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**SOME REFLECTIONS ON KOREAN PATTERNS**

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On my visit to Korea in November, 1971, I had an opportunity to review the many changes that have occured in this rapidly developing land since my childhood days in Korea from 1919-36, and as a physician from 1947-69. Physically the Korea of my childhood is hardly recognizable today, especially in the urban centers. There is relatively less change over the years in the rural village life of the average farmer.

In 1967 the Royal Asiatic Society,Korea Branch, published “Korean Patterns” as a handbook for foreigners, especially Americans, who were sent to work in Korea for short periods of time in the diplomatic corps, the military, or the various aid and missionary organizations. It was hoped that this book would be a first step in introducing Westerners to the differences in cultural patterns seen in Korea and thereby help them avoid the blunders made by so many short term foreign workers trying to adjust to life among the Korean people.

It seems now that some clarifications are necessary as well as some modifications of some of the over simplified statements made in that book. Recently an article in the Japan Times reported on an interview a Mr. Goto of the Asahi Shimbun had with Chinese Premier Chou En Lai in Peking. Following the interview,the first such granted by the Chinese after China was admitted to the United Nations,the paper stated that the Chinese Foreign Office took a week to produce the clarifications on the interview before they would release the text for publication. In similar manner, I should be allowed to make several clarifications on “Korean Patterns” some four years following its original publication. The first clarification that needs to be made results from the mistaken idea that some readers, particularly some of my Korean friends, have received, that the book is talking about Korean people. This is certainly [page 42] not the main thrust of this book. It has no relation to Korean people. It is basically a book about Systems. It is a type of systems analysis of the Korean cultural system. It is not reflecting on any people, other than the fact that people are modified and do react to any given system. As the system changes the book needs to be updated, but the book is trying to describe for foreigners the Korean traditional system. In Gari Ledyard’s delightful book,”The Dutch Come to Korea,” he evaluates the story of the shipwrecked sailor, Henrick Hamel, who came to Korea by accident in 1653 and for thirteen years made rather careful observations on the Korean system as he saw it from the position of a foreign prisoner, a view from the bottomside up in the seventeenth century.

My introduction to adult life in Korea came 294 years after Hamel, when I landed from a ship at the port of Inchon as a medical missionary doctor. I also came as a “nobody” in Korean eyes as well as in the eyes of the American Military Government which was accepting the surrender of the Japanese in Korea following World War II. At that time the newly installed military governors had a very jaundiced opinion of civilians in general, and missionaries in particular. We were odd balls. Why would anyone come voluntarily to work in Korea? There must be a catch somewhere. The military mind did not know how to use or what to do with these non-military types. Were they subversive, should they be granted post exchange privileges,should they be allowed travel orders to ride on military controlled trains and buses? All of our group were upsetting to the smooth rank and order system of the regulated military.

In 1947 civilians were absolutely “un-persons” in Korea. Even worse, I was determined to leave the good life in Seoul and head for the “Hawaii” of Korea, the Cholla Provinces,where even some of my Korean associates have been heard to remark, “a very peculiar kind of people live in the Chollas.” Thus my view of Korea was from the rural southern provinces, and I saw traditional Korea unmodified by the sophistication of the capital city. In addition to all of this, I was very young, and looked even younger, so that some of my patients even wonderea if I had completed high school. When I made infrequent visits to Seoul I saw it from the angle of the lowest of the “un-persons”.

My only claim to knowledge of “The Korea” was that I had lived through high school in Pyengyang in the North, and two years in Seoul during my military service in the Eighth United States Army Medical [page 43] Corps. This could hardly balance my long years of living in Chonju.

One of the barriers that separated me was my Cholla accent. When I lectured medical students in Seoul, I found my listeners hardly able to control their amusement when I lapsed into colloquial idioms. I have gained some insight into this problem by moving recently to practice surgery in East Nashville, Tennessee. This is the area of Nashville from which the “Grand Old Opry” and the “Hee Haw” people originate. This area of Tennessee has its own dialect and adaptation of the “King’s English”. At a gasoline filling station a lad came to see if I had been waited on and asked, “You done been got?” There are other colorful phrases such as the man trying the describe someone with a limited I.Q. when he said, “He ain’t gonna put up no rockets.” In adjusting to this brand of English I have come to understand why my Korean language abilities caused so much mirth among the learned medical students of Seoul. Unfortunately when I arrived in Korea, there were no language schools for foreigners, and I was thrust immediately into the practice of medicine, and had to learn my Korean syntax from my patients, whom I tried to imitate to be able to communicate effectively with them. This method of language study may be a good way to develop rapport, and empathy, it is a very poor way to learn the standard grammatical language of a proud race of scholars. By associating with rural people and the poor, learned to view Korea from their point of view, and I had the other unique advantage of being able as a surgeon to view Koreans from the inside out.

