Gender and Family in East Asia

Edited by
Siumi Maria Tam, Wai Ching
Angela Wong, and Danning Wang

ROUTLEDGE

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The on-going reconfiguration of geo-political and economic forces across the globe has created a new institutional and moral environment for East Asian family life and gender dynamics. Indeed, modernisation in East Asia has brought about increases in women's education levels and participation in the labour force, a delay in marriage age, lower birth rates, and smaller family size. And yet, despite the process of modernization, traditional systems such as Confucianism and patriarchal rules continue to shape gender politics and family relationships in East Asia.

This book examines gender politics and family culture in East Asia in light of both the overwhelming changes that modernization and globalization have brought to the region, and the structural restrictions that women in East Asian societies continue to face in their daily lives. Across three sections, the contributors to this volume focus on marriage and motherhood, religion and family, and migration. In doing so, they reveal how actions and decisions implemented by the state trigger changes in gender and family at the local level, the impact of increasing internal and transnational migration on East Asian culture, and how religion interweaves with the state in shaping gender dynamics and daily life within the family.

With case studies from across the region, including South Korea, Japan, mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, this book will be of great interest to students and scholars of Asian studies, gender studies, anthropology, sociology and social policy.

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Contents

Introduction

Gender and family in East Asia

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By now it is widely acknowledged that modernization manifested itself differently in East Asian societies than in the West (Rofel 1999; Jackson *et al.* 2008; Yan 2010a; Beck and Beck-Gernshein 2003). There were undeniably superficial similarities in modernity's effects on certain social phenomena in both East Asian and Western cultures. Just as the West did, East Asia experienced increases in women's education levels and rate of participation in the labor force, a delay in marriage age, lower birth rates, and smaller family size. However, in East Asian societies these phenomena were actually shaped by different local forces and culturally specific contexts. Modernization in East Asia was the product of a continuous tension between the local culture's efforts to model itself after Western modernity and its deliberate intent to establish its own identity, independent of Western influence. In understanding East Asian modernity, the social consequences of what Western scholars have characterized as the results of globalization and flexible accumulation of capital must be examined through a different cultural lens. Western scholars tend to emphasize the great value modernism places on individuality and the power of this newly realized individualism to transform intimate relationships in such a way that the patriarchal tradition comes to an end, opening a pathway toward a post-modern and post-traditionalist society (Giddens 1991; Castells 1997; Bauman 2001; Beck 1992). East Asian scholars, on the other hand, are more concerned with how various players in the modernization process have utilized and re-created the concept of "tradition" to cope with rapidly changing political and economic realities.

Two decades before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, most societies in East Asia had already begun to benefit from the expansion of the international economy that accompanied the rise of global capitalism. With Japan's economy surging in the 1980s to become the second largest in the world, other East Asian nations, specifically South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, quickly adopted an export-oriented industrial base to take advantage of the opportunities emerging as a result of a worldwide reorganization of the division of labor. When Deng Xiaoping opened China's doors, China's entry into international commerce undeniably added to the region's economic and political weight. In the realms of taxation, land development, labor management, and welfare policy,

East Asian governments encouraged export-oriented industries as a means of growing their economies. Such effective administrative restructuring greatly facilitated the region's incorporation into the global economy. However, it simultaneously exposed the peoples of East Asia to the fluctuations of a global economy governed by Western financial powers, with varying effects on their daily lives and standards of living.

The ongoing re-configuration of geo-political and economic forces across the globe created a new institutional and moral environment for East Asian family life and gender dynamics. It further directed the trajectory of change in both the domestic and public domains. What has surprised observers of the East Asian modernization process is that, instead of fading out of the "modern world," traditional systems, such as Confucianism and its patriarchal rules, continued to shape gender politics and family relationships. Both Korean and Japanese corporations adopted Confucian hierarchical rules in managing their transnational business ventures. Small Taiwanese businesses and entrepreneurs relied on long-held family traditions to operate on a daily basis. After years of denigrating Confucian ideology, especially during the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government revived the principles of Confucianism to aid in its efforts to establish a harmonious society. Even Hong Kong, the most Westernized society in the region due to its long history as a British colony, turned to Confucianism in constructing its post-1997 national identity.

How do we understand this East/West disparity in experiences of modernity? At the discursive level, if Eastern discourse, at the state level in particular, deviates so radically from the neo-liberalist discourse of the West, what happens at the practical level? In addition, what is the impact, on a daily basis, on family and gender relationships?

The second modernity and institutional individualization

In an effort to replace the deconstructive postmodernist social theories, a group of European scholars started to pay attention to the role of the institution in the current cycle of modernity which they dubbed "second modernity" or "reflexive modernity." To these European scholars, the neo-liberalist effort to emphasize individual choice, agency, responsibility, and do-it-yourself biography is actually a paradoxical result of capitalism in the nations with sizeable "welfare states" through which significant numbers of individuals have come to depend on contributions and assistance from institutional forces in order to survive in a perilous society. In order to push these individuals away from the welfare system, neo-liberal slogans and propaganda focus on the power of individual agency and encourage a do-it-yourself approach to almost everything. In this case, therefore, any examination of the individualization process should be contextualized within an institutional framework by understanding the tensions between the increasing demands for individuality, choice, and freedom being imposed on individuals on one hand, and the complex and unavoidable dependence of the same individual on social institutions on the other (Yan 2010a).

