

# **The stranded individualizer under compressed modernity: South Korean women in individualization without individualism<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

South Korean families have functioned as a highly effective receptacle for the country's highly compressed conditions of modernity and late modernity. It is as much due to the success of South Korean families as an engine of compressed modernity as due to their failure that they have become functionally overloaded and socially risk-ridden. Such familial burdens and risks are particularly onerous to South Korean women because of the fundamentally gender-based structure of family relations and duties that has in part been recycled from the Confucian past and in part manufactured under industrial capitalism. Under these complicated conditions, South Korean women have had to dramatically restructure their family relations and duties as well as their individual life choices. Furthermore, under the most recent condition of what Beck calls second modernity, other institutions of modernity, such as the state, industrial economy, firms, unions, schools, and welfare systems, have become increasingly ineffective in helping to alleviate such (gender-based) familial burdens and dilemmas. As a result South Korean women have experienced dramatic changes in marriage patterns, fertility, family relations, etc. South Korean women's individualization has thereby taken place primarily as a matter of practicality rather than ideational change. A brief analysis of the situation in the neighbouring societies of Japan and Taiwan reinforces the conclusion that individualization without individualism, particularly among women, is a region-wide phenomenon in East Asia.

**Keywords:** Individualization; gender; family; compressed modernity; Korea; East Asia

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## **1. Introduction: South Korean women in revolt or retrenchment**

South Korean capitalism – or South Korean modernity in general – has undeniably been characterized by hostilities to both labour and women. Whereas the

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anti-labour tenet in the national economy (and politics) has been politically fostered by Cold War liberalism, the subordination of women in society and families has been culturally nurtured, if not determined, by the country's Confucian heritage. Labour retaliated first in the late 1980s, riding the high tide of democratization, but the national economic crisis and the subsequent neoliberal rescue measures seem to have effectively debilitated the once globally prominent activism of South Korea's organized labouring class. From the late 1990s onwards, women took their turn by staging offensives against their country's chauvinist capitalist modernity. Their offensives, however, have been much less confrontational. They have utilized their personal freedom in seemingly *sabotaging social reproduction*, a domain which has been conceived and deployed almost exclusively as a private concern by the South Korean state as well as its citizens. Since social reproduction has remained in the private realm without significant public support or intervention – at least since the termination of the aggressive family planning programme – women's personal inclinations and decisions exert a quiet but critical impact.

By radically deferring, forgoing or ending marriages, by sternly refusing to produce more than one or two offspring (or to procreate at all), or by courageously rejecting family relations beyond the nuclear unit, South Korean women have taken their society – and, to some extent, the world – by surprise. All of a sudden, these tacit yet pervasive trends have begun to be widely deplored by policy officials and academics alike as a potential threat to the social sustainability of the national economy, and that of the nation itself (Peng 2009). Thanks to the strong, organized feminist voice in government as well as civil society, however, these trends are seldom openly branded as a manifestation of women's individualism. In this incomparably family-centered society, individualism is readily associated with moral defects, and is almost equated with egoism. In addition, few convincing studies exist showing the societal rise of women's individualism *per se* (even though the conceptualization of individualism attracts serious controversies). None the less, in international scholarship, the trends described above are usually considered components of individualization.<sup>2</sup> Innumerable survey reports, media articles, and social commentaries have converged on the observation that South Korean women have been individualizing at an unprecedented rate. How then can we make sense of this seemingly contradictory trend of South Korean women's individualization without individualism? This puzzle can be addressed by examining the gender implications of South Korea's family-centered modernity (and late modernity).

As extensively discussed elsewhere, South Korean modernity has been a highly compressed one, for which South Korean families have functioned as a highly effective receptacle (Chang 1999; 2010a). In this context, it is as much due to the success of South Korean families as an engine of compressed modernity as due to their failure that they have become functionally overloaded and socially risk-ridden. Such familial burdens and risks are particularly onerous to

South Korean women because of the fundamentally gender-based structure of family relations and duties that has in part been recycled from the Confucian past and in part manufactured under industrial capitalism. Under these complicated conditions, South Korean women have had no choice but to dramatically restructure their family relations and duties as well as individual life choices. A visible trend of *defamiliation* – reducing the effective scope of family life and relations – has thereby taken place as a matter of practicality rather than ideational change. More recently, on the other hand, South Korean families appear to confront additional institutional threats from the radical new world dubbed by Ulrich Beck ‘second modernity’ (Beck and Grande 2010). As the social institutions of (first) modernity, such as the state, industrial economy, firms, unions, schools, and welfare systems, exhibit seemingly irreparable weaknesses in delivering social functions and individual utilities once taken for granted, families are left with even more expanded functions and duties for their loved ones. As families experience the adverse forces of second modernity on top of the burdens of compressed modernity, many South Koreans – women in particular – observe family relations converting from a social resource to a source of individual risks, and thus are encouraged to minimize such family-associated risks by extending or returning to individualized stages of life. A notable trend that may be called *risk-averse individualization* has thereby been triggered. Like defamiliation, this is also a matter of practicality rather than ideational change.

These complicated patterns of relationships between different levels of modernities, familial relations and functions, and women’s life choices are not limited to South Korean society alone. In East Asia particularly, Japan and Taiwan share many of the historical processes and social characteristics of South Korean modernity and second modernity. The compressed nature of modernity, condensed transition to second modernity, family-centered personal and social life, women’s innumerable duties, and tendencies towards individualization are symptomatic, albeit in different degrees and periods, of Japanese and Taiwanese societies as well. That is, a brief observation of the neighbouring (capitalist) societies reinforces the conclusion that individualization without individualism, particularly among women, is a broader East Asian phenomenon. It is, however, essential to acknowledge the diversity in familial norms and values in these three societies, which, thanks to individualization *without* individualism, continues to characterize their distinct cultural characteristics.

## **2. Compressed modernity, second modernity, and women’s individualization**

### ***2.1. Variations of individualization: ideational, practical, and demographic***

In this article, we intend to show that South Korean women’s practically driven *defamiliation* and (risk-averse) *individualization* fall short of representing a

deeply ideational transition in their familial and individual life. Thus, it is essential to conceptually distinguish between ideational and practical individualization. In addition, demographic changes in family forms, individual life courses, and fertility-mortality trends, while physically reflecting other tendencies of individualization, can independently produce individualization effects as people find themselves living considerably longer, confronting extended periods of the 'empty-nest' stage, and so on. Given these distinctions and possibilities, we suggest the following categories of individualization and defamiliation as the guiding conceptual tools for our analysis of individualization (without individualism). While not all of these categories are referred to in the current study, it is important to contextualize this individualization without individualism (in terms of risk-averse individualization) in relation to other categories of individualization with which it might be compared.

Firstly, risk-averse individualization is a social tendency whereby individuals try to minimize family-associated risks of modern life (or modernity) by extending or returning to individualized stages of life. It can be distinguished from reconstructive, nomadist, institutionalized, and demographic individualization.<sup>3</sup> Reconstructive individualization is defined as a social tendency in which individuals actively redesign their life courses and structures in order to assertively confront (second) modernity through their autonomous individual life.<sup>4</sup> We define nomadist individualization as a social tendency in which individuals try to defy the adverse social forces of (second) modernity by disengaging their life from modern social institutions and structures such as the family, state, industrial economy, education, etc.<sup>5</sup> Institutionalized individualization, in accordance with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, is a social tendency that modern social structures, services, and policies induce individuals to pursue individualized living arrangements and lifestyles (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Finally, demographic individualization is a social tendency in which demographic changes such as increases in life expectancy and the empty-nest period result in individuals spending increasingly lengthy periods of their lives alone. Risk-averse individualization and demographic individualization do not have to be preceded by 'positive individualism' (i.e., a social norm whereby individualized patterns or styles of life are regarded as inherently valuable) as a generic culture.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, reconstructive, nomadist as well as institutionalized individualization are all predicated upon the cultural establishment of positive individualism of one sort or another.

