

## **TALKING TO OURSELVES AND OTHERS: *SHIMCHEONG*, *UBUNTU* AND ALL THAT JAZZ (COMMENTARY ON CHOI & HAN)**

Puleng Segalo & Martin Terre Blanche  
*University of South Africa*

**ABSTRACT.** For many years people have been classified as being either individualistic or collectivistic. However with processes such as acculturation and globalization, the lines are beginning to blur as people are exposed to different cultures and ways of doing things change. In this paper, which is a response to “Shimcheong Psychology: A Case of Cultural Emotion for Cultural Psychology” by Sang-Chin Choi and Gyuseog Han, we discuss the merits and risks of employing cultural concepts such as *shimcheong* in the current global context. We compare *shimcheong* to the South African concept of *ubuntu*, pointing to various similarities and differences. We conclude by suggesting that further work on concepts such as *shimcheong* and *ubuntu* could emulate the artistic and intellectual tradition that is represented by jazz. The paper is presented as a video discussion between the two authors.

Keywords: *shimcheong*, *ubuntu*, we-ness

### **Transcription of the video discussion**

**Martin:** So, what was the first thing that came to mind when you read this paper?

**Puleng:** The first thing that came to my mind was that I could relate to Shimcheong?

**Martin:** Shimcheong is that how one says it?

**Puleng:** I am not exactly sure.

**Martin:** I have no idea.

**Puleng:** I just think it sounds nice ‘Shimcheong’ Err, looking at Shimcheong and linking it to some of the theories we find in Psychology cos now Shimcheong is embedded in a specific culture; that for me was very interesting even though it was only focused in one culture.

**Martin:** Ok, I also had similar sort of things. I thought of local South African cultural things obviously the whole time as I was reading.

**AUTHORS’ NOTE.** Puleng Segalo is a South-African psychologist who currently works towards her doctorate at the City University of New York in the field of social psychology. Her research interests relate to the notion of identity construction in various contexts and also on issues of gender and sexuality. E-mail: Segalp@unisa.ac.za

Martin Terre Blanche teaches critical and community psychology at the University of South Africa. His research interests relate to the politics of representation in post-colonial contexts. E-mail: terremj@unisa.ac.za

- Puleng:** Like what?
- Martin:** Like Ubuntu--- I don't know, do people know about Ubuntu or is it only us who know?
- Puleng:** I don't know, maybe you could elaborate a little bit on your understanding of Ubuntu and how it links to Shimcheong.
- Martin:** Ok. So what is Ubuntu? I mean Ubuntu is such a big thing in South Africa, there are books about it and everybody is writing journal articles and everybody claims to have Ubuntu.
- Puleng:** For me it's actually like you say, it's something that is there that everybody talks about everyday but the actual definition of Ubuntu is what the difficulty of it comes in really, but the sense of caring for one another, that whole act of being human and therefore being human and living in harmony with other people, then people will say you have Ubuntu.
- Martin:** So it's that sort of like collectivist thing but not quite it's like more than that. What's that little phrase they use? I am...
- Puleng:** "I am because we are and because we are therefore I am." I think that will encompass what Ubuntu is about, and for me that links to Shimcheong as discussed in the paper. Shimcheong also looks at the interrelationships between people, that whole sense of "we-ness".
- Martin:** Right, right, and it's something that is sort of embedded in this fabric of... And also kind of empathy you know like you sort of sense that the other person is really humane and sort of acting in a humane way.
- Puleng:** Exactly, exactly, as we would normally discuss it normally in Psychology, but what is also interesting is that the authors say that with Shimcheong it goes beyond empathy, they actually say it's more like extended empathy because you know with empathy you are connected to the other individual, you can sort of imagine what they are feeling but with Shimcheong it actually goes beyond that you know; that you actually not only be in someone else's shoes but actually feel, not *as if* you feel but you *actually* feel it.
- Martin:** Oh ok, so not the as if.
- Puleng:** Yah, the actual thing or the actual feeling that the other person is going through.
- Martin:** I think that kind of thing is very useful, both Ubuntu and the Shimcheong business because we've got these sort of categories coming from Euro-American Psychology and one gets into the habit of thinking that these are the only available categories. And these things disturb those categories and it sort of says things don't fall into these neat little patterns of whatever, even something like empathy where we tend to think of empathy in too narrow a way and there are other sort of nuances.

