

Generational or Technological? The Gaps within the Modern South Korean Society

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Abstract

The modern South Korean society, having its cultural roots in Joseon-period (1392 – 1910) orthodox interpretation of Neo-Confucianism, naturally displays a high degree of hierarchism. The socio-economic transformation, brought by the end of feudalism during Japanese occupation period (1910 – 1945) and the post-World War II period, caused the re-alignment of the traditional social setting. Furthermore, the quick urbanization transformed Korea from a predominantly agricultural society into a technology-based one, which not only resulted in the typical city – village antinomy, but also became the main factor contributing to new types of social divisions. In the 1970s it was apparent that the elderly people living in rural areas – many of them direct descendants of the former Yangban (scholar – nobility) clans – could not keep with the rapidly changing world and processes of globalization, compared to the younger generations living in urban areas, who not only had access to newest technologies, but in fact were the main driving force behind democratization of the state and toppling of authoritarian rule of Park Chung-Hee and his followers. In the latter 1990s, it were young Koreans who spread the popular culture of their country worldwide and started utilizing internet technologies to form communities. Meanwhile, both the elderly living in rural areas and the former employees of the Chaebol conglomerates, many of them lacking sufficient education and economic funds, were often displaced in the new socio-economic system. This situation was influenced by two important factors – underdeveloped national pension system and the gradual downfall of the system of extended families, which stripped the elderly from the traditional support of their descendants. The aim of this paper is to examine and outline the differences between mindsets and lifestyles of Korean young and elderly as well as pinpoint the main reasons for these differences, with additional focus being set on the gender and educational issues, in order to confirm or disprove existence of certain divisions and conflicts within South Korean society.

I. Introduction

The notions of putting interest of a group and well-being of the elderly ahead of the needs of an individual are thought to be among the central aspects of Korean form of Neo-Confucianism. Combination of folk culture and Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy has not only contributed to the emphasis of authority and respect in daily life, but also to prevalence of “manicheistic” outlook in daily life, from Goryeo-Choson times into modernity (Kim Jae-Un 1991: 61 – 63). This dichotomy, deeply connected to such concepts as yin-yang or “five traditional relationships, is typically embodied in the ethnolinguistic opposition between old and young, privileged and underprivileged, male and female, or higher and lower. However, with the rise of popularity of western lifestyle and global culture in South Korea, new and significant changes can be noticed within the society. These new processes create new dynamics within conservative Neo-Confucian kinship politics and public structures modeled after these familial patterns. The goal of this text is not to analyze the complexity of these developments in its entirety, but rather to examine new aspects of social authority in the rapidly-growing Republic of Korea, with emphasis set on the alienating effect these changes have on the opposing, yet formerly interdependent groups.

II. The basic image of modern social changes in South Korea

One of the basic contemporary tendencies in South Korea is the gradual dissolution of extended family structures in favor of nuclear families, which is a result of rapid urbanization coupled with popularization of western model of life. The consequences of this change are far-reaching; however, the most prominent effect is the departure from Confucian idea of support of the elderly by younger generations. Despite the fact that Confucian values, such as filial piety or stress on self-cultivation, have influenced development of the state (Slote & De Vos [eds.] 1998: 250), it may be argued that the ritualistic aspect of the doctrine has largely disappeared from life of South Koreans, or became a “wagon” of the modern pop-cultural communication and mechanisms of economic development (Nelson 2000: 111 - 112). In this setting, the elderly cannot expect to receive sufficient financial support from the young, nor can they serve the role of focal points of family any longer because of the rising prominence of nuclear family model, in which grandparents are often being treated instrumentally, rather than with traditional respect (Kim Choong Soon 2007: 131 - 132). Aside of the cultural changes, the economic and educational factors are important as well in the process of rift-creation; for instance, it is due to the largely underdeveloped system of corporal retirement that the pensions for the elderly are low, and as such they typically must depend on their long-time savings. While there are certainly rising job opportunities for them (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/13/world/asia/13silver.html>, accessed March 4, 2013), it is because of their often low academic qualifications (with notable exception of those elderly who belong to conglomerate-managing clans) that they cannot sufficiently compete with young graduates of modern Korean universities in terms of employment. The rural communities are particularly estranged in this respect, as the downfall of the system of extended families has caused the rapid flow of intellectual and working human resources to the quickly developing cities (DeVos & Lee 1993: 377 - 393); the elderly were deeply affected and isolated by

these changes. However, in order to understand roots of these changes, the recent history of Korean Peninsula must be briefly described.