Secondly, we define defamiliation as a social tendency in which individuals try to reduce the familial burden of social reproduction by intentionally controlling the *effective* scope and duration of family life.<sup>7</sup> Defamiliation here denotes a decrease in family life and relations rather than a complete abandonment or abolition of them. Defamiliation can be conceived as a type of *refamiliation*, denoting various patterns of demographic, social, and psychological restructuring of families.<sup>8</sup> (Parts of the subsequent discussion on South

Korean women's defamiliation and individualization will allude to other trends of refamiliation as well, albeit, without necessarily conceptually demarcating them.) Just as with individualization, defamiliation may be subdivided into various types. Although our focus in South Korea is risk-averse defamiliation, we can also speak of institutionalized and reconstructive defamiliation. In the South Korean context, institutionalized defamiliation seems to be best illustrated by the state-promoted project of family planning from the 1960s to the 1980s.<sup>9</sup> It seems reconstructive defamiliation has been accommodated most zealously by young married women who want to lead an independent nuclear family household unfettered by patriarchal or matriarchal interferences from extended kin members.

## ***2.2. Family-centered compressed modernity, gender, defamiliation***

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, after carefully examining the historical relationship between macro-social conditions and familial and individual concerns in order to systematically explain individualization under Western modernity, conclude that individualization is much more an institutionalized social change than a cultural or moral modification. Briefly, they observe that 'individualization is a compulsion, albeit a paradoxical one, to create, to stage-manage, not only one's own biography but the bonds and networks surrounding it and to do this amid changing preferences and at successive stages of life, while constantly adapting to the conditions of the labour market, the educational system, and the welfare state and so on' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 4–12). They extend Talcott Parson's concept of 'institutionalized individualism' in order to describe this trend. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's view of institutionalized individualism is mainly focused on the (late modern) social, ecological and political economic conditions of individually tailored personal lives, whereas Parsons emphasizes the voluntaristic nature of social actions and relations associated with (modern) social institutional arrangements.<sup>10</sup>) To elaborate, industrial capitalism, the welfare state, democratization of politics and social relations, and even globalization all induce or force modern individuals to plan and live 'a life of one's own', entailing individualized efforts and risks (See Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 22–9). Institutionalized individualism inevitably induces the restructuring of individual-family relations and alters the modal attribute of families. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim emphasize, 'The family is becoming more of an elective relationship, an association of individual persons, who each bring to it their own interests, experiences and plans and who are each subjected to different controls, risks and constraints' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 97).

The above is far from analogous to what has been experienced by South Koreans. Institutional individualism – not to mention cultural individualism – is not what governs the life of contemporary South Koreans. While some of the

historical conditions for individualization in the West (e.g., industrial capitalism, democratization of politics and social relations, and globalization) have also existed in the South Korean context (and may have induced some trends of individualization), many additional structural factors (e.g., minimal public welfare, familial responsibility for social reproduction, and family-based social and economic competition) have simultaneously functioned to support what may be called *institutionalized familism*. It is through this institutionalized familism that South Koreans' family-centered life has been structurally integrated into the compressed modernity of their society.

Compressed modernity is defined as a civilizational condition in which economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner in respect to both time and space, and in which the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements leads to the construction and reconstruction of a highly complex and fluid social system (See Chang 2009). Compressed modernity may be demonstrated at various levels of human existence such as personhood, family, secondary organizations, urban spaces, societal units (including civil society, nation, etc.), and the world. Compressed modernity dictates that, at each of these levels, people's lives need to be managed intensely, intricately, and flexibly in order to remain normally integrated with the rest of society. In the particular socio-historical context of South Korea, family relations and functions have turned out to be both essential components and consequences of compressed modernity. South Koreans' extremely family-centered life has been structurally interwoven with rapid rates of capitalist industrialization, urbanization, and proletarianization and with aggressive educational pursuit and privatized welfare protection (See Chang 2010a). In sum, South Koreans have lived through family-centered compressed modernity', and thereby remain unrivalled *familists*.

Compressed modernity has led South Koreans to come in to contact with many different family ideologies prescribing complex, and often mutually contradictory, roles and responsibilities that beset their everyday life. More specifically, as explained and illustrated in detail elsewhere, Confucian, instrumental, affectionate, and individualist *familisms* have governed South Korean life in extremely complicated ways (See Chang 2010a: Ch 2). The kernel of Confucian familism – family values and norms along Confucian principles such as individual submission to family, age/generation-based hierarchy, and gender division – arises from the inheritance of traditional family values and norms of the Chosun era; instrumental familism – the ideology that family relations and resources should be used as the instrument for individual family members' social success which in turn is identified as the collective goal of all family members – is a sort of life philosophy that has evolved out of various family-reliant survival strategies of South Koreans in the turbulent twentieth century; affectionate familism – the ideology that the family should be an institution and/or arena for subjective interactions of an emotionally nurturing

quality – was originally established in the process of capitalist industrialization in Western countries and later incorporated in late industrializing countries in Asia and elsewhere; individualistic familism – the ideology that individual self-realization and/or gratification is the *raison d'être* of family relations and formations – is, in South Korea, hinged upon two social trends, namely, social democratization nurturing the development of individuality in regards to women and youth and also the commercialization of domestic life amid the rapid expansion of consumer capitalism. While each of these family ideologies separately imposes burdens and pains on family life and relations, chronic mutual discrepancies and contradictions lead to additional social and psychological strains. Even the state has strongly advocated familism albeit in an inconsistent manner, thereby exacerbating the psychological and functional difficulties of families.<sup>11</sup> Most governments have tried to use the family as a core instrument for diverse social policies, but none have seriously shared in its heavy material, not to mention psychological, burdens. In this way, South Koreans' institutionalized familism has directly reflected the sociocultural and political components of compressed modernity.

Interestingly, the Confucian, instrumental, affectionate, and individualist families – or, more precisely, the Confucian, instrumental, affectionate, and individualist *characteristics* of (virtually all) South Korean families – have a common attribute of emphasizing women's functionally dominant but socially subordinate role in family life. Confucian familism dictates a rigid gender division of labour under which women's morally prescribed duties in filial care for elders, spousal care for husband, and motherly care for children constitute the functional axis of family life; instrumental familism can be sustained mostly on the basis of women's *chimabaram* (skirt wind, meaning women's aggressive activities for promoting familial interests outside home); affectionate familism requires women to become the spiritual axis of family life by which other family members can be emotionally nurtured and mentally regenerated; individualistic familism may have bolstered women's premarital status but, after marriage, it burdens them with contradictory mutual expectations and demands from their children, spouses, as well as themselves. A functioning South Korean family, under compressed modernity, is both proudly and wearily bustling with all these ingredients of family life. A stably married South Korean woman, under compressed modernity, is almost made hysterical by these same ingredients of family life.

Not surprisingly, as stress and fatigue are inevitably endemic in the family life of almost all South Koreans, various efforts are made to avoid or, at least, ease family burdens, creating a visible tendency toward *defamiliation*. It is also no surprise that the most critical symptoms of defamiliation are directly enmeshed with women's life choices. For instance, the widely worried and increasingly prevalent phenomena of marriage deferral and avoidance combined with extremely low fertility rates and increasing childlessness as well as

high divorce rates are much more critically propelled by women than by their male counterparts. These trends of defamiliation, however, do not suggest a fundamental transition to an individualist society but rather manifest the continuing primacy of institutionalized familism and women's attitudinal attachment to it. In most cases, South Korean women try to reduce, postpone or remold *the effective scope of family life* because they intend to cling to it rather than desert it.