When you operate on someone, you immediately appreciate that the skin, the fat, the fascia,and the different internal organs of the body remain in pretty much the same relationships regardless of the external superficial cultural differences that divide races of men. I was even able to verify, contrary to popular myth among foreign troops, that the anatomical arrangements of men and women in Korea are no different from those in the West. One might say that I developed a worm’s eye view of Korea and her cultural system.

I make no apology for the fact that my views on the Korean system are often different from that of the tourist of three days, the diplomat, or those who never leave the environs of Seoul. The English speaking group of Korean leaders do, in fact, exhibit many modifications and differences from the village people with the belly ache due to the infestation [page 44] of worms. However, modern Korea is ruled by people, many of whom had their origins in the remote villages, and their gut reactions are set in the rural patterns, thus my observations of their system has some validity.

In trying to understand my patients, their medical concepts, and their emotional problems in terms of their own culture, and to translate this into some sensible diagnosis in terms of my Western medical training, I have learned to observe closely their basic drives, motivations, and reactions to pain, sickness, and death, as well as birth and living. In order to understand people, one must first understand their system.

Since returning to the United States of America I have had the opportunity to observe a number of Korean physicians, some of whom I helped train in Korea. It has been fascinating to see how they are adapting to life in their foreign culture of America. In Korea they reacted as do most traditional Koreans in their system. In America they now act as do most American physicians in the American culture. I am not saying that the change is either good or bad, I am merely stating that they have made some marked changes in their way of doing business in in order to survive in the American melieu.

The truism that people remain basically people still holds. However, in different systems people certainly do react differently to the same set of stimuli. Thus it does little good to try to study people in trying to understand their differences. They are different depending on the system that surrounds their lives. Thus let us concentrate on the study of systems. In the study of systems we also gain the additional advantage of being able to rid ourselves of some of the emotional overlay that erupts when we start describing people. When we talk about people, we are speaking of mother, father, aunties, and apple pie and the American flag, so to speak, all of which words carry a heavy load of emotionalism. As foreigners in Korea making observations about Korea, we do better to concentrate on the Korean system and leave the people alone.

One of the major differences in systems between Korea and Western systems of culture is the difference in heritage. The majority of Americans from Western Europe carry the Greco-Judeo-Roman load. That is the base on which our culture and laws are based. Very few Americans share the rich heritage of Paekje, Silla, Koguryo, Koryo, or the Yi Dynasty. We just do not have it; poorer though we may be for it. Westerners [page 45] approach life from a vastly different point on the cultural compass from people with a Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist heritage. The set of priorities may be quite different. In the West it is assumed as an ideal,although often not lived up to,that relationships are on a more or less horizontal plane. People are “sons of God” and, therefore, “brothers” equal before the law and in value. One may immediately point to the recent history of the treatment of minority groups in America to refute this concept, but the main stream in America today is trying with great effort to rectify this deviation from the standard that all men are created equal. Any American citizen can theoretically walk into the White House in Washington and speak to the president as “Mr. President.” There is no bowing, no “your majesty,” there is no “your excellency” and there is no “Kak Ha,” just plain “Mr.” like anyone else. This is a basic horizontal assumption.

In the Far East this is not the case. The base is more vertical. It is perpendicular, a full ninety degrees on the compass in one’s approach to people.

In Korea this is built into the verb endings. One may easily observe this phenomenon at a railway or bus station in Korea. Here an elderly gentleman, obviously distinguished, is accompanied by his son, or an aide. He speaks to the youths in low talk as if they were children, although each may be quite an adult. The aide in turn may speak to a porter, in equally low talk, and then both the porter and the aide will turn to address the elder in the highest forms of language. The relationship is vertical, depending on the relative social positions and status of the three men. In the Korean system no one is assumed to be equal, everyone is either superior or inferior to someone. Two twins born, of course, the first one out is forever superior to the second one to pop out of the womb,they are in an elder brother, younger brother relationship built into the system.

