

## INSPIRATION OF SOUTH KOREAN CORPORATE CULTURE FOR AFGHANISTAN BUSINESS ENTERPRISES

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**Abstract:** Corporate culture, as a management theory and method, emerged as an important component of organizational success in the late 20th century. Korea's unique style of corporate culture is a critical element to its economic success. The successful experience of Korean business based on its own corporate culture has also gained attention and praise from all over the world. The Korean economy has experienced a lot of success for the last decades and has had one of the highest growth rates in the world. Although, Korea has scarce natural resources and it is one of the tiniest countries in the world. What is even more miraculous is that in a short period of time, Korea has been able to develop one of the world's major economies from being considered one of the poorest countries in the world. The rapid development of Korean business groups, such as Samsung, Hyundai, SK, LG, and POSCO...attract attention from all over the world in many ways. In a large measure, the success of Korean businesses and economical activities is attributed to their unique corporate culture and management system, which is mixed by Japanese: Z Theory, American: Y Theory and Korean-Chinese theory: Confucianism.

Although Afghanistan and South Korea have different social systems and national environments, two countries have a similar experience of war and destruction. Korea experienced war from 1950 up 1953 and Afghanistan experienced war from 1979 up 2001. Actually nowadays the economic situation of Afghanistan is similar to South Korea in 1960s and it is in the first stage of economic development. As a result of war Afghanistan has no foundation to build its own corporate culture. Afghanistan can take very useful lessons from South Korean Corporate Culture and its economic development in the early stage.

This paper is the result of my one semester research about Korean Corporate Culture. My goal behind this paper as a student of MBA is to know the secret key of this kind of successfulness in the economic world. Especially, I want to know Korean unique corporate culture to inspire its positive points for building Afghanistan corporate culture. I hope to inspire a very useful model from South Korean Corporate Culture for Afghan enterprises to help the process of growth and development of Afghanistan.

**Key Words:** Corporate Culture, Confucianism, Chaebol, Paternalistic Leadership, Collectivism, Innovation and Competition.

### INTRODUCTION

The republic of South Korea is Asia's fourth largest economy. It is also the world's 11<sup>th</sup> largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity in 2016 {South Korea; 2017}. With extremely limited natural resources available in the country, the major driver of South Korea's economy is the production of consumer electronics,

automobiles, ships, machinery, petrochemicals and robotics {South Korea, 2011}. South Korea is known as one of the four Asian Tigers and it is the 7<sup>th</sup> largest exporter and 9 largest importer in the world as of 2016 {Economy of South Korea, 2017}. With its low state debt and high fiscal reserves that can be mobilized to address financial emergencies, South Korea was one

of the few developed countries that was able to avoid recession during the financial crisis dated back in 2008 {Economy of South Korea, 2011}.



In this paper I want to know the influences of Korean corporate culture on SK economic development and how to inspire the positive point of Korean Corporate Culture to build Afghan Corporate Culture. Korean corporate culture is one of the most dynamic and distinct corporate cultures in the world. With its high quality of labor and positive organizational behavior, it has contributed to the rapid development of the Korean economy. Big Korean conglomerates (Chaebols) such as Samsung, Hyundai, LG and Daewoo have emerged as well-known brands in the global consumer market within a short period.

### SOUTH KOREAN FAMOUS COMPANIES

Samsung has been ranked 8<sup>th</sup> on the 2013 Interbrand Best Global Brand list, and Hyundai is included within top 50<sup>th</sup> on the same list. Samsung Electronic has been placed in the 35<sup>th</sup> "Most Admired Company" conducted by Fortune Magazine in 2013. Also, Samsung ranked in 2<sup>nd</sup> and LG ranked in 7<sup>th</sup> position among top 10 U.S patent recipients in 2016 (Shin Gyonggu, 2017)

Beside the strong leadership of Korean government, the hard work and self-discipline of Korean labor are significant factors in speeding up the growth of Korean conglomerates. The poor economy of Korea after the Korean War has begun to change from the 1960s with new leadership and a new economic system. The close cooperation between the private sector and the government has been proven to be an effective strategy in developing the nation's economy, from an agricultural country to a knowledge-based economy today, the contribution of the Korean government's leadership, the positive work culture and the management system of Korea are equally important.