### **2.3. Compressed second modernity, gender, individualization**

According to Beck, second modernity is a civilizational condition in which various (mostly negative) 'side-effects' of (first) modernity add up to a qualitatively different situation in which the fundamental values of first modernity are still respected, but have to be pursued with radically different social means and institutions under a cosmopolitan paradigm.<sup>12</sup> This new stage of human civilization is characterized by global free trade and financialization, deindustrialization and corporate deterritorialization, informatization and cyberspace, bioscientific manipulation of life forms, borderless ecological and epidemiological hazards, transnational demographic flows, and even globally financed and managed regional wars (See Chang 2010b). (To the extent that second modernity is an outcome of intensification of first modernity which, in turn, has pivoted around liberal capitalism in an overwhelming majority of nations, neoliberalization may be considered a critical manifestation of second modernity.) Under second modernity, many social institutions of (first) modernity – the state, political parties, market economy, welfare system, schools, industrial enterprises as well as families – abruptly become ineffective or dysfunctional. As these institutions increasingly show seemingly irreparable weaknesses in delivering social functions and individual utilities once taken for granted under first modernity, it becomes necessary for individuals to (re)design their biographies in terms of permanently individualized endeavours, pursuits, and existences. In this way, individualization becomes essential to social change under second modernity.

Just as with early modernity, South Koreans have entered second modernity in a highly condensed manner. Compressed second modernity has been as much South Koreans' own developmental pursuit as an irresistible outcome of their subordination to cosmopolitan forces. In a sense, a developmental internalization of cosmopolitanized reflexivity has taken place (See Chang 2010b). Under a strong nationalist sense of developmental urgency, new bandwagon projects – such as *segzehwa* (globalization), *gaebanghwa* (opening), *jeongbohwa* (informatization), and *jisikgyeongje* (knowledge economy) – have governed South Korean life since the early 1990s, but not without serious economic, social, and even political impacts.<sup>13</sup> While these proactive initiatives have been instrumental in rapidly ushering South Korea into a new

civilizational stage and providing new sources of economic growth, there have also been disastrous consequences for society and individuals alike. In particular, the highly impulsive and thus haphazard way second modernity has been brought about for immediate developmental effects has crucially aggravated such risks – the national financial meltdown of 1997 being an indelible marker. Even after South Koreans astounded the world with their enviably swift macroeconomic recovery, they have however been critically affected by a range of diverse institutional problems involving the state, industrial economy, labour market, business enterprises, trade unions, schools, and, equally importantly, families.

Above all, in post-crisis South Korea, the highly developed industrial economy suddenly ceased providing more and better jobs for one of the world's most motivated and best educated populations. Instead many labour-intensive industries relocated to low-wage countries such as China and Vietnam. In the private sector, aggressive neoliberal labour reform measures have been undertaken and long-term regular employees are increasingly a rarity. Even the public sector, where jobs continue to be zealously coveted by an ever increasing number of applicants, is under mounting pressure to follow suit. Along with labour market restructuring (or 'flexibilization'), the so-called conservative welfare state-type social security system, which is predicated upon stable regular employment, is of little use to those already experiencing un(der)employment.<sup>14</sup> With their ever-worsening economic and social status, fewer and fewer South Koreans rely on labour unions and other class-based social organizations to promote class interests through organized struggle. Civil society, which once mightily erupted to restore democracy, remains largely quiescent in the face of mass economic disenfranchisement and social injustice.<sup>15</sup> As school diplomas, even from colleges, rarely help match graduates to jobs for which they are qualified, public education has been subjected to increasing scrutiny regarding its social efficacy.

Families are not immune from this general lean towards crisis. The majority of parents and adult children are now less capable of providing financially for their dependants. In addition, familial cultural resources have become increasingly ineffective in protecting family members against social challenges and in helping them to achieve communal as well as individual goals. Furthermore, families are also beset with increasing societal demands resulting from the decline of other institutions of modernity. The failure of the state, industrial economy, corporations, unions, schools, and welfare programmes to ensure the basic conditions of material livelihood and social status inevitably leads individuals to anxiously turn to their loved ones for assistance.<sup>16</sup> Although the familial capacity for offering such help may vary by class, most families do try to provide assistance of some sort according to their means. In doing so, however, families end up overburdening themselves, and, as a result, family relations ultimately convert from a social resource to a source of individual

risks. In such a scenario, family members may find it necessary to consider physical, material and/or emotional separation from one another, either temporarily or permanently.

This *risk-averse individualization* is all the more compelling for women due to their continuing bondage to the family as its ‘masterminding servant’. The adverse forces of second modernity have been particularly disturbing for South Korean women because they have had to disproportionately confront its familial hazards on top of their existing burdens under compressed (first) modernity. In fact, in order to supplement the functional decays of other institutions of modernity, second modernity often tends to intensify the simultaneously Confucian, instrumental, affectionate, and individualist characteristics of South Korean families and women’s complex burdens embedded in such familial characteristics. It is true that various patriarchal norms and practices in society, markets and firms as well as families have been seriously weakened amid the radical tendencies constituting second modernity. However, women’s almost exclusive liabilities in managing familial care work, home management, and socially oriented instrumental support (in education, etc.) have not seen any meaningful transitions (See Chang 2010a). As the trend of women’s (risk-averse) individualization has occurred in a highly condensed way since the mid 1990s, its demographic manifestations are not easily differentiated from those of defamiliation, a process still ongoing for numerous South Korean women. In fact, the simultaneous occurrence of women’s defamiliation and (risk-averse) individualization is another essential component of South Korea’s compressed modernity.

### **3. South Korean women in compressed (first and second) modernity**

South Korean women’s defamiliation and risk-averse individualization are far from difficult to detect. Thanks to the strong feminist political influence in the post-democratic transition period, such visible changes in women’s life patterns and family relations are no longer publicly subjected to traditionalist and/or conservative criticisms. But the tenacious conservative discourse around a supposed decline of the family (which is often deemed responsible for the deteriorating living conditions of the elderly, children, etc.) is indirectly targeted at women. Unsurprisingly, in the private domain, blaming women for family misfortunes and personal mishaps is much more prevalent, and this private ‘gender-bashing’ itself further accelerates women’s defamiliation and individualization. The widespread suspicion that South Korean women are ‘cultural runaways’, however, is not borne out by any clear evidence showing their moral and emotional detachment from family. As the following examination of recent data on individual life and family relations shows, contemporary generations of South Korean women have attempted to live and think pragmatically in order to *remain familist*, not individualist.

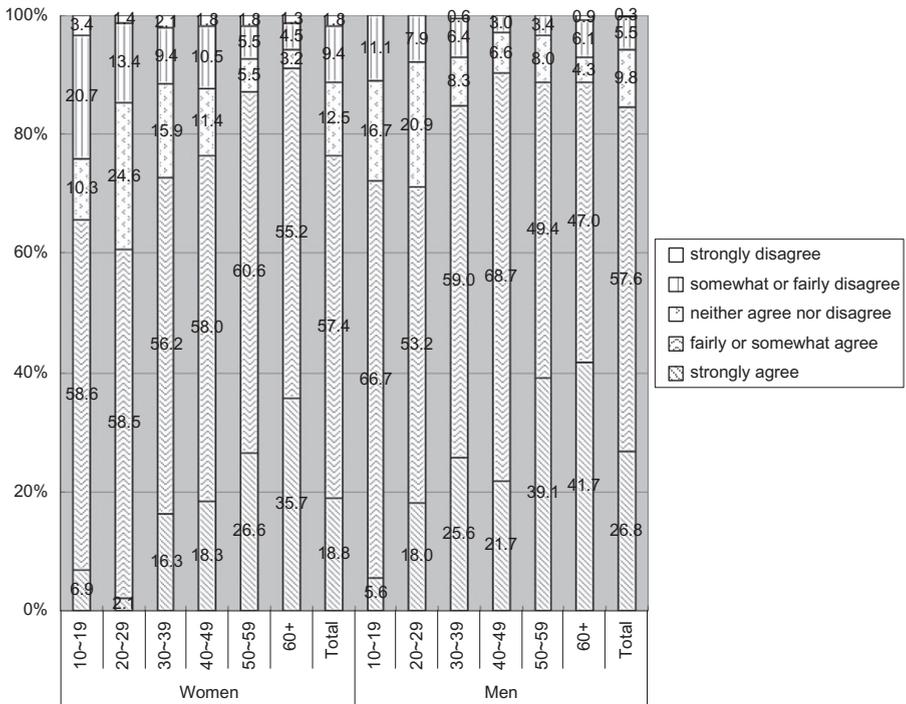
For this purpose, we have used the data generated by the Korea General Social Survey (KGSS) in 2006. Japan, Taiwan, and China also carried out corresponding surveys in 2006 using basically the same questionnaires. The statistical tables and figures presented here have been produced by the authors' analysis of the original survey results of the Family Module. The (South) Korean survey covered 891 women and 714 men; the Japanese survey covered 1166 women and 964 men; the Taiwanese survey covered 1047 women and 1055 men. The use of these data needs to be justified in regards to a possible criticism that such cross-sectional data may not be appropriate in probing a supposedly longitudinal process like women's individualization without individualism.<sup>17</sup> While we do not deny that individualization involves a chronological process of change, our focus here is on the *recently emergent patterns* of South Korean women's life choices, family relations, and personal and social values that attest to the seemingly contradictory but internally coherent relationship between their individualized life courses and enduring family-centeredness. Even under this substantive focus, however, the (quantitative) data used here have an inherent limitation in probing the much more qualitative issue of people's life orientation.