III. Korean War and its Consequences

The Korean War of 1950 – 1953 was, in a purely sociological context, essentially a continuation of the processes of nation-building, initiated at the end of XIXth century and during Japanese occupation (Seth 2011: 297, 308 – 323). Plans and visions of Kim Il Sung and Rhee Syngman, while officially encapsulated within doctrines of Communism and Capitalist Nationalism, may in fact be interpreted as embodiments of two fundamental impulses of Korean society – the sense of belonging within a communitarian structure (stemming from the mixture of pure Korean traditions and Confucian thought) and the ideology of individualism related to anti-feudalism and the Christian idea of salvation (introduced and absorbed in Korea firstly in the XIXth century); the South Korean form of communitarianism had eventually taken a form of anti-government movements, such as the Kwangju uprising (Han 2010: 121 - 144). The partition of Korea into two radically different states, despite being to a certain degree influenced by foreign powers, in fact divided the Peninsula roughly according to ideological preferences not only of the leaders, but also of the society (Stueck 1995: 15 - 16). The consequences of this division were much more long-term, however. In the case of South Korea (which will remain the main point of focus in this article), the complete breakdown of many kinship structures and separation of families were factors initiating the displacement of the elderly, while the education system of that time, centered on instillation of patriotic values and creation of the student/worker amalgamate cadre possessing abilities useful for the state, was gradually becoming less accessible and affordable for those living in the countryside, which – as the study of Chang Kung-Sup states - eventually contributed to creation of a social stratum consisting of, employment-wise, deeply dissatisfied and disadvantaged elderly (Chang Kyung-Sup 2010). Furthermore, as Hee-Yeon Cho says, “In such an anticommunist regimented society we can see a great imbalance between both the state and civil society and between capital and labor, facilitating both statist mobilization and authoritarian integration” (Cho Hee-Yeon 2013: 1 - 17). Indeed, the authoritarianism and anticommunism as the key values promoted by governments of Rhee Syngman, Park Chung-Hee and their successors, on one hand promoting the economic development of the country, in effect have closed the society within the specific form of national organization. It was only in the beginning of the 1990s that Koreans, motivated by the processes of democratization and the fall of authoritarianism, have set their sights on different cultural impulses, for the first time allowing globalization and all elements associated with it to influence their lives for the first time.

IV. The socio-political and technological revolution of the 80s/90s

Political change coupled with processes of globalization were not only the dominant causes for the popularization of Korean culture worldwide in the form of so-called “Han Wave”, but have also triggered new developments within South Korea’s internal socio-cultural reality. The shift from heavy industry and agriculture into high-tech

devices and machine components brought economic diversity, allowing new media to flourish. Awareness of the western models of social communication became higher due to rising presence of non-Korean movies and TV programs, while the South Korean products – such as k-pop music genre and TV serialized dramas – caused popularity of the country to surge worldwide. However, significant social problems relevant to the issue of social inequality have surfaced as well. The aforementioned urbanization of the country and concentration of the population in larger agglomerations were at their peak in the 1990s, and, in addition to the increasing popularity of the nuclear family model, have further caused the deterioration of the livelihood of the elderly. The National Pension System is underdeveloped and has not brought so far (especially in the 1990s) full benefits to the retired employees – most of whom used to work either in agriculture or one of the Chaebol (major conglomerates) – were no longer under the “paternalistic” protection exerted by their companies during the period of authoritarianism (http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/070321_gai_agingkorea_eng.pdf, accessed March 1, 2013), and their own children, following the “syndrome of the wild goose” are no longer obliged to stay close to their parents and support them, the almost absolute point of focus being education of their own offspring. As evidenced by the latest research (ibid.) the percentage of the elderly living with their children has fallen from 81 in 1980 to 44 in 2004, which further signifies the problematic situation. The academic deficiencies among the elderly are also common, and this, along with their conservative mindsets, brings forward the question: in what ways do the young Koreans represent the image of the new South Korea?

