

Dreaming, Making, and Breaking Family and Kinship in Contemporary South Korea

by Bonnie Tilland

While South Korea makes headlines much more frequently nowadays for its vibrant and lucrative popular culture industry, until the 2000s, South Korea was known to outsiders first and foremost as a “family-centric” society. This family-centrism has been the underlying focus of a large number of Korean anthropological studies, covering “education fever,”¹ extended family networks, hierarchical business culture,² and ancestor worship.³ North Korea is also noticed for its family-centrism—namely, dynastic succession between generations of the Kim family and the practice of penalizing two subsequent generations for the sin of a single disloyal family member. In fact, “family-centrism” has been a draw for not a few “Korean Wave” pop culture aficionados—when I was first studying Korean language in Seoul in the mid-2000s, several female Japanese classmates told me they had decided to learn Korean due to their love of Korean television dramas, and specifically the “warm family relationships” that they perceived as lacking in Japanese television dramas of the time. Even the pop music arena, fueled by young idols, has a “family” component, as idols engage in demonstrations of their “filialness” on variety show programs, leading to the coining of the term *hyojadol* (*hyoja*, meaning “filial,” plus the last syllable of “idol”). Yet Korean cultural and social commentators decry South Korea’s “familism” (*kajokjuui*)—family-focused investment of resources at the expense of an orientation toward a broader social good—even as they lament that South Koreans spend less time with family than ever before, with parents shipping kids off to one after-school cram school (*hagwŏn*) after another and families rarely eating meals together due to school and work schedules. Here I explore some reasons why South Korea continues to retain its reputation and provoke fascination as a “family-centered society” and, beyond this, investigate contemporary Korean notions of family and kinship. I center my discussion around three questions: (1) What are Korean ideals about family and kinship? (2) How are families made in South Korea today? And finally, (3) What happens when family breaks down? Understanding contemporary South Korean family issues can provide insight into the impact of rapid industrialization and accelerated economic liberalism on societies, the lingering effects of traditional “Confucian” family ideals, and South Korea’s impending demographic crisis due to a low birth rate and rapidly aging society. In short, one cannot understand contemporary South Korean society and culture—even youth-oriented pop culture—without understanding South Korean conceptions of family. The title of this essay—“Dreaming, Making, and Breaking Family and Kinship in Contemporary South Korea”—alludes to anthropologist Caren Freeman’s *Making and Faking Kinship: Marriage and Labor Migration between China and South Korea*; in that work, Freeman discusses the strategies of ethnic Koreans from China (*Chosŏnjok*) to gain the right to work in South Korea, extending to paper marriages.⁴ Here I suggest that even without complications of citizenship, South Korean family and kinship is a rich site from which to observe strategizing and fantasizing, within and against broader social forces.

Evolving South Korean Family Ideals and Practices

In terms of ideal family forms, surveys show that the majority of Koreans feel that the ideal marriage age is the late twenties, when in fact the average age of marriage is now thirty, as it is in several advanced economies.⁵ Factors pushing marriage age up in South Korea are primarily economic, with most young people in precarious employment and not confident about their ability to pay for the sizable deposits required for housing, among other expenses. After marriage, the ideal average number of children is two, but many couples stop at one out of concerns over the costs of education, as well as the impacts of childrearing on a woman’s career. There is a stronger, partially Confucian-inspired sense in South Korea than in most Western countries that a marriage is not between two individuals but between two families, and this contributes to the continued practice of arranged marriages that anthropologist Laurel Kendall described more than twenty years ago in *Getting Married in Korea*. Kendall updates this with a discussion of matches that are a compromise between acquiescing to the wisdom of an elder and seeking out love oneself, the so-called “first meeting” model.⁶ Although “love marriages” (*yŏnae kyŏlhon*) are much more common now than in the past, arranged marriages (*chungmae kyŏlhon*) are still not uncommon. Many of these are now technically “half love/half arranged” (*chungmae pan yŏnae pan*) marriages, meaning that a matchmaker introduces a couple, the couple dates for a while, and then goes through with the marriage.

Ministry of Family policies have in recent years granted cash awards to couples who have more than one child—though the amount varies depending on one’s city and district—and day care is now free for all Koreans or multicultural couples (defined as couples in which one member is Korean and one is not, so-called *tamunhwa kajok*).

