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AN ALTERNATIVE SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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WHY KOREA IS SO PRONE TO CONFLICT:
AN ALTERNATIVE SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to provide an alternative analysis of the unique features of social conflict in Korea in that it draws upon the cultural vocabulary of Korean society in depicting and explaining the characteristics of conflict. It touches upon the unusual frequency, duration, radicalness, violence, unlawfulness, selfishness, etc. in describing social conflict as a form of all-or-nothing ki-contest, and goes into the historical and cultural background to explain why such characteristics have emerged in this society. A few distinct cultural orientations including strong emotionalism, collective selfishness, power-status-seeking orientation, black-and-white mentality, egalitarian impulses, breach of the rules of the game, a lack of ability to manage and resolve conflict effectively, and the like, are brought in to interpret the unique features of social conflict in Korea.

Key Words: social conflict, unique features of Korean conflict, cultural interpretations, conflict management & resolution, social integration

JEL classification: D74
I. Introduction

In the main streets of Seoul, the hustling-bustling modern international capital city of the country, rallies and sit-ins take place virtually every day. Workers climb on to the top of many stories tall crane in order to wage illegal strikes, striking truck drivers block the country’s backbone highways, farmers dump their vegetables and grain stuff in the plaza in front of the National Assembly and burn them in protest, representatives of the occupants of the illegal squatter areas protesting against the workers hired to evacuate the areas throw Molotov cocktail down to the police force trying to quell them, high school students hold candle light sit-ins to register their complaints about the college entrance examination policies and the forced hair cut programs of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources, and what have you. No single day goes by without some noisy gatherings and traffic blocking crowds in this Land of Morning Calm, in this twenty-first century.

Since the inauguration of the new government in February of 2003, the key words for depicting the state of Korean society have been 'confusion and conflict.' Way into the early summer of 2005, we are still wondering where our ship Korea is heading in the rocky international water shaken by the North Korean nuclear issue. A pervasive sense of uncertainty and insecurity hovers over the minds of the ordinary people. Some of the typical codes reading Korean society in the international circle include 'ROC, the Republic of Corruption' (not the Republic of China, as is usually known), the Labor State, or the Militant Labor State. Perhaps a more appropriate nickname may be a 'Haven of Conflict.'

Why on earth, one may wonder, is Korean society so prone to conflict? And what can we do about it? To answer these questions that may emerge rather naturally when observing the current state of the country, we need to analyze the nature of social conflict in this society. The main purpose of this piece of work, therefore, is to provide an alternative framework for such analysis. Being 'alternative' here simply means that my framework goes beyond the conventional sociological thought pattern that overly emphasizes the structural sources and dynamics of social conflict, with a neglect of the cultural aspects of the phenomenon. In a way, my approach may be characterized as a 'Culturalist' one in two major senses. First, it is culturalist in that it brings in the cultural elements of social conflict to the analytic process, in addition to the usual structuralist analysis. And secondly, the cultural characterization and explanation
of social conflict draws upon the ideas and vocabulary indigenous to Korean culture, both traditional and contemporary.\(^1\)

In this exposé, I shall first summarize the rather unique features of social conflict in Korea and then try to explain the reasons for such characteristics focusing on the socio-cultural roots of the phenomena. This will be followed by a brief thought on what can and should be done to resolve conflicts and achieve a decent degree of social integration that is urgently needed in this society.

By social conflict we generally mean in sociology a form of social interaction that involves competition between social groups or collective actors for scarce resources such as status, power, privileges, economic and physical goods, and the like, but is different from ordinary competitive interaction in the sense that not only the goals of the competing social actors are incompatible but the means also are incompatible in such a way that each party in competition may try to neutralize, harm, or even eliminate the other party. Under this definition, individual conflicts are not our subject of immediate interest.

II. Actors in Social Conflict

Actors in social conflict usually include various sectors, groups, strata, regions, and other collective categories in society, who may participate in the conflict directly or indirectly by their representatives. There are, therefore, different reasons or causes for them to take part in conflict. In this regard, one could summarize the main types of social conflict as follows, according to the major sectors of society.

1) The State Sector

In the state sector, the main actors are various state or political apparatuses. And they include:

(1) There are latent or manifest conflicts among different branches (legislative, judicial, administrative), between the ruling and opposition parties within the legislature, between ideologically divergent groups or generations within the court, among various departments and ministries within the administration, and those waged by the labor organizations within the state

\(^1\) For a more detailed account of this type of alternative sociological approach in general, see Kim (1996) and an illustration of application of this approach to industrial relations in Korea, see Kim (2004).
apparatuses;

(2) Conflicts among different political groupings over mainly political issues are possible; and

(3) Other conflicts may also involve the market and civil society sectors, like managers, workers, farmers, interest groups, NGOs, citizens of different regions, college students, and so on, against the state.