In modern Korea it is interesting to look for deviations from this traditional vertical approach. Some might even argue that the system is changing. Quite possibly it is changing for those with exposure to Western culture, but for the majority of people in Korea the system is not changing yet. In visiting old friends in the university community of Seoul, I found no evidence of change on this score. My span is just under forty vears in Korea. The formalities between the superior and [page 46] the inferior are as rigid as ever. Only classmates and very old friends may enjoy the luxury of intimate half-talk to each other.

One of the major causes of friction and misunderstanding and frustration that Westerners meet when they come to work in Korea with Koreans is this head-on collision course between the vertical of Korea and the horizontal of the West. When we fail to take this difference into account we become emotional and uptight. This difference has often not been fully appreciated by either Koreans or foreigners working among Koreans. People always living in Korea have adjusted their personal balloons to it,and seldom even notice the problem until they meet strange long-nosed foreigners who always come at relationships from a “strange” different direction. Many Koreans interpret this as barbarian. It is certainly not cultured Korean.

It has been interesting to observe at close range Peace Corps young people from America over the past few years. One would imagine that as idealistic youths they would find no problem in being adaptable to any system, yet it has been this very group who have shown deep frustration, often a sense of hopelessness and sometimes even anger that their best efforts seem to make no shift in the slant of the vertical system of Korea. Often these highly advantaged young people have failed to appreciate that they too grew up in a rather rigid horizontal system in the West.

The Korean traditional system has many wonderful features to it. One of the most attractive features is that the system remains full of vitality and strength, even after being battered by ideas from the West for the past eighty years. When one considers the durability of this system that has survived amid turmoil, invasions,and persecution and colonialism for two thousand years,one must view it with respect,and take a long close look at it before making so many free efforts at advice on how to change it. This vitality has suddenly been turned loose in the city of Seoul which over the past two decades has grown from a sprawling town of half a million to almost six million souls. The physical changes in Seoul during the past decade are truly fantastic by any standard. Clean water, overhead highways,electricity, modern housing, and leaks that have sprung through the surrounding mountains to allow the increasing flow of vehicle traffic has expanded the city North, South, East, and West into a megapolis. [page 47]

Korea faces the fact of rapid change in its physical environment,with all the attendant problems this brings to view. The question is, is this just so much concrete being poured over structural steel,or is there a real basic change being wrought in the Korean system? It would be a worthy subject for a bright scholar to study the effects of this lightning change in the life style of the rural Korean who moves from his ancient mud hut village into the modern urban life of Seoul. What has really happened to these millions who have so recently moved to the city? These once rural traditionalists occupy every level from the Blue House on down to the shanties along the river bottom. Perhaps a multistoried study needs to be made as viewed from the perch of a foreign ambassador who sees life at the highest levels,while some others may have a better opportunity to observe the changes taking place on the lower levels of society. Has the ancient system really been dented or basically changed by sudden modernization? The answer to this question may be important to Korea as well as to other rapidly emerging Asian nations.

In Korean Patterns I tried to describe the traditional, largely rural system of Korean culture. Until very recently this system fairly accurately described the majority of people living in the small towns and villages and on the farms. The system was beautifully orientated to an agricultural community lead by scholars. The Yi Dynasty (1392-1910) lasted five hundred years, the longest single family dynasty to remain in power in the world’s history, I am told. This has been the Korean system we use as our baseline for any appreciation of Korea today.

One of the main strengths of the Korean system is the fact that everyone has a clearly defined position in it, and everyone knows his relative position in the order of things. This has tended to give one a sense of personal security as long as he remained in his place. As a practicing physician in Korea for 23 years, I was always impressed that young people under the system knew where they were. They were not lost,and did not suffer an identity crisis and the attending many insecurities that plague so many children and young people in Western systems. There were very few children to be found in Korea with serious emotional or psychiatric problems. I do not know how rapid urbanization is affecting the incidence of psychiatric disorders in Korea. The old system gave children a sense of belonging, being accepted,and as a part in the stream of life, [page 48]

Korea’s traditional system was strong in that it gave women a remarkable protection. It protected women by making woman’s place very special and private. Girls were supposed to be separated from boys at the age of seven. Contacts were at a minimum until the engagement ceremonies held with both families in attendance after the go-between had made all the arrangements for the proposed marriage contract. After marriage the wife continued to be very private, and was the “inside” person, whereas the husband was the “outside” person in the family who traveled beyond the wall that surrounds every village and town Korean home. A mother could thus raise her children without fear of being molested. Women were free to go abroad at night to visit or attend errands and men were supposed to remain indoors during the evening hours. Crimes of rape were almost unheard of in Korea under the old system.