V. Educational pressure and globalized mindsets as the key defining factors of Korean youth:

The educational drive present within all socio-economic classes of South Korea may be perceived as a reformed version of the exam- and bureaucracy-centered mentality of the former Yangban (scholar-nobility) families of the Joseon period (Seth 2005: 3 - 15). In that setting, achievement of the specific scholarly or official rank was directly tied to the genealogical status of the kinship group, and therefore was placed among the highest duties of Yangban children. With the advent of modernity and the downfall of feudal system, the pressure has remained, and even though parents can no longer be assured that their children will repay the favor by the means of a lifelong financial support, there is still an overwhelming sense of obligation and gratitude among students and graduates towards their families (<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/11/10/world/asia/south-korea-exams>, accessed March 7, 2013). South Korean education with all of its economic burdens and memorization-based studying is straining both to the younger and older generations, and the course of career is largely pre-determined due to peer-pressure and media emphasizing the reputation of the so-called “SKY” Universities (Seoul, Goryo, Yonsei) as the institutions graduates of which are hired by various Chaebol conglomerates most frequently. Parents, in order for their children to pass the strenuous examinations, sacrifice much of their financial resources and personal time for seeking appropriate cram schools – the so-called “hagwon” - while encouraging hard studying and respect towards authoritative teachers (Hwang 2001: 609 – 618). Those examinees who do not acquire the number of points required for entry not only must seek alternative,

less-recognized academic institutions, but also face a deep sense of shame of not fulfilling the expectations placed on them. However, the harsh reality of cram schools and endless memorization does not form the entirety of Korean students' lives anymore. Online games such as Starcraft are starting to be perceived as a form of career and even as credible sources of income to the dedicated players (<http://www.dailyfinance.com/2010/08/28/starcraft-pro-lives-off-game>, accessed March 1, 2013). Furthermore, another embodiment of globalized mindset among Koreans is the rising popularity of overseas education, perceived as less restrictive than its counterpart in Republic of Korea. Regardless of location, older generations still typically pay large sums of money for education of their children, and their frustrations on these issues are very apparent by the results of the recent research; the reformative attempts aiming at lowering both the costs and stress of schooling have not reached satisfactory conclusion as well (Chang S. J. 2008: 157 - 177). The uncertainty concerning careers of Korean youth as well as the future of their parents is further increased by new types of communication media, which may eventually override the traditional, Confucianism-influenced way of life.

VI. High technologies – increasing awareness or creating rifts between traditional elders and pop-cultural youth?

Online games represent only one side of the deep-reaching influence high technologies exerted on modern South Korea. Confucianism, a system for hundreds of years serving as a justification for Korean hierarchism, has been – at least to a certain extent – visibly shaken by the non-hierarchic online forums and instant communicators, where the speech levels do not matter. This phenomenon may be interpreted as a form of escapism into a “neutral ground” by young and old alike. Games, instant communicators and information media being accessible on mobile devices is a further sign of change in South Korean society, as the quicker dissemination of information potentially increases awareness of the world among traditionally conservative elderly and provides new platform for political discourse (Lee Jinsun 2013: 123 – 142); this revolution was helped by the abolition of censorship in the beginning of 1990s. Use of internet, however, may be restricted by such factors as lack of technical knowledge frequently exhibited by the elderly, or the unwillingness of younger generations or official institutions towards organizing courses in computer science for the aforementioned underprivileged groups. The harsh reality of Confucian social communication has even caused, especially in recent times, when far more specialized online games and communities emerged, a creation of bonds online. There has been a notable case in the recent years (<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/03/05/korea.baby.starved/index.html>, accessed March 4, 2013) in which a married couple was so involved in controlling matters of its online game counterpart that they neglected the well-being of their infant child. However, this issue is certainly multidimensional and cannot be easily assigned positive or negative connotations. As one of the many agents of change in South Korea, internet and new media provide new opportunities of development as well as the new forms of expression, but cannot fully undermine the traditional Confucian culture, as it was internalized as a type of underlying, non-political mentality some time after Korean War; the subsequent influences of globalization amount to modifications within the system, and not of its complete abrogation in

favor of purely western products and thought, which is further supported by the words of Samuel Huntington concerning cultural identity

(<http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Politics/Huntington-Clash.html>, accessed February 28, 2013). Still, in the domain of patriarchy and group-thinking, one part of society does not need internet applications to show its new impulses and changing image – and about this group, Korean women, requires much analysis.