### **3.1. Family over individual?**

One of the most direct ways of checking an individual's attitude to family is to ask them whether the welfare of their family is more important than their own. When South Korean women were asked such a direct question, according to Figure I, an overwhelming majority of them responded positively. While this was more strongly the case with older age groups, even younger age groups were predominantly familist, not individualist. (In a separate analysis of our data, even among those who had experienced marriage irregularities such as divorce, separation, and widowhood, only a tiny minority thought otherwise.) South Korean men turned out to be even more strongly familist. This is not at all difficult to understand because South Korean families, as explained earlier, have operated under diverse gendered ideologies for prescribing women's understanding and care for men. Women's strong allegiance to family thus needs incisive and/or comprehensive explanations.

One of the most compelling indicators of a married person's adherence to family is their endurance of a difficult marriage in consideration of their children's welfare. When asked whether divorce should be avoided until children grow up, a majority of women in middle or old age agreed, but a small majority of those under twenty or in their twenties disagreed (See Figure II). Among those women who were unmarried or who had divorced, their opinions were almost evenly divided (with very slightly more agreement overall). As divorce is increasingly seen as a (rational or democratic) readjustment of family relations and individual life (as opposed to the view where breaking-up

**Figure I:** South Koreans' responses to 'Must put familial welfare before one's own'

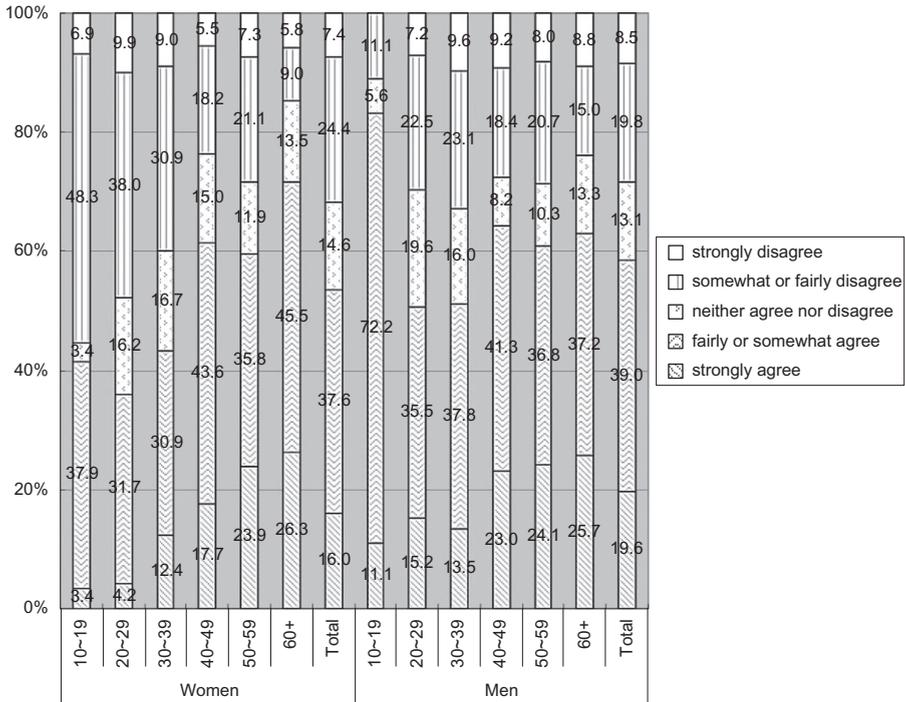


a marriage and family is deemed irresponsible), younger generations of women were more likely to consider it undesirable to endure a problematic marriage simply because of the presence of young children. South Korean men were again more conservative with regards to divorce where young children were involved. In a society where women's share of family care and household labour remains incomparably high, men may have felt much less of a burden in insisting on the endurance of a difficult marriage for the welfare of children.

### 3.2. Delaying or questioning marriage

While individuals rarely ask themselves whether they are familist (or individualist), the question of whether and when to enter marriage – that is, whether and when to form a family of their own – is an issue consciously reflected upon. In fact, the increasing deferral of marriage and sustained expansion of marriage refusal among South Korean women is often considered a key indicator of their (subjective as well as demographic) individualization. While the proportion of unmarried women aged thirty or more is still much lower in South Korea than in neighbouring East Asian capitalist societies, the speed at which the age-at-first-marriage is rising in this country is rather alarming.<sup>18</sup> This,

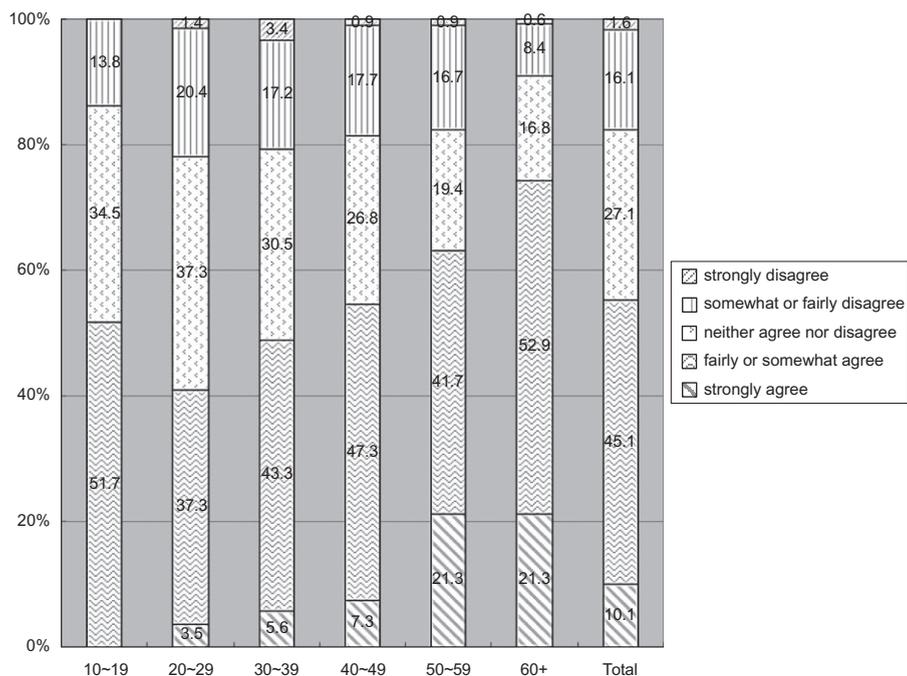
**Figure II:** South Koreans' responses to 'Should not divorce until children grow up'



however, is not due to women's prevalent pessimism about marriage as a life choice. As shown in Figure III, fewer than one in five South Korean women across all age groups (excluding those in their twenties) thought negatively about the happiness of their (previous, current or future) marriage. The relative (but still very minor) ambivalence of twenty-somethings is understandable because most of them were approaching marriage as a decisive choice in life. A clear majority of South Korean women still think that marriage can make them happier, but they also seem to be concerned about the practical conditions for a happy marriage.

