CHAPTER NINE

RECENT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGES IN EAST ASIA – LESS CHILDREN AND AGING POPULATIONS, SOCIALIST STATES TRANSFIGURED

Our discussion of patriarchy and the role of women in East Asia in Chapters 5 through 8 covered two main subjects: the possibility of the disappearance of the housewife in the capitalist societies examined and the status of women in China and North Korea. Our comparisons of how the housewife was born and the trend toward her disappearance in the capitalist societies indicated that the housewife was most likely to disappear in Taiwan and least likely to disappear in South Korea. One could say that the likelihood of the disappearance of the housewife is about the same in Japan and South Korea—perhaps a bit stronger in Japan. The comparisons mapped out help us clarify the relative positions of housewives in these societies by examining the rates of women’s participation in the labor force and the extent to which these rates rise with level of education. This gives us a picture of how the overall percentage of women working can be expected to rise. When we graphically compare Taiwan and Japan we see that the lines of the “M” patterns illustrating women’s employment signify what is truly unique about Japanese practices in the area of women’s employment.

The second line of argument is derived from an examination of the differences between the two societies of East Asia that had embarked on a socialist path. We found that China has had a more consistently positive position on gender equality. We say this because we find traditional Korean norms increasingly permeating North Korean society after the establishment of the Kim Il Sung dictatorship.

These were the basic hypotheses developed by the 1990s. In this chapter, while adding data from the 2000s, we will move ahead with the analysis and touch on a few new social phenomena in East Asia such as declining numbers of children and the aging of the labor force. Since we lack the kind of quantitative data needed for a statistical analysis, we will examine how gender issues are officially discussed in North Korea and China. The quantitative data is sufficient for a statistical comparison of Japan, Korea and Taiwan.
1. Declining Birth Rates and Destabilization of Marriage

Before discussing women’s labor, we must touch upon an important change occurring in post-2000 East Asia, one that was unimaginable in the early nineties. This is rapidly declining birth rates, which are illustrated in Figure 9.1. The year 2000 was a popular year to have children due to the popularity of “millennium babies” and because it was the Year of the Dragon. In the Chinese cultural sphere this was a lucky year,

Figure 9.1. Total fertility rates* in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong (1995–2010).

*Total fertility rate is the number of children a woman would have in her life.