

Reviews: Of families and modernities

Kyung-Sup Chang,

South Korea under Compressed Modernity: Familial Political Economy in Transition,
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There are only few countries in the world today that could not, in one way or another, be described as ‘modern’ and even fewer that would reject the aspiration to ‘become modern’ altogether. That does not mean that early modernization theories which often presumed a global convergence towards the western institutional model are now finally vindicated. Global modernity entails a lot of variation and difference as well as inequality, and there is no reason to expect sweeping homogenization in the future.

Considering the striking differences between modernization processes in Europe and elsewhere, there are not only ‘multiple modernities’, as Shmuel Eisenstadt and others have pointed out, but also multiple modernizations. Bearing that in mind, Chang develops and employs the concept of ‘compressed modernity’ to characterize the specific features of modernization in South Korea. The label highlights the fact that the modernization process in South Korea (and in other countries) has been much more rapid than, for instance, in Europe. South Korea’s modernization process has been ‘abridged’ or ‘condensed’ – one that has taken place in a relatively short period of time and mainly in the urban centres. In addition, the resulting modernization is ‘compressed’ or ‘complicated’ by what Ernst Bloch called the ‘simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’, i.e. in this case the ‘intense competition, collision, disjointing, articulation, and compounding’ of indigenous and foreign elements on the one hand and traditional and modern ones on the other (pp. 6–7). Rather than transforming existing institutions and social relationships into a new coherent social configuration, compressed modernity therefore appears to be ‘unsystematic’.

Being rooted in a modernization framework, the model reminds one of previous attempts to deal with uneven forms of modernization, for instance Rueschemeyer’s notion of ‘partial modernization’ or Riggs’s ‘prismatic society’. Chang’s approach differs by focusing on the role and transformation of the family. The unevenness of

development and the juxtaposition of 'modern' and 'traditional' elements that are often attributed to late modernization also feature prominently in Chang's account of South Korean family ideologies: Confucian ideas coexist with affectionate interpretations of family life but also with decidedly instrumental and individualistic ones, resulting in what he dubs an 'accidental pluralism'.

However, he does not only provide a history and sociology of the family under the special conditions of 'compressed modernity'. Chang's story has two sides: on the one hand, he investigates how families in South Korea have been affected by the typical social effects of modernization, such as increasing participation of women in the labour market, urbanization and individualization. On the other hand, he seeks to show that the significance of family patterns and ideologies extends beyond the private realm into education, politics and the economy. Thus, family patterns in South Korea are not just a reflection of modernity but shape the modernization process and its results. In many cases those results are not quite as straightforward as too linear notions of modernization would lead one to expect.

A particularly interesting feature concerns the role of the state. Being a prime example of the active and goal-oriented 'developmental state', the South Korean state contributed to the changes in family structures in a rather unexpected way: by not actively addressing them. Based on a 'unique marriage between Confucian ideology and functionalist theory of the nuclear family' (p. 66), the state failed to accept the responsibility to provide welfare services that had formerly been embedded in the extended family. Instead, it sought to foster self-support of families and only committed itself to minimal welfare, thereby putting South Korean families into often fragile conditions. The observed downsides of 'family nucleation' were then attributed to a lack of intra-familial solidarity and morality – rather than to the overburdening of families with the side-effects of rapid industrialization. Families and their social and financial resources have also buttressed rapid modernization in the educational realm. The more careers became dependent on a high level of formal education, the more families had to invest in the education of their offspring. Chang illustrates vividly how the 'social investment family' supported educational modernization 'by the unlimited financial and psychological investment of private families in their children's schooling' (p. 36). To be sure, the South Korean state did not neglect public education. Acknowledging the pivotal role of formal education, the state made sure that high-quality training was available. However, maintaining high standards also went along with rigorous selection at the stage of college admissions, whose regulation and reform therefore has become a prime site of educational policy.

In addition to education- and work-related functions of the family and the strains produced by swift industrialization and urbanization, Chang identifies 'familial capitalism' as another and rather unique feature of South Korea's modernization. He reconstructs the often emphasized role of the large industry conglomerates (*chaebols*) – such as Samsung, Hyundai or Daewoo – as a 'system of familial control over corporate ownership and management' (p. 104). At its core is a governance system oriented around family-based entrepreneurs that allows for the control of a large number of affiliated firms with relatively small amounts of capital. Relying on familial ties to exert control

beyond formal ownership and shareholding entitlements, conglomerate heads are regularly able to align individual corporate policies with the group's interests. Crucial to the stability of such a system is the way in which succession is organized. It requires the grooming of an heir within the organizational network and his (or her) installation against possible resistance and sometimes also against legal restrictions. The necessary leeway from external controls (which aim to prevent intergenerational transfers) is secured by familial connections between the business elite and its political and bureaucratic counterparts.

The entanglement of familial bonds and economic rationality therefore is another example of the ambivalent coexistence of traditional and modern elements that characterizes the condition of 'compressed modernity'. Chang regards the resulting social arrangement not only as unbalanced but also as unstable. All of the mentioned areas exhibit some signs of crisis. The prevalence of familial values often degenerates into a sort of 'familial egoism'; younger people postpone marriage or shun it altogether; educational pressures force families to send their children abroad; and the 'familial capitalism' is criticized by international organizations that insist on more transparency. It seems that the family is drawn on by too many other sectors of society to fulfil its own function: to socialize and take care of individuals as such.

With this diagnosis, Chang presents a fresh and instructive perspective on modernity in South Korea. Yet it is not altogether clear to what extent its features are specific to South Korea. Similar developments, for instance the strain put on families by educational demands and the labour market, can be observed in other fast-developing countries but also in the West. It would have been interesting to learn more about the application of the concept of 'compressed modernity' in comparative analyses. That includes the question of how the increasing entanglement of modernization processes worldwide also affects South Korea. The fact that some of its elements, such as 'familial capitalism', are increasingly under pressure may point to the fact that 'compressed modernity' as a particular path of development remains bound up with the modern universalisms of global models and expectations.

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