Conversely, their premarital life does not seem to be characterized by personal independence or freedom from family. As shown in Table I, nearly 80 per cent of the never married women were financially dependent upon their parents, with 60 per cent receiving such financial support often or very frequently. It may be surmised from the same table that most of them, however, would become financially independent upon marriage. Most of the never married women were even receiving personal care from their parents, with nearly one in seven doing so often or very frequently. In Japan, the protracted dependence of young (and not-so-young) adults on their parents led a Japanese sociologist to introduce an extremely derogatory but heavily popularized concept of 'parasite singles' (See Masahiro 1999). While there is

**Figure III:** South Korean women's responses to 'Married women are happier than unmarried ones'



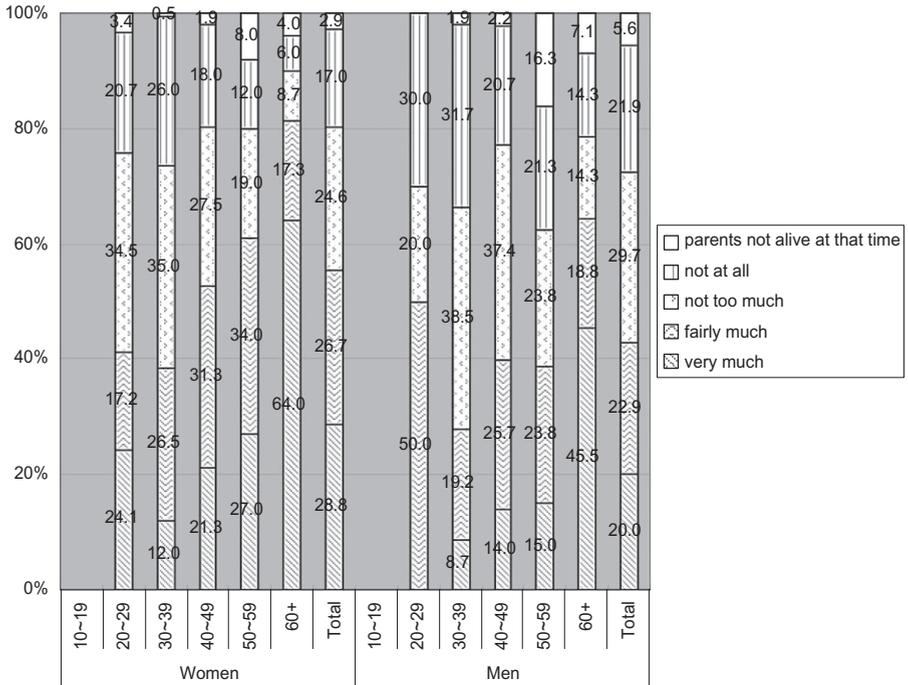
**Table I:** South Korean women's responses by marital status to 'How frequently own parents provide financial support and care work for you' (%)

Financial support from parents	Very frequently	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Not at all	Total
Married (living as married)	2.1	4.4	24.5	30.7	38.3	100.0
Widowed	7.1	7.1	7.1	7.1	78.6	100.0
Divorced	7.1	28.6	28.6	14.3	21.4	100.0
Separated (but married)		20.0		20.0	60.0	100.0
Single (never married)	33.7	27.6	18.4	10.4	9.8	100.0
Cohabiting		25.0	25.0		50.0	100.0
<b>Total</b>	10.4	11.0	22.5	24.4	31.8	100.0

Care work from parents	Very frequently	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Not at all	Total
Married (living as married)	4.4	8.9	22.7	24.1	39.9	100.0
Widowed	14.3	7.1			78.6	100.0
Divorced	14.3	7.1	14.3	14.3	50.0	100.0
Separated (but married)			20.0	20.0	60.0	100.0
Single (never married)	37.4	29.4	16.6	6.1	10.4	100.0
Cohabiting	25.0	25.0	25.0		25.0	100.0
<b>Total</b>	13.4	14.2	20.4	18.6	33.5	100.0

**Figure IV:** South Koreans' responses to 'Parents influenced the decision for the current marriage partner'



certainly a similar social trend in South Korea, this Japanese concept – unlike numerous other Japanese concepts describing new social trends commonly shared in South Korea and popularized by South Korean media and scholarship – has never been openly accommodated by South Koreans. This seems to indicate a psychological and/or cultural readiness on the part of South Koreans to agree to an extended parenthood role, particularly in relation to daughters, regardless of its social acceptability. The unprecedentedly serious squeeze on the job market for young people in the crisis-hit and neoliberally restructured economy tends to further justify the extended parental support for young adults.

### 3.3. Patriarchal marriage challenged

Many young women's dependence on parents does not end even as they prepare for marriage. Parents seem to have exercised an almost absolute authority over the choice of marriage partners for women now aged 60 and over (most of whom may have married while in rural areas). Figure IV shows that even most of the younger women of marriageable age, who have been rapidly entering urban areas, could not refuse such parental authority

altogether. Although South Korean parents have been less interventionist in respect to their sons, a majority of sons have also been subjected to parental influence in deciding marriage partners. It is noticeable, for both women and men, that those in their twenties were subjected to even stronger parental influence in deciding marriage partners than those in their thirties. To most South Korean parents, children in their twenties may appear too young to decide a marriage partner independently.

Upon marriage, South Korean women's dependence on parental support and influence used to turn into their subjection to the patriarchal division of labour vis-à-vis their husbands. As shown in Table II, a majority of South Korean women in middle or old age considered it important to help their husbands in their career advancement. However, a majority of those aged under thirty clearly disagreed with their older counterparts in this regard. Responses also varied with marital status. A high majority of never married women objected to such patriarchal stipulation of a woman's role, whereas a majority of women currently or previously married were inclined to compromise with patriarchy. While most South Korean women end up marrying, they have gradually rethought the rigid patriarchal prescription of women's role in *naejo* (assisting husband from inside). Younger generations seem to be more *democratically familist* than their elder counterparts.

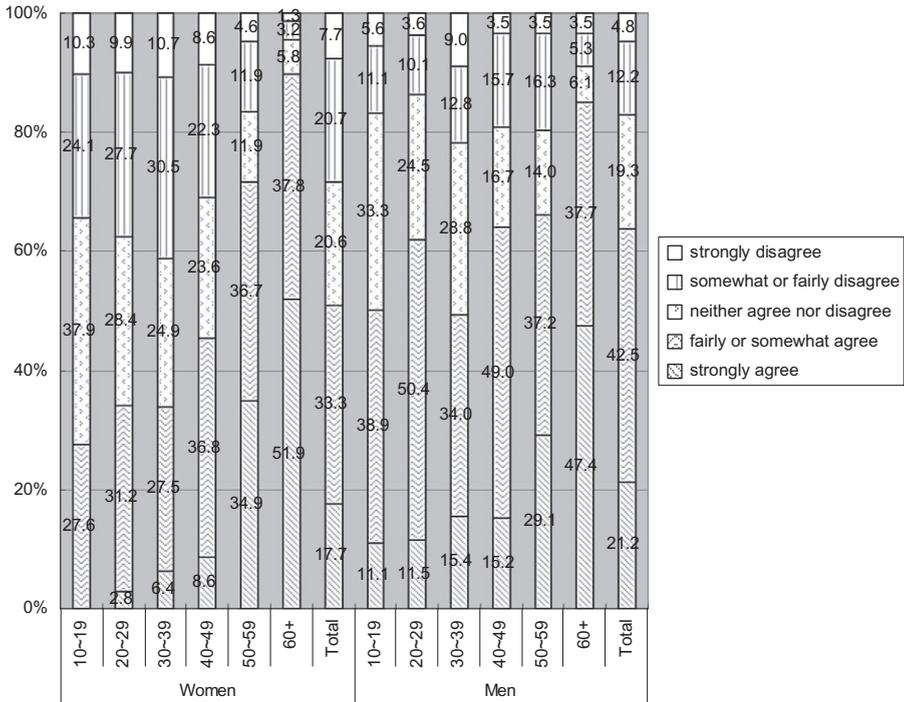
### **3.4. Forgoing or retrenching parenthood**