2) The Market Sector

Here, industrial conflict is the most general form. But even in this case, there are variations depending on the issues. And they may be:

(1) Conflicts between management and labor chiefly over economic interests relative to the management of enterprises;

(2) Conflicts participated not only by labor, management, and state, but also by NGOs and other civil organizations even though the issues are confined to industrial relations;

(3) Conflicts between labor and management over extra-managerial issues and interests;

(4) Conflicts within the labor sector over issues related to management and other economic or non-economic matters; and

(5) Conflicts waged by the civil society sector vis-a-vis corporations dealing with issues of the market sector.

3) The Civil Society Sector

There may be conflicts among a variety of social categories within the civil society sector, as follows:

(1) Regional Conflict: There are two cases of regional conflict, a) conflict among regional residents over socio-economic interests and b) latent regional conflict caused by political maneuvering of regional interests.

(2) Generational Conflict: Generational conflict is usually over values, ideological orientations, life-styles, behavior patterns, and other cultural differences, which tends to be rather latent until such differences are political agitated or linked to political and economic conflict.
(3) **Class Conflict**: If class conflict erupts in the form of naked collision among social strata, it can lead to a revolutionary situation, which does not happen in ordinary circumstances. There may be, however, occasional conflict among certain social groups (labor and management, farmers, special interest occupational associations, or NGOs) which may represent the conflicting interests of social classes.

(4) **Interest Group Conflict**: In the contemporary context, conflict among diverse interest groups rather than clearly class-oriented conflict is becoming more commonplace because of the pluralization of society and diversification of socio-economic interests.

(5) **Conflict Within the Civic Movement**: Since 1987, there has been a mushrooming of diverse civil society organizations and voluntary associations in Korea, and they have appeared frequently in the scene of major social conflict. Especially, advocacy groups have sometimes fiercely fought with the state, political, market sectors, and other civic forces within the civil society sector itself, or at least actively participated in conjunction with conflicts waged by other civic organizations and interest groups. Moreover, as the civil society sector has grown in quantity in terms of the number of NGOs, there also have manifested a variety of conflicts among different NGOs and voluntary groups within the civic movement.

4) **Ideological Conflict**

Most of the above mentioned types of conflict are over certain socio-economic interests. When such conflicts are explicitly backed by certain theoretical justifications provided by different social forces with distinct ideologies, they now turn into ideological conflicts. Basically, however, ideological conflict is little more than a means for hegemonic struggle among various social forces. In Korea today, what is often labeled as ideological conflict between the conservatives and progressives (or radicals), or the right and the left, may in fact be considered to be a form of rationalization of actually nothing more than sheer power struggle over the hegemonic monopoly of the vested interests and privileges in society.

At present, the major lines of ideological inclinations claimed by the so-called 'progressives' in Korean society include a) pro-versus anti-American,
b) anti-\textit{versus} pro-communist or solidarity with communism, c) anti-\textit{versus} pro-North Korea, d) pro-free market economy with emphasis on growth \textit{versus} pro-social democratic mass economy emphasizing distribution, and e) liberal democratic representative democracy \textit{versus} populist participatory democracy (Jo, 1989). Theoretically, these seemingly clear-cut dichotomies do not really represent any consistent and coherent ideological lines explicitly reflecting class-based interests. Neither are interpretations of and conformity to the issued contained in them uniform and unitary. If they are labeled as ‘rights’ and ‘lefts’ instead of ‘conservatives’ and ‘progressives,’ one might have a better idea of what they actually stand for, but Korean society still is not free from the stigma attached to such terminology.

In other words, it is hard to find in the supposedly ideological polemic at the moment any precise definitions of the terms like ‘conservatives’ and ‘progressives’ themselves, and there seems to be lacking any unswervingly firm commitment to such ideological lines among the major followers of the social forces in the contest. Nor are there any discernable class cleavages and participation in conflict along the ideological lines of conservative and progressive division. This leads us to believe that what is currently called the ideological conflict in Korean society is nothing but a pseudo-ideological conflict covering up the naked struggle over the hegemonic monopoly of power and privilege among the major political forces in society.

III. The Unique Features of Social Conflict in Korea

1) Conflict is Frequent

Open social conflict occurs so frequently that it almost seems to be an everyday affair in Korea. To show how common it has been, it would suffice to look back on the year 1987 when the recorded number of industrial conflict in the form of violent dispute, strike, sit-in etc was whopping 3,749 cases in a single year. This amounts to 10 plus disputes each day. By 1989, it has dropped to 1,600 cases which still was more than five times the annual average marked before and after 1987. The number of disputes decreased significantly beginning in 1990 to 322 and since 1993 when it plummeted to 144, the level of industrial conflict has remained within the 100 range. Still, these figures compare well with those past years, for example, of 1966 (104 cases), 1975 (133), and 1985 (265), and so on (National Statistics Office, 1995: 401; Lee, 2003: 41–42).
As is known, the year 1987 was an epoch-making turning point for political democratization and societal liberalization in Korea as the military-led regime ended by a widespread civil insurgency. This also meant that every corner of society turned to collective action to voice its demands and grievances in sometimes violent form of conflict. It should also be noted that between 1989 and 1993 cited above, the Soviet bloc crumbled with the symbolic breakdown of the Berlin Wall.