It remains a question whether this approach to the Western European process of individualization can be applied to East Asia. With the element of the welfare state absent from most East Asian countries and the belief in social and political democracy still under severe contestation throughout the region, how can we understand the continuous tension between the individual and the institution? Meanwhile, this is a region in which an unequal family culture based on Confucianism is deeply embedded in institutional discourse. The pursuit of personal freedom, choice, and individuality in East Asia has been much more constrained than in the West. In other words, the traditional family rules and practices that are built-in in the state and social institutions have returned once again to regulate the same group of people. In this scenario, what can the individual do? Will individual agency be able to confront these intensified social forces, or will the individual inevitably return to the traditional family and reconfirm its hierarchal system? Besides the state, the labor market, and the education system, what other social institutions contribute to sustaining these differing individualization processes?

In his detailed review of the institutional individualization theory, which is based on Western experience, Yan Yunxiang (2010a) identifies four major steps in the individualization process that involved both the individual and institutional forces in accomplishing a social result. The first step is disembedment. Individuals become disembedded from traditional social constraints, including family, kinship, community, and social class. Second, through a new set of social institutions, such as the education system, the labor market, and state regulations, disembedded individuals learn how to be "proactive and self-determining individuals who must take full responsibility for their own problems and develop a reflexive self" (Yan 2010a: 4). Third, individuals must rely on social guidelines and regulations to construct their own biographies and thus "they end up with a life of individual conformity" (Yan 2010a: 4). Finally, the belief in cultural democratization – a process of internalizing democratic culture – incorporates all of the above-mentioned processes, and a citizenship under which individuals have equal entitlement to institutional benefits is created.

When Yan Yunxiang applied this theoretical tool to an analysis of the rise of individualism in China, he found that after individuals are disembedded from conventional family/kinship constraints, the family interestingly remains a key resource for them, and the collective (be it the family or the lineage organization) remains to designate individual choice by way of tradition. People also learn how to create their individual biographies by attending to their opportunistic concerns about maintaining an extremely flexible relationship with the collective, whether it be the extended family or the socialist work unit (Yan 2009, 2010a, 2010b). This unique phenomenon involving individuals in and out of the collective led Yan to conclude that the individualization process in China includes features from pre-modern, modern, and post-modern times. If this is the reality of China, we would like to know what has happened in East Asia as a whole.

Gender and family studies in East Asia

The general relevance of this volume is in the domain of the transformation of family structure worldwide. With the accumulation of global wealth in the post-industrial/post-modern world, the adoption of new, more flexible methods of labor management has shattered the traditional family structure and up-ended long-held notions about the nature of conjugal relationships. However, whether this trend is universal and whether this framework can be applied to a study of family, gender, and sexuality throughout East Asia remains uncertain. For example, even in relatively recent times, public discourse about sexuality has been non-existent in this region. In mainland China, where state policy directly regulates human reproduction, the cultural construction of sexuality remains conservative and patriarchal, with little alternative for social transition. China's marriage rate remains high, and parental pressure continues to make marriage practically compulsory for members of the younger generation. East Asia is still that "imaginative geography" to which single males from more "developed" regions frequently turn when they search for traditionally feminine and submissive brides. Ideologically, when East Asia negotiated its own identity in response to modernization and the imposition of Western hegemony, it turned to traditional patriarchy in its search for cultural power. Such internal contradictions and paradoxes have worked intensively toward shaping daily life in East Asia. The family as a culture mechanism, structure, and symbol has persisted as the dominant force in determining the experience of gender in contemporary East Asian society.

There are growing scholarly interests recently in both the macro and micro perspectives that demonstrate such prevalence of conventional gender and family cultures in East Asia. Stella R. Quah's (2008) volume, *Families in Asia*, is a good example. It provides a bird's-eye view of family trends in China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippine, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Using demographic data and sociological analysis, Quah demonstrates how people in Asia "knew quietly in their hearts how precious their families were" (2008: 161). After years of war and social turmoil, people in this region treasure their family lives. Marriage remains a crucial aspect of most people's lives; parenthood is still a defining moment in life and people want to give their best to their children. Kinship bonds may have been strained by increasing migrant mobility and rising divorce rates, but judging by the presence of grandparents in East Asian households, extended families are definitely not rare in the region. Economic development and political ideology are identified as two of the "most unrelenting external factors" that have shaped family lives in the region (2008: 162). The double burden of family and wage work generates tremendous pressure on double-income couples. Quah's book further locates its comparative perspective in an examination of government policies regarding families under stress and helping dual-income families manage the double burden. However, Quah has not answered the question of why many communities in the region are reluctant to face acute issues such as the needs of

AIDS patients and their families, and of why policy-makers and the larger society shy away from really understanding the nature of drug addiction and domestic violence. Indeed, the absence of in-depth ethnographic data and a holistic analysis of the region's family and gender cultures and their impact upon the individual have prevented the discussion from going beyond certain structural constraints.