Intergenerational differences are much less noticeable when it comes to another tenacious patriarchal norm of son preference. As shown in Figure V, the necessity of having at least one son in family was objected to by only about one in three women aged less than thirty, whereas the remaining women were divided fairly evenly between acceptance and ambivalence in respect to this norm. (Given that South Korea's fertility rate has recently remained barely above the level of one child per family, having at least one son inevitably implies having no daughter.) In fact, women in their thirties were slightly more likely to oppose this patriarchal reproductive norm than younger women, whereas women aged fifty or higher predominantly accepted this norm. South Korean young men were even more startling in displaying their preference for sons. Only around 15 per cent of young men aged less than thirty were opposed to the necessity of at least one son in family, whereas this was opposed by around 20 per cent of men in their thirties to fifties. Across all age groups, at least a half of the surveyed men accepted this patriarchal reproductive norm. Younger men's son preference may not be unrelated to their own patriarchal attitude built up through their socialization into the male-dominant social structure and political culture, but it is also a critical reflection of their mothers' active collusion with the patriarchal social order and family support norm which induces them to seek the key meanings of life through their sons' social

**Table II:** South Korean women's responses to 'It is important for a wife to help her husband's career' (%)

	Strongly agree	Fairly or somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat or fairly disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
<b>Age</b>						
10-19		13.8	10.3	55.2	20.7	100.0
20-29		18.3	21.1	49.3	9.2	100.0
30-39	2.1	39.5	11.2	35.6	7.3	100.0
40-49	6.4	39.5	10.9	30.5	2.7	100.0
50-59	16.4	41.3	8.3	19.3	2.8	100.0
60+	28.4	45.5	10.4	10.4	1.9	100.0
31.8						
<b>Marital status</b>						
Married (living as married)	16.2	41.4	11.0	27.5	4.0	100.0
Widowed	25.2	44.7	13.6	12.6	3.9	100.0
Divorced	33.3	25.0	4.2	33.3	4.2	100.0
Separated (but married)	20.0	0.0	40.0	40.0	0.0	100.0
Single (never married)	1.8	18.3	15.4	52.7	11.8	100.0
Cohabiting	50.0	0.0	25.0	25.0	0.0	100.0
<b>Total</b>	15.1	36.5	12.2	30.8	5.4	100.0

**Figure V:** South Koreans' responses to 'One must have at least one son'



success and filial allegiance. This situation, however, is not likely to last long particularly since increasing numbers of lovingly raised and highly educated daughters have already begun to successfully challenge male competitors, above all, in the public and professional sectors.

As a demographic and, for that matter, ethical dilemma among South Korean women (and men), their total number of desired children and total number of desired sons are not too different. As shown in Table III, for South Korean women aged under forty, the ideal number of children in marriage was less than 1.5, and even those in their forties and fifties did not consider it desirable to have more than two children. (While not shown in this table, men held roughly the same view.) Roughly half of the surveyed women in their twenties to fifties favoured only one child, whereas the remaining women were divided between preferences for two children, three or four children, and none, in declining order. While 'far-below-replacement fertility' is a phenomenon widely shared across East Asia, South Koreans' strikingly low fertility desires are unparalleled in the region. The actual fertility level of South Korean women has been much lower than these preferences – stagnating at barely above the 1.0 level around the time the survey was conducted (in 2006). Since both the desired and actual levels of fertility were extremely low in spite of the persistent norm of wishing to secure at least one son, numerous unborn

**Table III:** Responses to 'Your ideal number of children for a family?' (%)

Age	South Korea						Japan	Taiwan	
	None	One	Two	Three or four	Five or more	Total	Mean	Mean	
10-19	13.8	41.4	34.5	10.3	0.0	100.0	1.45	n/a	2.25
20-29	9.9	52.8	28.9	8.5	0.0	100.0	1.38	2.44	2.15
30-39	8.6	52.4	23.2	15.9	0.0	100.0	1.48	2.57	2.27
40-49	5.4	44.3	32.6	17.6	0.0	100.0	1.64	2.77	2.37
50-59	0.9	49.5	24.8	24.8	0.0	100.0	1.80	2.86	2.38
60+	3.8	27.4	41.4	27.4	0.0	100.0	2.06	2.80	2.88
<b>Total</b>	6.4	45.3	30.2	18.1	0.0	100.0	1.65	2.74	2.41

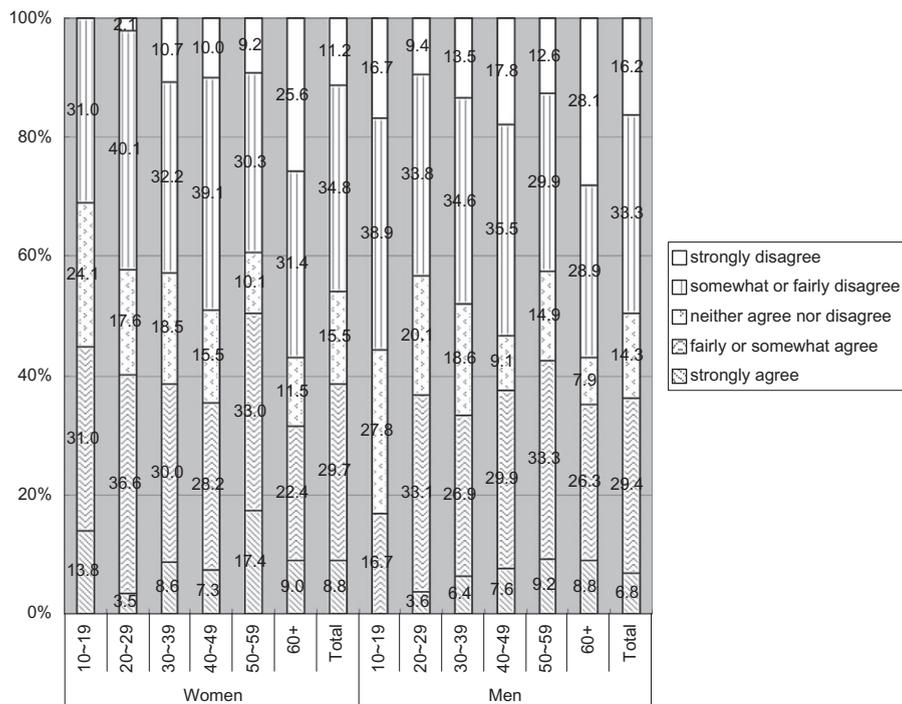
daughters had to be sacrificed by (illegal) abortions. This simultaneously pragmatic and patriarchal behaviour is directly manifested by an extremely unbalanced sex ratio, in particular, among higher-order births.<sup>19</sup> Their son preference seems to manifest a *will to parenthood*, which, under the patriarchal orders in family and society, is tantamount to a Nietzschean 'will to power' (Nietzsche [1901] 1968). In an *unfortunately fortunate* development of the post-financial crisis era, however, the swift deindustrialization, radical labour market restructuring, and widespread un(der)employment of young people has tended to negate men's socioeconomic advantages, thus helping to dilute South Koreans' son preference.

It is critical to acknowledge that South Korean women's extremely low levels of desired and actual fertility have not been accompanied, or facilitated, by any noticeable increase in childless marriages. Almost all South Korean women still intend to marry, and their marriages are rarely without children (even though it is usually limited to rearing only one). Childless marriage may readily be regarded as a symptom of (subjective) individualization in the South Korean context, but it has not become a significant social trend yet.