2) Conflict Lasts Long

Not only conflicts occur frequently, but they last long. This lengthy duration of conflict may be found in two different ways.

First, once a conflict starts, it lasts so many days until it come to termination. As an example, one could refer back to those turbulent years between 1987 and 1990 when the average duration of industrial disputes came to be 209 days or so. Interestingly enough, the average duration even increased, not decreased, to over 30 days since 2000 (Lee, 2003: 43).

Second, the duration may be measured by the number of years certain conflicts erupted. In Korea, one may find a world-record duration of political rallies waged by college students on and off campus. Starting in 1960 when they eventually toppled the Rhee Syngman regime in April of the year, student demonstrations took place without ceasing over 30 years up to the early 1990s even after the Iron Curtain was torn down to mark the end of the Cold War era. This indeed is remarkably persistent continuation of one type of political protest in one country. At this point, one should be reminded that one of the reasons why conflicts last so long, by day or by year is that conflict resolutions come by very hard. We shall come back to this shortly.

3) The Form of Conflict

In general, when a social conflict occurs, it does not have to take the form of collective action, such as demonstration, street rallied, sit-ins, strikes, and the life. There are other more peaceful means of conducting social conflict, like dialogue, consultation, compromise, agreement, mediation, arbitration, and so on. Somehow in Korea, however, people tend to immediately resort to collective action of some type. This also reflects the inadequacy of the institutional infrastructure to resolve conflicts readily and smoothly.
4) Conflict is Violent

Conflicts in Korean society have a tendency to become emotionally charged, disorderly, and violent. Even some conflicts in the form of collective action could be carried out, still effectively expressing whatever they want to pronounce or demand in an orderly manner in compliance with rules and laws. In Korea thus far, most conflicts have been extremely emotional and normless usually ending up in violent collision. Moreover, the manner in which the state tackles or deals with them has been rigid and oppressive so that protest action becomes more passionate, eventually all this leading to an escalation of emotional interaction in conflict.

5) The Unlawfulness of Conflict

Even if collective action is the means of social conflict, actors involved could behave within the confines of laws and rules. Nonetheless, more often than not social conflicts in Korea become illegal and unlawful behavior. On the part of the state authorities, then, such illicit actions need to be handled according to law, which often involves the use of forceful means by the agents of the state. And the vicious circle of violent conflicts persists.

6) Myongbun or the Justifiable Pretext of Conflict

In Korean society, what is called myongbun (명분) or pretext is a very important cultural element in human relationship or social conduct (Kim, 2004: 469-471). This term, like the two sides of a coin, is used in two related yet rather contradicting meanings. On one hand, it stands for the moral justification of one’s action. When one has a reasonable myongbun, one’s action is justified and the other side in social interaction has to oblige, at times with the risk of damaging one’s own interest. This is the case of sort of a positive usage of the term, because it provides good justification one can hardly refute on moral ground. When used to cover up one’s true intention or motive and supply some seemingly justifying but self-serving excuses, myongbun now becomes a negative pretext. Others may be deceived by this justification, but sooner or later when the truth is revealed, the pretext becomes mere excuses one can no longer stand by for their obvious immorality.

In social conflict, actors usually justify their action by claiming its moral righteousness. Again, there are two ways in which such pretexts may operated
in actual conflict situations. On one hand, in the actual process of conflict, the actors may be so much preoccupied by and immersed in the conflict itself that somewhere on the way, the real *myongbun* gets lost and conflict now revolves around the conflict itself or it becomes an end in itself. There are also cases, on the other hand, in which there may be no reasonable justification or only false pretexts to justify the conflict to begin with, or the only pretext is that actors participate in conflict in order to support or in solidarity with other actors. Still, they can claim to have righteous *myongbun* anyway.

7) The Selfishness of Conflict Motives

Oftentimes, despite the shiny *myongbun* presented by the actors in conflict, the real motive behind all the claims to righteousness or social justice tends to be self-centered pursuit of self interest. No doubt, social conflict by nature involves clash of interests, but those interests are supposed or claimed to be for the good of the entire society. In fact, however, they tend to be merely for the benefit of certain interest groups, political factions, or local communities. Thus, the real *myongbun* may be lost in such cases.

