The Culture of Industrial Relations in Korea: An Alternative Sociological Approach

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Introduction

In the social science discourse on development, modernization, and related subject matters, there has been a debate between the so-called “culturalists” and the “structuralists” or “institutionalists” on the relative importance and relevance of cultural factors in explaining social phenomena. Obviously, the culturalist camp places special emphasis on culture, whereas the other camp would rather focus its analysis on the more objective historical elements of structural characteristics and institutional arrangements (Berger, 1988).

For a more fruitful understanding of social affairs, however, one should not confine oneself to either of these extreme viewpoints. What is more important is how methodically and rigorously one’s position is substantiated. While my approach in this paper may be called culturalistic in the sense that I shall analyze certain significant phenomena of industrial relations in Korea by exploring the cultural background and sources of labour-management behaviour, I am not trying to “explain” them with cultural factors alone. The purpose of such an approach is to bring culture into relief and show how certain cultural factors might affect industrial relations in a given structural and institutional context. By doing this, one could gain a fruitful grasp of the very complex dynamics of industrial relations in a country like Korea, in which rapid transformations are taking place in almost all sectors of social life.

When culture is explored for a better comprehension of some social phenomena, one can benefit more than expected by drawing upon the indigenous cultural cognitions, orientations, and evaluations relative to the subject matter at hand. In recent years, some social scientists in non-Western academic circles have endeavoured to establish what is known as “alternative discourse” in social science through the “indigenization” of academic disciplines. This is not an easy task, but some useful ideas and experiments have so far emerged (Alatas, 1996; Kim Kyong-Dong, 1996a; 1998).

This is an additional consideration that is given here in my approach. When one attempts to provide some meaningful explanations of certain social phenomena, one immediately confronts the fundamental difficulty of
having to rely almost solely on the existing theories, which happen to be mainly couched in the language of Western culture and constructed in the social, cultural, and historical contexts of the West. Even if the universality of such theories may be seriously in doubt, one is left with little choice unless one has been able to provide some significantly valid alternative explanations independent of Western cultural idiosyncrasies. The indigenization effort is directed to this reality, attempting to furnish alternative discourses of culturally independent social science (Kim, 1996a).

What is actually being done in this direction is to dig into the historical and cultural backdrop of industrial relations in Korea and provide some meaningful explanations of why certain patterns of industrial relations behaviour occurs, by using the languages and concepts indigenous to our own cultures. Naturally, one cannot be completely independent of Western academic conventions and conceptualizations even in this type of endeavour. Nonetheless, the main body of concepts and explanatory schemes will be couched in our own language and conventions.

By using this approach, one could be alerted to certain apparently unexplainable, therefore, unresolvable aspects of industrial relations behaviour. This would then help us approach the problems of industrial conflict and tension management in labour relations more wisely so that more culturally relevant and realistic solutions may be found.

In this brief paper, however, I shall not be able to fully expound on and demonstrate my approach. Only a few outstanding illustrations, both on the macro- and micro-level, will suffice for our purposes.

The Political-Ideological Nature of Korean Industrial Relations

Even today, one of the most outstanding features of Korea's industrial relations is that it is highly politicized and ideologically charged. I emphasize this because in an ordinary situation, a country of Korea's economic status — of close to $10,000 per capita income and membership in the prestigious world-class group of nations, the OECD — would be expected to have established a system of industrial relations that remains neutral in the political and ideological spheres. When this kind of generalization is unattainable, one could benefit by looking into particular historical circumstances in the cultural background of the society in question and locating the source of deviance.¹

Historical Peculiarities

Korea happened to be under colonial rule during its embryonic phase of capitalist modernization. Industrial relations were barely formalized due to suppression by the colonial authorities, and the labour movement that