Nevertheless, affordable prenatal and postnatal care, and universal early childhood education cannot sufficiently relieve the psychological burden that accrues when thinking about future expenses of the hagwŏn system, not to mention potential costs of studying abroad or attending university. At issue are not only monetary costs, but lost opportunity costs, as universal day care does not extend to cover the long work hours of most Korean workplaces. Without changing overall South Korean work culture and family culture—in which women are responsible for nearly all domestic tasks and men provide very little in the way of domestic participation—there is little hope of raising the national birth rate, even though it is a chief policy concern of the South Korean government. Although it is typical for birth rates to be low in advanced economies, South Korea's subreplacement rate of 1.27 as of 2016 is a clear indication of entrenched family and work balance issues. In comparison, Japan, which is one of the world's most often-cited examples of a "low birth rate country," had a somewhat-higher rate of 1.41 in the same time period. (Replacement rate is two children per woman, and it is noteworthy that South Korea's birth rate in the 1960s was six children per woman.)⁷ In South Korea, women's high educational achievement often does not have much outlet other than vicariously through their children, fueling a competitive education system and competitive child-rearing.

Women who return to employment after having children tend to rely on family support to bridge the disconnect between day care hours and work schedules, chiefly mothers or mothers-in-law. Yet among Korean mothers I interviewed in their thirties through fifties, many said their own mothers were reluctant to help too much due to their desire for freedom from child care after decades of raising their own children.⁸ It was more common for women's mothers-in-law to assist, as more women had moved to the same area as their husbands' parents, and the children were, after all, still considered more a part of their father's extended family than their mother's, a legacy of the family register system. It should be noted, however, that in practice, relationships between children and grandparents are extremely diverse. There is an emerging ideal for the major holidays—the autumn holiday that falls between September and November each year (*Chusŏk*) and the Lunar New Year in January or February (*Sŏllal*)—that the time should be divided between paternal and maternal grandparents, when practical; in previous generations, it was common practice to only go to the paternal side and pay respects to paternal ancestors. Persistent patriarchal norms mean that many women report strained relationships with mothers-in-law, whom they feel side with their husband and children at the expense of their own well-being. Even when extended family conflict is chiefly with a sister-in-law or father-in-law, patriarchy deflects blame back onto the mother-in-law, who in turn micromanages the daughter-in-law in an act of self-preservation. I hope readers understand that this is only a general pattern, and plenty of women report positive motherly or friendly relationships with mothers-in-law. Yet the mother-in-law overstepping her boundaries was described often enough by my interviewees that it is clearly more than just a television drama trope.

A major stress factor for families is the tyranny of the work and school schedule; in the ideal middle class family, there is a male breadwinner with a company job and a stay-at-home mom (often referred to in Korean as a "professional housewife," or *chŏnŏp chubu*) and their two children. Husbands work from early in the morning until late into the evening, wives spend their days managing children's education, and children spend the evenings after school in hagwŏn, with hours increasing with the age of the child until the high-achieving high school student is in hagwŏn, or "self-study," at school as late as midnight. The expression "four hours [of sleep] you pass, five hours you fail" (*sadang orak*) is now frequently revised to "three hours you pass, four hours you fail" (*samdang sarak*) for high school students studying for the notoriously difficult university entrance exam (*sunŭng*). I do not think I will ever forget the sound of the ice-crunching of the eldest daughter of the host family I lived with; in her final year of high school, she was compelled to stay awake until the wee hours of the morning in order to cram for the entrance exam—after getting back from late-night study at school at midnight. She resorted to eating ice cubes to stave off sleepiness. Unsurprisingly, for some families, these stressful and divergent schedules can lead to a sense of alienation or lack of shared values among family members. Women I interviewed were careful to praise their husbands to their children so that even though they did not get to spend much time with their father, they would think well of him and not view him simply as an ATM machine financing their education and activities. And yet this could also breed resentment, as mothers were the ones investing all the time with children and did not seem so heroic in the eyes of children because of their deep familiarity. The linking of self-worth to earning power is acute for men in South Korea, and while certainly not the only place where masculinity is closely linked to income, the longest average working hours among Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations means that in South Korea the loss of a working identity can be profound. Novelist Kryss Lee describes this devastating loss of identity in the context of the

financial crisis of the late 1990s, in which thousands of men lost their company jobs: in her short story “The Salaryman,” a laid-off employee hides the reality from his wife and children, and once he reveals the truth, getting a divorce seems like the best way to help his family.⁹ Though his wife insists that it is only a “paper divorce,” his sudden free time and neediness are uncomfortable for everyone, and he ends up one of the many homeless at Seoul Station. Though this story describes a particularly extreme case, the system of “early retirement” in Korea adds to instability in the family—even obtaining a coveted job at a big company (*taekiöpp*) such as Samsung is no longer a guarantee of lifetime employment, as employees are increasingly forced out by age fifty-five.¹⁰ Then, if capital or networks to start one’s own business are lacking, the dreaded second career as the owner of a chicken delivery franchise or as a taxi driver begins.

