



ON CULTURAL PREJUDICE AND CULTURAL CONFLICT-FROM THE PERSPECTIVE  
OF COMMUNICATION

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# On Cultural Prejudice and Conflict

- from the perspective of communication-



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The meaning of the term 'culture' is too diverse and manifold to make one consistent definition since it depends mostly upon the interpretations of the word by each and every individual. Accordingly, there exists a long spectrum of variations in its connotations and implications. To mention a few of those, scholars like anthropologists tend to interpret the term in a very broad sense, while artists understand the term as something more like an 'Art', that is to say, interpret the term in a somewhat narrower sense.

It is, therefore, hardly said that there exists one universally accepted definition of culture. Besides, it is not our main task here to pursue the deeper philosophy in defining the meaning of culture. Sufficient for our purpose in this paper is a conventional and rather simplified anthropological definition that a culture (by and large) refers to the distinctive way of life of a group of people, their designs for living. In other words, "culture is a complex of thoughts and behaviors which include knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of society."<sup>1)</sup>

Cultures differ with times and places, tribes and groups in their patterns and structures as well as their entities. Villages, regions, ethnic groups, nationalities and religious groups all have distinct cultures at different levels of cultural heterogeneity. The culture of a village in southern Korea might be different from that of a village in northern Korea, but both are sharing in

common Korean culture that distinguishes them from Japanese one. Likewise, the culture of university students distinguishes from that of young laborers at factories, although both cultures share some common features and characteristics as a youth culture which are surely different from that of older generation. A regional culture is a sub-culture in relation with Korean culture, as Korean culture is, in turn, a sub-culture of Oriental culture as a whole.

However, most of the cultures have a common attribute that no culture remains to be unchanged. We know from the records of prehistory and history that the patterns of every human culture have been constantly changing regardless of whether the rates and types of fluctuations are slow and gradual as they were during the earlier era of human history, or fast and drastic as they are in contemporary societies. Today, we are concerned with finding out the internal and external factors that generate shifts in rates and types of cultural changes. Nevertheless, the data on cultural changes do not yet permit any easy generalizations concerning the relative primacy of various factors.<sup>2)</sup>

When we relate this to cultural changes in human history, it seems inevitable that there is a need for noting four kinds of cultural theories that this paper briefly introduces from now on.

First is 'Cultural Parallel Theory'<sup>3)</sup> which took its origin from the ancient cultural cradles, namely, the Nile, the Mesopotamia (i.e., the Tigris and the Euphrates river region), the Ganges, the Indus and the Yellow River regions. The ancient cultures formed in these areas share a unique attribute that these cultures never had a chance to interact and to influence one another, that is, they established their own cultures independently without contacting other cultures. At that time, there was no significant development

in the fields of transportation and communication technology; thus, they neither had a chance to have influence on other cultures nor could be affected by others. As can be seen here, cultural parallel theory bears a strong validity in explaining independently developing culture forms from a number of specific areas.

Secondly, 'Culture Convergence Theory' should be mentioned here.<sup>4)</sup> The notable advancements in science technology, especially those of transportation and communication technology contributed to shorten the geographic distance along with the remarkable saving in time consumption for transmitting all kinds of information and diverse forms of messages. Most importantly, these types of developments made it possible for us to send and receive all kinds of information and cultures directly without time delay.

Repeatedly, significant advancements in communication technology as a means of massive transmission made it unavoidable for each culture to interact and to interchange with other cultures and finally led to mutual convergence. Thus, in the modern days ('the Age of Mass Communication', if you insist) in which massive sending and receiving of most information is possible, the emergence of interchange and interaction between cultures must be taken as inevitable. At this point, it should be noted that the most potent means of generating, sending and receiving of these cultures are mass media such as TV, radio, newspaper, magazine, computer, etc. Thus, cultural convergence theory bears considerable validity to account for modern cultural phenomena.