### 3.5. Rampant but covert divorces

The widening divergence between family norms and the realities of family life in South Korean society is perhaps most strikingly illustrated by the explosive increase in the number of divorces despite the surprisingly enduring anti-divorce attitude of women (and men). Since the economic crisis of the late 1990s, South Korea has rapidly caught up with Western societies in the 'crude divorce rate', and now stands second only to those liberal societies in which divorce has a fundamentally different meaning as an active individual choice.<sup>20</sup> Despite such a huge increase in divorces across generations and classes, South Koreans' intense moral uneasiness about divorce has remained largely intact. When asked whether divorce is the best solution for an unworkable marriage (see Figure VI), South Korean women (and men) in their twenties to forties

**Figure VI:** South Koreans' responses to 'Divorce is best when marriage can't be worked out'



and in their sixties and over were more likely to disagree than agree. Women in their fifties and under twenty were more likely to agree than disagree.<sup>21</sup> In our separate analysis, most of the divorced women did not disqualify their decisions or experiences in retrospect (whereas their male counterparts were less content with such decisions or experiences). Nevertheless, the social stigma attached to divorcees are still formidable, inducing many newly weds to enter marriage without filing the nuptial documentation with the state until their marriages prove sustainable. On top of such cultural discrimination, most female divorcees have to confront chronic material hardship in the gender-discriminatory economy, which usually necessitates their financial dependence on aged parents. Divorcees, popularly called 'returned singles' (*dolsing*), often return to their parental families, instead of becoming liberated individualists.

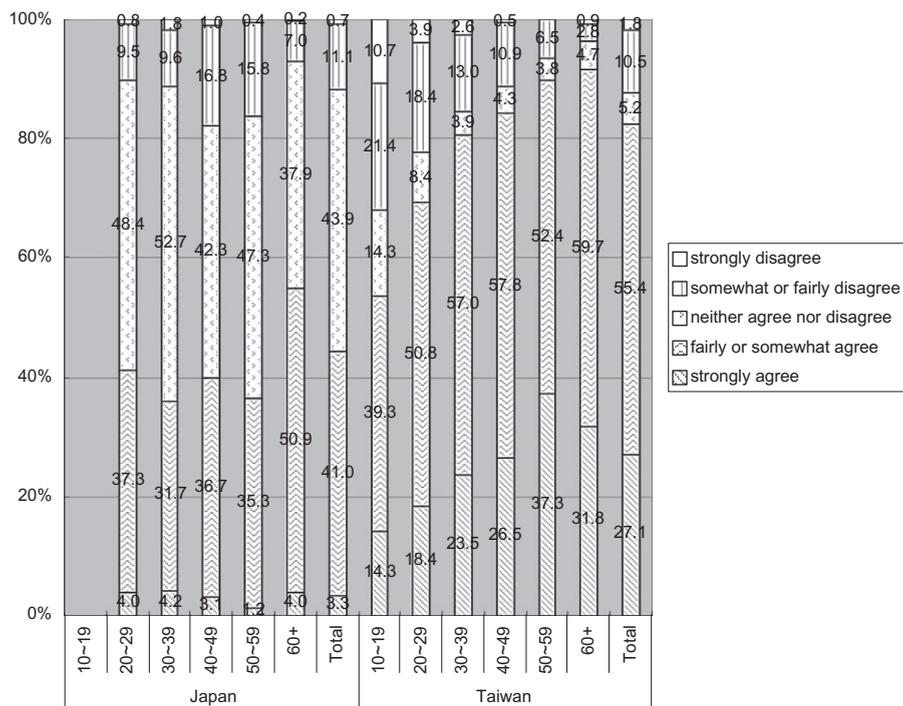
#### 4. Individualization without individualism as an East Asian trend

East Asia is often conceived as a homogeneous cultural region due to the very long historical exposure of societies here to common civilizational elements such as Confucianism, Chinese statecraft, etc. However, numerous scholarly

observations have instead revealed mutually different patterns of traditional family forms and relations in Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Interestingly, it is during the modern and late (second) modern era that these societies have shown similar patterns of family forms and relations and, as discussed here, common trends of defamiliation and (risk-averse) individualization. At the core of such similarities is the gendered nature of their family structures and ideologies that reflect modern and second modern social forces as much as cultural traditions. In particular, the compressed nature of (capitalist) modernity and second modernity in the three countries is intricately enmeshed with the simultaneously subservient and masterminding status of women in the highly family-centered systems of political economy, social care, educational competition, etc. In the same vein, women's defamiliation and risk-averse individualization as a practical – not ideational – reaction to the social burdens and risks emanating from compressed modernity and second modernity are also commonly observed in the three countries. As a result, women in Korea, Japan, and Taiwan have commonly been held responsible for spreading marriage deferral, declining fertility, and increasing divorce, all at staggering levels, regardless of the clear fact that they still show a strong subjective attachment to conventional, if not always traditional, familial norms and values. Interestingly, these familial norms and values are what most critically distinguish the three countries from each other. We will briefly show in the following section that individualization without individualism in (capitalist) East Asian societies is a social process that simultaneously homogenizes and dissimilates the region.

In Figure VII, while both Japanese and Taiwanese women, like South Korean women, were more likely to prioritize family welfare over individual welfare, the intensity of Taiwanese women's family-centeredness was much stronger than that of Japanese women (and slightly stronger than that of South Korean women, as shown in Figure I). In fact, nearly half of Japanese women in their twenties, thirties and fifties were simply ambivalent about this question. When asked whether divorce should be avoided until all children had grown up (in Figure VIII), a clear majority of Taiwanese women in all age groups except those aged 60 or over were opposed to this norm (or idea). By contrast, a large majority of Japanese women were divided between ambivalence and agreement to the same norm. It has already been observed (in Figure II) that South Korean women showed clear intergenerational contrasts in this regard, with older women agreeing to this norm more and younger ones refuting it more. Looking at the possible happiness arising from marriage in Figure IX, a not-so-ambiguous majority of Japanese women across all age groups were simply ambivalent about it. Taiwanese women were most pessimistic about the possibility of a happy marriage in the region whereas South Korean women, as earlier shown in Table III, were largely optimistic about this possibility.

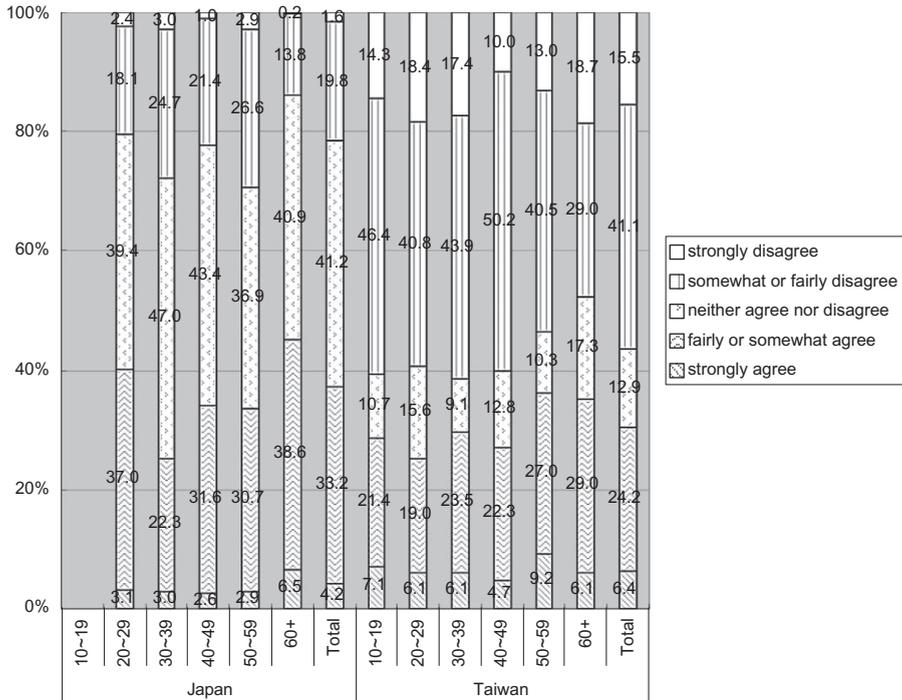
**Figure VII:** Japanese and Taiwanese women's responses to 'Must put familial welfare before one's own'



To conclude, the evidence above unfailingly indicates that Japanese, Taiwanese, and South Korean women remain *differently family-centered* despite – or, more correctly, because of – their common experience of individualization without individualism. Taiwanese women are most consciously family-centered, but become quite liberal when it comes to individual rights. Japanese women are most ambivalently (or most cautiously) family-centered, but tend to place family concerns before individual interests. South Korean women are most optimistically family-centered, but marked intergenerational differences make it difficult to generalize or predict the overall nature of their familial devotion. In spite of these contrasts in the individual-family relations as perceived by Japanese, Taiwanese, and South Korea women, the overall patriarchal structure of family life seems to have remained common to all these societies. It appears that patriarchy, albeit *in much mitigated and pragmatically modified forms*, continues to survive the powerful forces of second modernity in the East Asian context.