The characteristics of Korean corporate culture are influenced by several factors. The oldest influence is from Confucianism, and the recent influences are from America and Japan. Confucianism, as one of the major state philosophies in Korea is, continuously influencing the development of Korean society and culture in its values system, family relations and social stratification. Confucian values such as respect for the old, loyalty to superior, harmonious relations and filial piety are the main values that have significantly affected Korean interpersonal relations and work culture. Many founders of big group companies in Korea are famous for their hard work and paternalistic leadership in managing their business. Employees are treated as their own family members and in return they are expected to be willing to sacrifice personal interest for company benefit.

Besides the influence of Confucianism, Japanese and American influence on Korean corporate culture are also significant. Japanese influence on Korean corporate culture came in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Korea was ruled by the Japanese from 1910-1945. The Korean's work behavior such as self-discipline, diligence, and team spirit is very similar to the Japanese, that the *SAEMUAL UNDONG* (SMU: New village movement) symbol also designed by Diligence, Self-help and Cooperation {theory of *SAEMUAL UNDONG*, JJKIM, PHD}. The emergence of big business groups in Korea is also affected by the Japanese economic structure which is heavily dependent on big conglomerates. After Korea's independence especially after 1997 Asian financial crisis, South Korea transferred their management system to a close Westernized system (American Management System). Nowadays South Korea's people use Japanese, American and Confucianism management theories together.

### WHAT IS CORPORATE CULTURE?

Generally, the implication of culture can be defined through several meanings, such as life style, value system, ritual programs, philosophy of life, art formation and people's work behavior and style. The meaning of culture is so platy and it is difficult to describe at all. Culture can be divided into regional level, national level, generation level, gender

level, corporate level and others. In this report (Article) I concentrate on Corporate Culture. In terms of corporate face, culture is associated with the particular culture of an organization and is applicable to those who are employed in it. In the other side, corporate culture can be defined as the culture of one group of people who share the same goal. This group of people could be a company or organization. When the values and behavior of the people in the group are combined, culture is created at the same time (Zhang Xiaohui and Yew Kok Poong).

Corporate culture plays a key role in determining human resources` work behavior and the company`s financial performance. Some aspects of culture appear in visible ways but some are invisible. Visible culture are like the company dress code, work environment, work hours, ways for getting promotion, how the business world is viewed, what is valued and who is valued. This is the surface of layer culture. All of these can be seen and some of them are belong to company`s policies and regulation. Visible culture plays important roles in influencing its members` behaviors and determining how its members interpret the environment. For instance, strict rules for employees` daily attendance and work hours normally create mechanistic and conservative behavior in its members. It encourages obedience and conformity to rules and does not encourage free opinions (Tan Soo Kee, 2008)

The most powerful aspects of culture are invisible. It is composed of the beliefs, values, standards, worldviews, moods, internal conversations, and private conversations of the people that are part of the group. Invisible culture cannot be seen but it is more powerful than visible culture in influencing an organization`s competitiveness and management efficiencies. Usually, invisible culture comes from the characteristics of the founder and leadership styles of the organization.

There are different definitions and understanding about corporate culture. For instance, the Japanese define corporate culture as an “atmosphere of a community,” while the common Western meaning of corporate culture is mainly the culture of a company. According to literature review, corporate culture is a summation of management thought, management style, group consciousness and code of conduct formed during the long-term operations of a company. A well-known definition says that corporate culture is a cognitive framework consisting of attitudes, values, behavioral norms and expectations. These attitudes, values, behavior norms and expectations

are reflected in the organizational culture. Therefore, a corporate culture is considered to be a set of collective norms that govern the behavior of people within a company (Lee Choong Y and Lee Jennifer Y).

Managing corporate culture is one of the many essential management tools. A strong corporate culture can be asset for a company. The emergence of big Japanese and Korean integration since the 1970s has been mainly contributed by its positive corporate culture. The Koreans and Japanese are famous for their diligence and high quality of work. Their willingness in sacrificing individual benefit for company interest has helped many Korean conglomerates to grow enormously within a short period.