However, if one culture would influence the other unilaterally and oppressively or, on the contrary, get influenced in a one-sided way when two different cultures collide and become interact, it would not be considered as one of the pure forms of cultural convergence. The reason is that if one

culture affects the other entirely and the other only gets influenced, it can never be cultural convergence or harmony. Rather, it would be appropriate to regard it as a unilateral integration of cultures.

In this perspective, we can make a room for an emergence of 'Cultural Imperialism Theory.' When the reciprocity and balance in cultural exchange between nations is not kept, it leads to an acculturation. This acculturation, the phenomenon of one culture being flowed into the other, results in making a margin for general acceptance of cultural imperialism theory which justifies cultural super-powers subordinate or rule lesser-powers through cultural invasion.<sup>5)</sup>

This theory was asserted by professor Herbert Schiller at the University of San Diego in 1960s. Schiller made a distinction between traditional imperialism (which tries to subordinate the lesser-powers through the means of military and economic superiority) and cultural imperialism (which aims for cultural conquest). Then, he pointed out that the latter is more fundamental and dreadfully threatening method of domination.<sup>6)</sup>

The reason is that when the culture of a super-power is spread into lesser-powers, the people of lesser-powers tend to acquire and internalize the super-power's way of thinking and value system. The subordination and domination through military and economic dominance is temporary, while the subordination and dominance through culture is rather permanent.

According to Dr. Schiller, the definition of cultural imperialism can be summarized as follows. In the bursting age of mass communication like these days, the culture of super-power (such as the United States) is inclined to inflow into the lesser-power unilaterally. When the situation like this is propelled as a national policy, and an attempt to subordinate the lesser-

powers is made, then, it must be quite enough to be called as a cultural imperialism.

The fourth theory is 'Cultural Conflict Theory.'<sup>7)</sup> Arnold Toynbee in A study of History apprehended that human history has been the history of civilizations (cultures), grasping the relations among civilizations and cultures in terms of 'conflict'. He introduced the concept of 'challenge and response' to elucidate how one culture exercises its influence upon others and the way in which human history makes progress.

On the other hand, Dr. Samuel P. Huntington brought about a lot of controversies by publishing 'The Clash of Civilizations?' in the Foreign Affairs(summer, 1993)<sup>8)</sup> in which he contended that, with the end of cold war, international politics would move out of its western phase; conflict between the East and West, or the clash of cultures between the West and non-West, would play a vital role in international politics. Huntington's hypothesis is that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or economic. Conflict will be cultural.

Both Toynbee and Huntington advocated cultural conflict theory. Toynbee introduced the concept of 'challenge and response' to explain the process of human history, and Huntington used cultural conflict theory to explain what a new world order would look like after the collapse of Eastern Europe.

It is needless to say that cultural parallel theory is not adequate to investigate today's cultural phenomena detected between nations. That's because a nation can not sustain cultural isolation with no cultural interchange with other nations. When one culture interacts with others, whether the process of the interaction should be seen as converging and harmonizing or as colliding with one another depends largely upon the perspective each scholar

holds. It would be correct to conceive that the aspects of both harmony and conflict exist together in cultural interaction between nations.

Then, what causes the conflict observed when one culture interacts with another? Among several possible causes, the most prominent one seems to be cultural prejudice. Cultural prejudice is created when one evaluates a different culture with a subjective standard that lacks objectivity or when one forces his or her value system upon others. There can never be one absolute standard that dictates whether a culture is good or bad, right or wrong. In spite of that, cultural prejudice which makes one stick to a personal and subjective value system exists. Cultures vary in their ideas about right and wrong, and the differences are not always small. In some instances, what is taken to be a sin in one culture turns out to be another's virtue. For example, the conception of marriage that we are most familiar with - one wife and one husband joined for life; monogamy - is not universal. In some cultures polygamy - marrying several times - is not merely tolerated but regarded as something natural or even good. Sex before marriage has been generally viewed as immoral in Korean culture, but in some island cultures it is even encouraged. Homosexuals are hounded and tormented as immoral deviants in some cultures, while in others they are accepted without reservation.

