

VICTOR AHN: INDIVIDUAL TRIUMPH OVER BUREAUCRACY OR WHY HE IS CONSIDERED TO BE A HERO IN KOREA.

E.S. Abrosimova

Institute of Humanities, Social Sciences and Technologies

Language advisor: A.O. Shatknina, Senior Lecturer

Abstract: The bureaucracy problems in South Korea are considered through the example of sportsman Victor Ahn who had to change nationality to withstand it and continue his sport career. Common information about collective and individual communities is given and compared; features of Korea society are underlined and considered. At the end the author exemplifies bureaucracy issue in South Korea and sums up by answering the question given in the title.

Key words: Victor Ahn, Korea, collectivism, individualism, bureaucracy, in-groups, Durkheim

It seems there is no person in Russia interested in sport who has never heard of Victor Ahn. The former Korean citizen but now Russian one he has become a sensation of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi where he won three gold and one bronze medals in short-track competitions. His story, covered everywhere from newspapers to news reports, is now familiar to many people. He was once the ace for Korea's world-beating short track skating team, and was a dominant force in the 2006 Torino Olympics. After a knee injury and factionalism within the skating administration in Korea, Ahn did not make Team Korea's roster for the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver. Frustrated, Ahn became a free agent, renouncing Korean citizenship and taking the flag of the highest bidder, Russia. He solidified his place as the greatest short track skater ever, with six career Olympic gold medals and two bronze.

When he stepped on the ice in Sochi Olympics, overwhelming majority of the Koreans cheered him as much as if he still was a member of the Korean team. They were still happy when he got his first medal, a bronze one and actively supported him. Why did the Koreans cheer for Ahn? Only because he's Korean and Koreans simply love any Koreans who succeed? Shallow analysts might say that as ethno-nationalism is strong in Korea they support every Korean who succeeds. However, in this case the Koreans were cheering for triumph of individual over injustice represented by Victor. This article will focus on specific cultural obstacles Ahn had to overcome and, thus, was recognized as a Korea's hero but not a betrayer.

To start with we should look at the Korean society structure. Most of the Eastern cultures are famous for maintaining collectivistic ideas while the West adheres to individualism. The Korean culture is not an exception – they place a lot of value on interdependence and collective. For example, Hofstede reported that South Korea ranked 43rd in individualism, whereas the U.S. was the most individualistic of the 50 countries and 3 regions examined.

Individualistic cultural values emphasize self-reliance, autonomy, competition, personal control, and individual goals. Behavior is governed primarily by personal calculations of gain and loss. In contrast, collectivistic cultural values emphasize filial devotion, harmony, sociability, and a willingness to put aside personal needs for the good of one's social group. The self is considered to be an aspect of a shared group identity. Behavior is governed primarily by a sense of social norms and obligations (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998)

French sociologist Durkheim in his works identified two major types of social integration, *mechanical* and *organic*. Societies of mechanical solidarity tend to be relatively small and organized around kinship affiliations. Social relations are regulated by the shared system of beliefs, what Durkheim called the *common conscience*. In a society based on such solidarity, individuals differ little from each other. As members of the same team they look like each other because of experiencing the same feelings, share the same values, the same authority is recognized and unshakable. Thus people in mechanic or collective societies are easily interchangeable with the aim to achieving a common goal and it's almost impossible for individuals to advocate their own interests and ambitions (Collectivism and individualism from the modern point of view: Emile Durkheim [site]. URL http://www.e-reading.ws/chapter.php/24046/8/Irvin_-_Filosofiya_istorii/).

Although considering all the facts, in South Korea, perhaps due to its relative ethnic homogeneity, a distinct collectivism has evolved, different from the collectivism in other Asian countries (Rhee, Uleman, & Lee, 1996). Behavior is constrained by implicit shared norms in South Korea. The importance of emotional relatedness can be found in the emphasis on *cheong* (emotional connection) and *woori* (sense of “we”) in interpersonal relationships. Koreans tend to strongly identify with an in-group (Na & Min, 1998) and develop *woori* toward this group, as well as a sense of out-groups as “others” who are clearly distinguished. Strong emotional bonds and relatedness through networks of extended family relationships increase in-group identification. They prefer to “immerse themselves in the in-group’s activities” in order to “[form] a consensus of opinions rather than respecting the individual opinions (Han and Ahn, 1994).

