The U.S. and Korea: Values in Conflict

“The Republic of Korea and the United States: Values in Conflict,” a conference designed to contribute to the mutual appreciation of two countries, was held at CRIA headquarters in New York on July 21-22.

Korea and the United States have been allies for the last thirty years, since the war in the Korean peninsula. Yet if we are to realize the best in this relationship, we cannot simply dwell on a shared war experience, defense, or trade. Certainly we recognize that there are flaws in both societies, just as we are aware that each has strengths and vitality and reason for pride. The constructive questions we ask, then, are: What values should we apply to each other, and which ones can we share for a more mutually productive future?

Take the matter of political democracy. The South Korean form of government, usually defined in the United States as “authoritarian,” is considered by many Koreans to have its own kind of pluralism—farmers, the army, business, bureaucrats, students, religious organizations—operating by consensus. To what extent is Korean pluralism an expression of democracy by American standards? To what extent does American pluralism appear to be, in Korean eyes, simply chaos and confusion? And how do both of us, as we look upon the contradictions in our own societies, compare our rhetoric to reality?

Turn next to the question of the individual operating in his own political/social milieu. Many Americans are struck by the fact that in South Korea individuals have few American-style rights; that is, they are subject to the all-embracing dictates of government. At the risk of oversimplifying, let me raise the general issue of human rights. I shall go even further and quote some remarks of Mr. Ernest Lefever, which appeared in July, 1980, in the New York Times, in support of the notion that there can be no universal application of human rights:

“In South Korea, as in South Vietnam a decade ago, and in Iran and Nicaragua two years ago, a strong central government is essential to the survival of the state and to constructive economic and political development. In the three earlier cases, Washington in the name of democracy or human rights put pressure on the besieged allied regimes to reform and make common cause with its domestic adversaries. Thus it gave aid and comfort to the regime’s internal enemies and external supporters, both marching under the banner of national liberation.”

And Mr. Lefever continued:

“Mr. Carter’s foreign policy stance suggests he is profoundly confused about ends, means and consequences in the real world. There is little evidence that he understands the moral limits of politics. The first act of government is to govern, the second, to govern justly, the third, to govern democratically. To insist that the authorities in Seoul govern democratically when they find it exceedingly difficult to govern effectively and justly is to ask the impossible and to invite disaster.”

South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan’s views are not much different:

“Didn’t we learn a lesson from Vietnam? When students, religious leaders, and journalists indulged in blind criticism with no sense of patriotism, they drove the country to destruction. How much criticism is allowed in Communist countries today? We are under the constant threat of North Korea, which is waiting for us to make one false move. We can never feel or say that our reality is different from Vietnam. We must never forget that intellectuals can only survive in a safe and sound nation.”

“Another thing which I ask of our intellectuals is to gain a clear understanding of our historical background. Our nation lost its sovereignty at the outset of modern history and thus missed an opportunity to establish a modern state. We subsequently suffered foreign rule for thirty-six years. The nation found after liberation was independent in name only. The construction of a nation-state in the real sense is still underway at this very moment. How can we accomplish in thirty years that which takes others a century?”

“Thus intellectuals ought to analyze our historic situation correctly, participate in the construction of a democratic state, and do away with destructive criticism.”

A representative of a different point of view, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Donald F. McHenry, had this to say:

“There is an ethical flaw in Lefever’s argument. It is inconsistent with our national values to provide aid and comfort to a government that does not insure the life, liberty, and happiness of its own people. When we do not criticize the Korean junta, or a Somoza, we find ourselves confronting the fundamental moral dilemma of our policy—whether the democratic values to which we are committed are expendable in the face of other considerations.
"But there are other considerations, and the fact that these must be balanced in the decision-making process brings me to what I think is the second flaw. As we have learned ourselves, the 'stability' of some bulwarks against communism can be largely illusory, lasting only as long as the base of oppression upon which it is built can be maintained."

What do the Koreans themselves say about the human rights problem? One group that condemns the government of President Chun is the Japan Emergency Christian Conference on Korean Problems, which documents the plight of political prisoners and of other Koreans, often Christians, who suffer oppression. Student demonstrations too are almost daily reminders to New York Times readers that, among certain segments of the society at least, there exists a good deal of opposition to the political establishment in Korea. In the U.S., of course, freedom of religious belief and practice is a sacred principle. Can this principle be transplanted in Korean soil, in a culture that stems from a different tradition? As the New York Times reported in September, 1980, "To the millions of Koreans who live outside of urban areas—more than half the population of 37 million—Mr. Chun is not a tyrannical ogre portrayed in much of the Western press and by Korean activists. He is simply, in Confucian terms, the new father of the Korean family, the village head man, the all-provident king. 'We have a tradition of democracy here,' a professor said. 'Many rulers and kings of the I Dynasty were very democratic and benevolent but their rule was always for the people, not by the people.' And a school principal said to the Times reporter, 'Democracy must suit the Korean character—it must be adaptive. American-style democracy is suited to your character because you recognize certain limits or boundaries. The only difference between American democracy and Korean democracy is that our type must have a military way of imposing democratic life.'"

There are a number of broad terms to describe the differences between the Korean and the U.S. forms of government. One can say in a very general way that there is a conflict of values between America's pluralistic society and what we see as Korea's closed and homogeneous one. Americans, for their part, give high priority to a variety of individual freedoms, which are unregulated to the greatest extent possible. This system, common to Western democracies, values pluralism above all other considerations as a means of maintaining and expanding economic and social horizons—and this explicitly includes religious freedom. Korean society, on the other hand, wishes to limit conflicts among individuals. Through discipline that begins with patriotism and the educational system, it attempts to create a harmonious culture aimed at progress within the larger whole.