## **KOREAN CORPORATE CULTURE FORMATION AND CHARACTERISTICS**

### **Confucianism and Korean Corporate Culture**

Confucianism has been deeply integrated into the lives of the Korean people since the beginning of Chosun dynasty. Even under the influence of Westernization today, South Korean families still keep a strict family hierarchy based on Confucianism. Confucianism has become one of the most defining factors for a South Korean`s character, way of thinking and style of life. Therefore, corporate culture in South Korea had been built originally based on Confucian culture and tradition; they use paternalistic leadership, family-like working environment, hierarchical structure, family based succession and collectivism, from Confucianism ideology.





Reference: Gwangju Folk Museum

These pictures show the examples of Confucianism which Korean people use in their daily live and in their management culture. There is a brief description of SK Corporate Culture based on Confucianism.

- 1. Paternalistic Leadership:** Under the paternalistic leadership, employees are protected by their employer and are provided with what they need, but they are not given any responsibility or freedom of choice. This practice was particularly strong in the 1960s and 1970s when many Korean laborers were not given freedom and right to question their employers' management decisions. They were expected to be thankful for what had been provided and for the protection given by the employer (Tan Soo Kee).
- 2. Family-like Working Environment:** One of the positive aspects under paternalistic leadership is family-like environment is formed in Korean work organizations. Everyone is treated as their own family members; the superior plays the role as a parent while the senior staff plays the role as elder brother. To those who are of superior status, they are expected to take care of the inferior and be concerned about their well-being. As a whole, the organization or corporation tends to function as a family. Strong family-like bonds among employees are always emphasized and the founder or chairman is normally considered as a quasi-father figure (Lee Jennifer Y, 2014).
- 3. Hierarchical Structure:** In Confucian thought, hierarchy is necessary to maintain group and social harmony. In modern Korean society today, although the pyramid-styled social structure does not exist anymore, the hierarchical structure is still functioning in every corner of Korean society; in their language, family life and even at the work place. Confucius said: "A young man should serve his parents at home and be respectful to elders outside his home". Based on this teaching, the management decision-making process is highly centralized with the authority concentrated on senior levels. Inferior and junior levels are not given much freedom to make decisions on managerial matters. In many Korean companies, decision-making by the top is well accepted and common. In the early days, the centralized command and control model worked best in many Korean Chaebol, owners and top management were involved in minute details of management. In South Korea, the management and decision-making power of enterprises is centralized in the board of directors and above (Tan Soo Kee).
- 4. Importance of Family Ties and Blood-Based Succession:** Family control in Korean corporate management is one of the essential characteristics in Korean corporate culture which is also influenced by Confucianism. High ranking positions are usually dominated by the owner's family members, specially the sons of the owner. Even today, most Korean Chaebol managements are still controlled by the founders' family members; such as Samsung Electronics, Hyundai Group, LG Group, Hanjing Group and Ssangyong Group (Choong Y.Lee and Jennifer Y.Lee, 2014).
- 5. Collectivism:** Due to the influence of Confucianism, Korean people value achieving group interest more than individual interest. They always act for group benefit and limit the pursuit of self-interest. In a collectivism society, members of a group are loyal to one another and value harmony and cohesion among members of their group. Gold campaign in 1997 Korea financial crisis and recently candle right protest in Seoul against ex-president Park can show Korean collectivism culture (Lee, Choong Y, 2014).

The sense of loyalty to a group is also entrenched in the Korean corporate culture. Koreans are famous for their strong team spirit wherever they work. They

always work as a team and any individualistic intentions are seen as selfish and unacceptable. Individual freedom is repressed in order to achieve group interest. The company's purposes and the group's benefits are given first priority for whatever work they do. Therefore, long working hours without extra compensation is acceptable for many Koreans. The conduct of sacrificing individual benefits for the company is respected and is often considered deservedly in many Korean companies (Tan Soo Kee, 2008).

Group harmony is emphasized in many Korean companies as the result of collectivism. For achieving the harmonious relations within a group, superiors and subordinates, and colleagues meet frequently after work to release tension accumulated in their work. For many decades, promoting collectivism culture was one of the essential management tools in many Korean companies. For example Samsung had a team-focused campaign entitled "My machine, my area, and my job" (Tan Soo Kee).

### **Transformation and Westernization of Korean Corporate Culture**

Recently, South Korean enterprises have become more democratic in their decision-making and business practices. For instance, nowadays they are changing their manager-based decision making system to team-based decision making system (American System). So, employees have a stronger sense of democracy and are able to participate in the decision making process more than over.



