

DISTINCTIVE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

By Dr. Bong Rin Ro¹

On a subway train in Seoul one afternoon in May 1999, I saw two western young people (about 20 years old) standing along with many Koreans. They were hugging and kissing continually for several minutes in front of many Korean passengers as if there was no one else on the train. As passengers watched this couple, I was very interested in watching some of their facial expressions. Certainly, it is a common scene for young people to hug and kiss in public places in the West; this young couple thought that Korea is just like America. They were wrong, for they did not understand the Korean culture with its strong traditional, conservative Confucian view of male and female relationships in public. Similarly, another common embarrassing experience annoys many Muslims in the Islamic nations of the Middle East when many western women tourists dress in public with little covering their bodies in hot summer weather. The cultural differences, especially in the woman's dress code between the West and the Islamic nations, create tensions and misunderstanding. There are many other instances in which foreigners produce embarrassment for the nationals.

The consciousness of cultural differences among the peoples of the world is acute. Dr. Samuel Huntington, Director of the John M. Olin Institute for the Strategic Studies at Harvard University, wrote *The Clash of Civilization*, in 1993. He argues that, since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe that ended the Cold War in 1990, six great traditional civilizations are vying for supremacy. Warning of the future challenges of Confucian and Islamic cultures to the West, he says,

A Confucian-Islamic connection has emerged to challenge Western interests, values and powers History shows that as countries industrialize rapidly they tend to become much more assertive. At times, they become expansionist and imperialist So naturally they want to resume what they view as their natural place in the world. And that will have destabilizing consequences.²

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²Samuel Huntington, "Watch Out for China," *Newsweek*, November 21, 1994, 62.

Two renowned Asian political leaders co-authored *The Voice of Asia*, in which they condemned the attitude of superiority of the Western powers and encouraged Asians to preserve their traditional cultures against the intrusion of Western cultures into Asia. These two leaders' names are Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, Prime Minister of Malaysia since 1981, and Mr. Shintaro Ishihara, a Japanese parliamentary member of over 25 years and mayor of Tokyo today. Dr. Mohamad says,

Modern Europe eclipsed Asia in terms of industrial strength, and the booty of imperialism gave it great economic and political power Even today, Westerners generally cannot rid themselves of this sense of superiority This groundless sense of superiority prevents the West from seeing the rationality in Eastern values.³

Today is the day for mass communication and transportation. Millions of people travel around the world and work in other countries every year. It is common today to see many westerners in Asian cities and many Asians in the West. For example, thousands of foreigners including 200,000 factory workers from various countries of Asia and Africa are living in Korea; and thousands of Koreans have gone abroad for employment, education, and tourism. Therefore, when Koreans have their opportunities to visit other countries, they must learn something about the cultures and religions of the nationals in order to avoid mistakes and embarrassment in dealing with them.

There are more than 100,000 Protestant cross-cultural foreign missionaries from all six continents to all six continents including over 6,000 Korean missionaries. It is imperative for these missionaries to learn the culture of the native people to whom they minister. Millions of other people live in cultures that are other than their own. Therefore, there must be a clear understanding of distinctive differences in cultures between East and West. A comparison between the Eastern and Western cultures follows. Readers need to understand the following are generalized comparisons of cultures between East and West, and that there will be exceptions in some cases.

³Mahathir Mohamad and Shintaro Ishihara, "Will East Beat West?" *World Press Review*, December 1995, 6-7.