A Comparative Study of Childcare and Motherhood in South Korea and Japan

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INTRODUCTION

South Korea and Japan exhibit a number of similarities in their definitions of gender roles and gender norms. In both societies, modern gender-based divisions of labor and an M-curve pattern of women’s labor-force participation emerged with industrialization. In addition, the M-curve pattern, as well as strongly held norms regarding motherhood, have persisted in both societies even though gender equality has been on the political agenda since the 1980s. At the same time, however, modernization has produced significant gender role differences, particularly in the area of “motherhood.” Numerous Japanese social historians since the 1980s have shown that motherhood – the rearing of children by their mothers – did not have the social value in early modern Japan that it would gain after industrialization. For example, within the samurai class of the Tokugawa era (1603–1868), fathers played a significant role in the education of their children (Ohta 1994). Children of the peasant class were brought up within broad social networks that included parents, grandparents, nursemaids, and local children’s groups. Mothers were only one part of this network of childrearing agents, and the norms emphasizing motherhood had not yet developed (Miyamoto 1967). A large body of scholarship in social history contends that the assignment of value to motherhood, especially the stress on the emotional attachment of mother and child during the child’s infancy and early childhood years, is a “modern” invention (Wakita, ed. 1985).

Compared to the case of Japan (as well as northwestern Europe and the United States), where the construction of motherhood was greatly
altered by industrialization, contemporary notions of motherhood in South Korea have two dimensions: the principles of patrilineality and Confucianism rooted in the Choson period (1392–1910) and a modern sense of motherhood grounded in a gendered division of labor between the workplace and home. Women were valued in the premodern era when they bore sons as heirs to the headship of their jip (house and patrilineal line) and contributed to the social success of their husbands and sons through housework and childrearing. Indeed, rearing a successful son was a mother’s only means of receiving public praise. Building upon these premodern norms of motherhood, Korean motherhood has, nevertheless, changed through the introduction of the Western and Japanese-influenced concept of *hyeomno yangcheo juui* (principle of good wife, wise mother) during the precolonial and colonial period of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (Sechiyama 1996), the development of a gender division of labor accompanying the rise of an urban middle class, and the stress on “scientific” motherhood following the period of rapid economic development (Lee 1999). Motherhood in Korea, unlike motherhood in Japan, where maternalism emerged alongside modernization, should thus be regarded in the dual context of premodernity and modernity.

The differing historical trajectories of motherhood in Japan and Korea affect the present situation of motherhood in those societies. Although Japan and Korea are often considered similar in terms of gender-related normative structures, there appear to be important differences between them concerning childrearing. For example, anxiety about early childhood care, which has been described as a structural social problem in Japan, is not viewed as a common problem in South Korea. South Korean mothers’ “educational fever” – that is, their enthusiastic devotion to their children’s success in educational competition – is not as evident among Japanese mothers. Another significant difference is in the attitude towards son preference. Son preference is not common in Japan but has increased in importance in Korea as the birthrate has declined since the 1970s.

The data suggest both commonalities and differences regarding childcare in these two societies characterized by M-curve patterns of women’s labor force participation. This chapter will also consider possibilities for change as each society experiences a rise in the age of first marriage and an increase in rates of divorce and re-marriage.

DATA

This chapter is based on the findings of three studies:

**Research Study A:** South Korea

Area: Busan and surrounding areas (Yangsan), Daegu and surrounding areas (Gyongsan). Method: Semi-structured interviews with households that included young children or elderly members (forty-two cases total): August 2002 and 2003

Object of analysis: nineteen mothers with young children