In sharp contrast in the American system, rape is one of the more common crimes committed against women and young girls. No woman is safe to walk alone on the streets of most American cities after dark, and often even in the day time they may be attacked. This is still unthinkable in Korea. Everything related to the home, the family, the wife and the children in Korea is of utmost importance and takes precedence over other matters, often even affairs of state. The family is the central core of the society in the Korean system. The loyalties are first to the family, and a man in Yi Dynasty times would be excused from military service to return to care for an aged parent. The parents are respected as superior beings in the family, and the word of the father,or clan chief still directs the affairs of members of the family. A young man dare not go against the advise or commands of his elders in Korea. Personal wishes and needs may have to take second place to the major decisions of the family head.

This close knit family system also concentrated its resources where they might best insure the future security of the family. The brightest and most promising son was selected to be educated, and all other needs were sacrificed if necessary to see this son receive the best possible education and opportunities for promotion in society. This tended to produce an aristocracy of scholars, and social mobility was mainly possible by educational attainments. The government examinations, given locally and at the capitol, were the gates through which any bright [page 49] young man could possibly be advanced to the highest levels in the land. Failure of the examination was a major defeat for the future of a family. Even today tremendous emphasis is placed on the passing of entrance examinations to various levels of schools from kindergarten on up to the universities. Education is still a major goal of most Koreans. This system,when working at its best,was supposed to insure that the most able minds would advise the king and help lead the nation. Unfortunately, as with many grand schemes in human history,it often failed to take into account the human nature factor,and thus often was perverted and shifted off course, with less than ideal results for the history of the nation. The system basically sacrificed individual wishes and needs for the good of the whole by allowing the superior to develop at the expense of the less talented members of the family,clan, or nation.

It is interesting to look for what remnants of this once rigid system still remain in the 20th century,and are even revived as events dictate. The turn from permissiveness of recent years, as a result of foreign influences from the West,to the older system of tapping recently liberated students quite firmly on their heads to bring them back to their traditional role as students has been seen on college campauses, and by the enforced cutting of long-haired deviants by the police. Students are reminded once again that they must remain in their vertical place in the system as students. The old system remains viable, and revivable by the leadership whenever they feel threatened by foreign corrupting influences on the youth.

On a recent visit to Seoul I noticed other features that remind one of the traditional approach to problems. The recently opened scenic highways around the ridges of the high hills north of the city of Seoul illustrate this point. This tourist road offers a new honeymoon taxi ride for many newly wed couples and their friends in Seoul. Namsan was the favorite honeymoon ride destination before. However,as one approaches the new scenic highway there are signs and police warning that no photographs may be taken along this route. Of course, every newly wed couple needs to take a photograph of the wedding day festivities. What a sour note on an otherwise happy day. The interesting question is, what kind of mind would insist on withholding such a pleasure for so many citizens of Seoul and Korea? The answer is, of course,that the president’s life was threatened by North Korean agents a few years ago, [page 50] and these signs went up to prevent photographic intelligence pictures from being taken of the fortifications surrounding the Blue House for any future attempts by agents from the North.

But anyone must realize that any professional intelligence agent will not be easily deterred from taking the pictures he wishes to plan such a mission against the President by the mere putting up of signs, “No Photography Allowed”. It thus seems that only the innocent tourists are prevented from having happy reminders of the beauties of Seoul by this approach. Whoever made the decision that the signs should go up, however, was making a very traditional visible sign that he at least was doing his duty in showing his concern for the life of the President. Who would dare criticize such a noble display of concern? The traditional system insists that one go through the forms, according to appearances, hyungsik, and it is this hyungsik that makes a police officer try to make signs look right, to show proper concern for the problem at hand. Once the gesture is made, the duty is performed for all the public to see. This is an example of the traditional system at work in the modern world of super sleuths, electronic monitoring,and satellites. Long live traditional hyungsik.

One other traditional feature has been the relative lack of a divorce problem. Until very recently divorce was a very rare occurance in Korea in contrast to the increasing frequency of divorce in the West where every fourth marriage ends in the divorce courts. The Korean system protected the family and the children from the trauma of divorce until modern times. Who is to say that the family system that protects women and girls, and holds the family together, ,and stresses education of the gifted should suddenly be changed? Before tampering with this family system Koreans might do well to take a long look at the system before adopting Western systems that have been so unstable in this respect.

