Introduction

Becoming an Adult in East Asia: Multidisciplinary and Comparative Approaches

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Transition to Adulthood in East Asia

Along with the significant economic recession in East Asia during the last two decades, often described as the “lost decade” in Japan and “economic crisis” in South Korea, East Asian societies have seen rapidly rising economic inequality and job insecurity (Brinton, 2011; Shin, 2013). Although the impacts of economic and social changes in the region are overarching across different dimensions of societies, particularly notable are their influences on the pathways of adulthood. Young adults in the region have increasingly delayed their transition to adulthood by staying longer in school, experiencing difficulty in attaining a stable job and marrying later (or, even increasingly, remaining single), which also likely have affected leaving the parental home (Brinton, 2011; Newman, 2008; Yeung and Alipio, 2013). Importantly, the transition to adulthood in the region is not only taking longer, but is also taking place in much less standardised way than in the past. For instance, co-habitation before marriage has increasingly appealed to Japanese young adults, although co-habitation is still much less prevalent than among young adults in the West and it has different meanings and consequences (Raymo et al., 2009).

What does it mean to East Asian young adults to “become an adult” in these rapidly changing contexts? When do they feel they have become an adult? What are the major criteria with which young people in East Asia define adulthood? Do traditional markers such as full-time job, marriage and parenthood still matter for them to perceive themselves as adults? How do

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they navigate new educational and economic environments that increasingly pose challenges for them to make smooth transitions? To what extent are the patterns of transition to adulthood that East Asian young adults display distinctive (or similar) from what scholars of Western societies have found among their young adults? What do the findings of transition to adulthood imply for policy efforts to help young people make a smooth transition?

The transition to adulthood has been of major interest to social science literature. Scholars, especially in the fields of demography and sociology, have focused on identifying determinants and consequences of timing, duration, sequence and connection of socio-demographic transition markers, considered to be crucial for adulthood, such as the completion of education, full-time job, marriage and parenthood (Hogan and Astone, 1986; Shanahan, 2000). Several studies in the United States and Europe have illustrated how young people attain transition markers under specific contexts of institutions and cultures (Buchmann and Kriesi, 2011; Corjin and Klijzing, 2001; Furstenberg, 2010; Sandefur et al., 2005). These studies have shown considerable diversity in the pathways to adulthood among young people across societies with different institutional arrangements and cultural norms, as well as within-country heterogeneity among different demographic and socioeconomic groups of young people.

Consistent with this tradition, existing literature of the transition to adulthood in East Asia has mostly applied a socio-demographic perspective to document the patterns of role transitions that East Asian young people achieve throughout their life course, and to examine how the patterns vary by the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of young people. Some studies investigated in detail a specific role transition, such as leaving the parental home (Fukuda, 2009—Japan; Huang, 2013—Taiwan), while others offered an overall view of young people’s transition status across different markers of adulthood, particularly in comparison between societies in (East) Asia (Park and Sandefur, 2005; Yeung and Aplipo, 2013; Yi, 2015). These previous studies have highlighted distinctive patterns of role transitions East Asian young people experience in comparison to their Western counterparts, although some similarities also exist. The relatively strong linkage between marriage and parenthood, and different norms and patterns of leaving the parental home are some examples of differences.

However, the literature that focuses on attainment of objective transition markers has been increasingly subject to criticisms. Challenging the socio-demographic approach, for instance, the literature of emerging adulthood in the United States has highlighted increasing relevance of individual and subjective criteria to define adulthood. Specifically, Arnett’s (2000, 2004) research