CHAPTER 1

Individualization without Individualism

Compressed Modernity and Obfuscated Family Crisis in East Asia

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1 The Paradox: Individualization of Familialist East Asians

Despite the frequent Western observations of East Asians’ family-centeredness as a supposedly shared attribute, numerous Korean, Japanese, and Chinese scholars have clearly shown that the traditional families of the three countries were structurally and culturally different from each other and have linked these differences to the macroscopic contrasts between them.¹ Traditional East Asian societies seem to be family-centered in different ways. In a recent, highly interesting, development, East Asian societies have been experiencing many common symptoms of family decline and/or individualization. In comparative sociological (and demographic) studies, all of a sudden, East Asia has come to be commonly characterized by family decline rather than by family-centeredness. To be more precise, modern East Asians have commonly led family-centered lives, but this modern attribute is becoming increasingly untenable due to the various structural conditions of East Asian modernity and late modernity (or second modernity).²

Among other phenomena, extremely low fertility has been discussed as a common East Asian feature in international demographic studies.³ East Asian sociologists have also carried out comparative studies of changing family forms and living arrangements in their countries, often concluding that there are mutually similar trends of marriage delay, bachelorhood, family break-up, lonely old age, etc.⁴ At the same time, however, careful observations indicate the continuing allegiance of East Asians to family values and relations.

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² China here includes both mainland China and Taiwan.
³ Second modernity (Beck and Grande 2009) is explained in detail in the following section.
⁴ Another region in which an extremely low fertility rate is prevalent is Southern Europe (Kohler, Billari, and Ortega 2004; Billari and Kohler 2004). East Asia, however, has caught up with Southern Europe in low fertility rates.
⁵ Numerous collaborative research groups—some being purely academic, others being policy-oriented—exist in East Asian countries in order to carry out comparative analyses of population and family issues.
Similarly, it is difficult to find thoroughly persuasive accounts of East Asian individualization—whether similar to or different from Western individualization—as deeply ideational processes. It appears highly paradoxical that enduring familialist East Asians have manifested numerous tendencies of what I will explain here as defamiliation and (risk-aversive) individualization.

I hereby explicate that the fundamental nature of East Asian modernity and late modernity has dictated a paradoxical process of individualization without individualism. East Asian modernity and late modernity are highly compressed, involving condensed changes with respect to time and space and a complex composition of disparate historical and spatial elements. East Asian families have functioned as a highly effective receptacle of compressed modernity (apchukjeok geundaeseong 압축적 근대성 壓縮的 近代性) and late modernity. It is as much due to the success of East Asian families as an engine of compressed modernity and late modernity as due to their failure that they have become functionally overloaded and socially risk-ridden. East Asians have found it inevitable to thoroughly restructure their family structures and relations as well as their individual life courses. As other institutions of modernity such as the state, industrial economy, firms, unions, schools, and welfare systems turn increasingly ineffective in helping to alleviate familial burdens and dilemmas, families and individuals have had to carry out rather drastic transitions in fertility, marriage, living arrangements, etc. Individualization has thereby taken place irrespective of the formation of individualism as its spiritual and cultural basis. In what follows, I will mainly rely on the South Korean experience as it is deemed a paradigmatic case of individualization without individualism. This chapter, however, concludes with a brief comparative observation of the Japanese situation in order to emphasize that individualization without individualism is a broad East Asian phenomenon.

2 Compressed Modernity, Family Change and Individualization

Compressed modernity is a social situation in which economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner with respect to both time and space, and in which the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements leads to the construction and reconstruction of a highly complex and fluid social system.\(^5\) This concept was first

\(^5\) This definition of compressed modernity also appears in Newsletter No. 3 (2009) of the Global Center of Excellence for Reconstruction of the Intimate and Public Spheres in 21st