# The Genealogy of "Making Harmony" among Co-Workers of a South Korean Conglomerate

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> What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity
> of their origin; it is the dissension of other things.   It is disparity.
> > Foucault [1986: 79]

The question came in November of 1986, only a few days after I [Roger Janelli] had begun fieldwork in one of South Korea's four largest *chaebŏl* (conglomerates). "Now that you've been here for a while, what's your impression [of our office]?" asked the young section chief (*kwajang*) whose desk was closest to my own.

As I tried to think of a good reply, several thoughts ran through my mind. One was that I ought to say something positive, partly to be polite and partly because the outcome of my fieldwork depended on the future cooperation of this section chief and that of other young managers and premanagerial white-collar workers.   Another thought was that it seemed far too early to hazard a guess about the eventual findings of my research question: What sorts of continuities and discontinuities could be found between the practices existing in a modern South Korean enterprise and those that obtained in rural South Korea a few decades ago? I even worried that I might say something very naive, as fieldworkers are especially likely to misunderstand what they see and hear during the early stages of participant observation.

Yet another thought was not so debilitating: perhaps I had noticed something that would later turn out to be significant, as cultural differences are often most vivid at the initial stage of fieldwork, before the fieldworker becomes inured to local practices.[1]   I had made especially detailed notes during the first few days of research for that very reason, and I knew that the absence of any apparent conflict between co-workers had particularly impressed me.   No one ever quarrelled with or raised a voice toward office mates of the same rank.   Even in private, men very rarely complained about each other, exhibiting a generosity they did not maintain when talking about their superiors, the Chun Doo Hwan government, or the United States.

A number of other signs also indicated mutual good will, strong social bonds, and group identification among male co-workers.[2]   Men who worked in the same section usually ate lunch together in the conglomerate's cafeteria, though their section chiefs often chose to eat with each other or were called upon to eat with a

superior. And when men of the same section, or managers of the same department (*pu*) or division (*ponbu*), went out to eat lunch together, they often ordered the same item from the menu. Whenever a man married, each of the sections in his office (except his own) gathered together and presented in one envelope its members' wedding gifts. A man's marriage, his child's first birthday, or a funeral in his family provided occasions for all the men of his office to gather for the ceremony or celebration. Though several complained that their long working hours left them too little time to spend with their families, co-workers often met for after-hours drinking and eating, explaining that such gatherings were devices for building camaraderie and healing any injuries or ill feelings that might have arisen during the hectic workday. And one young manager revealed that yet another strategy for thwarting ill will was to avoid talking with co-workers about one's own family, lest such revelations invite comparisons and provoke jealousies.

Reinforcing these early impressions of good human relations was the exceptionally generous reception that I had received from the office's young managers. During my first few days there, each of the section chiefs and department heads (*pujang*) of the division which occupied the office where my desk was located had come over to chat about the weather, compliment my choice of neckties, or propose that we have coffee together. While I had been wondering what efforts would be appropriate to establish rapport with these busy and hardworking young men, they had taken the initiative to establish rapport with me.

Yet one more reason why my attention was drawn to human relations at the initial stage of fieldwork was the emphasis they received in the *chaebŏl*'s managerial ideology. The conglomerate's three official managerial slogans (*sahun*) included the term "human harmony" (*inhwa*); and that phrase received a good deal of attention in training programs and company magazines, where it was often claimed to represent one of Korea's traditional values. Though a survey of 77 South Korean companies revealed that "harmony" was among their most popular managerial principles [Yi Hak-chong 1986:98], many workers agreed with the upper managers' view that a particular emphasis on good human relations distinguished their conglomerate, to which we have given the pseudonym Taesŏng, from others of similar size.[3]

With these several thoughts in mind, I finally ventured to answer the section chief's question with: "Human relations here seem to be very good," thinking that would constitute an appropriate and safe, albeit very bland, reply. "In American offices," I added, "one can see people complaining about each other or even quarrelling."[4]

Much to my surprise, that seemingly banal answer about good human relations at Taesŏng met with a firm rebuttal. "We too get annoyed and angry with each other," countered the section chief, "but we make efforts not to show how we feel." In several subsequent conversations over the next several months, many other office workers expressed similar views, maintaining that their apparent cordiality was not a natural expression of social solidarity but rather a fabricated outcome constructed

through constant attention and effort. Both premanagerial white-collar workers (*sawŏn*) and young managers of the division maintained further that competition and "individualism" (*kaeinjuŭi*), a word with negative connotations in Korean, were especially rife in their office.[5] A few added that there was a big difference between how they felt inside and what they showed outside. Some even revealed that they wondered whether all the effort expended to maintain social relations did not absorb some time and energy that could be better invested in enhancing productivity.