#### **Technological Development**

Also, South Korea corporate culture has been influenced by technological development and advancement in South Korea. Just like Japan, South Korean enterprises had to import foreign advanced scientific technology due to a lack of advanced technology

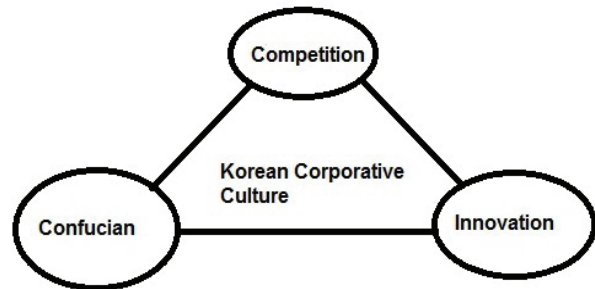
and a weak foundation of technological development. From the 1990s, South Korean enterprises started to realize that advanced technology could bring a stronger competitive power, and so they shifted their focus to technological development, independent innovation and entrepreneurship (Japanese Management Culture) (Wai Ip Chan, 2011).



**Lee Kun-hee former chairman of Samsung Electronic**

The leader of POSCO believes "resources are limited but people have infinite creative ability". The president of Samsung Mr.K.H.Lee, issued a strong message reinforcing the importance of innovation by stating that "everything must change expect your wife and children".

Nowadays, most Korean enterprises have changed from producing cheap products with cheap labor to producing more innovative products of high added value, with high productivity, and at a high price. Innovation has become an important part of South Korean corporate culture today. This bellow figure shows the main frame of Korean corporate culture.



**Figure (1): Korean Corporate Culture Main Frame**

Obviously, there are some interesting characteristics of South Korean corporate culture.

- 1- Learn widely from others' Strong Points:**The South Korean corporate culture has integrated

American corporate culture and Japanese corporate culture based on the principles and values of Confucianism. The South Korean corporate culture has been uniquely developed by combining other countries' corporate cultures. By adopting some western values, South Koreans can organize their work as efficiently as Westerners, while having the ability to tolerate hardship and work as diligently as Easterners.

**2- Develop the Country through Industry:** the efforts to develop Korea through industrialization have become a strong driving force for South Korean enterprises. South Korea gives priority to self-esteem, which is a highly regarded characteristic in South Korean society. Many of the well-known enterprises in South Korea believe that they have the responsibility of developing the country's economy. In other words, they have national consciousness. In enterprises, individuals and the company itself work at the same time to benefit each other. In South Korea, most people believe that their own progress will eventually lead to a better company and a more advanced country. Daewoo the leader of Daewoo International said "In any era, the happy life of offspring and the foundation of happy development are brought by individual sacrifice." This strong sense of mission comes from the "sacrifice spirit" of Daewoo. Those who work for Daewoo share a common goal of wanting to revitalize both their company and their country. This kind of mindset South Korean enterprises and led to the inimitable development of the South Korean economy (Lee, Choong Y, 2014).

**3- Human Relation:** the sense of harmony that comes from Confucianism has permeated the internal structure of South Korean enterprises and has become an important part of an enterprise's values. For instance, the value of "diligence, devotion, and cooperation" of Hyundai, the value of "mutual cooperation, being a pioneer, and innovation" of LG, and the value of "unity, honesty and innovation" of KIA are embodied in all South Korean enterprises and emerged from Confucian culture. This kind of harmony can instill a sense of family into a company, which creates a sense of belonging and membership. Employees, therefore make more contribution to their companies, rather than to themselves. The corporate culture of South Korea

has created a kind of cultural atmosphere that has brought new meaning to what Koreans define family. Similar to a family, an enterprise experiences success and losses based on its members or jobholders.

**4- People Orientation:** Due to its lack of abundant resources and technology, South Korea has become very familiar with the significance of human resource development. The operational principle of Samsung is "talent is a never changing-theme".



#### Samsung Human resource development Training

Confucian culture centers on the role of human beings in the world. Similarly the role of human being is fundamental to modern management. Therefore it is natural for South Korean corporations to create people-oriented management model. This model has created a stronger sense of responsibility and self-respect among company employees.