One can argue that if each society has the utilitarian goal of the greatest good for the greatest number, both of them fulfill their own aspirations. And it is easy to see why a substantial number of Koreans with Western ideas—particularly those emphasizing personal and religious freedoms—find themselves at loggerheads with the traditions of Korean society. The case of the dissident Kim Dae Jung is illuminating here. To quote once more from the New York Times, a farmer who was interviewed said, "Kim Dae Jung should be killed. We watched the news and according to what television had to say about his crimes, he caused much confusion."

What did he mean by "confusion"? Under the Tang Dynasty in China (618-970 A.D.), at the head of the list of crimes in the penal code were the ten great abominations. First, of course, came plotting rebellion, promoting sedition, and so on. Abomination number seven was discord. By this the Tang Dynasty, following the Confucian ethic, meant anything that upset the harmony of the five great relationships (beginning with ruler and subject and going on through the loyalty of children to their parents, younger 'brother to elder brother, etc.). Anyone who acted from a different ethic was considered to be acting criminally. This kind of cultural value was passed on by the Chinese to the Koreans and modified over the course of generations to fit the particular Korean political genius.

I'm not suggesting that one agree with this point of view, but I think it is necessary to understand it. Many Americans fault the Koreans for a lack of sensitivity to Western-style democracy, the Koreans seem to be expected to make important adaptations. In urging this kind of change, one has to consider what it might do to a closed, homogeneous, and disciplined society. Can Korea withstand our kind of "confusion"? Should it? In response to American pressure the Koreans are well aware of this American attitude and try to deal with it as best they can. Consider, for example, the inaugural address of President Chun Doo Hwan in which several Korean goals were enumerated: "The cultivation in this land of democracy suited to our political climate; the attainment of a genuine welfare society; a renaissance of patriotic and civic spirit through educational reform and enhancement of cultural values; an efficient constitution that recognizes and addresses our reality."

While it is true that we in the U.S. do not wish to adopt the Korean—or for that matter the Japanese—system, we have to be aware that our insistence that others change their societies in our particular democratic terms poses profound problems. Most of us, though, are open to reasonable discussion. As Richard V. Allen, President Reagan's national security advisor, observed last June, "Our support of human rights around the world should not be confused with a policy of indiscriminate promotion of our own political system or institutions. There would be no point in denying that we consider democratic or representative government better than the available alternatives. Because we believe, or perhaps even because we know, that our way is best, we may fervently wish that all nations adopt institutions similar to our own. But we are too sensitive to the vast differences in the historical and cultural experience of different societies, and the manifold obstacles many nations face in maintaining even a modest level of political stability, to try to impose our own institutions on them. We are convinced that to do so would be neither right nor wise...."
There will be an increasing number of changes in our two societies and their impact will intensify. It is of more than casual interest what type of society succeeds in the future, and on what terms. Discussions such as this, in the spirit of friendship and concern, will identify many areas of conflict, but they will also highlight areas of mutual interest, including peace, prosperity, freedom, and the fulfillment of the individual's aspirations within the framework of his local, national, and, finally, international community.

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AMERICA'S CULTURAL DILEMMA

by Wilson Carey McWilliams

It is not surprising that other nations are often puzzled by America. Americans do not understand themselves or their country very well, and in many ways they do not wish to. Our leaders often speak of an American "creed" or "way of life," implying that American culture is a unified whole; and periodically a crusade for "Americanism" grips large numbers of citizens, as it seems to be doing today. In fact, however, American culture is profoundly incoherent, composed of elements that are radically incompatible. America descends from Judaism and Christianity, on the one hand, and from Enlightenment rationalism on the other. It praises love and individualism, scarcely aware of the contradiction; and Americans scorn "materialism" at the same time that they define an expanding Gross National Product as an essential element of the common good.

Coming to terms with America—something few Americans are willing to do—requires understanding just how much at odds the two sides of our culture really are. In sketching those differences, I will be arguing (1) that both sides of American political culture, for very different reasons; are suspicious of regimes like Korea's; (2) that this coincidence of doctrines that are ordinarily so at odds creates an extremely difficult climate of opinion for Korea in the United States; (3) that so long as both regimes remain unchanged, friendly relations between Korea and the United States will require a great deal of forebearance—and willingness to learn—on both sides.

The most familiar definition of the "American creed" points to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and to the liberal political philosophy that underlies them. These doctrines, embodied in our national institutions, have undeniably shaped American public life and thought. Americans learn about "rights" and "checks and balances" even before those doctrines are taught formally in the schools. Philosophic liberalism is presented as if it were the "common sense of the subject," as Jefferson thought, rather than as a controversial and controversial teaching. Louis Hartz was right to argue that in a great many ways American political thought is governed by an "irrational Lockeanism," a philosophic liberalism planted in the subconscious of the American mind (The Liberal Tradition in America, 1955).

The Framers began with the familiar proposition that we are "born free." This concern for our birth reflects their idea of human nature as ontological. Human beings are defined by their origins. To locate human nature, in this view, it is necessary to strip away the effects of tradition, family, society, and education. "Natural man" is discerned most clearly in the child or in uncivilized settings. Fundamentally, only their biology is natural to human beings.

Two aspects of this doctrine should be noted. First, it asserts that by nature, human goals are determined by our desires. Reasons and the higher faculties come into existence to serve the body and the passions. They are instruments only and cannot pretend to rule.

Second, the Framers' philosophy is radically individualistic. Human beings are naturally separate, each isolated in his or her own body. We may touch, but we cannot—except by violence—pass the boundary of the flesh, and in that fundamental sense we are always alone. Moreover, each individual is morally complete as well as physically separate. Since our innate desires determine the ends we naturally and properly pursue, we need no authority to educate us in goals. The soul of the individual is his or her own business, and no one has the right to intrude on it. We come into the world, the Framers taught, owing nothing to anyone and with no obligations to any authority.

