern means the ultimate equality and balance.
- Embodying the Dual Principle of Yin and Yang, it also represents the continuous cycle of life.

◆ Example 2

◆ Taegeukgi: Korean flag



- ◆ The flag depicts the balancing philosophies of Yin and Yang.
- ◆ In the central circle, the upper red portion represents positive Yang, while the lower blue portion represents negative Yin.

- ◆ The combination of bars in each corner also symbolizes opposites and balance.
- ◆ The set in the upper left corner (☰) embodies the sky, spring, east, and gentility.
- ◆ The lower right corner (☷): the earth, summer, west, and justice.
- ◆ The upper right corner (☾): the moon (water), winter, north, and wisdom.
- ◆ The lower left corner (☲): the sun (fire), autumn, south, and courtesy.

Example 3

Mugunghwa: Rose of Sharon

The national flower of Korea is the *mugunghwa*, rose of sharon.



Source: *Hankyoreh*, 2007.08.07. "Pulkkotireum" (Names of Flowering Plants).
<http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/opinion/column/227469.html>

- Unlike most flowers, *mugunghwa* is remarkably tenacious and able to withstand both blight and insects.
- The flower's symbolic significance stems from the Korean word *mugung*, meaning immortality.
- This word accurately reflects the enduring nature of Korean culture, and the determination and perseverance of the Korean people.

Example 4

Bujok (talisman; amulet) for good luck and protection from evil spirits



Source: *Hankookilbo*, 2008.10.23. "Gonginjunggaesa hapgyeokeul giwonhapnida" (Wishing You the Best in the Passing the Real Estate Agent License Exam).

http://eyenews.hankooki.com/mm_view.php?gisa_id=78116&cate_code=0105

- ◆ Talisman comes in **two types**:
- ◆ 1) one acts as a good luck charm; and
- ◆ 2) the other works to protect from evil or bad luck.
- ◆ It commonly has a yellow background with red symbols or characters.
- ◆ It is believed that evil spirits dislike the colors of gold and yellow.
- ◆ Red represents blood or fire, and psychologically it means the color of life and emotion.