VII. Changing role of women

Women' position in South Korean society is largely determined by two factors: legislation aiming at creation of full equality of rights between genders, and the changing opinions on the role of "...the patrilinear family as the basic unit of the nation" (Cho Uhn 2013: 19 – 27). While the percentage of women employed in various economic sectors has been steadily rising since 1980s, there is still much to be done by the government in this respect, since, by extension, the difficulties of working in a company (especially the typically high levels of male favoritism) and the financial uncertainty cause women – especially single ones – to be reluctant towards creating a family structure of their own (Kee 2008: 9 - 20). On the other hand the Neo-Confucian terminology – especially concerning the concept of „gi”, or „material force” – is still frequently being used as a justification of preference of companies towards male workers, who are perceived as more productive and less burdened by issues of the body (such as menstruation, pregnancy, etc) than women (Cho Uhn 2013: 19 - 27). The birth ratio has been indirectly influenced by the fact that Korean society has always traditionally favored boys, and while the obligations of male descendants in regards to performance of ancestral rites have largely diminished (Yi 2003: 79 - 117) their key role in familial structure has been preserved, girls being considered much less important to the well-being and honor of the family. The abolition of the so-called “Hojuje” household management system, in which only male siblings of a woman or her spouse could have full legal rights of a familial authority head, is an issue widely discussed in South Korea to this day (Lee Mary 2008: 56 – 85). This and other examples of patriarchalism and patrilineality in Korean tradition and Confucian doctrine make it even more difficult for retired and unemployed women to seek financial and developmental opportunities, already highly limited due to the aforementioned changes regarding structure of Korean family.

VIII. Conclusion:

The goal of this article was not to give detailed data concerning employment of Korean men, women, university graduates, the elderly, women and other relevant groups. Instead, the point of focus was on the rapid transformative processes initiated by the divisive Korean War, which, aside of political effects, has laid bare the ideological differences within Korean nation, formerly united in feudalism. As one can see, the age, social standing and family relations have remained the main factors defining interpersonal relations in Korea, but, on the other hand, the processes of modernization and the increasingly high level of presence of advanced technologies have provided both new types of social bonds and created new divisions.

These developments, treated collectively, were made possible only after the fall of authoritarian dictatorship. The persons living alone without any form external help, such as estranged elderly, laid-off workers and even some high school students, who disappointed their parents all represent the harsh reality of South Korean society, have all exhibited varying outlooks towards their past social standings, the significance of politics in their lives and the changes the future may bring. Conflicts may therefore be treated as something natural in this environment – however, the question as to how these divisions can be resolved still stands. One possible solution may lie in the hands of South Korean government, which, besides alleviating the aforementioned financial difficulties of the elderly, should also ease the access to internet services, making them more user-friendly to frequently disadvantaged representatives of this social stratum. While at present it is the youth that is the most proficient in computer sciences and internet, the activities of the government and such organizations as The University of the Third Age may help the nation in the long-term perspective by opening new educational possibilities to everyone, gradually making the financial, generational and career divisions disappear. Furthermore, the transformation of Confucian mentality resulting from the contact with the western modes of thought may also bring positive consequences, rather than exclusively negative ones – perhaps in the future the group-thinking may give way to individualism, lessening the number of social divisions on the Peninsula. Women, who still face many dilemmas due to their frequent employment-related difficulties, are especially relevant in this regard, as their traditionally low hierarchic position is still prominent in modern South Korean society despite many legal attempts aiming at the change of this situation. Confucianism cannot and should not completely disappear from Korean ethnolinguistic reality; it must instead be further harmonized with modernity in order to bring more comfort and freedom to daily lives of Koreans, and to eliminate the detrimental gaps between all social strata.

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The logo for the International Association for the Study of Confucianism (iafor) is centered on the page. It features the lowercase letters 'iafor' in a light blue, serif font. The text is surrounded by two large, overlapping, semi-transparent circular arcs. The outer arc is a light red color, and the inner arc is a light blue color, matching the text. The arcs are positioned such that they appear to frame the text, with the red arc on the left and the blue arc on the right, creating a sense of depth and movement.

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