Natural right, then, derives from what is most universal about human beings, their bodies and their passions, as opposed to the customs, excellences, and institutions that make us different. The tradition of the Framers thus leads to universalistic definitions of human rights—and, in fact, they had an extremely unified view of the human condition.

The ruling desire of human beings, the Framers argued, is to be free, by which they meant that human beings, by nature, want to be able to do as they wish and, most especially, to preserve themselves. Consequently we are at odds with all obstacles, especially with nature. Nature, in this view, is an implacable enemy: It does not give us what we want without trying to frustrate our most basic desire and radically limiting our freedom. Human beings, then, are locked in a struggle with nature, and the aim of mastering nature by adding to human power ranks as the overriding goal of human life and politics.

At odds with nature, self-regarding human beings are...
also naturally in a state of war with their equally self-concerned fellows. Sometimes you refuse to do as I wish; at other times both of us want and compete for the same things. But human beings can be conciliated in a way that nature cannot. We can make agreements—"social contracts"—that create societies and states.

Political society, in the Framers' doctrine, is not natural. It is a contrivance, something we make because the "state of war" is unprofitable. In that state every other person is a potential enemy; in Hobbes's famous saying, "the life of man is nasty, mean, poor, brutish and short." To escape this condition we agree to give up some of our "natural right" to do as we please in order to obtain a more secure and complete enjoyment of the rights we retain.

Hence, political society is a second-best alternative, accepted because none of us is strong enough to be a secure tyrant. That practical limitation, however, does not change the fact that, in principle, tyranny—which allows me to do as I wish with myself and with you—is the best life. Political society has few claims on our allegiance. It is an instrument and must prove its utility by (1) enhancing the security of lives and properties and (2) helping people advance in the mastery of nature by adding to their power and, hence, their freedom. The Framers rejected the small state, which political philosophy has traditionally regarded as essential for republican government, because such states are too weak. Only a large state has the resources for the war with nature.

As this suggests, "progress," as we have come to understand that term, is an essential measure of the political good. (One of the few positive duties enjoined on Congress by the Constitution is the advancement of science and "useful arts.") Political society must establish reasonable law and order and it must provide material progress. If it does not, it has ceased to be useful to the ends for which we "entered" society, and such a polity has no claim on our allegiance. Economic growth, in this view, is valued for more than its material benefits: It is a requirement of patriotism, the cement of political society itself.

THE RULE OF LAW

While progress is always desirable in philosophic liberalism, the rule of law is always in danger. In liberal theory, I agree to contracts, the foundation of law, only because I cannot get what I want alone. Since political society is better than the "state of war," I am obliged to keep the promise I made to my fellow citizens when we established our regime. This assumes that if I break my promises, my faithlessness will spread contagiously and society will fall back into the "state of war." But will society collapse into anarchy if I violate my commitments? Will my fellows follow my bad example? I have two reasons to doubt this. (1) I may be too unimportant to set a trend; people may simply choose to ignore my peccadillos; and (2) I may not be detected in breaking the law, in which case I will not have set any example at all. In other words, liberal society cannot rid itself of the tempting possibility that I may be able to break my promises while everyone else keeps his, allowing me to combine the advantages of society with the freedom of the state of nature. This prospect of a socially invisible criminality—the myth of Gygges' ring in Plato's Republic—offers me a great many of the advantages of tyranny without the tyrant's damning visibility. In liberal society, law is especially vulnerable to that temptation because our desire to break the law is so easily moralized in terms of "individual freedom" and "natural right." Consequently, a great deal of education in liberal politics is devoted to repressing the temptation to lawlessness, particularly by concealing the relation between the ideal of individual freedom and the tyrannical life.

This is important in the dialogue between America and regimes like Korea's because it helps explain the strength of America's antipathy to authoritarian regimes. Obviously, an authoritarian or dictatorial government runs counter to philosophic liberalism in that it violates "natural right" and the idea that government originates in agreement. Legitimate government, in this teaching, is limited government and, moreover, government restricted to as narrow a sphere as possible. But Americans also oppose dictatorships because they find tyranny so tempting. Dictatorial rule and authoritarian government create anxiety in us because they exert the powerful, threatening attraction of tabooed things. In general, this is all for the good, but it means that authoritarian governments will encounter more than rational suspicion in America.

Military governments find their welcome even more chill. Armies deal with war, and in liberal theory the "state of war" is primitive and prepolitical: War is not "politics conducted by other means." It is outside politics and not subject to rules or laws. All war, in this view, is essentially total war, since war reintroduces the lawless condition of prepolitical life.

The separation between war and peace in liberal theory creates an almost categorical distinction between the "military" and "politics." Since military men are preoccupied with war and violence, they are always introducing these "prepolitical" concerns into politics. Doubtless we need armed forces, liberal theorists concede, but it is important to keep these more "primitive" organizations and considerations subordinate to civil rule. Moreover, for liberal theory (as well as for its Marxist progeny) violence and the military are characteristic of an early state of society. Progress will gradually replace this "military" stage by an "industrial" one. In these terms military rule may be tolerated in a "backward" society, but at considerable sacrifice to the dignity of the military regime itself.

THE PRIVATE ORDER

The liberal tradition in America has always been opposed by an older tradition rooted in ancient Greek political philosophy and in Jewish and Christian religion. The peoples who came to America brought these ideas with them, entangled with their ethnic cultures and customs and embodied in their families, churches, and community institutions. If liberalism shaped and dominated the public order in America, traditional culture retained a powerful foothold in the private order of American life.

