

# A Study of the Korean Family Interactions

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## I. Introduction

The Koreans are fairly conservative in their thoughts, whose tradition, culture, philosophy, values, and standards find their foundation mainly in Buddhism and Confucianism. These two religions built nests in Korea in A.D. 372, the Koguryo dynasty. Buddhism was made the national religion in A.D. 676, the Silla dynasty, and again in A.D. 918, the Koryo dynasty; Confucianism the national philosophy in A.D. 1392, the Yi dynasty. (Lee, gi-baik, 1973) Korean culture, philosophy, values, standards of Korean family life style and all kinds of personal interactions have been greatly influenced by Confucianism since.

Originally Confucius was a teacher of his private school in China, whose major concern was how to successfully live an ethical life. He enumerated five virtues for an ethical life: Filial Piety to one's parents, Loyalty to one's king, Confidence to one's friends, Righteousness to one's people and Courage in battles.

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The filial piety has seen some other relevant virtues stem from itself, which are Ancestor Worship usually expressed in the ancestral rituals, Respect and Obedience to the elders including teachers, and so on. As for the virtue of obedience to the parents, one was supposed to obey one's parents almost unconditionally, no matter whether their commands were right or wrong. One's sole concern was to make one's parents happy. The virtue of obedience, in the long run, has led children to live an ethically good life, by letting them to follow the good pieces of advice of their parents.

Besides those virtues mentioned above, man was supposed to have himself equipped with tolerance; woman with modesty, humility and patience.

This paper is to review what ethics with filial piety as the central point is like in Korea and how the traditional family interactions between parents and children, grandparents and parents, and grandparents and grandchildren are in Korea.

## II. Procedures

### 1. Korean Family System

The structural-functional analysis of the Korean traditional family indicates that it had been patriarchal, lineal and extended family till the 1950's. After that time, it has seen the last characteristic slipping away gradually. The extended family has found itself replaced by the three generation family.

Burgess (1975) keeps historical track of how the larger extended patriarchal family changed into the small nuclear form of democratic family, showing the differences between the two. The latter is found also in Korean society.

1. The patriarchal family is authoritarian and autocratic, with power vested in the head of the family and with the subordination of his wife, sons, their wives and children, and his unmarried daughter to his authority. The democratic family is based upon an equality of husband and wife, with consensus in making decisions and with increasing participation by children as they grow older.
2. In the patriarchal family, marriage is arranged by the parents, with emphasize on prudence, on economic and social status, and on adjustment of son-in-law or daughter-in-law to the family group. In the small democratic family, selection of a marriage partners is in the hands of young people, and choice is on the basis of affection and personality adjustment to each other.

3. compliance with duty and the following of tradition are major expectations of the patriarchal family, while the objective of the small democratic family are the achievement of happiness and personal growth of the individuals. (Eshleman, 1975, pp.125-126)

Korea was one of the countries where marriage was arranged by the parents. They screened the prospective spouse of their child, taking the other party's racial, lineal, social, economic and birth-order background. In other words, the spouse's family background was more important than the concerned party himself. The final decision in choosing the prospective spouse is up to father or grandfather, the head of a family. The honour of one's family or family clan was cherished more than one's own life. One's life and happiness used to be sacrificed for the honour of one's own life. One's life and happiness used to be sacrificed for the honour of one's family. In sacrificing some members for the whole family, a daughter was supposed to take first turn rather than a son. Traditional Korean society had premarital and extramarital sexual relationship sternly tabooed. Women's virginity was considered especially a thing as dear as life itself, and cherished for decent marriage as well as their family's honour, —one of the cardinal virtues in traditional Korea.

A family usually used to consist of three generations: grandparents, parents and children, also with the head's unmarried brothers and sisters and sometimes even the employees' family included.

A nuclear family, which is to be sustained solely for its proper member of the couple, may well leads to individualism. The individualism, in its turn, can make the family ties easily broken up as the case may be, weakening the unity of its members. On the other hand, the extended family, whose members exists for the whole family rather than their own sake, may well bring about the spirit of mutual dependence, not that of egoism. And also its unity must be so strong that it won't be easily disorganized.

## 2. The Interaction between Parents and Children

Each of Korean parents owns his or her own room more often than not. What we call *Mother's Room* is at once a sort of the family's living room and the bed room. The *Father's Room* is a sort of men's living room as well as his study. Generally fathers are rather authoritative, while mothers over-protective, in treating their children. Most of Korean mothers have breast-fed their children, and slept together with them separately from their husbands until they grow about 3 to 4 years old. A Korean child is scarcely allowed to sleep by himself or herself in the dark room. When the mother gives birth to another baby

with the elder still under age of 3 to 4, the latter sleeps into the bed of the grandparents.