**5- Spirit of Competition and Innovation:** Innovation is strongly promoted by South Korean enterprises, and success means consistent innovation. Although, Confucian culture is deeply rooted in South Korea, Korea has also been influenced by American individualism. Therefore, the corporate culture of South Korea has taken on the side of competition and individual talent. The aftermath of the Korean War made South Koreans more accepting of the American culture (Lee, Choong Y, 2014).

The traditional hierarchy that was seen in Korean Society was impacted and became less important. The individualism and competition in the American culture has more or less influenced the corporate culture of South Korea since then.



Samsung Edge 7: the pattern of Innovation and Competition

## INSPIRATION OF SOUTH KOREAN CORPORATE CULTURE FOR AFGHANISTAN BUSINESS ENTERPRISES

### Current conditions and problems in Afghanistan regarding Building Corporate Culture

With almost 16 years of progress and reform after three endless decade's war, Afghanistan has experienced not only economic success, but also success in all other aspects of its society. However, since Afghanistan is still in the initial stage of economic development, it has been unable to fully develop a market economy or create world-class business corporations. As a result Afghanistan has no foundation to build its own corporate culture. Because Afghanistan is still influenced by a very traditional and diverse culture, it prefers emphasizing religious morals and values, even when establishing a corporate culture. An employee's performance is often based on his or her values and attitudes towards the organization. A lack of people-oriented practices and abuse of power for personal gain has led to poor corporate business performance. The formation of a corporate culture in Afghanistan has only just begun. In order to establish a strong corporate culture in Afghanistan, Afghan enterprises must overcome challenges and difficulties due to culture, tradition, socio-political situation, and economic problems:

- 1- Overemphasize in Collectivism (Ashar):** Afghanistan has a long tradition and culture of collectivism (in Persian language called Ashar). Collective interests still exceed personal interests, which has been detrimental in creating a corporate culture. Most enterprises require their employees to sacrifice personal interests for collective interests, yet at the same time want their employees to
- 2- Old-oriented management culture:** Mostly the organization hierarchy is based on age and old people have high position in an organization. Young people should follow the order of old people even they are wrong. If a young person tell to old person about his false he will strongly minded as a strong unethical action and negative behavior.
- 3- Lack of Scientific Goal and Poor Responsibilities:** Afghan enterprises overemphasize intangible attributes and therefore lack a scientific approach for their decision-making. Afghan corporate culture formed under these ideas does not help Afghan organizations have clear goals. Instead, it usually relies on a kind of holistic approaches to management that do not have objective quantitative measures. Managers do not understand their legitimate power, responsibilities, and obligation, and so they delegate their authority to others without following the chain of command. Managers in Afghan enterprises believe that "no one is complete" so they do not enforce punishments and rewards properly. Consequently, mistakes occur frequently and managers are unable to improve their business practices. When building their own corporate culture, Afghan enterprises should learn from the Korean model of corporate culture by combining Korean tradition and also modernized western practices. Afghan enterprise also should build their corporate culture based Afghanistan tradition and also well-known modernized culture of other developed countries in order to achieve excellence.
- 4- Lack of Innovation and Poor Sustainable Development:** Compared to western culture, Afghan culture emphasizes appearance and perception over the real meaning of actions. Therefore, Afghan tradition and culture do not encourage innovation. Afghan culture in considered conservative and there is no flexibility to accept other culture. Afghan people focus on long-term

stability rather than taking risks. Afghan people's conservative attitude and behavior based on their culture results in poor innovation and hurts the sustainable development of enterprises. A lack of innovation makes Afghan enterprises inflexible and unable to adapt the ever-changing market conditions and environment, making them unable to compete in the global market, even in the regional market.

### **Lessons from South Korean Corporate Culture for Building Afghan Corporate Culture**

Although Afghanistan and South Korea have different social systems and national environments, two countries have a similar experience of war and destruction. Korea experienced war from 1950 up 1953 and Afghanistan experienced war from 1979 up 2001. Actually the nowadays economic situation of Afghanistan is similar to South Korea in 1960s. Afghanistan can take very useful lessons from South Korean economic development in the early stage. Because both countries similar war and destruction, as Afghanistan building its corporate culture, it should look at Korea's corporate culture as a model based on the following principles.