In contrast to liberalism, the classical and religious
view of human nature is teleological. That is, it defines human beings and institutions by their ends rather than their origins. Obviously, a statement like “human beings are rational animals” does not mean that all humans are rational. Rather, it suggests that human beings are drawn by nature toward rationality and that, given a decent rearing, they will tend to become rational. The statement also implies that human beings who are not rational are incomplete or immature, and that human beings who are not rational cannot enjoy a truly human life. In Aristotle’s famous illustration, the nature of the acorn is the oak tree. We cannot possibly understand what the acorn is without recognizing what it strives to become. In this understanding, human beings aim at completeness, at fulfilling what nature intends. To be complete implies that one has what one needs. One is self-sufficient, capable of self-rule.

But to be self-rulled is to be ruled “by oneself,” and that poses the question, “Who am I?” Evidently people differ in their minds, and still more in their feelings, about what the “self” is. The classical tradition maintained that genuine self-rule demands that one be ruled by one’s true self. To be self-rulled, then, I must be ruled by my nature as a human being. Moreover, since human beings themselves are parts of nature, to be ruled by human nature we must accept the partiality of humanity and its dependence on the whole of which it is a part. In this sense, to be self-rulled means to be ruled by nature.

Our ability to be self-rulled is limited by our passion, the ancient tradition argued. Our emotions and feelings are inevitably self-centered. They are parts of a body, and all the senses make the body the center of things rather than a part of a larger whole. Our emotions, left to themselves, do resent limitations, dependence, and mortality. In this liberalism is correct. The classical view differs, however, because it denies that the self can be identified with untaught feeling. Self-rule requires that the passions be educated to accept the real self and the real condition of humanity. This education is never perfect; our senses and passions will always have a strong element of bodily self-centeredness. But the emotions can be schooled: Our feelings lead us out of the self, and the right political and social institutions can encourage us to become emotionally involved and identified with other people and things. We learn to feel that property, family, and country are “our own,” so that we are willing to suffer or to die to protect our possessions, friends, and kinsmen.

Force or fear can drive our feelings underground, but it cannot eliminate them. Coerced obedience, the classical tradition observed, is always resisted, and hence obedience to rules is not enough (a proposition central to the Christian insistence on love as opposed to law). Mere obedience leaves us unhappy and angry at even the best rules, and it endangers the rules themselves, for the resentful soul will destroy the laws at the first sign of weakness.

When Aristotle said that human beings are political animals, he meant more than the obvious fact that we are born weak and dependent and that we need one another for nurturance, education, and material well-being. He was also arguing that human beings need politics because participation in political life can teach us to be self-rulled. Participation is vital because ruling and being ruled in turn affords us the experience of self-rule, and having a role in making a rule lessens our resistance to it. This does not mean that, given the chance, all human beings will be political activists or even that they will demand democracy. Some may choose merely to be peaceful, obedient citizens but will be resentful unless they feel they can have a say, that they matter, and that it makes a difference whether or not they abide by the law.

**POLITICAL SOCIETY**

Plato and Aristotle argued for the small state because (1) its smallness brings the political community within the range of the senses, lessening the tension between private feeling and the public good, and (2) the small state allows us to participate in public life and increases the citizen’s sense that he or she matters. The education of human souls, not power, is the measure of a political society in the classical tradition.

It has been a long time since the city state was practicable, of course. Yet that does not invalidate the ancient argument. It merely proves that we live in a time which does not permit the most excellent sort of regime. The kind of laws appropriate for a country is determined by the character of its citizens and by their political situation. Laws attempt to make human beings better and must start with them as they are. Moral obligations are contingent on circumstances. In this sense, the spirit of the classical tradition is alien to universalistic definitions of human rights.

While political life plays a vital role in schooling the passions, it is not enough. Our love for our country, like our love for our kinsmen, gives it more importance than it is due, given its place in nature. Though more noble than egotism, patriotism is still unjust. To be truly self-rulled is to be ruled by nature, and nature commands that all countries wax and wane, and all regimes rise and fall. Political life may lead us to resist that law of nature, but it also points beyond itself. At least, the ancients observed, politics leads us to see other countries, other ways, and other peoples. The existence of other ways poses the question, “What is the best way?” Just so, meeting other people encourages us to ask, “What is like and unlike between us? And what is human?” At best, politics encourages us toward philosophy and toward religion, toward a concern for the truth and for the nature of things.

Political society need not, and probably cannot, make this higher truth a part of the law. Human beings need love of country, for all its shortcomings, because patriotism plays so vital a role in educating the passions. A law designed for the best human beings describes the mark for all lesser law; it cannot be applied to base human beings. Nevertheless, the classical tradition insists that political institutions respect the higher law and that rulers recognize moral as well as practical limits to their actions. Power and wealth cannot be goals in themselves, since the legitimate end of political life is a self-rulled humanity. In this sense, government is certainly limited, and it cannot be arbitrary, since it is designed for rational creatures. The classical tradition...
does not reject authoritarian rule, but it suspects dictatorship and it loathes tyranny.

The ancients were also grudging toward military rule. In a good society, military forces are the result of necessity, reflecting the fact that other countries are unjust and might become aggressors. Some unjust men, moreover, will yield to persuasion; only the most recalcitrant will give way only to force. Military force, then, is tailored to extreme injustice and its educational role is limited to the control of behavior. Good soldiers are trained to fight, not to decide whom to fight. In the Republic, Socrates likens the virtue of guardians to the virtue of dogs. Military life places too much emphasis on courage among the virtues, and courage needs to be ruled by wisdom.