At a seminar at the Academy House several years ago I remember several Korean scholars became quite vehement in discussions when it was considered that Korea might do well to consider her history before jumping too rapidly on the bandwagon of modernization. They accused us of constant preoccupation with Korea’s past. These gentlemen avowed that modern Koreans cared nothing for the “corrupt” past, and wished to divorce themselves completely from the past. They were now concerned only with modern Korea. How do these men propose to [page 51] change Korea if they are not first willing to study the strengths and weaknesses of the past? Korea’s rich heritage has much that will bring wisdom to the present and will need to be studied by Korean as well as foreign scholars to gain insights that may be useful for the future. I have listened to many frustrated foreigners in Korea, who become quite eloquent and at times resentful over some facet of Korean culture on which they had stubbed a toe. One must not forget that many aspects of the Korean system work very well for Koreans in their situation,although they may grate the different sensibilities of foreigners.

In my view the Korean traditional system takes very good care of the problem of people living physically very close together. The emphasis on interpersonal relationships, politeness,the sensitivity to the feelings of others, the ability to make one feel comfortable and important, is little short of fantastic. Everyone’s bubble is preserved and given due respect. The system oils inter-personal tensions and reduces them when the full play of natural politeness is brought into the picture. One from the outside might make the superficial judgement that this politeness is merely shallow surface show and hypocrisy, but this may fall short of the truth. The fact is that the courtesy and deep politeness is to be found in the remotest mountain village as well in the most educated centers of the land. It is practiced by the disadvantaged as well as the wealthy. The poor in Korea are not often poor in spirit with their grace and natural feeling for human understanding. Compared with a modern Western city ghetto,one finds little of the crudeness and raw emotions so evident among people in the crowded streets of New York City, for example, among Korean people. In a world where people are becoming ever more crowded,the Korean system that allows people to live together without too much violcncc or visible tension merits the serious consideration of all social scientists of every culture. There is so much we can learn in this field from the Korean traditional system.

One aspect of this Korean interpersonal relationship system is the way one comes on. In the language of youth, we in the West are “Coming on too strong”. The Korean low profile approach, this coming on to another person or situation quietly, softly, with deep bows, and self negation, reduces tension and allows for time to build relationships step by step, taking the required ebb and flow of signals from one to another, digesting them before making the next advance. The circling around [page52] problem areas before touching them directly, the defusing of issues by working through third parties and go-betweens preserves emotions and waits for the mellow mood before making a confrontation of personalities directly. The Western approach in contrast comes on loud and clear, with a brisk handshake,no nonsense, down to business,picking brains, moving ahead with vigor with scarcely an awareness of the feelings of others, and then leaving people emotionally drained, brittle, and raw. No wonder so many in the West have duodenal ulcers. Violence is a frequent result of Western system encounters. Violence is only turned to when all else has been tried and fails in the Korean traditional system.

This system gets the desired results without causing permanent damage to the human equation in rubbing hard problems abrasively against people. The secret of this system is taking the time to study people before rushing in on them. This is part of the “Wisdom of the East” that so many from the West would do well to study and learn, for we need all the help we can get on the matter of how to live closely with people without friction.

As we all grow older, we need to look at the Korean system and the way they care for elderly people. This gracious concern for old people, the filial piety bit, the respect, the love, the good diet, the best little comforts reserved for the respected teacher or parent is a gem that the Korean system holds that is very precious. Contrast this with the dismal picture in Western lands of the neglected elderly shuttled off to nursing homes to be cared for often by professional but insensitive incompetents. The great emphasis on the youth culture in the West tends to give the impression that the aged are worthless. They should not be allowed to hang around and take up space in the home or have any influence on the young. What a miserable outlook we in the West have made for so many elderly parents and grandparents. This cruel aspect of Western culture must be very shocking to the traditional East. Before the Korean system is changed, Koreans should consider their approach to aging, and avoid the pitfalls of neglect that have become a way of life for the senior citizens in the West.