Such differences are not limited only to sexual morality. In some cultures, it is considered as a person's moral obligation to assist blood relatives' business, even by stealing from others. How do we account for the fact that an action that is praised in one culture may be condemned in another? This suggests that all moral values are relative to the culture they are found in. The principle that covers such cases is 'the Principle of Cultural Relativity'. It means that the ingredients of a culture do not depend on any

absolute laws outside that culture; instead, they vary according to the background and evolution of the particular culture.

'The Principle of Cultural Relativity,'<sup>9)</sup> anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn writes, does not mean that because the members of a savage tribe are allowed to behave in a certain way this fact gives intellectual warrant for a certain interpretation of such behavior in all similar circumstances. On the contrary, cultural relativity means that the appropriateness of any culture must be evaluated with regard to how this fits with other cultures. A number of people initially took the optimistic view that the danger of wars and major conflicts would disappear from the earth after watching in amazement the collapse of the former eastern block including the Soviet Union. However, national conflicts in such countries as Rwanda, Bosnia and India are continuing to this day. Then what is the cause of those terrible atrocities? In a word, it is difference of culture. As discussed above, the factors which constitute a culture include knowledge, faith, custom, morality, law, language and religion. If one would insist on his or her value system, conflicts and disagreements would become inevitable. It is only when one understands the historical background and circumstantial particularity of other cultures that the causes of cultural conflicts are subdued. As the thought that one's culture is superior to other's culture breeds cultural nationalism, as the idea of other culture being superior to his or her culture breeds cultural toadyism. Such cultural consciousness, that is, cultural nationalism and cultural toadyism are both originated from cultural prejudice.

Cultural prejudice is created by self-righteousness that only his or hers is right all the time. A certain level of cultural prejudice is present in everyone, but if cultural prejudice became an unremovable faith 'raison de etre' of a different culture would be groundless. Whoever is fallen into this



cultural self-righteousness would not only deny the possibility of harmonious coexistence of different cultures but also take cultural uniformity through unilateral subordination for granted. To the people who believe that different cultures can not coexist in harmony, the only remaining choice can not help but be military means. In other words, cultural conflicts originated in cultural prejudice may become the primary cause of wars and terrible atrocities.

Dr. Huntington asserted "culture as a civilization identity will be increasingly important in the future, and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight major civilizations (cultures). These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilization. The most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating civilization." According to him, cultures (civilizations) are differentiated from one another by history, language, tradition and religion. The peoples of different cultures have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husbands and wives as well as differing views on the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the products of very long human history; so that, they will not soon disappear. They are far more fundamental than the differences among political ideologies and political regimes. Over the centuries, differences among cultures have generated the most prolonged and the most violent conflicts.<sup>10)</sup>

Hence, the fundamental solution to the conflicts happening even after the collapse of 'the cold war' structure is that all of us accept cultural relativism, disposing of cultural prejudice. Since every custom, rule, value system, language and religion has reason for its own being, it is not possible

to judge whether they are right or wrong, good or bad from only one cultural viewpoint. That all cultures could exist in harmony should be accepted without any reservation. It is because cultures fundamentally have mutually supplementary relations, not mutually exclusive relations.

This world is becoming a smaller and smaller place day by day. The interactions between peoples of different cultures are markedly increasing. This is mainly due to the rapid development of modern transportation and communication technologies. In particular, the development of mass communication has changed the everyday living patterns of modern men; furthermore, it has become a strikingly important socialization agent of teaching the way of perceiving and the way of inserting certain values. The amount of time modern men spend on mass media (newspaper, radio, T.V., magazine, movie and video tapes, etc.) is truly phenomenal. Were it not for the mass media, people would spend that much time on other things. From the above discussion, two distinct influences of mass media are revealed. First, a very big portion of our time is taken away from us by mass media. Second, mass media exerts a strong influence on our ways of perceiving, making moral judgements and ways of making actions.