In short, a certain percentage of families in South Korea sustain love and mutual understanding despite hardships and setbacks. As in other societies, financial hardship contributes to family strife; socially condoned long work hours for most men in practice, combined with pressure on women to quit jobs upon pregnancy despite technical legal protections, lead to greater gender inequality in South Korea than in many other advanced economies. In spite of high education levels for both men and women—higher than the OECD average, with postsecondary attendance around 80 percent—the default family situation is still that married women with children stay home, and men devote themselves to their workplace and to *sahoe saenghwal* (“life in society”).¹¹ Gender inequality and gendered expectations have inevitable effects on family dynamics. Sometimes, the center cannot hold and families break down; despite a slow but consistent rising divorce rate—according to OECD figures, less than 1/1,000 in 1970, 2/1,000 in 1995, and slightly under 3/1,000 in 2014—stigmas remain against divorce and single parenting, as the familism through which many Koreans make sense of their own society are undermined.¹²

Family “Breakdown” and Re-creation

With echoes of postrecessionary Japan in the 1990s, post-International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis South Korea in the 2000s and beyond has seen a proliferation of the concept of “family breakdown” (*kajok haechè*). Media reports and government memos blame the problems on increased individualism and social atomization, a widening generation gap, and schools; more online commentary accuses feminists, same-sex marriage advocates, and immigrants of destroying the family. In addition to the increasing divorce rate, the rates of people staying single once reaching adulthood is also increasing, and the precipitously low birth rate is undeniable. Yet it is worth asking what the positive dimensions of these “crises” might be: couples who once might have stayed together due to social taboos can now escape unhappy relationships; singles can focus on careers, hobbies, or friendship rather than family ties; and a low birth rate means lower population numbers in a country that already has one of the highest population densities in the world. South Korea’s level of development, social changes, and globalization all point to a growing differentiation of family forms, no matter how attached to an idealized image of “the Korean family” on the part of some segments of the population. Yet providing support for diverse family forms is a challenge in an environment in which support for even the “normal” family is insufficient.

The gender inequality mentioned previously does not only affect interpersonal family relationships, but also the general social atmosphere. The most explosive fuel for the “gender wars” is the issue of mandatory military service, which all South Korean men must complete for two years, typically going after high school or during a break from university. While some women complain that the system creates unfair advantages in terms of all-male networks based on military duty, men counter that this is only fair given their sacrifice of two years at the prime of life. The gender wars continue with men’s paid employment, when men’s resentment at long working hours can find an outlet in dismissal of women’s domestic and care labor at home as “playing around” (having coffee with friends while the kids are at school, etc.). Even though raising the birth rate is a primary policy concern, women’s birth of children is not framed as “national duty” but rather a choice connected to pure maternal love. While men receive certain social benefits from military service—though the controversial military points system was abolished—women do not receive social benefits in terms of *sahoe saenghwal* for their “service” of raising the national birth rate. One interviewee lamented to me that since her husband felt that she could absolutely not understand his stressful experience of mandatory military service, he was less inclined to try to understand her strenuous and tedious experience of early child-rearing. Paraphrasing a belief of one my interviewees, aspects of male solidarity impedes mutual understanding and fuels the gender wars.¹³

While there are exceptions, divorce in South Korea tends to be a final affair, especially when children are involved. Joint custody between parents is not common, but with the abolishment of the patriarchal “household head”

(*hoju*) system in the mid-2000s, the household registration system (*hojök*) effectively became a personal registration system based on individual rights. It is now possible for a woman's new husband to register her child to his family register. The stigma of divorce has lessened considerably in the past decade, but children can still be seen as baggage for a woman entering a new marriage, leading to the transfer of custody to grandparents or, in extreme cases, to an orphanage. The overwhelming majority of relinquished children in South Korea are children of single mothers (*mihonmo*), and single mothers are still routinely pressured to give up children for adoption. After a suspiciously robust international adoption industry in the 1980s and 1990s, recent policy changes have meant that international child adoption from Korea has dwindled, but domestic adoption has not increased accordingly to meet the demand. A domestic adoption campaign featuring celebrities has had some effect, but the overall rates are still low. Middle-class family reproduction is the ideal, and many families in the position to adopt are wary of the genetic unknowns of an adopted child.¹⁴

