

Individualist familism in South Korea is hinged upon two social trends, namely, social democratization nurturing the development of individuality in regards to women and youth and commercialization of domestic life amid the rapid expansion of consumer capitalism. While individualist familism was initiated in the West, it has spread rapidly into South Korean society under the compressed processes of economic growth, democratization, Westernization, and even economic and cultural globalization.

Both in the West and South Korea, the status of women has fundamentally altered due to the intense feminist critique of women's role in the nuclear family of middle class as emotional protector and provider and also due to the increased participation of women in labor market under constant economic restructuring and destabilization of family income sources (Chang, 1998). Under these circumstances developed a growing awareness of the need for gender-equitable role and status arrangements both at home and in society. Furthermore, more and more women consider marriage merely one of the rational options in life, and postpone it until very late or even avoid it altogether.

On the other hand, modern families and homes have become the target of unlimited attack by commercial capital as individual taste and preference are touted as for every familial matter -- from wedding to daily life. Money does it all for commercialized home life as it can purchase various electronic equipments, home video movie, instant meal, and even delivery party cuisine. This deterioration of family culture has a particularly spoiling effect on youth, who are often described by mass media and academia as an asocial and unspiritual new generation indulged in commercial consumption (Ju, 1994). For many of them, the utility of the family consists mainly in the provision of commercial goods or money for purchasing them. Since even the adult generation is increasingly immersed in commercialized daily life, they cannot exercise strict moral pressure on the similar attitude of youth.

3. The Functions and Dysfunctions of the State

The South Korean state, despite its proud success in family planning, has rather exacerbated the psychological and functional difficulties of families. Many administrators and politicians have loudly advocated familism, however, in various contradictory ways. In general, most administrations officially attempted to preserve the Confucian nature of South Korean families so as to utilize familial functions and duties for the social support and political control of population (Chang, 1997a). However, actual state policies have been fairly complex and inconsistent. The ideological and functional demands of the state on private families directly reflected and then reinforced the plural family ideologies of Confucian, instrument, affectionate, and individualist familism.

Here are some examples. The state has adopted a (non-)welfare policy on the basis of Confucian family support norms; its educational and economic policies have demanded that instrumentalist private families would mobilize most of the financial and human resources required for the formation of the so-called human capital; its labor policy has incorporated a largely western view of the modern affectionate family in which breadwinning man and housewife occupy “separate spheres”; it advanced a new affectionate value in children as a family planning policy; its recent consumption and media policies are extolling youth, not to mention women, as independent cultural consumer; it is currently trying to practice a sort of “state feminism” by assisting and cooperating with various feminist movements for rescuing the individuality of women. It is interesting that all these directly and indirectly family-related policies have been devised and implemented without an overarching policy framework or coordinating organizational body.

Nevertheless, there exists one coherent feature of these family-related policies. The South Korean state has never stopped encouraging and sometimes forcing private families to fulfill all the functional

burdens of feeding, protecting, educating, disciplining, consoling, supporting, and even nursing its citizens in its behalf. It is in this way that the state can afford to excessively skimp on social policy expenses while spending lavishly on economic and military projects. All in all, the state has helped intensify the functional overloading of private families, and thereby accelerated fertility decline, among other tendencies of defamiliation, apart from the direct effect of family planning programs. Now, as the necessity for policy turnabout is seriously discussed concerning population, its prospective pro-natal policies will critically require a reconsideration of the multi-faceted and protracted functional dependence of the state on private families.

4. Trends of *Defamiliation*: Reduction, Exit, Deferral, and Protest

As South Koreans have accidentally stumbled into many dissimilar family ideologies, their everyday life is beset by the complex, often mutually contradictory roles and responsibilities prescribed in such ideologies. Besides, the disharmony and contradiction among the diverse family ideologies impose various psychological difficulties on the family life and relationship of South Koreans on top of the burdens and pains each of the family ideologies causes separately. The state, with its loud but inconsistent advocacy of familism, has rather exacerbated the psychological and functional difficulties of families. While using private families as core instrument for various social policies, no administration has seriously tried to share the heavy material, not to mention psychological, burdens of them. Stress and fatigue are inevitably endemic in the family life of almost all South Koreans, so that various efforts to *protect themselves from family burdens* constitute a visible tendency of *defamiliation*. The plummeting fertility is not the only serious symptom of defamiliation, but a host of other symptoms, such as divorce, separation, runaway, late marriage, and single life, have also been increasing in alarming degrees.