The actions and statements of Taesŏng office workers offered a striking contrast to the open displays of conflict that had been visible and audible from time to time in the rural village of Twisŏngdwi, where Dawnhee Yim and I had conducted fieldwork nearly fifteen years earlier [Janelli and Janelli 1982]. The elders and young people of the village, for example, comprised two factions that vied for control over village affairs; and while the loud outbursts occasionally produced by this conflict invariably quieted within an hour after they began, the competition between the two factions would have been hard to miss. A few villagers also spoke of long-standing personal resentments toward their neighbors. An elderly woman who owned a house where we once rented a room, for example, explained to us that one of our nearest neighbors never set foot into the courtyard of her house because of a dispute they had had many years earlier; and more than one person complained of the stinginess of a relative.

Altercations that erupted occasionally in other rural South Korean communities during the past few decades are also depicted in published ethnographies. Vincent Brandt, for example, observed:

> The frequent use of intense oral aggression as an immediate expression of tension and hostility is a significant factor in village life.... There is little restraint once a real quarrel is launched, the principals often continuing to shout at each other until every conceivable grievance and bit of resentment has been dredged up and spewed out. Where serious conflict exists, the process may go on for days; in other cases it will last an hour or two, while work continues uninterrupted. [1971:186]
>
> Anger or disapproval is often expressed at a level of sound and with an apparent intensity of emotion that impresses western observers as the prelude to violence, although violence is rare. [1971:203]

Kim T'aek-kyu's account of contending segments of the Hahoe Yu lineage [1964], Chun Kyung-soo's report of a quarrel between two agnatically related families in the pseudonymous village of Hasami [1984: 48], and some incidents described in Laurel Kendall's report of a shaman's life history [1988] offer more examples of open conflict in rural South Korea.

Personal relations at Taesŏng could also be contrasted, though perhaps not as starkly, with my observations of other urban settings in South Korea. Though I have often noticed efforts to build or maintain cordial social relationships in family settings, academic gatherings, and other social situations in South Korea, and while

intense oral aggression was not at all common in those circumstances, instances of interpersonal friction did not seem to be as well hidden as at Taesŏng.[6] Thus, my "practical consciousness" [Giddens 1984: 41–45] for comprehending human relationships and interpreting interpersonal action in South Korea, forged through both personal experiences and reading ethnographies, seemed inappropriate at Taesŏng.

Perhaps the best way to describe the major difference between the cultural understandings obtaining in the village and those of the workplace is to relate them to two different aspects of social life: structure and agency. Whereas interpretations of human actions offered by most rural villagers seemed to be informed by a view of society that emphasized structural persistence, Taesŏng office workers advanced explanations that placed greater emphasis on human choice and the contingent quality of social relations. Rural villagers had been inclined to explain individual actions as manifestations of enduring genealogical relationships, fairly stable personal feelings, and, somewhat less often, consistent personalities or moral qualities.[7] In the offices of Taesŏng, by contrast, co-workers spoke and acted as if individual human actions created social relations and could also repair— or at least smooth over—fault lines and fractures.

In light of frequent reassignments, moreover, much of the harmony that office workers sought to make was implicitly temporary; and reformulations of social relationships that occurred after transfers of personnel even within the same office were often striking. Harmony was not expected to be distributed uniformly throughout the office, but rather varying degrees of gendered solidarity were supposed to correlate with the company's and the division's organization chart. Thus, more of a man's efforts were directed toward workers of his own section than toward workers of other sections in his division, and more toward men of his own division than those of other divisions. A reassignment called for an immediate refocusing of such efforts.

Dawnhee Yim and I are not claiming that feelings of mutual animosity were any less intense at Taesŏng or that social relationships there were more ephemeral than in Twisŏngdwi or elsewhere. There are good reasons to agree with Taesŏng's office workers that considerable rivalry and conflict existed among them. And not all their social ties were so transitory as to correlate exactly with the fortuities of job assignments. While the after-hours socializing about which men openly spoke was done by those who were expected to socialize together, many men also engaged in more surreptitious after-hours gatherings that crosscut their organization chart, and the participants at these latter events were usually men who had formed close ties when they had been stationed in the same unit in prior years.[8] What we wish to direct attention to is not the extent of any mutual hostility or flexibility of social arrangements but rather the cultural understandings and practices Taesŏng workers had for interacting with each other in order to minimize conflict and ill will or at least keep them from erupting into open displays. How and why did these ideas and practices for making harmony come to prevail?