**SQUARING MORAL CIRCLES**

Much of American political history has been defined by the conflict of these two views, the more modern theory intent on advancing individual liberty, the ancient one struggling to establish a political community which would educate its citizens to use freedom rightly. In America, for example, capitalism has never been able to enact or carry out its theories. It was opposed, moderated, and constrained by the heritage embodied in locality, church, and party. Politically, the same forces worked to limit the privatizing individualism of the Framers, which is what Tocqueville meant when he said that the customs of the people were more important than laws in determining the character of American democracy.

Tocqueville understood, however, that the liberal Enlightenment tradition—embedded in public institutions, endowed with the highest legal authority, and governing economic life—would gradually erode traditional culture. “Individualism,” he wrote, “at first only saps the virtues of public life, but in the long run, it attacks and destroys all the others....” And so it has. It is easy to see, in contemporary America, the truth of Tocqueville’s prophecy:

> Not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.

This does not mean that the conflict between America’s two traditions has disappeared. The churches and communities that organized the older view and inculcated its teachings have become more and more disordered and fragmented. Fewer and fewer Americans can articulate the classical alternatives as a coherent body of teaching. Nevertheless, that heritage and the values it upholds continue to speak powerfully to Americans. The conflict between ancient and modern culture in America takes place less and less between groups and classes and more and more within the psyche of the individual, schooled in modern individualism but drawn, however confusedly, toward the ideal of political community.

This division in the American soul, more marked today, has been evident for a long time. In Pragmatism, William James argued that the advantage of his philosophy lay in enabling one to hold two contradictory beliefs. Americans have sometimes spoken of their “pragmatic” temper as if it reflected a sunny indifference to theory. Actually, it bespeaks their fear of theory, their desire to avoid a choice between God and Mammon. But pragmatism does not solve the problem. Too often the two theories conflict. Consider the Reagan administration, for example, caught between its individualism and devotion to economic growth at all costs, on the one hand, and its social conservatism on the other. To be for “morality” may require curtailing individual “freedom,” and vice versa. Clever ideologists will try to persuade us that we can square these moral circles, but it is easier to persuade the mind than the soul. At deeper levels, Americans recognize that they face contradictory moral demands and that any decision they make will be painful, and probably wrong. The American psyche exists in a state of chronic tension and nagging guilt.

Americans are thus inclined to become self-righteous whenever their two creeds agree. Freedom from their ordinary ambivalence gives Americans an extraordinary sense of confidence and certainty—and, of course, it makes it much easier to act. Moreover, moral crusading in one area of life seems to offer a way of concealing and excusing our sins in other spheres. In fact, given half a chance, Americans will combine the absolutistic elements of both traditions.

Ancient and modern theory do agree, for their very different reasons, about certain principles of human rights. Both are hostile to dictatorship. Both insist on limited government and favor the rule of law. Similarly, both regard military rule as, at the very least, undesirable. And both regard consent as a necessary element of any good regime.

President Carter, an engineer and a born-again Christian, personified the division in the American soul. It is no accident that he was unusually decisive in the area of human rights. And the popularity of his human rights policy—which the Reagan administration discovered to its surprise—suggests how typical of his fellow citizens Carter was in this respect.

All of this suggests, obviously, that the Korean regime must expect to meet with a good deal of suspicion in America.

I do not think Americans should be reticent in trying to teach what we believe—although civility and understanding would go a long way—and I have no doubt that other regimes have much to learn from us. At the same time, it is equally clear that the United States is often intrusive, self-righteously moralistic, and ignorantly unsympathetic in its dealings with other nations. We are, to put it simply, often very hard to take, and we have to rely on our friends to bear with us. It may help to realize that our worst qualities reflect the conflicts of America’s political soul. If the United States is sometimes overeager to heal the ills of others, it is because it suffers from an anguish that may be past healing.

The historic dialectic in our culture may be winding down to a whimpering conclusion. Our religious and classical heritage is waning, and the modern, individualistic side of our culture, already dominant, may win
what amounts to a complete victory. But modern political philosophy wins only pyrrhic victories. The quest for mastery, the great modern project, is a destructive illusion. America and her friends can only hope that we will remember the ancient wisdom that tells us the

good life is found in obedience to nature.

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KOREA: TRADITION AND CULTURAL REVOLUTION

by Pyong-Choon Hahm

If one can characterize the Western political tradition as legal, the Korean political tradition could be described as ethical, or alegal. In the old Korea law was considered beneath the dignity of the ruling elite, who regulated their conduct by the Confucian li, a concept broad enough to encompass all the usages and conventions inhered from the legendary sage-kings of the Chines Golden Age. It was, in other words, an accumulation of political as well as ethical wisdom—the moral expression of Cosmic Reason, or the Way of the Universe. Confucius said that when a society is ordered by law (or by the threat of punitive sanctions), its members evade the law with impunity and feel no shame; but when a society is ordered by li, its members not only behave properly but also know shame. The rule of li, not the rule of law, was the Korean ideal.

Woodrow Wilson in 1889 defined a state as "a people organized for law within a definite territory." Now if it is quite clear that law never occupied such an esteemed position in Korea as in Wilson’s America, how did Koreans manage to govern themselves as a nation-state for sixteen centuries? In order to understand the basic fabric of communal life of old Korea, it is necessary to go beyond the official ideology of the ruling elite.

INTERLOCKING EGOS

How the individual is perceived in a culture is largely a function of the "desirable" pattern of interaction between the ego and the non-ego as posited by that culture. Indeed, a culture may place a heavy emphasis upon the separateness and the distinctness of every ego. In such a culture, a clear division between the ego as the subject and the non-ego as the object may be deemed the beginning of human intelligence and the foundation of mental health.