Despite the fact that by tradition the culture of South Korea has been quite collectivistic, and many citizens hold quite fast to these values, some segments of society have recently experienced strong pressures to adopt more individualistic cultural values (Y.-S. Park & Kim, 2006). Observers note that beginning more than two decades ago, Korean society has become increasingly Westernized and individualized in the economic, social, and political spheres, with increasing emphasis on individual freedom and rights (G. Han & Shin, 1999). The importance of extended family or clan has decreased. Western operational styles have been adopted in education, business and of course sport.. The culture has been more complex and urbanized. Another point is the prevailing stereotype about Koreans saying that Koreans are conformist and deferential, ever wary of what other people think and never stepping up to challenge authority. However, this is just a stereotype – throughout their history Koreans actively fought against injustice and abuse of authority. Suffice it to remember the massive March First Movement, the echoes of which lasted until the end of World War II.

Taking into consideration the factors characterizing Koreans and listed above, such as collectivism, in-groups division, westernization, impatience to all form of injustice, let’s look closer at Viktor Ahn’s case. The situation in Korea Skating Union clearly illustrates the above features of collectivist societies, and in particular within the intra-division of the Korean nation. The entire KSU, including the administration, coaches and the athletes, was split into two factions: those who attended Korea National Sport University, and those who did not. Ahn, a KNSU graduate, initially was a beneficiary of the factional politics when the KNSU “line” was more dominant in the early 2000s. When the political tide turned, the players and coaches of the non-KNSU line did everything they could to push out Ahn. Even in international games, the non-KNSU players would impede Ahn and wouldn’t let him win. It became so bad that Ahn ended up practicing with the women’s team, in which the KNSU faction was stronger. Ahn’s knee injury made it much easier to freeze him out of the 2010 Winter Olympics. Even despite the fact that he had already won three gold medals at the Olympics in Turin and was the hope of the Korean short track team, it did not help him to gain a foothold in the Korean national team. After gaining his injury, he was considered being useless by local chiefs and no one was going to treat him and retrieve his former strength. The person was treated as a used part of a large machine that could easily be replaced with another one. Ahn did not want just to accept this attitude and give up a career in his 25. Ahn was forced to look for new ways to continue training and perform in Sochi Winter Olympic Games.

Staring down the demise of his athletic career, Ahn fought back by adopting a new homeland, taking on a new name and skating with the Russian flag on his chest. Ahn’s three gold medals matched the number of gold medals won by the entire Team Korea which, as fate would have it, did not win a single medal in men’s short track skating. Ahn could not possibly have had a sweeter revenge, standing victorious over the KSU bureaucracy that wronged him.

Seeing this, it is difficult for any Korean not to identify with Viktor Ahn - for Korea has no shortage of small injustices committed by those who hold the authority and power. As it often happens, those who fight back fail more often than they succeed. But when they do succeed, Koreans heartily cheer them on. So, Koreans cheer for Viktor Ahn, for Ahn most certainly suffered injustice in the hands of the authorities. Who wouldn’t want to project themselves onto Ahn on the podium, a brilliant individual shining over the boss’s yelling, the petty corruption, and all the other social ills that Koreans see as being the results of too much deference to authority? Viktor Ahn may have become an Olympic hero for Russia, but for a different reason, he is just as much of a hero for Koreans as well.

References:

1. Han, S. Y., & Ahn, C. Y. Psychology of the Korean People. In G. Yoon, & S. C. Choi (Eds.), *Collectivism and Individualism in Korea* - Seoul, 1994 – P. 301-315.
2. Han, G., & Shin, S.-J. A cultural profile of Korean society: From vertical collectivism to horizontal individualism. *Korean Journal of Social and Personality Psychology*, 13(2), 1999 – P. 293–310.
3. Hofstede, G. *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). - Thousand Oaks,. 2001.
4. Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. - *Psychological Review*, 98(2), 1991 - P. 224–253.
5. Na, E.-Y., & Min, K.-H. Discrepancies between formal/explicit and informal/implicit norms in Korea and generational gaps: Theoretical points and evidence from existing survey data. *Korean Journal of Psychology: Social Issues*, 4(1), 1998 - P. 75–93.
6. Park, Y.-S., & Kim, U. (2006). Family, parent-child relationship, and academic achievement in Korea: Indigenous, cultural and psychological analysis. In U. Kim, K.-S. Yang, & K.-K. Hwang (Eds.), *Indigenous and cultural psychology: Understanding people in context* - New York, 2006 - P. 421–443.
7. Rhee, E., Uleman, J. S., & Lee, H. K. Variations in collectivism and individualism by ingroup and culture: Confirmatory factor analyses. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71(5), 1996 - P. 1037–1054.
8. Triandis, H. C., & Gelfand, M. J. Converging measurement of horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(1), 1998 - P. 118–128.

Internet recourses:

1. Collectivism and individualism from the modern point of view: Emile Durkheim [Электронный ресурс] - URL http://www.e-reading.ws/chapter.php/24046/8/Irvin_-_Filosofiya_istorii.html (дата обращения 01.04.2014)