8) Displaced Objectives of Conflict

Labor unions and especially teachers’ unions in Korea very often engage in political movements and get embroiled into conflicts of political nature, which have virtually nothing to do with the original objectives of their own organizations relative to the protection and promotion of the rights of their membership or the enhancement of good quality education in the case of teachers’ unions. To be noted in this context is the fact most of the more active labor unions engage in industrial or political conflicts in sheer neglect of the pathetic conditions and urgent grievances of the majority of workers, including foreign workers, who suffer poor working conditions, low wages, or even unjust discriminations on account of their being employed in the small–medium enterprises where usually no union organizations exist. These illustrate the misled social conflict in terms of the displaced objectives. It shows that some conflicts may be started with wrong motives and they could turn into conflicts which have no or little relevance to the genuine objectives of those social organizations or forces involved in conflict. Interestingly, such a tendency of social conflict often involves ideological motives hidden beneath the apparent social movement.
9) The Strategy of *Nunchi* or Following the Herd

Another way of describing this act of deviating from the genuine motives, either by intention or not, is to show how some social actors go about in engaging and carrying out in conflict in terms of what is called in Korean *nunchi* strategy (Kim, 2004: 472–473). *Nunchi* is a word with many shades in its meaning and usage. In this particular case, it refers to a strategy of 'following the herd by sensibly reading how the wind blows.' In other words, some interest groups, social movement organizations, NGOs, or other *ad hoc* groupings often engage or participate in social conflicts merely because others do, without regard to their own objectives or motives. Simply following the herd in this case is supposed to make sense perhaps to enhance their position or promote their purposes or ideologies, not because the conflict itself has an authentic significance with respect to their own purposes and convictions. If you do not join the flock, you may be ostracized, they fear.

10) Conflict as a *'Ki* Contest'

Once social conflict evolves into a misled one where the original or genuine motives and purposes are lost, it often ends up as what I characterize as a *ki* contest (Kim, 2004: 473). This is no place for Chinese philosophy, but this term originates from ancient Chinese thoughts dealing with a form of vital energy pervasive in the universe, as a counterpart of the concept of *li* or principle of universe. This energy can be controlled by human mental endeavor (meditation) or physical training (martial arts). Applied to a situation of social conflict reaching a deadlock where either side has no intention of compromise or retreat, the only option left for both actors would be to stand firm to the very end, no matter what the consequences may by. In such a situation, rational action makes no sense but the power of one side’s *ki* against the other’s.

At this point, the use of *myongbun* often helps. If one side can preempt the other by presenting a beautiful *myongbun*, it could boost its position and may lead to a termination. Or, when either side is exhausted by the stalemate and wishes to end the tedious, energy-consuming, uneconomical *ki* fight, a nice *myongbun* could break the standstill, even if both sides are aware that it is a mere pretext. Social conflict of this nature could lead to a struggle to the extremes, where any *myongbun* may not work and conflict turns into an end in itself. Actors involved in this kind of conflict as a *ki* contest may now lose sight of public good, only preoccupied with the importance of winning the struggle.
11) Conflict is Radical

Considering all the above characteristics, one could have little trouble imagining how social conflict may easily become radicalized, in form and in ideology. What is interesting in this respect is that under the circumstances the more radicalized one gets, the greater popularity can one gain, both as an organization or as an individual leader. In the case of many labor unions and advocacy oriented NGOs, the leaders have to play this game of who is more radical in order to be elected as leaders and the organizations compete in terms of the extent of radicalness of their behavior and professed claims.

12) The All-or-Nothing Character of Conflict

When a conflict runs to the extremes, it could take on an ‘all-or-nothing’ character. Compromise or concession is rarely achieved. This sort of extremity in social action in Korea is reflected in a culture where concession implies weakness or cowardice and compromise can mean deceit or unfaithfulness of a double agent. To resolve this kind of all-or-nothing $ki$ contest, intervention by a third party may be necessary and useful. In Korean society, however, this sort of mediation or arbitration seldom works.

13) The Intervention by the Third Party

In Korea, the intervention of the third party in social conflict is frequent. But the form and consequence of such intervention is not in the line of resolving the conflict. Rather, it tends to aggravate it. For instance, in the case of industrial disputes on the enterprise level, the third party here means the national umbrella organizations of labor unions or other advocacy groups in the civil sector which tend to play the role of agitator, promoter, leader, or participant, misleading the conflict into violent $ki$ struggle. Here again, ideology can play a heavy hand in such occasions.

14) The Inability to Manage Conflict

When social conflict takes on these characteristics in combination, it becomes difficult to manage it. In Korean society, the first problem has to do with the lack of legitimacy not only of the state and mediating institutions including the court themselves with the authority to handle it, but also various
other actors taking part in conflict. Because the state, too, would engage in a *ki* contest relying upon forceful means rather than peaceful dialogues and mediations, this would contribute to the escalation rather than amelioration of violent conflict. This would then prolong conflict and make it more violent.

The state and the political sector, for example, would have been able to accumulate the capability to resolve various social conflicts more effectively and positively, if they had maintained a firm stand to take national interest seriously and uphold the rule of law more earnestly. Instead, unilateral oppression, unprincipled compromise according to the narrow interests of the political factions or populistic politics, disinterestedness on the part of the public service sector, the rule of personal connections rather than the rule of law, and chronic corruption all added up to come in the way of effective conflict resolution. Moreover, it is more important and efficient to prevent conflict prior to its eruption than to attempt to resolve conflict already in progress. In this respect, as well, Korean society is extremely ill prepared in terms of the institutional infrastructure of conflict management.