First, corporate culture is not a cure all for Afghan enterprises; it is the mental outlook of companies adopted by its entrepreneurs and staff. Corporate culture should be consistent with and developed from a company's business strategy (Barney, 1986; McCune, 1999). Corporate culture refers to the common value, code of conduct and habit of a company's employees and is formed during an enterprise's long-term business activities. It reflects the mental outlook of members and employees and determines the overall reputation of an enterprise and its success. The high quality of human resource is the key of enterprise competitiveness.

Second, the focus of Korean corporate culture is on its people. Therefore, Afghan enterprises should develop their value, code of ethics, and standards of behavior and improve the professional competence of their employees based on a people oriented mindset. They can accomplish this transformation through training and education, guidance, inspiration, and incentives, which will lead a company's employees to acquire a strong mental drive. This strong mental drive will promote enterprise development for better organizational performance.

Third, in order to build corporate culture in Afghanistan, it is necessary for a corporation to set long-term goals and build common values that benefit all of its employees, the nation, and the corporations themselves. Enterprises cannot have a long-term prospective until the interests of the enterprise are in line with Afghan society's demands. Common values can regulate the behavior of enterprise members, provide strong moral support, and can give the enterprise incentives to create an excellent reputation for the company.

Fourth, to build a great corporate culture in Afghanistan, it is necessary for Afghan companies to create an innovation friendly environment, pursue excellence, and value harmony. Enterprises should have a competitive advantage and satisfy all of their stakeholders, especially their customers. Further, enterprises should also have up to date market information and entertain new ideas in order to encourage innovation.

### **CONCLUSION**

Corporate culture is one of the main keys (reasons) for the success of the South Korean economy in the last three decades. Therefore, Korean corporate culture is one of the most dynamic and distinct corporate cultures in the world. The Korean corporate culture has been influenced by Confucianism, American and Japanese culture, and also been developed with its government's leadership and guide.

The traditional Confucian values left their strong influences on Korean corporate culture although it is facing challenges from the new culture of the West. The paternalistic leadership pattern, hierarchical structure, blood-based succession and collectivism are the main features that resulted from Confucian influences.

The process of modernization in Korean corporate culture has been speeded up since the financial crisis hit the Korea badly in 1997. Western management styles were introduced into human resource management by implementing the performance-based system instead of the seniority-based system. The new management styles have made Korean corporate culture more individually motivated, less seniority-based and less authoritarian. Today, Korean corporate culture is made by Confucianism traditional culture of Korea-China, competition and individualism culture of America (Theory Y) and innovative culture of Japan (Theory Z). They mixed all these characteristics



together and have been made Innovative-Competitive-Confucianism Corporate Culture (I4C) the most successful corporate culture in the world.

Afghanistan Corporate Culture is underdeveloped and faces many challenges and problems. Afghanistan needs to learn how to create and develop its own corporate culture. Corporate culture in South Korea has not only been influenced by Confucianism and American and Japanese culture, but has also been developed with its government leadership and guide. As a result, Korea has formed a unique corporate culture, and it has become a very strong positive force for Korea's economic success. Afghan Corporate Culture also the potential to create economic success continuously for its people and country by incorporating lessons learned from Korea's corporate culture as well as from the positive point of other advanced countries' corporate culture.

In a sense, Afghan enterprises can learn lessons from the characteristic of family-like working environment, diligence, team spirit, people-oriented management from traditional Korean corporate culture. Team-based decision-making system, the way of technological development, the ability of adopting strength points of different corporate culture from well-known world corporate culture, self-esteem, national spirit, sacrifice spirit, mutual cooperation, being a pioneer, innovation, spirit of competition and individual talent from the new combined/modernized Korean corporate culture (I4C).

### RECOMMENDATION

- 1- Afghan businessmen should learn the positive points of Korean Corporate Culture to make an efficient corporate culture for them as well as to contribute in country economic growth.
- 2- Second recommendation is for both countries Korea and Afghanistan and strongly suggested for Afghanistan. Korea and Afghanistan should focus more on creative corporate culture. They should promote creative organizational culture by encouraging suggestion for work process improvement, adopting a flexible time program, work-life balance, welfare program.

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