**Theoretical Considerations**

Studies of behavior in contemporary offices of different nations are beset with at least four major intellectual dilemmas: idealism versus materialism, local versus international, traditional versus modern, and structure versus agency. These dilemmas have long plagued a great deal of social research, but the first two especially become salient when trying to understand behavior at an organization like Taesŏng. Compared with the study of kinship terminology, religious beliefs, or esthetics, it would be more difficult to overlook the material as well as the ideal motivations of actions in the workplace. At least one reason—and the most ostensible reason—why men worked in Taesŏng offices each day was to obtain a salary, and their efforts were supposed to be directed toward ultimately generating sales revenue, lessening expenses, and otherwise producing income. Yet a purely or even primarily materialist interpretation of their behavior seems to grant too little recognition to the ways in which their actions were predicated on ideas. These new-middle-class workers possessed multiple and sometimes contradictory interests [Wright 1985; Wright et al. 1989], and the weighing of those competing interests was informed by subjective understandings of nation, class, and gender [Janelli and Yim 1993]. Choices of strategies for pursuing these interests, moreover, were informed by ideas about means of persuasion and what others would recognize as morally acceptable behavior.[9]

Similarly, it would have been difficult not to recognize that the practices and cultural understandings of the men at Taesŏng had both local and international origins. Their conglomerate was a multinational enterprise engaged in worldwide production and sales, and many of their daily activities involved people and institutions of other nations. Though some of their actions were chosen deliberately as assertions of Korean culture and identity, their choices of what represented that local identity and culture also owed much to their understandings of commercial conventions prevailing elsewhere in the world (see below).

Rather than formulate an interpretation of workplace behavior that would favor one or the other alternative of any of the four dilemmas identified above, we seek to acknowledge fully all eight terms of the dilemmas. This requires us to avoid simplifying motivations to the essentially material or essentially ideal, generalizing origins as essentially local or essentially international, characterizing ideas and practices as essentially traditional or essentially modern, and typifying actions as freely chosen or tightly constrained. In order to develop an interpretation of making harmony that acknowledges these seemingly opposing qualities without surrendering theoretical consistency, we attempt to build upon some recent innovations that have sought to dissolve essentialist dilemmas by suggesting how their apparently contradictory terms can be reconciled [Giddens 1979, 1984; Bourdieu 1977; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Comaroff 1985; Archer 1988; Taussig 1980].

In order to weave together an interpretation that incorporates all eight diverse

strands, we attempt to use Michel Foucault's concept of "genealogy" as an overall framework.   His image of a bilateral and ego-based genealogy offers a helpful metaphor for conceptualizing how contemporary ideas and practices can have multiple origins, disparate qualities, and partial similarities with the past.   It points to the continued development of such phenomena over time rather than the transmission of essences.   And it accommodates a process of reproduction and transformation through choices of actions, some with unanticipated consequences, rather than positing traditions that have somehow been "handed down" from one generation to the next.   As Foucault puts it:

> Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, [nor] that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes.   Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people.   On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents.   [1986:81]

## Toward A Genealogical Reconstruction

In attempting to comprehend via this genealogical metaphor the various origins and processes of reproduction and transformation of making harmony at Taesŏng, we begin by identifying two of its apparent forebears: (1) ideas and practices found in rural Korea during the past few decades, and (2) those of twentieth-century Japanese organizations.   We then explore how the genealogy continued to unfold during several months of fieldwork, or the process whereby Taesŏng's white-collar workers selected, adapted, resisted, reproduced, or repeated these ideas and practices, and how their choices were informed by their perceptions of their various material interests.

From early years spent in rural villages, or indirectly from parents and others who grew up in such settings, Taesŏng workers apparently acquired some of the understandings that informed their actions aimed at making harmony in the office.   As we have indicated already, it is difficult to view modern ways of dealing with co-workers as essentially a heritage of village conventions or "traditional" culture, but it would be equally misguided to claim that rural experiences had no connections to the office workers' cultural knowledge.   Twisŏngdwi villagers, for example, like people anywhere, were not entirely without efforts to maintain amicable relations or at least the appearance of amicable relations with relatives and neighbors.   A theme recurrent in a good many interpretations of Confucianism is,

after all, the importance of maintaining social harmony; and even Vincent Brandt's ethnography pointed to the existence of a "ubiquitous concern with maintaining good relations and restoring equilibrium if a quarrel does break out" [1971:212].

In neither village nor office, however, did interpersonal relations persist out of sheer inertia, acquired and transmitted as a result of the socialization and enculturation processes. As Anthony Giddens [1979, 1984] has argued, such a Parsonian view is ahistorical and gives too little attention to change and the contingent quality of social relationships. It also overlooks the choices and strategies that are necessary to reproduce or alter those relationships. Similarly, as several anthropologists have recently argued, cultural ideas do not become ossified into traditions that persist out of inertia [e.g., Bestor 1989]. Interpretations and applications of social rules are contested; and cultural understandings are continually transformed, renegotiated, redefined, reformulated, or perhaps reproduced, as a result of each new contest. Elsewhere, for example, Dawnhee Yim has shown how lineage organization and property ownership in rural South Korea were subject to competing claims and counterclaims [D.Y. Janelli 1984]. And Shima Mutsuhiko [1979:106–109] has shown how the identity of a lineage's primogeniture descendant (chongson) could also be contested. To take an example primarily from the realm of cultural understandings, filial piety per se seemed never to be openly contested in Twisŏngdwi, but how that norm came to be interpreted in any particular situation was negotiable, the outcome dependent upon which details of the situation could be foregrounded and which occulted. Thus, while a portrayal of workers' efforts to manufacture social relations as an extension of Korean "tradition" [e.g., Sin 1984] would be a cultural construction based on "partial truths" [Marcus and Fischer 1986], a culturally informed preference for generally avoiding open conflict may well have formed in village settings and helped to make appealing to Taesŏng workers a management-supported ideology that emphasized efforts to prevent or heal social ruptures with co-workers[10] To comprehend how and why such ideas were transformed to exclude all expressions of conflict and how they were redirected from kinship and village to office requires, however, that we look to extra-village experiences as well.

