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Confucian Patriarchy Reexamined: Korean Families and the IMF Economic Crisis

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Korean Families and the IMF Economic Crisis

Introduction

The world's perception of East Asian economies was fundamentally changed as the result of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. In the space of a few months South Korea went from being an economic miracle to an economic fiasco. The causes of the crisis and especially the appropriateness of the IMF bailout package have remained controversial topics,¹ but whatever its causes, the "IMF Economic Crisis" has left a residue of uncertainty that has permanently altered the assumptions that South Koreans had about their economy. The economic crisis caused widespread unemployment and even broader economic uncertainty that created hardships for many families. It also triggered a debate over gender roles and modernization as the country tried to determine the best strategy to cope with its effects.

In this article, based on fieldwork in South Korea during the IMF financial crisis, we examine the differential impact of the crisis on families in different social strata, and the ways that the crisis brought competing ideologies (conservative vs. progressive) to the foreground. We look at how individual families coped with economic insecurity, and at the public discourse about family and gender generated by the crisis. Rather than attempting to evaluate the underlying causes of the IMF crisis, we want to examine the convulsions that shook South Korea during this period and in so doing, provide a partial understanding of how the society experienced and was transformed by the crisis.

The Crisis Hits Middle Class Families

Even though Confucianism lost its official position as Korea's state ideology in 1910 with the collapse of the Yi dynasty, Confucian ideas continue to pervade contemporary Korean culture. Contemporary Korean Confucianism persists in family rituals practiced by many Koreans, but even more importantly in values and ethics that emphasize social stability and hierarchy, and which continue to structure important aspects of gender relations, work and family life. Confucianism begins with family relationships and ascribes different roles and responsibilities to various family members. Taking family as a microcosm of society, it organizes political and economic life along a model of harmonious family relationships.

Profit-making corporations are not part of traditional Confucian philosophy, but business leaders have found the Confucian model of society as the family writ large congenial. The Confucian organization of work is reflected in the ideology of the company as family with lower ranking employees obligated to respectfully defer to their superiors and management obligated to show paternal concern for workers. Janelli discusses the discontinuities between the ideology and practice of corporate paternalism,² but Confucian-inspired paternalism shows up, not only in corporate literature, but also in "surprisingly pro-labor measures" contained in labor laws.³ Job security is an extremely important feature of corporate paternalism, and laying-off workers tends to be regarded as a betrayal of a fundamental obligation between employer and employee.

The Confucian construction of gender relationships is also reflected in a work environment where the only permanent relationships are those formed between men. Women workers fit into their corporate niches as daughters under the Yi dynasty fit into their families, that is, as temporary low status members. Urban nuclear families function very differently than traditional farm families, but the Confucian separation of the roles of husband and wife, and the wife's subordinate position within the family persist. Men and women usually hold different kinds of jobs and the expectation that the husband is supporting his family is reflected in a "family wage system" that produces large wage differentials between men and women.

As the financial crisis hit, economically secure middle class families suddenly found themselves facing pay cuts and unprecedented fears about losing their jobs. By May 1998, 80% of Korean households had suffered significant reductions in income.⁴ As unemployment spread to banking and other managerial and professional jobs that had been considered secure, middle-class families no longer felt safe. Many people even felt that...



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