First, a renewed process of fertility decline has been observed since the 1990s (see Table 1). After marking one of the most dramatic fertility transitions in human history between the mid 1960s and the early 1980s, South Koreans' fertility came to be stabilized from the mid 1980s and even recovered slightly in the early 1990s. Perhaps, the favorable economic conditions in these years may have allowed them to afford more children. However, another round of sustained fertility decline has taken place thereafter. In particular, the TFR of 1.30 for 2001, a level far lower than that of Japan, instantly became a national sensation. However, an even stronger shock awaited South Koreans as the TFR for 2002 turned out 1.17. A quick recovery from the national economic crisis of 1997-98 was only accompanied by an ominous demographic trend whose immediately jeopardous economic consequences were all too

clearly expected. A recovery in fertility in 2003 (i.e., the TFR of 1.19) was too narrow to be considered a meaningful signal for fertility revival.

As the industrialization and concomitant urbanization of South Korea had largely matured by then, the proletarianization thesis does not provide a sufficient explanation for it. This trend has been the most salient among women in their twentieth. Whether hesitating to marry, postponing childbearing or even planning a marriage without children, young women (and young men) have become more and more timid about the burden of family construction and maintenance intensified by diverse family ideologies and responsibilities.

South Koreans' breathtakingly fast fertility transition has a severely skewed shape along the gender line. Adapting to the proletarian life conditions of modern industries and cities, South Koreans unhesitatingly gave up the traditional high fertility norm, but not shedding timeworn son preference. On the contrary, they shrewdly noticed – and even colluded for – the patriarchal structure of capitalist industry and authoritarian politics, and did their best to ensure the birth of at least one son. As the likelihood of having at least one son seriously decreased due to the self-induced limitation of fertility, the gender detection and abortion of female fetuses became rampant. The medical profession found lucrative business in this social trend, whereas the state lacked a serious will to penalize either doctors or people for the illegal, not to mention immoral, practices. Thereby developed a population with one of the most distorted sex structures in the world. As shown in Table 3, such *strategic* procreation behavior has been kept by Confucian and instrumentalist South Koreans well into the 21st century. The sex distortion of the newborn population culminated in the mid 1990s. And the gradual yet inconsistent decline of the sex ratio at birth thereafter is only a very flimsy basis for predicting any genuine change in one of the most tenacious elements of South Koreans' "habits of the heart".

The intense attempt to downsize family organization has been made upward as well. The traditional norm of serving cohabitant old parents (and parents-in-law) has become either practically infeasible or personally unacceptable for most young married couples. In fact, a clear majority of the middle-aged and even older parents themselves would not hope to live together with married children in their old age (Choi, 1992). As a general social norm, an overwhelming majority of South Koreans, including young ones, regard old-age support as a basic filial duty. But their individual fulfillment of filial piety is quite another thing. Trying to remain sympathetic about children's extremely burdensome situations in own family life, old parents would not blame their children too much for not providing the same kind of filial service as had been provided by themselves in the past.

Even after trying hard to minimize the burdens of bearing and rearing children and serving elder parents, more and more contemporary South Koreans still remain uneasy about their marriage. Divorce, besides separation and runaway, has been on the increase among all age groups. In particular, young couples in rapidly increasing numbers would not mind terminating their marriages within an extremely short time, whereas old people consider *hwanghonihon* (dusk divorce) in gradually increasing numbers. Most of these relatively new types of divorces tend to be caused by "personality factors" as well as by "broken commitments". These tendencies turned noticeably strong since the mid 1990s. If the rapidly increasing cases of divorces are juxtaposed with the decreasing numbers of marriages (see Table 4), South Koreans' move away from family organization does seem quite serious. This disheartening tendency took on further velocity as South Koreans entered the new millennium. The Confucian stigmatization of divorcees seems to fall short of intimidating numerous apparently individualist and/or affectionist South Koreans away from marriage-breaking.