Another source of the devices for dealing with co-workers at Taesŏng appears to be Japanese business ideology and office practices. Criticizing the existing ethnography on rural Korea, Laurel Kendall [1985:25] once noted that "anyone familiar with China reads Korean ethnography with a smothering sense of déjà vu." After reading ethnographies of Japan, particularly those dealing with modern Japanese organizations, one often feels a sense of déjà vu in the offices of Seoul. Much of the ethnographic literature on Japan points to the apparent harmony exhibited by various groups and, for more than a decade, to the efforts that are required to fabricate that harmony as well as the differences between inner feelings and outer appearances [e.g., Reischauer 1977:152, quoted in Smith [1983:56–57]; Dore 1978:266–281; Smith 1978:229–248; Clark 1979:200–205; Krauss, Rohlen, and Steinhoff 1984; Kinzley 1991].[11] In the context of Japanese business firms, for

example, Atsumi Reiko [1979] has pointed to a linguistically acknowledged differentiation between after-hours socializing with workmates to attain pragmatic ends and that carried out with friends for the sake of enjoyment.[12]

Several writers have pointed to a variety of similarities between Japanese and South Korean business practices, though considerable difference of opinion exists on the degree to which those similarities derive from the colonial period or from contacts during the past three decades. The introduction of Japanese capitalist methods during South Korea's early industrialization has already been noted by Leroy P. Jones and SaKong Il [1980], Carter Eckert [1991], Dennis McNamara [1988, 1989, 1990], and Karl Moskowitz [n.d.]. In more recent years, Japanese cultural understandings about interpersonal relationships have also entered Korea in the form of company training programs and popular business publications, many of which present Japanese ideas unmediated except for language translation. A portion of one such text begins with a well-known Japanese proverb which has apparently not been reported by Korean folklorists [e.g., Korean Folklore Society 1972]: "As the proverb, 'the nail that sticks out gets hammered down,' indicates, from long ago in our nation people avoided going ahead of others, and spent their lives avoiding making any disturbances" [Suzuki 1988:91–92]. Similarly, one of Taesŏng's directors was thoroughly conversant with William Ouchi's *Theory Z* [1981]; and a department head told me that reading Marvin J. Wolf's *The Japanese Conspiracy* [1983] made him aware of how similar South Korean and Japanese business practices were. Finally, in a public interview at which a newspaper reporter compared the *chaebŏl*'s closely held ownership with the more dispersed ownership of *zaibatsu*, the chairman of Taesŏng sought to defend his family's monopolization of the conglomerate by arguing that Korean companies were following the path of their Japanese counterparts:

> *Interviewer*: In the case of the Japanese *chaebŏl* [i.e., *zaibatsu*][13] companies, they became firms of the people [*kungmin ŭi kiŏp*] by widely dispersing their stock ownership. Naturally, a citizen thinks of them as "my companies" and has affection for them. In our case, however, the companies are still virtually owned and managed by a single owner-manager or family, and it is rather difficult to expect affection for them or a sense of participation in them.
> *Chairman*: Japan's Mitsubishi, Mitsui, and other companies became available for public ownership 70 or 80 years ago, and I have heard that their founders and principal stockholders [now] hold no more than 2 or 3 percent of their stock. Moreover, their management is in the hands of professional managers. In the case of our firms, however, it has been only about 20 years at most since they became listed on the stock exchange. It appears that our firms too will become Japanese-style in the future. I'm not sure about my son's generation, but I think it will probably be difficult to have a successor within the family by the time of my grandson's generation. [*Chosŏn ilbo*, Feb. 28, 1987, 10; our translation]

Much of South Korea's managerial practices, managerial ideologies, and

commercial and organizational vocabulary (see the Romanizations below) bear more than an accidental similarity to those of Japan. Upper managers' urging young workers to practice self-discipline and accept self-responsibility for their own welfare, for example, was reminiscent of ideas explored in Dorinne Kondo's [1990:76–115] account of spiritual training in Japan and Helen Hardacre's [1986] study of Kurozumikyō, a Japanese new religion. One of the particular themes to which Hardacre points is that poor relations with others ought to be regarded as one's own, not the other person's, fault. Ironically, Hardacre herself sharply differentiated these cultural understandings from those of the Korean minority in Japan [1986:31–32]. And the use of "harmony" as a managerial slogan, which so many South Korean companies emphasize, was also one of the slogans used in the Japanese bank studied by Thomas Rohlen [1974].