15) The Negative Consequences of Conflict

Many conflicts in Korean society tend to end with some negative consequences for the entire nation. Social conflict is not necessarily harmful to society and often can operate as a source of societal energy to promote development. And some even in Korea have contributed, though in a passive and indirect manner, to societal development thus far. In general, however, conflict has obstructed development by disturbing social integration so that society came to be divided into diverse social forces with the result of deepening of cleavages and wasting valuable national energy, precisely because of the various features described above, frequency of occurrence, lengthy duration, radicalness with no concession or compromise, extremity, lack of ability to control and manage it, and the like. All this added up could have hurted the national credibility in the global scene to lower the national competitiveness as a result.

IV. The Dynamics of Conflict

Historically, the dynamics of social conflict in Korea has manifested several patterns as summarized below.

1) The Traditional Pattern
In the traditional Confucian society of the last monarchy, the Yi Dynasty (1392–1910), social conflict took two major forms. On one hand, competition among the factions of gentry class over the positions in the government bureaucracy often led to severe, sometimes bloody, conflict. This was almost structurally inevitable under the patrimonial state system of the Dynasty (Weber, 1951; Jacobs, 1985). Under this system, the only available status positions with political and economic privileges were concentrated in the government offices for any aspiring young literati family members. The formal avenue of mobility into this route of success was state examinations in Confucian classics one had to learn by heart from childhood. Failed, one has to remain among the commoners engaged in farming. And to retain the status, one has to cling together with one’s politico-ideological clique vying for the mercy of the ruler who demands absolute loyalty in return. Oftentimes, open political conflicts erupt in this struggle, with great myongbun or moral justification for the fight coated with eminent Confucian teachings. Since the patrimonial system requires all-or-nothing loyalty, the conflict becomes typical ki contest under the guise of loyalty and ideological righteousness.

The other form of conflict quite frequent in this ear was the revolt and insurgent movement of the peasantry rising against the ruling gentry elite. This was primarily caused by the style of governance on the part of the literati bureaucrats. Since every official had to depend on the mercy of the ruler, each had to offer better and more resources to the king in return for his favor as a sign of one’s unswerving loyalty. In order to accumulate material resources for this purpose, the officials had to rely on some illicit means to collect as much as possible in the form of formal and informal taxation. Corruption and exploitation of the peasantry ensued, for farming was the only source of national revenues and accumulation of wealth. Exploited and oppressed by the depraved officials, peasantry often rose in collective protest, sometimes even waging peasant wars under the most extreme circumstances.

2) Colonial Experience

During the colonial period between 1910 and 1945, major conflicts occurred against the Japanese colonial regime. Independence movements in a variety of forms engaged in various types of conflict. In addition, there naturally were social conflicts among the Korean people, too, mostly among the ideologically opposing groups like communists versus nationalists and so on or among various interest groups including industrial disputes and other conflicts in the
civil society sector, often agitated by the Japanese as a means of divide-and-rule policy.

3) After Liberation

Third, immediately after liberation in 1945 at the end of World War II, the most prevalent and typical social conflicts were in the political arena, each faction or political clique, many of them armed with ideologies of communism, anti-communism, nationalism, and what have you, would vie for political hegemony in the wide open arena of new nation building. Because social institutions were still very fragile and unprepared, and there was no centripetal force to attract the attention of enough of the general populace and to maintain stable social order, there arose myriads of newly formed organizations, political and social, openly fighting for the privileges of grabbing power, causing serious confusions and violent protests. Conflicts were rampant those days and very violent at times.


Between 1948 when the new nation finally was created and 1960 when this first regime was terminated, Korea was engulfed by a war and was struggling to recover from the ashes of the war. The major conflict erupted in 1960 when college students rose up against the corrupt and authoritarian regime of Rhee Syngman and eventually toppled the government. This was to be the beginning of the incessant student protest movements lasting more than one generation ever since up to the early 1990s. The period of one year from April 1960 to May 1961 saw a confusing field of social conflicts waged by diverse forces in society chiefly because the newly installed Democratic Party regime was unable to contain the unbridled demands of almost every corner of society. Sensing a serious security hazard facing a militant regime in North Korea, the military took over the government through a bloodless coup d’État in May 1961.

While the military based regimes of Pak Chung Hee (1961–1979) and Chun Doo Hwan (1980–1987) were able to make a remarkable stride toward achieving miraculously rapid economic growth, they were not free at all from violent social conflicts. The protest once more came primarily from the university campus and the central grievances expressed by the students had to do with the lack of legitimacy, kind of the original sin of these regimes which came into power by means of coup, on one hand, and the political oppression by the authoritarian government denying democratic political development, on the other.
As time passed by, the protest movement became more ideologically radicalized (meaning turning left eventually all the way to absorb North Korean *Juche* or Self-Reliance ideology), physically violent (resorting to the use of Molotov cocktail, wood sticks, rocks, arson, attacks on government facilities, etc), and socially consolidated by the growing solidarity formed with labor movements, religious leaders, and intellectual elements including the press, cultural groups, as well as university professors.