Now, mass media have secured a solid position as a significant institution of creating new environments around us. Before mass media were fully developed, family, peer groups, schools, work, religions and etc. played a major and crucial role as the institutions of socializing individuals. However, nowadays, mass media function greatly as an agent for teaching ways of perceiving, ways of inserting certain values and ways of making actions. The accommodation of mass media has become the most important part of modern men's daily lives. As a result, taking into account the long-

term and cumulative influences mass media do exert, it will not be going too far to describe their effects as shocking.

Some 80 years ago, Walter Lippmann already asserted that mass media created a pseudo-environment<sup>11)</sup> and a stereotype of ghost image<sup>12)</sup>, not a real environment nor a real image. As he noted many years ago, stereotyped thinking precedes reason, and, as a form of perception, it imposes a certain character on the data collected from our senses. The media images in our minds influence how we appraise a host of social realities, including our government's domestic and foreign policies. If we learn from mass media like TV and movies that the invasion by hostile alien forces is imminent, then we would become willing to support increased military spending and government interventions.<sup>13)</sup>

The audiences of mass media as a whole usually do some perceptual editings and projecting something of their own viewpoints upon what they see and hear. But these editings themselves are partly conditioned by the previously internalized images fed to us by the same media we are now viewing. In other words, rather than being rationally critical of the images and ideologies presented by the entertainment media, our minds sometimes become active accomplices in our own indoctrination of those images and ideologies. We are probably more affected by what we see and listen to than we realize.

In most instances, mass media in Japan have painted Koreans with negative images. Koreans have been generally portrayed to be cruel, dirty, cunning and deceitful by the Japanese mass media. This Korean image is nothing but a "false stereotype" created on purpose by mass media in Japan. Likewise, the images of the Japanese portrayed by the Korean mass media are, of course, negative most of the time.

Even as to the country we never visited and people we never met, there exists an 'association of ideas in our mind.' A big portion of these ideas and images are resided within ourselves owing to the mass media. For instance, the images we hold for Gadaphi of Lybia and Hussein of Iraq have been created by mass media for most of us. It is possible that a stereotypic image coincides with reality, but there are many cases where an image is colored and fabricated to meet the need of an image creator such as mass media.

In conclusion, to make peaceful coexistence with others come true, above all, we should not hold any forms of cultural prejudice any longer. Second, we should not let mass media create misunderstandings and prejudices through presenting false images. As long as we remain slaves of cultural prejudice who look down on others with false superiority, or mass media continue to create pseudo-environments, the prospect of peaceful conexistence through cultural harmony seems not that bright.

📖 Endnotes 📖

- 1) Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 16., (Chicago, Encyclopedia Britannica Co, Inc.), p. 925.
- 2) Clyde Kluckhorn, Handbook of Social Psychology, Garner Linzey ed., (Cambridge, 1954), p. 921.
- 3) Alfred Kroeber et al., "The Concept of Culture and of Social System", American Sociological Review, Vol. 23., pp. 582-583.
- 4) *Ibid.*
- 5) Herbert Schiller, Communication and Cultural Domination, (New York: M. E. Sharpe Inc., 1976), pp.1-3.
- 6) Herbert Schiller, Mass Communications and American Empire, (Boston: Beacon press, 1971), p.79.
- 7) Please refer to Arnold Toynbee, A Study of History, (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).
- 8) Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations", Foreign Affairs, (summer 1993).
- 9) Kluckhorn, *op. cit.*
- 10) S. Huntington, *op. cit.*
- 11) Walter Lippman, Public Opinion, (N.Y: The Free Press, 1949), p.53.
- 12) *op.cit.*
- 13) Michael Parenti, D. Shimkin et als., "The Make-believe Media" in State of Arts, (N.Y: St. Martin's press, 1992), pp. 22-25.