Having thus atomized the ego, an egocentric culture invariably becomes fascinated by logic as "the basic weapon for the discovery of truth." Logical distinctions and conceptual categorizations become the essence of both logical and judicial processes. As "litigiousness" predominates, an egocentric culture becomes preoccupied with legal problems. Differences are maximized and distinctions emphasized in the name of conceptual clarity and the discovery of truth. A society with highly discrete egos has to rely on legal rather than ethical bonds to hold itself together. It is through adversary, or litigious, proceedings that an egocentric culture secures truth, justice, freedom, equality, and democracy.

The Korean culture has refused to be obsessed with self-concern. Emerson’s "self-reliance" constitutes an exact antithesis of "humanness" in Korea. An attempt to place a clear boundary around one’s ego is tantamount to pitting oneself against the non-ego—a declaration of war against the rest of the world. What the Korean culture valued most were deep and close interpersonal relations, which could be best described as an overlapping and interpenetration of the ego with the non-ego. It was not enough that several egos came sufficiently close for their boundaries to make contact. Rather, a portion of each ego should overlap or interlock with the others.

Every civilization develops a worldview that gives meaning to human life. It may therefore be useful to examine the Korean Weltanschauung, in which certain values were maintained as the summum bonum. Some civilizations have postulated a supreme being that is jealously unique, omnipotent, universal, and historic. But Koreans have not postulated such a creator-god at—and as—the center of the universe. They did not seek the ultimate meaning of life in a relationship with a god. If there were such a thing as "salvation," it was to be found in relationship with other human beings.

Man came into the world as a part of the rhythmic flux of nature. He did not come from another world, nor would he go away from this world when he died. Man was a part of nature and nature a part of him. This did not mean that a Korean lived in perfect harmony (in the Greek sense) with nature. He was, for example, under no "obligation" to freeze to death in a harsh winter. Instead, he built fires and a warm shelter. Accordingly, every form of life would be sustained if it managed to adapt its lifestyle to nature’s rhythm and balance.

HUMANNESS

In many cultures heroes were said to be of divine origin; in Korea even heroes were thoroughly human. For a Korean, godliness and divinity were nonhuman conditions. Life in this world was too precious to be mere preparatory transition to a more perfect and permanent life in another dimension of existence.

Nor were human instincts denigrated by the Koreans, placed in opposition to Logos, or divine reason. Man was fully human only if he had instincts. Koreans failed to be enchanted by the body/spirit dichotomy. The notion that the one was somehow superior to the
other was as alien as the idea that the two were hostile to each other. Body and spirit constituted a continuum—a mutually overlapping, interpenetrating, and conjunctive whole. Similarly, man and nature (or god) formed a mutually overlapping continuum. The absence of dualism of man and god dictated freedom from otherworldly obsession.

Human behavior that made life rich and full was judged good. The very fact that one could share touch-es, smells, sounds, sights, and tastes with other human beings became the strongest confirmation of one's life. Conversely, loneliness was the ultimate evil and pain. Even negative affections such as anger, hatred, and jealousy were better than an absence of feeling. With hatred there was still interpersonal contact. For the effectiveness of ostracism as the most potent punishment against antisocial behavior in Korea, Banishment from home meant a deprivation of kinship and communal affection. The more reprehensible the crime, the greater the distance one had to travel. Thus a stranger was automatically suspected of being a malefactor in exile.

SHAME AND HONESTY
Shame is the emotional pain caused by apprehension of an impending withdrawal from the affection of others. For a Korean the fording of loneliness was a more effective sanction than guilt—more effective even than fear of retribution by an abstract being for violating metaphysical commandments. The offense committed had to be a tangible injury to a human being rather than an infraction of an abstract rule. To inflict emotional pain upon another person was as reprehensible as bodily damage; a violation of another's property rights was usually thought less-reprehensible. In the case of property offenses the degree of culpability corresponded to the extent of personal pain such offenses caused.

Ethics were relative and situational in Korea. A wrong in one situation was not necessarily a wrong in another. Good and evil were seen as a continuum. Neither of them was more potent or dominant than the other, and both would remain with mankind always.

Honesty, an ethical quality characterized by steadfastness and constancy in interpersonal affection, was highly valued by Koreans; it meant being loyal to one's existential commitment to other human beings. But as a moral attribute that compelled a person always to tell the "truth," Koreans refused to esteem it as a cardinal virtue. Since no person can know the complete truth and there was no absolute god to piece together the fragments of human perceptions, truth became relative and had to be qualified by the particular equities of a situation.

Koreans insisted that "fact" be evaluated in the light of its specific impact upon concrete interpersonal dynamics. Distortion of fact for selfish gain was most severely condemned as vicious and despicable. On the other hand "dishonesty" to save a human life, for instance, would not be reprehensible at all. Again, a calculation of ethical costs and benefits was involved, the calculation avowedly prejudiced in favor of the interpersonal, the particular, and the tangible.

EMOTION
Strong emotion had a special place in Korean culture. A monarch, however powerful, rarely dared to ignore the tearful remonstrances of his ministers. As the essence of humanness, emotion was thought to have a powerful influence over man and nature. Emotion not only moved other human beings, but animals and inanimate objects as well. A strong negative emotion was believed to play havoc with the rhythm of nature. It is still a common saying that the agonizing grief of a wronged woman will bring forth frost in midsummer.

It is because of the powerful influence of emotion that crime against individuals was inhibited in Korea. Despite dangerous overcrowding in the cities, Korean streets are still much safer than those in America. One who contemplated harming another had to reckon with the strong negative emotion of the intended victim. Moreover, retribution was certain; vengeance belonged to the victim and his kin. Actual retaliation might be visited upon the children or other loved ones of the evildoer in the manner and at the time of the victim's choosing. In view of the almost religious significance attached to a child, such vengeance was dreaded.

