



Book Review of *South Korea under Compressed Modernity: Familial Political Economy in Transition*, By Kyung-Sup Chang. New York: Routledge

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South Korea under Compressed Modernity puts ‘family’ on the center stage in the analysis of the transformation of the social, political, and economic structures of modern Korean society. Chang significantly advances our understanding of modern Korean society with unique efforts to incorporate both micro and macro perspectives that are unprecedented in modern Korean social science. The author’s analytical strategy significantly differs from others in several aspects. In the first place, it differs from the majorities of Korean social scientists’ by approaching the macro-structure of Korean society through its micro-foundation: family. In the second place, Chang’s approach differs from American family demographers, who rarely touch such topics as the political economy of welfare states and economic organizations. Finally, his approach significantly differs from many sociologists as he develops his own theoretical concept, “compressed modernity,” based on European classics in social history. Chang’s originality blossoms from the combination of these unique analytical and theoretical approaches: his micro-foundational, family-centered approach opens a path toward utilizing a considerable amount of valuable individual-level demographic information to investigate macro-structural phenomena.

More importantly, the construction of a novel theoretical concept, “compressed modernity” (even if still being “reconstructed” since its inception in the early 1990s) is a bold, creative move. It looks like the key content of “compressed modernity” was adopted from Ernst Bloch’s famous notion, of “the simultaneity of the unsimultaneous” (1991), which implies the coexistence of old and new social norms, beliefs, and institutional orders. Chang’s contribution, however, is to adapt this notion to the Korean case in a more radical way regarding time and

space. For him, “compressed modernity” means “the phenomena of intense competition, collision, disjointing, articulation, and compounding among traditional, modern, and postmodern elements...or between foreign/multinational/global elements and indigenous elements within a compact socio-historical context” (pp. 6-7). In other words, he attempts to mold the shaping and reshaping processes of the old and new elements into a single concept which not only embodies the emergence of hybrid forms of modernity, but also their outcomes. In this vein, “compressed modernity” is not a deductive tool for hypothesis testing, but an inductive theoretical conceptualization of unsystematic and complex processes of modernity in modern Korean society.

Chang proposes several major types of family ideologies in Chapter 2: Confucian familism, instrumental familism, affectionate familism, and individualistic familism. He claims that these seemingly incompatible family ideologies have indeed coexisted in modern Korean society. In subsequent chapters, Chang explores how Koreans’ obsessive pursuit of higher education has led to the crisis of the social investment family model with the declining workfare model (Ch. 3), and how women, the elderly, and children suffer from the lack of social support system (rather than from the emergence of the nuclear family) (Ch. 4). Chang proceeds to analyze class formation processes by gender, highlighting how women have been mobilized as semi-proletarian workers in informal sectors, providing low-wage services to other low-wage proletariats as well as unstable subsistence to their own families (Ch. 5). The next chapter moves the focus to the cost that the rural sector has had to pay during Korea’s rapid industrial development. Borrowing from Lipton’s famous “urban bias” thesis, Chang claims that Korean industrial development was achieved only at the cost of the rural sector (Ch. 6). The author’s critique of the South Korean rapid developmental model culminates in the next chapter on chaebol, in which he analyzes the formal and informal social foundations sustaining chaebol-centered familial capitalism (Ch. 7).

Chang explores a critically important point in Ch. 8 (initially raised in Ch. 2) by asking how the developmental state has shaped and reinforced these different types of familisms and their articulation. He contends that the state has relegated the basic welfare of citizens entirely to the realm of families, and that the lack of public support for the basic family functions ranging from education to nurturing has led to “defamiliation” in early twenty-first century Korea. He interprets the strikingly low fertility rates as “social tendencies and behavior to avoid, postpone, reduce, escape, and/or break familial relationships”(p. 130). The author raises the most critical puzzle of this book, which is probably the single most urgent social and economic issue in modern Korea: why do Korean families, which have sustained such rapid social, political, and economic changes since the Korean War, refuse to reproduce themselves, which may seriously undermine the social and economic basis of the celebrated rapid development in modern Korea due to the obvious reduction of the working-age population?

Chang attributes this rapidly declining fertility rates to an unbalanced sex ratio, the rising

age of women at first marriage, increases in the numbers of unmarried women, and women's own desires for (economically) independent lives. Disappointingly, however, the author does not delve further into this important puzzle with more systematic data analyses and exploration of other factors. For instance, women's desires for economic independence and possession of higher credentials are almost universally observed in post-industrial economies, but in liberal and social democratic countries, fertility rates are fairly high compared to East Asian countries such as Japan and S.Korea. The author rightfully compares the low fertility rates to similar trends in Southern Europe, in which strong familial orders prevail, but does not step forward to analyze their similarities to and differences from other high-fertility countries despite the same individualization trends. The author does not discuss the most obvious factor: Korean men's cultural tendency of declining to participate in household chores and childrearing and to spend most of their leisure times outside their homes. Without analyzing both Korean men's unbalanced work-family lives and women's burdens of managing families in the same analytical framework, it would be very difficult to reach a conclusion that would encourage the state to implement social policies sponsoring women's participation in the labor market or dual-career families.

If Chang had analyzed this puzzle – the abrupt trends of defamiliation in the strongest family-oriented societies – by utilizing his own theoretical concepts of “compressed modernity” and “accidental coexistence of different familial ideologies” (which almost disappear in the latter part of the book), this project would have been a more coherent story of ‘familial political economy.’ Such efforts might have opened a new path toward synthesizing family studies, gender studies, class analysis, and even comparative welfare state literature into a unified theoretical framework. For instance, the author might have been able to theorize further how ‘instrumental familism’ invades the realm of ‘affectionate familism’ thereby damaging the most fundamental functions of family institutions – the cultivation of child's emotional empathy and communicative reason (or skills) that should be shaped in the early childhood between parents and children. It is worth considering the possibility that the skyrocketing suicide rates and the lack of cooperative playing cultures or solidaristic sympathies with friends and neighbors in younger generations of Koreans may originate from these collapsing functions of fundamental family functions.

In a broader context, the puzzle reminds me of Polanyi's celebrated work, *The Great Transformation* (1944), in several aspects, even though the author is not consciously engaged in such a direction. For Polanyi, the market has a tendency to destroy the society in which the market itself is embedded, and therefore society should protect itself from the self-destructive forces of the market. In other words, Polanyi insinuates, if the market keeps encroaching upon its own basis – society – eventually the market will destroy not only society but also itself, which could be interpreted as ‘a society's revenge.’ The author's insight into the family-economy relationship in Korea is akin to the one in *The Great Transformation*: families in

Korea (the most basic units of society) have been “overworked” (or over-mobilized) in modern Korean developmental processes, with virtually no public support. They have endured the cost of rapid economic growth driven by the market (and the state), and the burdens have surpassed their maximum capacities to such a degree that they refuse to reproduce themselves. I appreciate the author’s keen insight that rightly recognizes this deep interaction between the market and society.

The author does not propose easy solutions or policy implications/suggestions in his conclusion. Instead, the book ends with a bewildered Korean’s view of the contemporary Korean society, in which she or he has been unintentionally engaged, partly participated in shaping, and yet cannot “entrust” wholeheartedly. I was able to feel a deep sympathy with its questions and concerns. *South Korea under Compressed Modernity* provides us with an original insight and analysis of what we are and why we stand here like this. It does not offer us a way of what we can be and should be, but gives us a hint of where we should start such conversations. This book will be of great value to the history of Korean social science.

REFERENCES

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