One area that has been sorely lacking in the study of East Asia is the diversity of sexualities and gender subjectivities. A heterosexual discursive framework prevails in the region, and the recognition of sexual diversity barely exists. The general attitude toward sexual freedom remains repressive, if not downright hostile. As the feminist and sexual liberation movements strike at the heart of traditional Asian values, they are often seen as unwelcome Western imports. At the same time, homosexuality challenges the foundations of the patriarchal family. In many East Asian societies, gays and lesbians are still treated as sick and perverted. In general, economic factors continue to play an essential part in the formation and development of social and/or intimate relationships. Sex roles within marriage tend to suppress sexual agency or subjectivity on the part of wives who are expected to conform to the ideal type of the "good woman." Women in the region are still struggling against great constraints when they search for sexual freedom. The documentation of women's sexual lives in this region is considered radical, and often courageous. Even unconventional sexual behavior is marked by the internalization of traditional values, and is governed by the framework of the everyday and the conventional, straddling the fine line between respectability and disreputability.

Unfortunately, the region is becoming the victim of its own conservative cultural structures. The perceived lack of an alternative has hindered the academic study of sexual behavior in the region. For the same reason, the de-stigmatization of sex work has proven impossible, even though prostitution continues to flourish in the name of tourism, and business practices are often facilitated through sexualized leisure. In order to overcome such obstacles, scholarly efforts seek to transcend the public versus private dichotomy in their examination of women's domestic responsibilities at work, re-conceptualizing prostitution as work and understanding domestic workers as subject to sexual objectification. In Jackson et al.'s (2008) volume, which focuses on the issue of work, the boundaries between respectable office workers and disreputable sex workers have become blurred. The aesthetic and emotional labor performed by sex workers is seen to parallel other forms of work performed in the service sector. The line between modern, cosmopolitan, positive self-identity and the negative consequences of working in the sex trade becomes hard to locate.

In addition to the construct of work, legitimate public articulations of personal topics also rely on the concept of "science" to penetrate the conservative constraints. Evelyne Micollier's (2004) volume presses further into the area of sexual stigma by addressing the cultural construction of sexuality in the era of HIV/AIDS. The need to control sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), particularly HIV/AIDS, has legitimized sex education and the public dissemination of

information about sex and contraception, even as the AIDS pandemic imposes new social stigmas and repressive practices upon those populations particularly vulnerable to the virus due to their sexual proclivities. For example, in the case of China, the only East Asian country with a state agenda geared toward regulating sexual behavior in the form of family planning policy, regulating prostitution as a means of controlling STDs and HIV/AIDS has fueled the state's corrective tone in its promulgation of related policies.

Cross-border marriage is definitely the place for us to understand the impact of this conservative culture from a global perspective, and recent studies reveal the negative consequences of these social and cultural constraints and restrictions. In her recent work, Nicole Constable (2005) deals with how cross-border marriages are linked to gendered mobility and global hypergamy. Her work reveals that transnational migration, as in the case of global marriage-scapes, is always mediated by the interplay of class, culture, gender, nationality, and ethnicity. In such cases, the hierarchical world system overlaps with the "gendered geographies of power" and facilitates the persistence of the cultural idea of women having to marry up. Imagination, desire, and the personal ambition to improve one's quality of life via marrying into a more socio-economically prosperous region has enabled the global business of mail-order brides to quickly develop through the emigration of women from less-developed peripheral areas to more advanced core regions. Unfortunately, when middle-class women from less-developed areas marry working-class spouses in core areas, the internal paradoxes faced by both partners can create insurmountable problems in family life. The wife's fantasy of a modern and liberal life clashes with the husband's expectation that he has secured a traditional and docile woman. Such cultural fractures emerging from the differences in both spouses' class background and cultural imaginings pose the greatest obstacle to successful cross-border marriages. If the geographic border is easy to cross, what cultural tools are available to repair the ruptures to the boundaries in people's minds that have been created in the enculturation process?

Not surprisingly, women in these cross-border marriages are actively utilizing the power of their culture to improve their quality of life. Their experiences also provide a vivid demonstration of how the world system works on a daily basis among and for women in developing and under-developed regions. Unfortunately, while studies such as Constable's have successfully revealed couples' daily interactions at the individual level, they have entirely ignored the structural analysis of family life in the countries and regions they are examining. Beyond the lives of the relatively small proportion of the populations of these countries who engage in cross-cultural marriage, most aspects of family life as lived in these regions remain unaddressed.

The relation between gender and modernity is a prevalent concern in the East. Hayami *et al.*'s (2003) volume is a remarkable review of this debate, asking why societies in Asia and the Pacific took a different position historically and theoretically on gender issues than those in the West. Addressing issues in a wide range of societies, covering Australia, India, Indonesia, Thailand, and Japan, the