Even as child adoption remains relatively unusual, other new family forms continue to expand. Integration has not been seamless by any stretch of the imagination, but marriage between Koreans and foreigners is an unstoppable social force. In the late 2000s, school textbooks stopped referring to South Korea as a mono-ethnic community (*tanil min-jok*) and began actively addressing the issue of "multicultural families" (*tamunhwa kajok*). The concept of "multiculturalism" in the Korean context is still highly assimilationist as well as gendered, as even as the phenomenon of a marriage market between Korean men and foreign women from other Asian countries started in earnest in the mid-2000s to solve the "marriage problem" for rural Korean bachelors, marriages between Korean women and foreign men in practice remain excluded from the definition of "multicultural family." Since women are assumed to be the ones responsible for managing education and passing down culture, it was simply assumed that Korean women married to foreign men did not need any assistance with this. Foreign wives, on the other hand, are deemed needy of government help and, in exchange for benefits provided for multicultural families, must attend courses in Korean culture and language to gain Korean citizenship. Korean men are not required to gain any knowledge of their foreign wives' culture, though certain migrant rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have pushed for this.¹⁵ The dualistic nature of South Korean familism (*kajokjuüi*) is illustrated by this example: demographics, structures, and sensibilities of family forms have changed drastically each decade, yet underlying patriarchy and expectations of assimilation of any "outsider" remain unchanged.

Future Directions

In this essay, I have only been able to provide a broad outline of recent South Korean ideals and practices related to family and kinship. There remain issues that I have not addressed, including the effects of an increasingly globalized paradigm on Korean family practices. The phenomenon of "flying geese families" (*kirögi kajok*) that began in the 1990s but really gathered force in the 2000s has also shaped the way Koreans think about family—in these families, the mother and children live abroad in order for the children to learn English (or nowadays, often Chinese) in what is sometimes called *chogi yuhak* (early study abroad), and the father continues working in Korea alone in order to finance the arrangement. Unsurprisingly, after several years apart, many couples find it hard to begin living together as a family again. In one form of *chogi yuhak*, children go abroad without parents, living instead with extended family, most typically an aunt who has emigrated or in a homestay arrangement. This produces different strains on the family. In recent years, public opinion has turned against *chogi yuhak* and *kirögi kajok* as a phenomenon, as many high-profile media stories highlighted family members growing estranged from one another, and often with no great effect on the children's educational achievement (not to mention psychological adjustment). Nevertheless, some parents still turn to *chogi yuhak* and family separation if they deem foreign language acquisition to be crucial enough or if they are looking for a way for children to escape the stress of the Korean school system.

A final point that I would be remiss to neglect is the still-prevalent but perhaps eroding attitude in South Korea that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality in the ideal South Korean family.¹⁶ Changing attitudes toward divorce, the gradual rise of those who do not want to marry (*bihon*) or have children, and the ever-evolving landscape of multicultural families in South Korea can all be considered under the large umbrella of "new kinship" practices, a field of thought that is intrinsically linked to feminist politics and projects of "queering the family." "Queering" here does not mean looking for homosexuality where it does not exist, but instead encourages elimination of the belief that anything but heterosexuality is not normal and does damage to members of society living with non-normative gender and sexual identities. Despite some opposition, there is growing discussion of LGBTQ rights, with several

student council presidents of Korea's most prestigious universities bringing these issues into the limelight by coming out in public. In addition to many of the conservative tendencies linked to "Neo-Confucianism" mentioned in this essay, South Korea also has a staunchly conservative evangelical Christian contingent that is loathe to accept same-sex marriage, LGBTQ parenting, or open discussion of homosexual identities. But given how much else is in flux with South Korean family values, I suggest that presently "queering the family" with the hope of helping more families to thrive is both possible and necessary. For while structural orientation of kinship—with its ancestor worship, family registers, and rules dictating family relations—remains a fascinating topic in Korea, it is the affectively volatile and strategically negotiated terrain of family where potentially great shifts in Korean social life can be observed.

NOTES

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16. An academic term for this perspective is heteronormativity.

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