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**Figure VIII:** Japanese and Taiwanese women's responses to 'Should not divorce until children grow up'



**Notes**

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1. In ordinary language, the word, 'individualizer' is quite rarely used, but not necessarily a neologism. Its common dictionary meaning, which is also adopted in this article, is 'one who individualizes'.

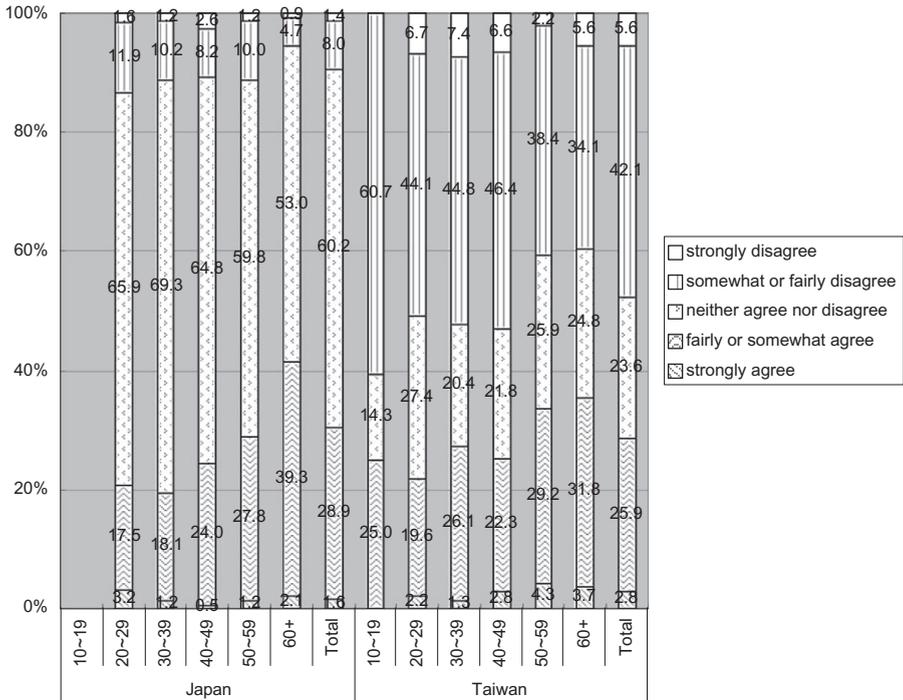
2. To the extent that women's individualization ramifies the weakening of family relations and functions (or the destabilization of family-dependent social reproduction), it also tends to become a political concern.

3. Some authors use the term 'individuation' to denote similar trends (e.g., Lash 1990), but I prefer to more precisely categorize different types of individualization by adding individually discernable adjectives.

4. Beck's (Beck and Grande 2009) emphasis on individualization as a main symptom of second modernity seems to most closely correspond to reconstructive individualization.

5. While it is beyond the scope of the current paper, nomadist individualization has been closely associated with the thundering process of informatization – in

**Figure IX:** Japanese and Taiwanese women's responses to 'Married women are happier than unmarried ones'



particular, with the breathtaking rise and expansion of cyberspace. As South Korea has been spearheading informatization, its nomadist individualization trend has been critically facilitated in cyberspace (Choi, Choi and Bae 2007).

6. Broadly speaking, demographic individualization also comprises the trend of individualization without individualism discussed in this paper, but it does not necessarily involve complex familial social dynamics as are observed in defamiliation and risk-averse individualization.

7. While avoiding neologism is always desirable, we consider it a bit indispensable to use the concept of *defamiliation* in systematically delineating people's increasingly individual-based life that, however, is predicated upon their continuing subjective attachment to family.

8. I wish to thank Professor Asato Wako of Kyoto University for inducing me to think this way.

9. However, it was also an instance of institutionalized familism because people were strongly encouraged to earnestly and wisely care for their children.

10. For the latter perspective, see Kim (2003).

11. I characterize the social policy paradigm of the South Korean (developmental) state as *developmental liberalism* in that its liberal social policies and programmes have been tightly enmeshed with its excessive developmental orientation (Chang 2010c). The developmental liberal state did everything to redefine social policy – or, for that matter, social citizenship – in terms of private responsibilities for mutual support and protection. Families have been summoned in order to meet various public necessities in social reproduction (Chang 1997). The developmental liberal state somewhat resembled the early modern liberal state of the West in articulating various social problems accompanying

industrial capitalism as individual and familial responsibilities and in morally regimenting individuals and families to cultivate human qualities and attitudes suitable for industrial work and life (cf. Donzelot 1979). In doing so, the South Korean state was equipped with a distinct advantage of Confucian familial culture.

12. See Beck (1999), Beck and Grande (2010), etc. Beck disputes 'methodological nationalism' in social theory and analysis and instead advocates 'methodological cosmopolitanism' in order to reflect international and global processes by which the nature of modernity in late-modernizing societies is critically determined.

13. For instance, South Korea is now the world's foremost information society as manifested in terms of its global competitiveness in ICT industry, its most widespread access to internet and mobile communication, etc. Its industrial restructuring and respatialization have been astonishingly swift, so that the national economy is now governed overwhelmingly by high-end technological industries whereas job-supplying industries have been heavily relocated to China, Vietnam, etc. Its exposure to experimental sciences and technologies both in industrial production and everyday personal life is seemingly unconstrained. Its world record-breaking pace of population aging has resulted in elderly people's rampant poverty and social alienation and in widespread familial conflicts concerning care provision. Its labour market liberalization ('flexibilization') has been incomparably radical as measured in terms of the society-wide dominance of transitory and casual employment. Its financialization has been staggering in terms of an instant portfolio domination of major domestic industries by global capital, the snowballing debts of both the state and grassroots households, etc.

14. As of 2005, few non-regular employees were covered by national pension (32.8%), health insurance (33.4%), unemployment insurance (30.7%), retirement allowance (19.6%), bonus (17.5%), extra-hour surpayment (14.6%), paid vacation (15.9%), etc., whereas most regular

employees enjoyed such welfare and labour benefits (Yoon et al. 2005).

15. The so-called 'candlelight protests' staged over a few months in 2008 once heightened hope for revitalized civil activism, but fell short of rekindling politically organized causes for progressive goals. See Amnesty International (2008), *Policing the Candlelight Protests in South Korea*.

16. Interestingly, according to numerous recent media reports, the American economic crisis since 2008 has led to an analogous trend that many adult children, unable to find jobs after graduating from colleges, return home to stay with their parents.

17. This point was brought about both by a BJS reviewer and during a seminar at Seoul National University. We are thankful because it reminded us of a need to clarify our substantive focus.

18. According to our data, the percentages of never married women aged 30 to 34 and aged 35–39 were 19.8 and 3.6 for South Korea, 25.8 and 15.8 for Japan, and 25.7 and 12.0 for Taiwan.

19. According to official data compiled by the National Statistical Office, the sex ratio of third or further births was 180.2 in 1995, 143.9 in 2000, and 128.2 in 2005. The sex ratio of second births in the corresponding years was 111.7, 107.4, and 106.4.

20. According to official data compiled by the National Statistical Office, the crude divorce rate (number of divorce cases per thousand people) increased from 0.6 in 1980 to 1.1 in 1990, 1.5 in 1995, 2.5 in 2000, 3.5 in 2003, and then declined to 2.6 in 2005 (National Statistical Office 2002–6 a, b).

21. The relative acceptance of divorce by women in their fifties – constituting what is popularly called *hwanghon ihon* (dusk divorce) – is directly linked to the observation presented above concerning the presence of young children as a deterrence to divorce (see Figure II). With their children now grown up, women in their fifties seem to have more courageously considered divorce. In this respect, individualization is not necessarily a young generation's exclusive cultural privilege.

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