- Puleng:** Hmm It's more broader than that. And, I don't know what also for me with what the authors were talking about and in focusing on shimcheong, I struggled a little bit in terms of how do you then link Shimcheong with something outside of Korea for example, are there other studies related to that or not? Ant that for me didn't really come out and therefore it makes it a little bit limited.
- Martin:** Yah like in a way I agree and the only access that people like us have to it is to sort of think of it like something exotic, you know as this sort of strange Eastern thing. So its almost like those sort of post-colonial theory critiques of people running around selling the orient, and the east as being exotic and strange, as if despite everything, there's a little element of that in this paper and in writings about Ubuntu for that matter.
- Puleng:** Exactly, I mean the mere fact that we could immediately link Shimcheong with Ubuntu makes me wonder about somebody sitting in another country if they could also link it to something that is specific to their culture as well and it would have been very interesting if the authors could have interrogated that issue a bit more and went outside of Korea and outside of Shimcheong and look at what other similarities are there and how that fits into the whole concept of cultural Psychology and if that could work or not.
- Martin:** Right, and so you were saying that it would have been nice if they could have related it to cultural Psychology in general a bit more and to other cultural writings phenomenon and so on. But that's also something that struck me quite a bit; if you look at the reference list, the authors of these paper seem to be this sort of world experts on Shimcheong and I don't see a lot of other writing and I was wondering if there is a lot of other writing but it's in Korean perhaps.
- Puleng:** I guess that could be a possibility, but in that way it excludes many other people and I'm sure if it's really of interest to the wider community it would then be a task for some of our researchers or Korean researchers to try and translate into English so that people like us can have access to that and be able to understand from their perspective as well.
- Martin:** And not just this very small group.
- Puleng:** Exactly, exactly.
- Martin:** And then I suppose whatever limitations there might be in the way they are approaching will become more obvious if they had a larger group of people that they were, who were also familiar with Korean culture that they were in conversation with.
- Puleng:** I think in a way Choi for example, I think he really played it safe because he didn't really go broader and look at other views, other perspectives in terms of culture and the whole concept of we-ness, the Cheong and Shimcheong as

discussed in the paper. They instead focused more on Korea and its culture and not linking it to anything else.

**Martin:** You know something else? I don't think Korea, or I would imagine – not knowing Korea – is sort of a simple thing you know like in a way obviously sort of the uniquely Koreanness of Korea is highlighted in a paper like this, but I'm sure – well I know – in many ways Korea is a western country, it's not an eastern country, you know because it's part of this modern world, post-modern world, this global world that we are in and certain consumer ways of looking at things, so money operates in certain ways in whatever you do. So I am sure there's like a huge amount of hybridness, sort of hybridity about Korea.

**Puleng:** It's interesting that you should mention that because what also comes out is that whole concept of collectivism, with Shimcheong it gives one the idea that actually Korea is a very collectivistic country, but like you mention, with globalization and with influences from outside – how is that affecting the culture and how is that filtering into the culture and I am wondering if people are becoming more individualistic and that whole concept of we-ness is still very strong.

**Martin:** I wonder yah, maybe it's not just bad, and maybe it's not just this precious heritage that's being destroyed, maybe it's sort of like new forms, like Shimcheong used to be something and now it's something different, maybe even more wonderful than it used to be, or something like that.

**Puleng:** Exactly, and that's something I would have liked to hear more about, in terms of the changes in society and the changes in the world and how that is affecting Shimcheong, for example, or if it is affecting it at all because the chances, are 'it's not' but did not really come out for me, so yah it really makes me wonder.

**Martin:** I'm kind of thinking about hybrid forms like music for example, you know which is not only sort of like traditional whatever but it's somehow a mixture of different things. I don't know if I can think of an example.

**Puleng:** You mean like err... typical Korean music for example? I don't think I have ever heard Korean music. That's actually quite interesting, yah.

**Martin:** I don't think I have. Maybe that sort of African Western music that gets mixed you know. Like sort of slave music from the US, jazz for example.

**Puleng:** Yah, yah, that's something that has really played a role in terms of people communicating through music, I think jazz has really played a role in that, because in Africa for example jazz is very big and the kind of jazz you find is very similar to the one that you would find in America as well, yah in the US.

ON THE NON-DISTINCTION OF SELF AND OTHER

**Martin:** It's sort of this wonderful thing; it's like the African soul that got imported to America and back into Africa or something like that.

**Puleng:** Yah exactly, it's also another way in which people communicate with one another, you know the whole 'talking to each other through music' and jazz has really played a role in that.

**Martin:** Ok, so, to end on a sort of constructive note, I think we were both sort of inspired by this paper and it sort of opened up possibilities for us and if we could say what they ought to be doing now if we were to give them advice, what would it be? If we could be so bold as to dare to give advice?

**Puleng:** Yoh, give advice, sho I wonder, you know like I said in the beginning about that whole concept of Shimcheong and it being something I had never heard of before, and the excitement as I read about it cos I could relate to what they were talking about. It's similar to what we were just talking about now in terms of jazz, even though we have our own kind of music in Africa and jazz being one of them, I am sure if I can go and sit somewhere in the United States and listen to the jazz I can also relate to that as well, so that whole concept of we-ness comes through again there for me.

**Martin:** Ok, and that's almost sort of the theme, it's almost sort of like the we-ness and the I-ness and the wonderful complex ways in which it gets interwoven, you know so, it's almost sort of like jazz is a private meditation in this sort of special venue, you imagine the whole space opening up with the notes playing off each other. And at the same time jazz is very sociable music.

**Puleng:** Exactly, I think that's beautifully put. You know like you say the keys, the notes together, and with people socializing or co-existing with one another, it's almost like those notes, and one needing the other to be able to exist and to be able to go on. That for me is a beautiful metaphor for what Shimcheong is about.

**Martin:** And finally in case people have been noticing these things [balloons in hands], what time is it?

**Puleng:** Celebration time!

**Martin:** Yee hah! Bye.

**Puleng:** Bye!

(This page left intentionally blank)