Proportional to the increase of marriage-breaking is the increase of marriage deferral, in particular, among women (see Table 5). The demoralizing stories of family burdens, conflicts, and

dissolutions seem to induce more and more women hesitant about marriage, in particular when they acquire a more-than-sufficient economic capacity for self-support, mainly thanks to the expansion of service industries. Their high educational levels enable them to undertake whatever jobs newly created in the economy if arbitrary barriers of gender discrimination are checked. A new term, *bihonyeoseong* (non-marrying women), has been coined to describe the single women for whom marriage is just a matter of personal choice (Wu, 2001). To them, *mihonyeoseong* (unmarried, or yet-to-marry, women) is a personally insulting and socially incorrect misnomer. Most of these women do not detest marriage or family, but their marriage, if at all, must be personally gratifying.

It should be pointed out that, before embarking upon various acts of defamiliation, most South Koreans earnestly endeavor to explain their difficulties and pains and voice their complaints, however, only to privately related ones. They rarely bring or disclose the troubles out of family and kin organizations. Inside the family and kin organizations, unfortunately, there rarely exists a sufficiently liberal atmosphere for democratic discussion and understanding. As a consequence, so many families are plagued by psychological distress, emotional abuse, and even physical violence. Domestic violence has become a major target for public monitoring, policing, and penalizing (Korea Criminal Policy Institute, 1992). Needless to say, family violence easily results in separation, runaway, and divorce.

In the same milieu, South Koreans are not quite accustomed to making a social issue of their familial burdens and distresses. Their preoccupation with family matters tends to prevent them from realizing and demanding the political responsibilities of the state to feed, protect, educate, support, and nurse its citizens in terms of “citizenship rights” (cf. Marshall, 1964). Nor can conservative bureaucrats and incompetent politicians devise a serious welfare state scheme in order to relieve the functionally and emotionally overburdened families. Still indignant about the irresponsible political situation and disturbing social atmosphere, many young and middle-aged South Koreans have instead opted to

relocate their families to more family-friendly societies such as Canada and New Zealand (Chang, 2002). Although many of the immigrants still lead fairly family-centered life and experience similar functional burdens in their destinations, they want to voice a clear message of protest against the troublesome situations of family life induced by the inconsiderate state and society by leaving them behind.

5. Conclusion: From Demographic Success to Socioeconomic Dilemma

The remarkable improvement in South Koreans' material life conditions and their plummeting fertility, both the direct consequences of the rapid economic development of South Korea, triggered another swift social transformation, i.e., population aging. By all indications, the South Korean population is aging at a speed unparalleled by other aging human populations. Another expression of population aging, of course, is the shrinking of population of "productive ages". As younger population in decreasing numbers have to provide for older population in increasing numbers, the social and economic burden of population aging is going to get heavier and heavier. Although population aging has never been a matter of arbitrary social or political choice in any country, many governments are trying to slow down the process by encouraging fertility recovery. In South Korea where many remnants of the family planning programs are still in effect, serious suggestions for a pro-natal social policy are now being made and discussed. It is quite likely that the policy transition from fertility control to fertility promotion will become another area in which South Korea is to record the highest rapidity.

By 2030, as shown in Table 6, the age structure of the productive population in South Korea is going to change such that those aged fifty years or higher will account for one third of the working-age

people with their absolute number almost doubling for the preceding three decades.⁴ By contrast, young people aged fifteen to twenty-five will gradually decrease both their proportion and absolute number. More serious is that those aged twenty-five to forty-nine, the core working age group, will significantly shrink in their proportion and absolute number, threatening the main manpower basis of the South Korean economy. It is quite clear that the human resources of old workers should be tapped in more active and creative ways. If such prospective shortage of the main manpower is to be shunned, fertility recovery is needed right now.