Despite all of these similarities, one can find many differences as well between Japanese and Korean business practices [Hayashi 1988; Hattori 1986, 1988; Korean Chamber of Commerce 1987; Yi Kwanhŭi 1989: 1–93; Choong Soon Kim 1992], and many allegedly Japanese ideas and practices continued to be resisted at Taesŏng. Its owner-managers had not adopted an implicit lifetime employment system for their large enterprise's managers and managerial-track employees, for example, a practice which seems to have prevailed for office workers among Japanese firms of comparable size and stature during the past several decades. And younger employees continued to resist the company-as-family metaphor for legitimizing managerial control, a metaphor that has been used in Japan and that received considerable support in top management's ideology at Taesŏng. This resistance was indicated by subordinates' preferring to portray the top-down decision making and everyday control as militaristic rather than familial [Janelli and Yim 1993:223–228]. An apparently Japanese-style in-office calisthenics program, introduced in the summer of 1987, was also resisted by subordinates, who simply ignored it.[14] Some employees also chose to portray their long working hours—which they also sought to resist—as not only a Japanese practice but also a carryover from the colonial era, thereby adding a sharper edge to their critique. The attribution of such long hours to Japanese origins was predicated on the belief that Japanese—not Korean—workers devoted themselves entirely to their companies.[15] Several men also pointed out that they, unlike Japanese workers, used an honorific suffix when introducing their section chief (i.e., *kwajangnim*). The absence of the honorific in Japan signified, these men claimed, that Japanese subordinates regarded their section chief as a member of their own group. Other men simply maintained that Koreans were not as group oriented as Japanese. And a Taesŏng section chief, when shown one of a series of office etiquette guides I had bought at a Seoul bookstore [An 1986], said simply: "I hate that stuff. It's all Japanese."[16] Evidently, workers continued to make choices as to which Japanese practices they would accept, modify, or reject.

Though Japanese and rural Korean cultural understandings and practices seem to have a place in the genealogy of those at Taesŏng, a comprehension of how and

why particular ideas and practices with which workers came into contact were rejected, accepted, transformed, adapted, or reproduced requires a consideration of contemporary workers' motives, perceptions, and material interests as well as the conditions under which workers made their choices. In the remainder of this paper, we will try to show how such decisions by these workers were informed by their understandings of their interests, both as new-middle-class workers at a major conglomerate and as South Koreans in the world system.

As managers and managerial-track employees of one of South Korea's largest conglomerates, Taesŏng workers occupied positions that were highly desirable—indeed privileged. According to figures released by the conglomerate to the South Korean media at the time of fieldwork, the salary of the newest recruit was about three times the amount of South Korea's per capita gross national product. The salary of a new department head equalled about nine times per capita GNP. To acquire these advantaged positions at Taesŏng, men had to compete successfully in a conglomerate-wide entrance examination at which the ratio of applicants to positions was about 6 to 1.[17]

Together with these high rewards, Taesŏng workers also accepted the risk of losing their lucrative positions. As one of South Korea's largest enterprises, Taesŏng itself enjoyed considerable security; but premanagerial workers and young managers were well aware that they faced the possibility of being dismissed. Few employees were formally fired, but men spoke unhesitatingly about the possibility of being forced out (nagaya handa), primarily by being transferred to an undesirable or difficult post. Persons who were forced out lost a great deal. Experience at Taesŏng gave them few marketable skills, since all of the chaebŏl usually hired only young workers and trained them in their own procedures.[18] Moreover, workers faced the difficulty of passing another entrance examination after being out of school for a few years, fitting into a new group composed of workers younger than themselves, and having to accumulate seniority and climb up the pay scale all over again. And because all of the major conglomerates had a maximum (Korean) age of about 29 for hiring new employees, persons over that age did not even enjoy the possibility of being rehired by a conglomerate that paid comparable salaries. Ineligible to apply to other major companies, older workers had to contend with a disorganized job market where personal contacts were especially important. In other words, the greater the financial rewards of a position, the greater the potential loss its occupant faced.[19]

Another risk that men confronted was the possibility of being passed over for promotion, the consequences of which were far greater than simply forfeiting an increase in salary. Since men were generally promoted according to years of service, a close correlation between years of service and rank was expected; and even slight deviations from that expectation were the subject of whispered gossip. Being passed over for promotion was regarded as a painful humiliation as well as an inauspicious sign for one's future career. The absence of one worker from a company-sponsored social event was attributed by co-workers to his ill feelings at

having been passed over in the preceding year.