Children usually prefer mother to father, in consulting about their personal matters, as the former is the symbol of authority while the latter that of love in almost every cases.

The eldest son is supposed to learn to play father's role, and the eldest daughter mother's, from the time when they are quite young. The primogenital family may well have such an early education established as a tradition, and get the eldest son burdened with heavy obligations to his parents in terms of filial piety or ancestral worship.

The daughter is supposed to learn how to manage a household from both mother and grandmother, until she is married. The women's subordinate position in Korea is revealed by this proverb-like expression: Woman is ruled by father before marriage, by husband after marriage, and by children with husband dead.

After she marries, a daughter is not to be allowed to return to her home except temporary visits, which means that, devoting herself entirely to her husband, his family and her children, she must not remind herself of the words such as divorce and remarrying.

"Women marry into their husband's families and their children, especially the son, become part of his family rather than hers. These children are raised in the social tradition of their fathers's lineage and the patrilineal kinship continuity is maintained." (Blankenship, 1976, pp. 112-121).

The successful married life of hers in her husband's home will be considered as a great honour to her own original family and an act of filial piety to her own original parents.

Children are not permitted to say, "No" to their parents or other elders, I'll say not only of his own family but also of his community, which word is considered to exist only for the elder to inhibit the younger from doing something bad ethically. So, "Yes, I will try." is what children must say. Such an almost blind obedience is one act of filial piety. There are two proverbs in Korea which shows how important a virtue the filial piety is:

Filial Piety is the source of all virtues.

A filial son makes a loyal subject.

### 3. The Interaction between Grandparents and Parents

The residence pattern of the newlyweds is msot commonly patrilocal, i.e., the bride live together with the parents of the groom, leaving her own parents. The groom, whoever wife is to move into his parent's home, is usually the eldest son of the family.

The couple of the eldest son are to live with and take care of his parents in either his house or his parents' which both the parties take for granted, -as it is the way the Koreans

have done since the long distant past when Confucianism was introduced.

It is as often as not the daughter-in-law that takes charges of house keeping, but the decision-maker remains the mother-in-law. Beside the mother-in-law, the more decisive a decision is, the elder the maker is. So rigid a hierarchial family system sometimes brings about conflicts especially between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The young ladies in particular, who have gotten conscious of human rights or something during their schooling, find it quite difficult to live smoothly with her husband's parents in such tradition of blind obedience. The husband more often than not has himself frustrated in playing the role of a coordinator between his conservative mother and his liberal wife. Father-in-law's authority is almost absolute in most major decisions of the family, whereas the daughter-in-law is supposed simply to offer her opinions.

If the eldest son's wife had no son, she would feel so guilty to her husband and his family as to persuade him to remarry or to adopt a son from as near a relative of his clan as possible. The marriage system is in general monogamous, but the lack of any male children can occasionally lead to polygamy, i.e., one husband with two wives.

The second wife, that is, a concubine, is never to get the status of real wifeness. The first wife is called "*Cho-gang-ji-cho*" which means the woman with whom the husband shared his difficulty and poverty in his early married life. She exercises her proper power and privileges over the concubine, and what is more, the husband can never divorce his first wife even if he does not love her any longer. As for the husband with a concubine accepted, the divorce is not as his disposal.

The descent of a family keeps on running through only the line of father's which is why the male child is highly preferred. This of lineage enables the family's property, tradition and the ancestral rituals to be handed down from generation to generation. Another important reason why a male child is a must is that the ancestral rituals should be stopped, which can be performed only by sons. No eldest son can avoid the obligation of performing almost as sacred an ancestral ritual as an religious ceremony.

The loyalty expected one-sidedly from the son, however, is not all there is to it in the Korean family system. Father is also burdened with his proper obligations to his children, and expected to do so many things for their sake. We can see the filial obligations balanced with the parental ones.

"These multi-generational structure of expectations makes up the fabrics of loyalties and together with the accounts of actions, the ledger of justice. The term loyalty means trust, merit, commitment, action; the ethical obligation component in loyalty is first tied to the arousal, loyalty-bound member, sense of duty, fairness and justice. Justice thus transcends

the psychology of the individual and of his partners in relationship. Justice as a multipersonal homeostatic principle with equitable reciprocity as its ideal goal. It is based on a minimally three generation content." (Nagy and Spark, 1973, pp.38-65).

It would not be wrong to say that most of Korean tradition and ethical values have been descended through Korean history to modern society.