The rapid extension of South Koreans' life expectancy has taken place almost simultaneously with their fertility transition. It took less than thirty years for South Korean women to extend their life expectancy by more than twenty years (see Table 7). The trend was a little less dramatic for men, but they also enjoyed a remarkable elongation of life. During the same period, the Japanese population also went through a sustained process of life extension, but their leads over South Korean women and men decreased gradually. The sustained lengthening of life and plummeting fertility have inevitably magnified the dependency ratio between working-age population and retired population (see Table 8). After marking the ten percent level in the first year of the twenty-first century, its rise will be accelerated further and further so as to become almost thirty percent in three decades. By contrast, the youth dependency ratio is going to decline, though at decelerating rates, so as to match the elderly dependency ratio somewhere between 2020 and 2030.

The well-known reluctance of the South Korean state to provide social welfare requires its people to deal with old age primarily as a family matter. In this context, filial piety became a political virtue. However, the shrinking fertility and gender imbalances (i.e., too many boys for girls in schools,

⁴ In fact, these projections are now considered too conservative as the demographic data of the recent years reveal much more radical tendencies in fertility decline and life expectancy increase.

marriage markets, etc.) tend to critically destabilize the basic conditions for the family-supported old age, in particular, among rural and poor classes. Even among better-off classes, a prolonged parenthood for sheltering even adult children against unstable economic situations is often responsible for the delay or failure in the financial and emotional preparation for independent old age. For both poor and fortunate classes, neither their one or two sons nor their daughters-in-law are very likely to understand the genuine filial piety as was practiced by parents, grandparents, etc. Therefore, fertility recovery is not going to be an effective solution to old-age support at the private level although it is going to strengthen the economic basis of the nation and thus allow the state to prepare better social security measures.

At this point, it is not very clear whether South Korea must or will establish a major pro-natal social policy regime. The problems of population aging and labor shortage in South Korea will be as remarkable as the earlier fertility decline and other symptoms of defamiliation. But fertility recovery alone, while even this does not appear quite feasible, is not going to solve the matters significantly. The aging society requires not a quantitative adjustment of its population but a qualitative restructuring of its economy, culture, and community (Chang, 2001b). In this respect, South Korea may once again benefit from the “late development effect” by carefully observing the experiences of forerunner aging societies including Japan. Furthermore, fertility decline is only one symptom of South Koreans’ defamiliation, and its causes have been much more complex in South Korea than elsewhere due to the extremely compressed and dependent nature of economic and social transformations. Unless the diverse ideologies and concomitantly complicated functions of South Korean families are carefully examined and comprehensively dealt with, no state policy can stop such tendencies of defamiliation. To the extent that the one-sided reliance of the state on private families in welfare, health, education, labor, social control, and culture has exacerbated their psychological and material overburdening, a serious will of the state for burden-sharing or even burden-substituting will certainly alleviate many symptoms of

defamiliation. Perhaps this is the baseline from which new ideas and programs for social policy should develop in South Korea.

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<Table 1> Age-Specific Fertility Rate (unit: per thousand women of each age group)

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
15-19	4.7	4.4	4.0	3.6	3.3	3.1	2.9	2.6	2.5	2.2	2.7	2.5
20-24	82.8	72.7	66.0	62.9	58.8	54.5	48.0	43.5	39.0	31.6	26.6	23.7
25-29	188.9	178.8	179.6	177.1	167.6	161.5	153.4	148.1	150.6	130.1	111.3	112.3
30-34	65.1	64.2	68.0	69.6	71.1	73.2	73.2	72.9	84.2	78.3	75.0	79.9
35-39	12.6	13.8	14.7	15.2	15.5	16.0	15.8	15.4	17.4	17.2	16.7	17.3
40-44	1.8	2.0	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.4	2.6	2.5	2.4	2.5
45-49	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
General												
fertility rate	59.6	56.6	56.3	55.0	52.2	50.3	47.3	45.1	46.4	40.5	35.9	35.9
Total												
fertility rate	1.78	1.67	1.67	1.65	1.58	1.54	1.47	1.42	1.47	1.30	1.17	1.19

Note: General fertility rate indicates the number of live births to one thousand women aged 15 to 49.