One consequence of this combination of high reward and high risk was a measure of competition between workers; and since most of the opportunities for promotion were openings in one's own division, a man's chief competition came from other workers in his own office. Yet despite this competition among fellow workers, men did not attribute individual cases of failure to keep up with cohorts to differences in ability or accomplishments but rather to damaging intervention by superiors.

This was only one of the ways in which premanagerial workers and young managers evinced an awareness of oppositions between their interests and those of their respective superiors—despite top management's untiring efforts to present the company as a family united by the pursuit of common goals [Janelli and Yim 1993:116–121]. Another illustration of this awareness could be seen in one man's complaint about the coffee-vending machine in the hallway outside his office. Since the men were not allowed to have their own water boilers, he noted, they had to use this vending machine, which was not only owned and operated by the conglomerate but also charged more than vending machines located on college campuses.

Awareness of differences of interest between themselves and their immediate managers also appeared in other comments. Not only did young men blame superiors for co-workers' late promotions, but one even pointed to an instance in which a superior made a low evaluation of one of his subordinates out of fear that the subordinate would replace him. Several others complained that their superiors disregarded their suggestions, thereby preventing them from demonstrating their abilities and the creativity which the company claimed it desired of them. Several more attributed their long hours to the demands of their immediate superiors, telling poignant anecdotes of how they were prevented from leaving at 7:00 P.M. on particular evenings even when they had important engagements with family or friends. Not once did a man portray a boss as being particularly supportive of a subordinate's career. All in all, men seemed to perceive their co-workers as less of a menace than their superiors.

In spite of their competition, moreover, it was advantageous for co-workers to get along and elicit each other's cooperation. Intense individualism or a spirit of autonomy increased a man's risk of slow advancement or being fired for at least two reasons. One was that "harmony" or "teamwork" was demanded by the company. Company training programs deliberately attempted to inculcate the importance of "teamwork" by dividing the trainees into competing groups and attempting to devise tasks that required group participation. A specific number of the points were even awarded on the basis of internal cooperation exhibited by the team. Lest any factions form during the training process, the membership of these groups— and even sleeping arrangements in the company's dormitory—were deliberately rotated. Later, while on the job, personnel evaluations considered ability to get along with others. Under such circumstances, few men wished to run the risk of being considered a stick in the mud.

Another reason why individualism and autonomy increased workers' risks was that they often needed each other's help and cooperation to accomplish their assigned tasks and satisfy their superiors. Premanagerial men were still in the process of acquiring very specialized knowledge which they needed in their daily work; and the tasks asked of them were often beyond their individual abilities, which left them few alternatives but to ask their colleagues for assistance. Such difficult assignments were neither accidental nor simply aimed at encouraging teamwork. They were also the result of a particular managerial philosophy (also inculcated at company training) that emphasized assumption of responsibility for accomplishing a task. As one manager explained it: men are often given difficult or seemingly impossible assignments, but even if they don't succeed completely they may achieve twenty percent of the goal, which is better than nothing. Moreover, asking a superior for clarification or more explicit directions risked a negative personnel evaluation, for people able to work without requiring constant supervision or advice were evaluated more highly, the same manager explained.[20] Men of the same section also answered phones and took messages for each other, and co-workers and section chiefs sometimes defended an absent man by presenting him in a favorable light before an irate superior. More than one worker told me of how he had been able to accomplish tasks only through informal connections. One manager maintained that his temporary assignment to an overseas branch for a few years had hindered his career because it deprived him of the opportunity to use those years for building rapport with other employees, as his cohorts had done. Most business decisions, he explained, are not based on purely objective considerations; and when you have a good relationship with someone there is a greater chance that person will grant your request.[21]

Finally, continued reproduction of strategies for making harmony with co-workers seems also to have resulted at least partly from political choices motivated by perceptions of South Korea's position in the world system. The office in which my desk was located dealt with American and other foreign buyers, and several men often expressed their objections to American contracts and strategies used to extract the lowest prices. Workers in the adjacent office were involved in a joint venture with an American firm and were particularly critical of being subjected to—and even having to use—American managerial practices.[22] Many American business methods had also been acquired in schools [Lee 1984] or were urged on workers by upper management; and many men felt that an excess of American cultural influence not only disadvantaged them individually in dealings with foreigners[23] but also created general confusion in South Korea and debased its cultural capital.