Similarly, Koreans feared a curse—not as an invocation of superhuman forces, but as a human commitment to a certain course of action impelled by strong emotion. In other cultures a person might be driven to homicide because of an overpowering animosity. A Korean might experience a similar urge, but to slay a foe was only to compound the difficulty, rendering the slayer liable to a reprisal by the family of the dead nemesis. The ultimate alternative was to commit suicide by hanging oneself during the night from the lintel of the enemy's front gate. Such a suicide, of course, was careful to carry a document on his body, specifying all the woes and sufferings that had driven him to this desperate act of self-destruction.

Given the powerful attachment to life in Korea, suicide as a form of protest naturally carried a tremendous impact on public opinion. This is why when Korea was being forcibly taken over by a neighboring power, many prominent Koreans committed suicide, leaving a testament in which the brutal injustice was harshly denounced.

FEMALE TOTEM
The cultural revulsion against personal injury to others chilled the martial ardor of Koreans. Since political unification in the seventh century A.D., the Korean people have never managed even a modest military conquest of another people. Some observers have pointed out that this emotional abhorrence of bloodshed may be due to the Koreans' female totem. Koreans trace their ancestry to a Bear-Woman, a she-bear turned into a woman to procreate the Korean nation. The word "Korea" comes from a Far Eastern word for bear, and the Koreans have been called the Bear People from time immemorial.

Korean culture has regarded the female sex as more creative and productive than the male. If there had to be a creator-god, it would certainly be a female one. But the totem was not endowed with the qualities of divine law-giver. The fundamental principle of human justice simply demanded that every wrong and injury be so
recompensed that no grudge be allowed to linger on. To discover the punishment that fit the crime, one needed only to put oneself in the position of the victim.

Homicide was not only a heinous crime, but the desecration of the rhythm of life itself. A killer lost his humanity from the moment of his crime. In the old Korea the penalty for homicide invariably was death. Imprisonment was rarely prescribed even for lesser crimes, and jails were maintained primarily for the detention of the accused while awaiting final sentence. Punishment commonly took the form of menial bondage in border garrisons, combining elements of servitude and banishment. A downgrading to slave status was the authoritative expression of the community's decision to deprive the criminal of his full membership in the community.

The traditional sense of penal justice was little concerned with the humane treatment of convicted criminals. Once beyond the pale of humanity, the dehumanization of the guilty party nullified his claim to decent treatment. The Korean sense of humanity, therefore, dictated that every effort be made to prevent a conviction of guilt itself.

A voluntary admission of guilt, on the other hand, enabled the criminal to redeem his humanity. Confession signified the criminal's readiness to accept punishment as a just compensation for his wrong while it also allowed the community to escape the onus of inflicting new pain that would generate in turn new ill will on the part of the criminal.

Inflicting capital punishment always posed difficulties. However justified, the destruction of human life was deplorable. Executions were not permitted in spring, the season of life's renewal; with the exception of crimes against ancestors or communal superiors, executions had to wait until autumn, the season of life's retrenchment. In addition, no regular member of the community dared stain his hands with blood. Korea was home to people of alien origin who, though treated as social outcasts by indigenous Koreans, provided the community with essential services such as butchery, tanning, and executions.

**CONFLICT AND CONCILIATION**

Every culture devises a pattern of practice whereby a conflict is resolved as speedily as possible. In monotheistic cultures, adjudication settles a dispute by authoritatively designating one side to be in the right, the other in the wrong. For Koreans the most desirable form of conflict resolution was to achieve consensus that there had never been a conflict in the first place. What there was, in fact, was a misunderstanding. The abundant humanness of all concerned had only to exert itself to correct the dangerous miscalculation. In such a case a misfortune was transformed into a blessing. As the saying went, "The earth becomes firmer after the rain."

The Korean reluctance to grant formal recognition to the existence of a conflict was not for the sake of postponing its resolution. Rather, it stemmed from concern that a conflict, once publicized and formalized, would become more difficult to resolve, having turned the parties into adversaries rather than fellow members of the community. Once the relationship degenerated into one of public antagonism, an adversary proceeding with a view toward an adjudicated settlement became the only alternative. The clear choice was for the parties and the entire community to endeavor jointly to reinstate the interpersonal continuum and rehabilitate the rhythm of communal life through mutual concession and compromise.

The underlying premise was that no one could be perfectly right or absolutely wrong. Even a victim of a robbery was to blame to some extent. He should not, perhaps, have made himself such a tempting target by traveling alone on an isolated stretch of road after failing to keep his wealth a secret, and so forth. Then, the extenuating circumstances of the robber had to be taken into account as well.

If a conflict could not be avoided by denying its reality, the second best form of resolution was conciliation. Unlike adjudication, conciliation operated on the principle of minimizing differences and maximizing the areas of commonality. Deciding clearly which side was right and which side wrong was not primary; the goal was to achieve an amicable and agreeable resolution. A settlement that maximized emotional satisfaction of both parties and minimized postsettlement resentment was the fair resolution.

The parties to a conflict were under subtle but intense pressure to achieve speedy reconciliation. While the fiction of privacy was being maintained, the entire community made its preferred mode of settlement known. Unless the parties were prepared to risk ostracism, the wish of the community was most difficult to ignore. The community had a legitimate interest in any conflict that might develop among its members simply because every conflict had a propensity to disrupt the rhythms of communal life.

**CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES**

From earliest childhood every "decent" member of Korean society was trained to avoid any course of action that might lead to a confrontation with another member of the community. The greater the delicacy and alertness with which a person carried out this operation, the greater his virtue. This sensibility was the quintessence of Korean cultural refinement. The word for this faculty in Korean is much'i, literally "eye sensitivity." The underdevelopment of this faculty was a sign of vulgarity, if not barbarity.

Although one's indicated readiness to modify a projected course of action was not coupled with an overt demand for a reciprocal concession, a person lacking the culture to reciprocate in such a situation found himself gradually shoved out of the regular orbit of communal interaction. The rest of the community no longer felt constrained to exercise much'i toward such a rude person. Reciprocity was the essence. No balance sheet or ledger was kept, but a meticulous accounting was maintained in the communal memory.

Since the concession was made so unobtrusively and so far ahead of any likelihood of an actual conflict, an "uncivilized" person, or a foreigner, might not even be aware of the need to make the required reciprocation. If the outsider persisted in his "shameless pushiness," the
accumulated exasperation often exploded into open hostility. Having been quite unprepared for this outburst, it was now the outsider’s turn to be deeply offended. Without a premonition of impending disaster, the foreigner had no choice but to condemn the sudden display of anger and resentment as totally unwarranted. Even if an explanation were proffered, he could not but complain that someone should have given him a warning or some indication of what was required of him.

This is perhaps as good an illustration as any of the almost insuperable hindrance to crosscultural interaction. When people belonging to different cultures—that is, accustomed to playing by different sets of rules—come into interaction, conflict seems unavoidable. This is especially true when the rules are amorphous and unarticulated even by the natives themselves. The trouble is that the rules may be so basic, familiar, and habitual that they appear to the natives as “natural” and decent. All the actors tend to be unaware of the need to collate the different rules or, at least, to prepare themselves for the probable behavioral and normative dissonance. It is ironic that the finely tuned Korean rules, established to avoid intracultural conflict, may be the very cause of crosscultural conflict.

**COMMUNICATION**

The mode of interpersonal communication preferred by the Korean culture was a faithful reflection of what it regarded as the desirable and decent pattern of interego dynamics. The more intense the sentiment, the less verbalization was thought necessary. The fact that a sentiment could be communicated only with the help of verbal symbols demonstrated quite clearly the failure or absence of inter-ego continuum between the communicator and the communicatee. Furthermore, a lack of ego-overlap proved rather conclusively that the sentiment now being verbalized could not be very intense or sincere.

Due to the phenomenal development of modern communication and transportation, the necessity of interacting personally across cultural boundaries has been growing rapidly. Among many aspects of crosscultural communication the field of international trade and investment deserves particular attention.

The principal medium of crosscultural business communication is a contract and the negotiations leading to it. Traditionally even business transactions were approached differently in Korea. Where two minds met to produce an agreement, even for monetary gain, Koreans experienced certain cultural awkwardness or unease in confining the resultant relationship to one of legalism only. From their vantage point, a legal commitment was too “conflict prone” and belligerent. What the Koreans aspired to was mutually shared humanness, not clever anticipation of adverse contingencies and advantageous provisions in a legalistic document.

Not that Koreans were so optimistic as to foresee only successful fulfillment of all the terms of an agreement reached on the basis of utmost sincerity and ego-overlap. But where there had been mutually shared humanness, the chance of overcoming difficulties would have been immeasurably greater than if there had been no such unity of shared sentiment. At this juncture in modern history, however, Koreans have been exposed to the American idea that if both parties fight hard for their positions, they will reach an agreement that is to their mutual benefit. Korean businessmen have learned to bargain hard and be legalistic in international business deals. But they have not yet reached a cultural stage at which they are at home in such a milieu.

**FUTURE PROBLEMS**

Korea has been going through very rapid changes, affecting every facet of communal life. Cultural changes have assumed revolutionary proportions in the past two decades. The most drastic agent of change has been rapid industrialization and close and intense interaction with the industrial economies of North America, Japan, and Europe. The marketplace has its own logic. Capitalism decrees a new set of ethics and a new perception of the ego. Increased egocentrism and a higher degree of ego separation become necessary because individual accountability, rather than accountability on the basis of family, is the norm. A person’s worth is to be determined by the contribution he makes to economic productivity, not by his decency or affection.

This cultural dislocation has been little short of traumatic for the Korean people. The traditional value system is unraveling much more quickly than the new one is establishing itself and being legitimated, and a confusion of values aggravates the bellicosity of newly emerging egocentrism. The denigration of emotion and the raising up of individualistic rationalism, though unavoidable, renders life cold and lonely. It is easier for those who specialize in international business to learn to regulate their conduct by the imported legalistic rules of the game. It is much more difficult, however, to be aggressively individualistic against fellow Koreans. Although the number of lawsuits is increasing fast in Korea, the act of instituting a litigation is still regarded as akin to a declaration of war.

Even in America there are two kinds of self-interest—the good kind usually preceded by the adjective “enlightened.” But at this stage of Korea’s industrial transformation, egocentrism is running amok. The more impatient of our “social engineers” (Korea has its full share of them) tend to reach for legislation (“modern and enlightened,” to be sure) to speed up the process of “internalizing” the new individualistic values. Unfortunately, ethical education by legislative fiat, however well-meaning and enlightened, has turned out to be rather ineffective in Korea. The traditional antipathy to law has not helped. An alien Weltanschauung is difficult to impose upon a culture, and experience shows that the effectiveness of law depreciates rapidly when its quantity inflates rapidly. A full-scale replacement of our traditional worldview by an imported one through legislative coercion seems both unwise and impractical. How adroitly and speedily the Korean people manage to evolve a new value system by adaptation and indigenization may largely define the pace of Korea’s industrial development.

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