Sources: 2002 Annual Report on Live Births and Death Statistics (Based on Vital Registration), p.13; 2003 Annual Report on Live Births and Death Statistics (Based on Vital Registration), p.13.

<Table 2> Rural-Urban Redistribution of Population and Changes in Total Fertility Rate, 1960-2000

	1960	1970	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
% Urban (<i>dong</i>)	28.0	41.2	57.3	65.4	74.4	78.5	79.7
% Rural (<i>eup, myeon</i>)	72.0	58.8	42.7	34.6	25.6	21.5	20.3

Total fertility rate	6.00	4.53	2.83	1.67	1.59	1.65	1.47

Note: Total fertility rate indicates the average number of live births to a woman hypothetically assumed to go through fertility chances of all childbearing ages (15-49) in a given year.

Sources: *Tonggyero bon hangugui moseup* (The Image of Korea Seen through Statistics), p.41, p.45; *2001 Annual Report on Live Births and Death Statistics (Based on Vital Registration)*, p.13

<Table 3> Sex Ratio by Birth Order (unit: males per hundred females)

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
All	113.6	115.3	115.2	113.2	111.6	108.2	110.1	109.6	110.2	109.0	110.0	108.7
1 st	106.2	106.4	106.0	105.8	105.3	105.1	105.9	105.6	106.2	105.4	106.5	104.9
2 nd	112.4	114.7	114.1	111.7	109.8	106.3	108.0	107.6	107.4	106.4	107.3	107.0
3 rd +	194.5	206.6	205.1	180.2	166.2	135.5	145.6	143.1	143.9	141.4	141.2	136.6

Sources: *2002 Annual Report on Live Births and Death Statistics (Based on Vital Registration)*, p.18; *2003 Annual Report on Live Births and Death Statistics (Based on Vital Registration)*, p.18.

<Table 4> Changes in Crude Marriage Rate and Crude Divorce Rate (unit: per thousand persons)

	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
C.M.R	9.2	8.0	10.6	9.2	9.2	8.7	8.0	7.7	7.0	6.7	6.4	6.3
C.D.R	0.4	0.5	0.6	1.0	1.1	1.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.8	3.0	3.5

Sources: 2002 Annual Report on Live Births and Death Statistics (Based on Vital Registration), p.12; 2003 Annual Report on Live Births and Death Statistics (Based on Vital Registration), p.12.

<Table 5> Unmarried Proportion of Women in Thirties (unit: %)

	30	31	32	33	34	35
1975	4.2	2.5	2.0	1.5	1.2	1.0
1995	9.7	7.9	6.4	5.4	4.6	3.9

Source: *Population and Housing Census Report, 1975, 1995*

<Table 6> Changes in Productive Population Aged 15-64 (units: thousand persons, %)

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2030
Productive population	13,698	17,540	23,717	29,701	33,671	34,130
Aged 15-24 <i>proportion</i>	4,741 34.6	5,838 33.3	8,613 36.3	8,784 29.6	7,662 22.7	6,066 17.8
Aged 25-49 <i>proportion</i>	6,964 50.8	9,179 52.3	11,812 49.8	16,184 54.4	19,822 58.9	16,628 48.7
Aged 50-64 <i>proportion</i>	1,993 14.6	2,522 14.4	3,292 13.9	4,768 16.0	6,187 18.4	11,436 33.5

Source: *Tonggyero bon hangugui moseup* (The Image of Korea Seen through Statistics), p.36

<Table 7> Changing Life Expectancy in South Korea and Japan

	South Korea		Japan	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
1960-1965	53.6	56.9	66.5	71.6
1965-1970	56.0	59.4	68.5	73.9
1970-1975	59.3	66.1	70.6	76.2
1975-1980	61.3	68.4	72.8	78.2
1980-1985	63.5	71.1	74.2	79.7
1985-1990	65.8	73.7	75.4	81.2
1990-1995	67.3	74.9	76.4	82.4
1995-2000	70.6	78.1	76.8	82.9

Source: *Main Statistical Indicators for OECD Member Countries*, p.43