Appropriate cultural symbols of resistance, therefore, were often chosen with a view toward contrasts with American behavior. Sometimes this led to the adoption of symbols that were shared by other Asian nations and were thus used to represent pan-Asian practices that contrasted favorably with American methods. Making harmony was chosen as one of these symbols. Particularly when pointing to their efforts to build cordial social relationships, many men asserted the superiority of

their own ways over the allegedly American style of confrontation. One young man, for example, told me that he had read somewhere that the difference between Americans and "Eastern people" (*tongyang saram*) was represented by their respective eating utensils: whereas a fork was an "aggressive" tool, chopsticks emphasized cooperation. A manager contrasted the indifference handed out to him by Americans with the kind treatment that he received at a Japanese office when he arrived early for an appointment: at the American office he was told simply to sit down and wait, but at the Japanese office an "attractive young woman" took him to a nearby room, gave him a cup of coffee, and furnished him with some reading material. Another manager contrasted his southeast Asian and American customers, maintaining that whereas Americans aggressively pushed for the lowest prices, Southeast Asians and Koreans shared similar understandings about the importance of good human relationships and knew that their maintenance was advantageous for both parties.[24] Thus, it appears that some of the choices regarding manufacturing social relationships were encouraged by a desire to resist the imposition of American capitalist practices and hegemony. In other words, Taesŏng workers had opted for a commitment to cultural ideals which in their estimation served their national as well as personal interests.

**Conclusion**

By using the metaphor of a genealogy, we have tried to demonstrate that the cultural understandings and practices of Taesŏng's office workers for making harmony had multiple origins and disparate qualities. They were simultaneously traditional and modern in that past ideas and practices had been transformed and adapted to modern circumstances. They had both local and international origins in that Korean notions of social harmony seem to have been reformed through contact with both Japanese and western practices. They were both materially and ideally motivated in that the pursuit of self-interests had resulted not in a Hobbesian war of all against all but in a choice of particular strategies and alliances. Finally, both structure and agency were evident in actions that were constrained and enabled—but not determined by—social position and cultural ideas, both of which had been continually reproduced or transformed though choices that workers and managers made.

Our attempted reconstruction of the genealogy of making harmony at Taesŏng could be extended further back in time and broadened to encompass several other relationships. Such an endeavor might include an examination of how particular ideas about social relationships came to prevail in Korean villages and Japanese organizations, respectively; why Korean managers adopted them for their own enterprises in order to legitimize managerial control and promote cooperation among subordinates; and how the general cultural transformations accompanying Korean urbanization and industrialization were linked to the adoption of similar ideas and practices in other South Korean institutions. That research could also

look to the origins of the South Korean middle class's shifting representations of Japan and the United States, their nation's principal trading partners, and how these representations related to their own sense of national identity.  It might also explore the critique of Confucianism developed by Korean intellectuals since at least as far back as the 1920s, how that critique affected Taesŏng workers' understandings of "harmony" between superiors and subordinates, and how that understanding in turn related to their efforts at making harmony with workers of equal rank.

Yet our limited reconstruction does suggest that the metaphor of genealogy affords a workable theoretical framework for encompassing the many disparate causes of the development, reproduction, and transformation of cultural understandings and practices found in modern South Korean organizations.

## Notes

1) I am indebted to Ward Goodenough for this point.
2) This apparent solidarity did not extend to women workers, who usually ate lunch with each other rather than with the men of their sections, organized their own celebrations of each other's birthdays, and were often absent from after-hours activities, either because they left work earlier than the men or because they were excluded by the managers who organized the events.
3) This pseudonym was adopted in order to minimize any adverse publicity to the conglomerate's principal owners, managers, and employees, all of whom kindly made my fieldwork possible.
4) I was recalling encounters in offices of American academic institutions as well as several small American business firms I had visited many years earlier while working as a accountant and auditor.
5) Perhaps this was because the white-collar male workers in this office dealt directly with customers.  We thank James L. Watson and Kim Kwang-Ok for suggesting that trying to satisfy customers can compete with improving social relations among co-workers in Chinese enterprises.
6) For observations on expressions of conflict in urban South Korea, see McCann [1988:45].
7) The kinship relationships included membership in the same lineage segment (p'a) or occupying a particular pair of family positions, such as mother-in-law (siŏmŏni) and daughter-in-law (myŏnŭri).  Personal feelings that two individuals had toward each other might be summarily expressed in terms of good or bad relationships (saiga chot'a, saiga nappŭda).  And an individual's or whole group's relative apparent lack of conflict was on occasion explained as a result of "kind heartedness" (insimi chot'a).
8) Only because of my own involvement in some of these gatherings did I learn of them.  I surmise there were many more of which I was unaware.
9) We say "informed" because individual choices were responsive to but not determined by the cultural knowledge that individuals drew upon to formulate the meaning of and negotiate their way through daily encounters in the village and workplace.
10) This was a hardly an unreflective perpetuation of Confucian ideals.  In fact, the word "Confucianism" had acquired a negative connotation in the office.  It was used as a codeword for the authoritarian, top-down style of management which gave little

recognition to subordinates' views.