#### 4. The Interaction between Grandparents and Grandchildren

It is in any country that grandparents love their grandchildren. The Korean grandparents, however, seem to be warmer in their love of grandchildren than those of any other country.

The Korean grandparents usually occupy their own separate room where is warmer in winter and cooler in summer than any other room. The balmy atmosphere of the room must be one lure leading the grandchildren to frequently visit their grandparents, who in addition to that cannot help liking to listen to the fairy tales and episodes of family history told in tender voice of their grandparents. The grandparents can not be more considerate of their grandchildren, even though the grandfather is still a stern figure to the father of the children. A three or four year old child could easily yield the mother's breast to a newly born baby, as he can find another shelter in his grandmother's bosom when sleeping. The grandparents are willing to take as good care of their grandchildren as if they were their own children. Sometimes children can like grandparents better than parents, as those are always of avail whenever they need while these are almost always busy doing something else. A Korean proverb says, "The water downstream will not be clear if the water upstream is muddied," which means that the elders must be careful not to commit follies the sight of which might corrupt or mislead the younger.

The Korean grandparents keep this proverb in mind so dearly as to be of great help in educating children unconsciously.

#### 5. The Kinship System

The ties of kinship in Korea is also as strong and close as in any country. Almost every family performs the ancestral sacrifice not fewer than one time in a year, on the day of which all the descendants of the ancestor (in honor of whom the day's sacrifice is performed) assemble in the performer's house, talking, drinking and eating, and listening to their glorious family history told by an elder. Usually the participants consist of the third cousins in father's lineage and the second cousins in mothers.

### III. Conclusion

The family relationships are no less face-to-face and close than those of a primeval family group, but they won't openly say, "I love you" to each other of the family members. Their relationships are based on mutual trust, human nature and intimate associations, so that they don't feel the need to express their feelings of favour all the time.

The Korean family interactions can be said to have led children to grow more dependent upon someone else, which may not be the case with a nuclear family. On the other hand, they must have children more socialized than the other family system.

Since the World War II, Korean society has been greatly influenced and changed by the Western waves, and so has the Korean family system. Therefore, what I have stated above is mainly a sort of traditional or pre-war story, even though it is written down in the present tense, —the present tense is taken only for the figurative effects.

A new family life style like that of the nuclear family system has been and will be preferred particularly among the people of the younger generation, of late. In urban areas, it is rather the side of parents that try to encourage their married children to establish their own separate families. It seems that the importance of kinship solidarity is more declining as the family relationships are getting more democratic. That is to say, the patriarchal authority of father or husband has been substantially weakened with the authoritarian relationship more democratic. Such a phenomenon is particularly true in the middle and upper urban families. In the rural areas, however, you can find the traditional Korean family life style still intact in both structural and functional terms.

If a people were to keep their tradition and culture unchanged as it has been they would have to transmit them from generation to generation solely through the three-generation family, which contains in itself the past, present and future. Many Koreans want to keep their traditional family life style, but the great waves of modern civilization has been swallowing their desire, compelling them to see their family patterns gradually being changed.

Myself personally has grown in a three generation family. Again myself personally want that family system to be sustained as it was, in the hope that that system will prevent such social problems as juvenile delinquencies, divorces and alienated old people from increasing. In addition to that, this life style would surely make people more humane and altruistic than that of the nuclear family system.

Either family system however, must have its own merits and also its own demerits. Which

one is better, or rather which one was better would be the task proper to a future historian other than us. All we can do would be simply to survey both the cases and try to find out some pieces of wisdom for a better futrue life.

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국문요약

한국 가족관계에 대한 이론적 고찰

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한국은 전통적으로 매우 보수적인 나라이다. 불교와 유교의 영향은 한국인의 생활속에 깊이 잠재하고 있으며, 특히 유교는 가족관계에 많은 영향을 미치고 있다.

유교는 하나의 생활철학, 가치관, 그리고 관습적인 면에서 가족관계에 중심을 이루고 있다해도 과언이 아닐 것이다.

한국 가족의 구조적, 기능적인 특성을 살펴보면, 한국 가족은 부계혈족을 중요시하는 직계 가족임을 알 수 있다.

따라서 가족을 이루는 중심은 부부가 아니라 부자 중심이며, 가족관계 또한 부부관계 보다는 자녀 부모 자녀관계 특히 부자관계를 중요시하는 가족특성을 지니고 있다.

본 연구에서는 한국 가족관계에서 “효”를 중심으로 한 부모, 자녀관계, 조부모와 부모의 관계, 조부모와 손자녀의 관계를 요약하였다.