As a practicing surgeon in Korea for over twenty years I have seen much of Oriental medicine, especially acupuncture, moxa burning, and herb medicine. It is rather interesting that since Mr. Reston of the New York Times made his famous trip to China and had his appendectomy [page53] at the “Anti-Imperialist Peoples” Hospital in Peking, he reintroduced acupuncture to the West. Some people have harshly suggested that Mr. Reston had a lobotomy along with the appendectomy ; however, the point has now been uncovered for the Western world that there exists an ancient system of medical practice which has survived some six thousand years in the East. This system places its main emphasis on the good doctor-patient rapport, and emphasizes the need for the doctor to relieve symptoms and make the patient feel good. This system has little scientific interest in etiology, prevention of disease, or the cure of major medical problems. Its main interest is in the relief of symptoms, not cure of disease. It often equates relief of symptoms as “cure” of disease. When one recognizes that about sixty percent of man’s illnesses are self limiting, and a person will recover regardless of what treatment is given, then the relief of symptoms becomes a significant factor in therapy. If one adds to these diseases the large body of psychosomatic overlay there is in many disease states, there is obviously a wide area where any support of the patient by close doctor-patient relationship will make the patient feel better and actually speed his recovery. Merely the fact that someone cares,and takes the time to sit and fiddle with the patient, be it twirling needles and spinning a philosophical bit about the balance of forces or telling a funny tale, will divert the patient’s attention from his complaints and make him feel improved.

It is also recognized that the “gate effect” of the nervous system is such that the mind tends to receive stimuli from only one place at a time, and if needles are placed in the skin and twirled to right or left the stimuli from this area will tend to block out stimuli from other areas of the body where perhaps a surgical procedure is taking place. Pain is mostly felt only in the skin. Once an incision is made through the skin and the body cavities are entered there is no pain sensation with the sewing of bowel, or the cutting of organs, thus acupuncture has been shown to take the place of some other anesthetic agents in certain types of surgical procedures, especially in China where the modern drugs are largely not available and skilled anesthesiologists are rather in short supply. The acupuncture anesthesia is probably as good as surgery done in the past with “Six strong men and a bottle of whiskey.” Added to this is a philosophy that does not insist that all pain is somehow evil and bad and must be relieved immediately. Opium also plays its part in Oriental [page 54] medicine to a large extent, and let us face it,opium is more powerful thanas pirin.

Oriental medical systems seem to care little for followup, the keeping of accurate records, and the term “cure” is rather loosely used. Death may steal in without much pain, and one considers this as part of the natural stream of life, one is born and one dies, and why try to keep the event from taking its natural course? This acceptance of death, especially among the elderly, does not put the pressure on the doctor in the East to prolong life as is put on his colleague in the West where death is considered the great tragedy and must be prevented at all costs.

There are several aspects of the Korean traditional system that seem to me not to work very well for Koreans. These features should also be looked at to gain a balanced view of the whole system. The emphasis on making a person feel good, even to the keeping of obvious truth from him, eventually runs its course and catches up with him in the long run. The short term gain of pleasant deceit is often paid for later with serious misreactions. This wonderful expansive feeling one gets while being lathered with good stroking often has a bitter hangover when the stark reality finally breaks through and one realizes that one has been had. The bankruptcy that overtakes so many Korean businessmen and common folk who have flown too high on promises and the inflated claims of promoters is a problem for the business community. It is not too unlike the newly acquired credit card level of society in surburbia USA, where the purchase is made so painlessly until the bill arrives at the end of the month requiring prompt attention in computerized unemotional reality. The inability to limit oneself to hard reality is a problem the world over, and certainly the Korean system is not immune from this feature of human nature. Interestingly in the Korean set up, while one goes happily on wheeling and dealing in some Kisang House making unreal deals to the soft caressing of a painted doll,there seems always some minor clerk or detective in the shadows keeping little notes on all that goes on,and these eventually find their way to the police,and the once proud leader has his comeuppance and is hauled off to jail in a most distressing manner,discredited by the press,and sits ignominously before a judge in his traditional white farmer’s clothing, where a few days or weeks earlier he rode in a seat of the mighty, untouchable by the law. This recurring playlet fills the daily press in Korea year in and year [page 55] out for all to see,but few seem to heed

The whole problem of making decisions based primarily on personal relationships and kinship rather than on the more objective analyses of people or situations lead many traditional Koreans down the path to ruin. Impersonal analysis is not something that is often found in the traditional Korean system of calculations in my experience of living and working with Koreans.

There is one rather amusing and also delightful part of the system in Korea that is for men only to enjoy. This is the system of professional women entertainers, the kisangs. This is one system to keep the “boys” in line, but also it provides them in line with fun and games. Men are allowed to have extra marital pleasure, and yet they stumble home at night without any fear of being beaten on the head by an irate spouse, in contrast with the Western system where one can only play around as long as he does not get caught by his wife. Western women might strongly reject this male chauvinism, but like it or not, the Korean system faces the facts that men enjoy women and sex whereever they may find them, and yet basically want to come home to a wife they truly love and a family they wish to support with love, feeding,and care.