11) Recognition of the contrived nature of social relationships in office settings can also be found in popular Japanese literature. In his novel, *Shoshaman*, Arai Shinya contrasts office workers with chefs and sommeliers of exclusive restaurants: "The attitude and behavior of these people exceeded the measure of common sense Nukaya could expect from his colleagues at Nissei Corporation. Their artless, uninhibited good cheer belonged to a world Nukaya had never imagined" [1991:112].

12) We are indebted to Walter Edwards for directing our attention to Atsumi's essay.

13) The Chinese characters with which the word *chaebŏl* is written are pronounced *zaibatsu* in Japanese. In the published account of the interview, however, *chaebŏl* was spelled out in the Korean alphabet. Therefore, we surmise the Korean pronunciation had actually been used in the interview.

14) Everyone with whom I broached the topic claimed that such exercises were a Japanese custom.

15) The notion that South Korean workers are not particularly devoted to their companies was not unique to Taesŏng's office workers. In a survey of the personal values of Korean managers, sociologist Kim Kyong-Dong [1979:57] reported that company loyalty was not among the more important values of Korean managers. Youngil Lim [1981:56] also claimed that company loyalty was absent in South Korea.

16) When I objected that its author was Korean, the section chief flipped through the pages of the book, found the page which listed the author's accomplishments, and pointed to the line which revealed that the author had taken a business management course in Japan.

17) In the fall of 1987, the *chaebŏl* reported that it had 15,418 applicants, of whom 2,400 were hired [*Recruit*, Oct. 1988, p. 37].

18) Exceptions occurred primarily when a *chaebŏl* sought to establish a new company in an industry in which it had no previous operations. In such cases, experienced employees were "scouted" or poached from other enterprises rather than hired from among the unemployed.

19) As in Japan [Rohlen 1974:83], there was a saying current in the company that expressed the view that only new recruits voluntarily resigned: "If a man quits he does it after three days, three months, or three years." In fact, at the time of my fieldwork, about one-third of the men who entered resigned within the year, though that rate may have been exceptionally high at that time. It was the subject of newspaper reports and became a concern of upper managers, who were attempting to devise countermeasures or inducements to increase retention.

20) Fieldwork experiences verified this. I was often asked to translate documents that contained technical terms not found in the best Korean dictionaries [e.g., Yi Hŭi-sŭng 1982] and had to ask others for help.

21) It is perhaps important to note that the kind of competition faced by Taesŏng workers was considerably different from that faced by peasant agriculturalists nearly a generation earlier. Farmers sold their surplus commodities in markets comprised of many buyers and sellers. Thus, farmers of the same village were not fundamentally in competition with each other as were workers of the same office at Taesŏng. Moreover, village conventions, such as agreeing on the price of agricultural wages, obviated competition over labor. In times of drought, farmers did compete over water to irrigate their fields, but that was hardly a regular, much less daily, occurrence.

22) It was difficult for me to see such Western influences, however, since Western practices have become naturalized ("enchanted" in Bourdieu's [1977] sense of the term) as a result

of my own training and experience in American business practices.

23) Having to conduct their negotiations with American customers in English was one example.

24) As the manager put it:

Our company might sell a product for 110 won to a Southeast Asian customer but get only 100 won from an American buyer. However, if there were a sudden price increase of 50 won, we would pass it along immediately to the American. If the Southeast Asian customer said he couldn't absorb such a large price increase all at once, we might sell to him at 130 won for a while before passing on the whole price hike. Or if there was a rise in demand, and our company couldn't satisfy all its customers, we would satisfy the needs of the Southeast Asian firm rather than those of the American [Janelli and Yim 1993: 190–191].

## Romanizations

| | |
|---|---|
| chaebŏl (K) | 재벌 (財閥) |
| chongson (K) | 종손 (宗孫) |
| *inhwa (K) | 인화 (人和) |
| insimi chot'a (K) | 인심 (人心) 이 좋다 |
| *kaeinjuŭi (K) | 개인주의 (個人主義) |
| kungmin ŭi kiŏp (K) | 국민 (國民) 의 기업 (企業) |
| *kwajang (K) | 과장 (課長) |
| *kwajangnim (K) | 과장 (課長) 님 |
| myŏnŭri (K) | 며느리 |
| *nagaya handa (K) | 나가야 한다 |
| p'a (K) | 파 (派) |
| *ponbu (K) | 본부 (本部) |
| *pu (K) | 부 (部) |
| *pujang (K) | 부장 (部長) |
| saiga chot'a (K) | 사이가 좋다 |
| saiga nappŭda (K) | 사이가 나쁘다 |
| *sahun (K) | 사훈 (社訓) |
| *sawŏn (K) | 사원 (社員) |
| siŏmŏni (K) | 시어머니 |
| tongyang saram (K) | 동양 (東洋) 사람 |
| zaibatsu (J) | 財閥 |

(*denotes terms often used at Taesŏng)

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