The regimes facing such widespread conflicts have generally been extremely suppressive in their measures and ironically this approach has exacerbated the situation further. The more severely the regime pushed the dissidents into the corner, the more radical and violent they became. And finally, the authoritarian government succumbed to the civil pressure to open the door towards
democratic transition politically and societal liberation in the wider society. In this case, the main strategy of the dissident groups was to ‘undermine’ the regime and the entire establishment, for that matter, by alienating them from the general populace by means of illegal underground activities, as depicted in the diagram above.

5) Democratization and Conflict

The kind of dynamics of conflict described above would be more realistic in a revolutionary situation in which the revolutionary forces attempt to topple down the established system totally and abruptly. Although some dissidents, mainly among the students, were serious about revolution, it would have been unrealistic to actually materialize it in Korea where the threat, real or professed, from the North was a fact of life. Such tactics were employed, however, by the dissidents to agitate the general public to arouse their awareness of the illegitimate and oppressive authoritarian rule. As a consequence, the state yielded to the demand of the civil society to democratize the polity and liberalize the society. This process was started in 1987 and it was this particular year that Korean society witnessed the violently rampant industrial conflicts mentioned earlier and mushrooming of various civic organizations.

This led to the emergence of more genuine civilian regimes beginning with the 1992 election of Kim Young Sam as president followed by Kim Dae Jung in 1997 and Roh Moo Hyun in 2002. One remarkable fact is that with the advent of civilian governments led by former democracy fighters, erstwhile dissidents now landed on the regime as the ruling elite. Nonetheless, they have not entirely shed the mantle of revolutionary reformers and continued to struggle with the inner elements of the establishment they used to fight. In this struggle, they no longer need to employ the tactic of ‘undermining.’ Instead, they have adopted a populist strategy of agitating and appealing to the mass to mobilize popular support for their reform programs.

The former establishment forces initially were enormously shocked by the election of Roh as the populist president, but they have gradually come to their normal state of mind now to start organize as a resistant force attempting to halt the radical turn of affairs led by the current regime of former dissidents with socialist inclinations.2) Moreover, with the explicit and often implicit resistance from the inner circles of the former establishment still intact within the state apparatuses, the regime faces a rather adamant wall blocking their radical reform projects. Due to this kind of obstacle, the current government is

unable to push for certain reforms to appease their own disgruntled supporter groups, especially in the labor, farm, and other under class sectors of the society. This poses a tricky dilemma for the regime. On one hand, they need to make concessions to quell the resistance from within the government to be able to implement their reform programs. Their supporting forces see such compromises as a betrayal and hence demand uncompromising push for reforms as promised during the campaign, on the other. As a result, the past dissidents now placed as the ruling elite still is in a populist trap of having to play behind the forces still active in conflict rather than in a position to manage conflict effectively. Thus, so much of social conflict even today is still widespread and violent.

V. The Culturalist Explanation

We can now look into why social conflict in Korea has taken on such unique characteristics as reviewed above. In this, I am proposing a kind of 'culturalist' approach bringing in the most outstanding features of social organization and cultural orientations of Korean society (Kim, 1999).

1) Emotionalism, Personalism, Black–and–White Mentality

Behind the unusual frequency, lengthy duration, radicalness, extremity, and the like of social conflict are certain socio-cultural tendencies of the Korean people and the Korean style principles of social organization. They include strong ‘Emotionalism,’ ‘Personalism,’ and ‘Extreme Black–and–White Mentality.’

Emotionalism means that people tend to be easily aroused emotionally in social interaction, hot tempered, impatient, sentimental, sensitive to feelings, not very rational in their thinking and action, and so on. Personalism is sort of an offshot of Emotionalism particularly relevant to human relationships. When people are unusually emotional, it shows up in their social behavior in such a way that they generally tend to be warm kind to others, emphasize expressive interaction over business–like instrumental interaction, try to make transactions as personal as possible shunning impersonality, get emotionally involved in personal affairs of others often at the risk of invading privacy of the other party, and so on. And with Extreme Black–and–White Mentality, Korean people have tendencies to make either–or judgments without allowing other options, look upon others as either your side or the other side, friend or foe, dislike hazy gray zone in thought and action, and so forth. One could now relate this to social conflict and see how they would affect it.
2) *Han,* the Psychology of Frustration and Revenge

Related to the above characteristics, it is not uncommon in Korea to hear or see a unique word quite frequently used to depict a very delicate and complex state of mind and feeling, that is, *han.* This word has no equivalent expression in English and cannot be literally translated. It refers to a complex psychological state which may be caused by some frustrating experiences, wrongs and injustice done to one, leading to the feelings of remorse, regrets, resentments, and hatred, which in turn may incite a desire to revenge. Historically, the Korean nation has been incessantly battered by strong neighbors in the form of invasion, occupation, colonization, and otherwise, and a deep-seated feeling of *han* about this kind of experience is said to have been harbored by the people. Also, the Koreans are unusually nationalistic in their sentiments armed with a strong sense of national pride in their history of survival as an integral ethnic entity. And this psychic state, I argued, must have helped the Korean people muster up their unused collective energy as a nation to engage in rapid economic growth, say, in the last generation or so (Kim, 1988). Having gone through a tragic history in modern times of colonization, national division imposed upon them by the world powers, the fratricidal war, and finding themselves in a state of pathetic poverty, a proud nation must have felt frustrated, ashamed, and revengeful of the powerful neighbors. To release this painful *han* feeling, they had to do something unusual, namely speedy economic growth.