According to Confucius,”Woman’s place is beneath the man,” and there it is. The Korean system has tended to keep the woman in this place,and has also allowed the man to flirt from flower to flower, as a recognized part of manhood. Aside from the ephemeral pleasures of the Kisang House, this is also the private club where men may find warmth and friendliness, where men meet other men and contract much of the serious business in most gracious surroundings. No such equivalent institution has yet appeared with public approval in Western cultures. In the East the tea house is a very important place in every community for the men.

There has always been a problem for Westerners coming to Korea to live in their strange new roles as revolutionaries, as subversives, offering by their very presence a threat to the traditional system, by showing often for the first time to many Koreans that there are other ways than the Korean way,and even claiming often that their “Way” is the better way of life. Whether the bearer of change be a diplomat, a foreign aid official,a Peace Corp youth, or a devout missionary, or just an international bum, these changers find to their sorrow often that being a [page 56] revolutionary in any society is not a happy one.

Historically changers have been lynched,stoned,burned at the stake or done to death in most unpleasant fashions. Korea has produced its quota of such victims. Anyone attempting wittingly or unwittingly to change a system eventually crashes into the emotional response from people long comfortable in their system and fearful of any change that might pose a threat to their cherished way of life. The Yi Dynasty kings were absolutely correct in their estimate of the threat posed to Korea by early French Catholic missionaries who tried to sneak into Korea in the 16th and 17th centuries. They would eventually endanger the very survival of the ruling dynasty,and thus the kings drew a defense perimeter along the coastline of Korea, and threatened to kill any foreigner who dared to trespass on the sacred soil of Korea. This effort rather effectively isolated Korea until the pressures of the 19th century finally forced concessions and treaties from the Korean court, and pried open the gates for foreigners to enter the land in 1882. This entry of first Protestant missionaries, then representatives of foreign governments, and finally businessmen and tourists has profoundly changed the life of every Korean. Thus the problem of comfortable isolationism is only a memory from the past,and the problem of the flow of subversive ideas into Korea remains, whether they come from the North or the West.

Certain areas of modern Korea have and are changing very rapidly. Modern medicine has a firm foothold in Korea with Western style medical schools, hospitals, doctors, nurses, and health centers. However, the ancient herb doctor with his acupuncture needle continues to flourish and is still the main provider for medical care for the majority of Koreans. Before Korea completely abandons her traditional system with its many strengths and fine points,there is a need for the leadership in every area of life to restudy the basic traditional system and make firm decisions about what things definitely should be allowed to change,and what elements of the Old system should be held and preserved. It is easy to burn things to the ground to clear the way for sudden and violent change,but it might be possible that in Korea change might come more smoothly and naturally with less violence and death. It may require a bit of patience and sophistication on the part of many would be changers to allow this transition to take place without the wrenching that has taken place in North Korea or in China. The viable rich Korean system [page 57] has its deep strengths and abiding values that no hell-fire-bent-to-convert-the-heathen should be allowed to destroy without first fully understanding what one is trying to liberate from what. For the Western innovator in Korea there is a need for much more serious study and insight and respect for the Korean system, then he may someday be in a position where his efforts for change might be heard and his opinions carry some credibility and value for the future of Korea.

When one speaks from a different cultural point on the compass, and appears to question things long accepted, one also runs the risk of offending, and being misunderstood by Koreans no matter how “pure” and God-sent his motives might be.

The foreigner in Korea only needs be reminded that he is a foreigner, a guest in Korea,outside the traditional system, and must not run hobnail boots over the beautiful paper floors of his host’s precious home. Even the use of the appropriate word can be so difficult for the foreigner,that he may blunder where he hopes most to be understood. This point was illustrated by a Phillippine doctor visiting the United States who was trying to explain to his host in his limited English the problem of why his wife could not have a child. He said,”Well my wife is unbearable.” Then realizing that this was not quite the word, he said, “She is inconceivable.” Another try, “My wife is impregnable.” Finally in desperation he said, “My wife is insurmountable.” The problem of language and cross culture remains fascinating and one that requires our best wits to help resolve. I suspect that there are no quickie and simple solutions.