Gender Roles and Childcare Networks in East and Southeast Asian Societies

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on gender role changes related to childcare through comparative studies of women’s life course patterns and the structures of social networks in each society. The societies this chapter discusses are China, Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, the six societies covered by our project. This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the results of the entire project.

Our hypothesis is that the crucial factor behind a change in gender roles is a change in childcare practices. A child is taken care of by various agents in any society. However, the available kinds of agents and their relative importance are different in each society and change over time. In other words, the structures of social networks for childcare vary among societies and evolve historically. The salient feature of modern childcare is the concentration of caring roles on mothers. We assume that this phenomenon exists at the core of the “housewifization” of women that often takes place in the process of modernization. This chapter interrogates whether mothers are becoming the primary agents of childcare in contemporary Asia.

All Asian societies under study are facing tremendous social changes. They are rushing to catch up with the process of modernization at the same time that they are being swallowed by the tide of globalization. Our question, then, put differently, is whether Asian societies are constructing a civil society with the gendered modern family as its unit, or
whether they are heading in a direction that Western societies did not experience in the modernization process.

In this chapter, we will examine in detail each society under study, then make comparisons and synthesize the findings from different societies. For each society, we will try to delineate the actual childcare practices that people experience everyday based on interviews, observations, and questionnaire surveys. Our focus is on who the agents of childcare are in the society under consideration, whether they are effective, and how people combine different types of agents in different situations. Then, we will examine the effect of childcare practices on women’s life course and the changes taking place. As Bott has demonstrated, the nature of the family network and the family’s internal structure are mutually related (Bott 1957).

As indicated in Chapter 1, the concepts of “life course” and “social network” were coined to overcome the limitations of treating the “family” as a group with clear boundaries and rigid membership rather than as a flexible network. The agents of childcare are not necessarily restricted to family members. We consider the child, not the mother, as the Ego, or the central individual of the childcare network. His or her network includes various kinds of agents inside and outside of the family, and the child’s mother is only one of them. We avoid the modern assumption that the mother should be the primary agent of childcare. More generally, we need to be wary of cultural biases when conducting a comparative project covering such diverse societies.

The societies treated in this chapter are ordered by the type of female life course proposed in Chapter 1. The first are China and Thailand, which are Type 1 societies in which the high levels of labor-force participation rates for women are maintained throughout the productive years. The next are Singapore and Taiwan, Type 2 societies where women’s participation rates decline unidirectionally from their thirties onwards. The last are South Korea and Japan, Type 3 societies with an M-shaped curve. Do societies with the same pattern of female life course have a similar structure of childcare networks? We will examine the six societies in turn with this question in mind.

FEMALE LIFE COURSE AND CHILDCARE NETWORKS IN THE SIX SOCIETIES

(1) China

GENDER AND LIFE COURSE

The female labor-force participation rate in China traces a reversed U-shaped curve. Specifically, labor-force participation rates for women between the ages of twenty and the early forties reach 90 percent (Figure 2.1). In a questionnaire survey conducted in the city of Wuxi in Jiansu Province, we asked both women and men what an ideal life course for women would be. Eighty-one percent of women and 71 percent of men chose “combining work and marriage/childbirth/childcare.” “Temporary retirement followed by reemployment” came in second, but