When this *han* psychology is applied to human relationships in the micro-level social life, individuals and groups may harbor this remorseful and resentful *han* feeling when they are physically or socially harmed and ashamed and attempt to revenge. One could easily imagine how such feelings may cause social conflict or can affect the process.

3) Collectivism, Connectionism, and Supremacy of Politics and Power–Status Orientation

‘Collectivism,’ ‘Connectionism,’ and ‘Supremacy of Politics and Power–Status Orientation’ as major principles of social organization prevalent in Korea have something to do with collective selfishness, displaced objectives, loss of true *myongbun* in social conflict and the unusual politicization and ideological extremism of conflict.

Collectivism places emphasis on the group to which individuals belong.
Under collectivism, one is identified not as an independent person but as a member of a group, one’s honor is for the glory of the group and one’s fault brings shame to the group, collective goals and interests override those of each individual member to the extent that one is often asked to sacrifice one’s own interest for the sake of the group and conform to the collective effort. Particularly in the Confucian tradition the family and kinship groups were the central locus of this collective orientation. Familism, therefore, is the most typical collective orientation in very Confucian Korean society. Hence comes the phenomenon of what is called in this society ‘collective egoism’ or ‘collective self-centeredness.’ This orientation breeds the tendency of factionalism, ethnocentric closed-mindedness toward outsiders or xenophobia, exclusive nationalism, and a variety of group-centered inclinations to get embroiled in conflict with other such groupings.

To successfully climb the ladder of social mobility in Korean society requires good and right kinds of connections. Social network and social capital are the technical terms used in contemporary sociology to analyze what I call ‘connectionism,’ a cultural tendency to stress social connections in human relations and in pursuit of interests. Since your own group or cohort provides this network, collectivism and connectionism often operate hand in hand. When combined now with ‘emotionalism’ and ‘personalism’ mentioned above, ‘collectivism’ and ‘connectionism’ now can become the source of nepotism, favoritism, cronyism, and the like, which in turn can easily breed corruption and depravity in public life. Interests could readily clash when encountered with those outside this circle of connectionism causing conflict.

In Korean society, politics enjoys an unusually strong attention of the ordinary people. Everybody seems to be interested in politics and talks about it all the time. This partly reflects the still strong potential of politics to bring one closer to a disproportionate amount of power and privileges. Or still broadly, people aspire to attain some position or title in formal organizations, public or private, because it is such status that carries so much power and privileges with it. This is why Korea also is characterized as a strongly ‘status-oriented’ society. One of the unique features of social conflict in this society, therefore, is that more often than not it is a form of power struggle or pursuit of status.

4) Egalitarian Impulses

As is well known, Korean society is essentially a hierarchically ordered kind of society. This may be attributed to the Confucian image of social order where king and subject, father and son, elder and youth, men and women are placed in
a basically hierarchical status. And yet, curiously enough, the Korean people are very much inclined to prefer a leveled, equalized society, with minimum inequality. Differences in privileges are generally abhorred and even resented. This, one may argue, could be due to the fact that the Koreans are very able and competent people and they have historically been forced to aggressively compete for the privileges in society. In a competitive society, you are going to have winners and losers, but in this society where the differences in privileges enjoyed by them are so great that losers now are more likely to be resentful about them. A strong sense of relative deprivation pervades among different social strata in Korea.

5) The Broken Rules of the Game

Another important reasons why losers do not accept the consequence in competition may have to do with the historical experience where the winners used to breach the rules of the game, by means of corruption, illegal deals, illegitimate forces, crony collusion and collaboration, or whatever you may be able to maneuver. Under the circumstances, when the true myongbun of the victory gets lost and your moral justification wanes, a standard of moralism may be applied against you and a sense of resentment about the resulting uneven distribution of privileges grows stronger. Then, the voice of "Equalize!" gains strength.

6) Formalistic, Ritualistic Moralism and Authoritarianism

Social conflict is supposed to have some morally justifiable reasons or nice myongbun and this is to be applied to both parties in conflict. A very strong moralistic tendency in Korean culture places much greater emphasis on this. There are some problems in this moralism, though. When moralism becomes an empty pretext coated with lofty justification, it turns into frigid 'Formalistic, Ritualistic Moralism.' This sort of ritualized formalized moralism has been one of the outstanding features of Neo-Confucian ideology of the earlier Dynastic culture, causing incessant conflicts over the years without much substance in them, only wasting the societal energy and eventually bringing down the dynasty itself. What is more problematic is that this moralism applies only to the other side not one’s own side. One can criticize the unjust motives and conduct of conflict on the part of the other party, while one’s own action is exempt from any such harsh moral criticism.

And on top of this, when this moral contest fails to support one’s own
behavior, another traditional principle of social organization is brought in, namely, ‘Authoritarianism.’ Traditionally, protest movements against the regime or ruling elite used to be justified with this claim to moral righteousness on their own part, with moral fault on the part of the others in power. When one takes this stance, it tends to take on a flavor of authoritarianism, as well. Facing this kind of resistance, then, the elite in power would attempt to suppress the dissident movement by unilateral authoritarian measures.

VI. Managing and Resolving Conflict: Closing Thoughts

The ultimate goal of resolving social conflict would be to achieve social integration. Social integration requires effective coordination of the differentiated social units, symbolic unification or at least some degree of cultural generalization, and political control over the hierarchical class strata in the social structure of inequality (Turner, 1987:187-189). In order to attain such social integration, Korean society badly needs a socio-cultural centripetal core from which some sense of direction for the entire society’s future should emanate. The lack of this center and its vision is the fundamental shortcoming of Korean society, at the moment.

In principle, conflict management and resolution requires a minimum of the sense of public good, public mindedness, a culture of social responsibility, rationality, disinterested dialogue, and readiness to concede and compromise. However, the predominant socio-cultural tendencies in Korea, as described above, make it difficult to satisfy such requirements. Take a few outstanding examples.

(1) Respect for public good and public mindedness can easily clash with personalism, collectivism, or connectionism, egalitarian impulses, and the broken rules the game.

(2) A strong sense of social responsibility can also be damaged by the stubborn persistence of personalism, collectivism, or connectionism, the breach of rules.

(3) Rationality is hard to come by when emotionalism, personalism, black-and-white mentality, han feelings, connectionism, egalitarian impulses, and the breach of rules interfere.

(4) Disinterested dialogue is difficult under the influence of emotionalism, black-and-white mentality, adherence to hollow myongbun, and authoritarianism.

(5) Concession and compromise are often incompatible with emotionalism,
black-and-white mentality, claim to myongbun, collectivism, authoritarianism, and power-status orientation, and formalistic moralism.

Considering these difficulties owing to the very nature of socio-cultural inclinations in terms of the major principles of social organization and the culture of conflict management unique to Korean society, certain fundamental changes may be in order to establish a reasonable system of conflict management and resolution. In this age of globalization, it is anachronistic to hang on to the kind of emotionally charged ki-contest in social conflict no matter what the morally righteous myongbun one may claim to have. It is time to shed the habit of repeating illegal and disorderly conflict under the influence of collective egoism or outdated ideological zeal in favor of settling disputes rationally by means of dialogue and reasoned negotiation. Those in charge of the business of handling and managing social conflict need to learn to forego the narrow interest of their own cliques and factions to pursue the larger and more lofty causes of public good of the entire society. Respect for the rule of law and principled approach in handling conflict is urgently needed.

In a more advanced democratic society with civilized civic culture, typically, the management and resolution of social conflict is reasonably well institutionalized so that the matter can be routinely handled through dialogue and compromise. Moreover, those societies generally respect the rule of the game even in social conflict. For Korea to overcome the thorny problem of unusual social conflict as depicted earlier, the first step at the moment would be to create the institutional infrastructure within the system of society for effective coordination and management of conflict to reach a new level of social integration. And it is most urgent that everybody in social conflict respect and observe the rules of the game. Otherwise, the society may not be free from the vicious circle of illegal, irrational, and disorderly social conflict met with illegitimate, impatient, and coercive control ever.

The question now is who is going to do this job. No doubt, the primary responsibility lies with the state and political sector which are in charge of making rules and establishing institutional infrastructures. Unfortunately, however, they are the least developed sectors in Korean society and not quite up to the formidable yet urgent task, especially with respect to handling social conflict and promoting social integration. One, therefore, has to look to other institutional sectors for the task. In this regard, the court is still relatively weak in its autonomous authority vis-a-vis politics, while religion and education as the auxiliary institutional organs to contribute to the promotion of social integration are very much immature and mired with their own problems.

Under the circumstances, therefore, one might be tempted to turn to the civil society sector for its potential to at least initiate, if not implement, the
necessary reforms. We are fully aware of the short history of the rise of civil society in Korea, mainly due to the prolonged authoritarian rule in its background. Nonetheless, the recent experience of flourishing of a whole variety of voluntary organizations and active participation of various NGOs in the broad societal governance processes suggests that the civil society sector may be the only viable force at the moment to which we may attach some hope for genuine interest and perhaps potential capacity to pursue necessary reforms in this area of urgently needed conflict resolution and social integration.

References

[Works in English]


[Works in Korean]
