

# Industrialization, Urbanization and Family Change in Korea

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## ABSTRACT

*Most analyses of the consequences of change on the family suggested that the process of urbanization and industrialization fundamentally affects the family system. This paper, however, points out that the response of the Korean family is different and that notwithstanding the trend towards the conjugal family system, urban life does not pari pasu weakened kindred solidarity.*

## ABSTRAK

*Kebanyakan analisis mengenai kesan-kesan perubahan ke atas keluarga mengemukakan bahawa proses urbanisasi dan industrilisasi meninggalkan kesan besar ke atas sistem kekeluargaan. Dalam artikel ini, penulisnya membincangkan pengalamannya di Korea di mana didapatinnya bahawa kehidupan di bandar tidak semestinya diikuti dengan perubahan kepada pertalian kekeluargaan.*

## INTRODUCTION

Since the industrial revolution, the world community has experienced an accelerated rate of rapid social change under a somewhat similar set of influences. For example, almost all societies are moving towards industrialization, although at varying speeds and from different points. Accounting for this large-scale long-term change taking place throughout the world has attracted scholars from many disciplines to a study of industrialization, urbanization, and/or modernization. In spite of this wide spread interests and numerous attempts to formulate generalizations about the processes, a number of problems relating to the nature of changes in many different societies have not been adequately resolved.

In the specific area of kinship and family change, there is recurrent interest in the effects of industrialization and urbanization on the structure and function of traditional family and on relations with kin. Concerning world trends of family change, two distinct approaches have stimulated discussion and research in the field. The first approach concentrates on the relationship between a certain family type, e.g., nuclear or conjugal family,

and its functional fitness to a modern, urban, industrial social system. The writers with this orientation tend to see gradual breakdown of large extended family and the emergence of nuclear family as a society moves towards urbanization and industrialization. The second approach emphasizes the variety of adaptations to the changing forces of industrialization and urbanization. Usually, they are more interested in identifying major variables which might account for the observed variety of adaptations than in formulating universal generalizations about world trends of family change. As to its theoretical orientation, the first approach would be identified in the milieu of convergence theory while the second would argue for divergence of social structure through modernization process.

Korea seems to present an excellent opportunity for evaluating the validity of propositions advanced by the two different approaches, as Korea has been undergoing rapid industrialization and urbanization processes since 1960. Therefore, the present paper will attempt to evaluate the two contrasting approaches in light of the data concerning familial change in Korea.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

An evaluation of the two contrasting approaches requires clarification of central issues concerning familial change. This, of course, can be done by examining implied assumptions, general theoretical background, and derived propositions with respect to each approach.

### INDUSTRIALIZATION AND FAMILY

The interrelatedness of technology and social structure has long been a subject of discussion and theorizing. Max Weber, for example, in his *General Economic Theory*, indicated his belief that the reduction in family size and strength is a direct function of industrialization. More recently, Nimkoff (1965: 346), summarizing world trends of family change, stated that while societies with different cultural histories will differ in their response to industrialization, the general direction but not the pace of change is generally the same. Sharing the opinion, Goode (1963, 1964, 1968) suggested the direction of world family change as moving towards conjugal pattern, and noted the lack of 'fit' between the extended family and industrialization. He wrote: "...where any movement toward industrialization occurs, the family system moves toward some kind of 'conjugal' pattern" (1963: 239).

The basic assumption the first approach makes is that similar set of influences will produce similar set of results. Based on this assumption, those who focus on the industrial process tend to emphasize the structural

constrains and common imperatives that the modern industrial system imposes on the economy and the social structure of industrializing nations (see Kerr et al. 1964). Thus, they argue that the industrial system demands certain organizational and institutional arrangements and only nuclear or conjugal family form is functionally appropriate for a modern industrial society (Parsons 1959). The theoretical grounds for such argument it as follows:

1. Industrialization demands that occupational role be determined more by individual skills and knowledge than by ascriptive factors; thus, family or kinship ties no longer play an important role in job recruitment. The fact that the elders can no longer control the selection of jobs of the young makes the young to become freer in choosing their jobs, spouses, and residence independent of the authority of the elders.

2. As the opportunities for geographical and social mobility on an individual level increase, individuals tend to be separated from their extended kin, further weakening the ties between extended kin.

3. Industrialization also eventually creates a system of rational, universalistic, and functionally specific social relations, subversive of the opposite systems of non-rational, particularistic, and functionally diffuse relationships which constitute the basic element of the kinship system. On these grounds, a proposition was advanced that the extended family system is functionally incompatible with a modern industrial economy and value systems and so it declines (Cho 1975: 22).

As it is clearly expressed in the above discussion, the assumed incompatibility between the extended family and industrial economy has been the basis of the argument for those who postulated the unilineal trend of family change. However, this proposition has been challenged. Singer (1968), for instance, raised a question over the validity of the assumption by demonstrating the successful adaptation of the joint family system to industrial setting in India. Bennet and Despres (1960) also showed the ways in which traditional kinship structure and principles were utilized as a means of organizing new economic and political activities among Japanese, Hindu, Philippino, and African Soga. Therefore, the assumption that industrialization demands particular social forms seems to require further scrutiny. In this respects, Manning Nash's (1967) study on the Quiche Indians of Gutemala is very suggestive. He convincingly demonstrated how a small traditional village adjusted to a new mode of production with relatively little cultural loss or social disorganization. Thus, Nash concluded the "general trends of industrialization, however, leave much room for social variation" (Ibid: 8). Nash's study is of particular importance because it controls the urbanization variable.

The prevalence of the nuclear family before and after industrialization appears to be a crucial test for the hypothesis implied in the foregoing discussion. However, a precaution must be made in determining whether

the family is a truly independent nuclear family or a temporary nuclear family. I will come back to this point later on.

#### URBANIZATION AND FAMILY

In the literature of anthropology and society, there exists numerous theoretical frameworks contrasting the social organization of small face-to-face peasant community with that of the large, densely populated urban centre. Some relevant conceptualizations are Maier's distinction between status-based and contract-based societies, Toennies' contrast between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and Redfield's concept of folk-urban continuum. All these conceptualizations have stimulated thinking among social scientists about the changes which take place when traditional societies undergo urbanization. In particular, Redfield's (1941) generalized formulation of the sequence and results of these changes is well known. He argued that peasant societies tend to change, when they come in contact with urban societies, into 'urban' type culture through a series of interdependent change, in the direction of increasing individualism, secularism, and cultural disorganization. Thus, Redfield implied the disruption of extended kin ties and extended family system in the urban societies. However, it was Louis Wirth's classic statement on urbanism as a way of life which has provided a framework for discussion on the effect of urbanization on kinship and family change: "the substitution of secondary for primary contacts, the weakening of bonds of kinship, and the declining social significance of the family, the disappearance of neighborhood, and the undermining of the traditional basis of social solidarity" (1938: 20-21).

Following Wirth's lead, students of urbanization stress certain characteristics of urban life, i.e., anonymous, atomic, and isolated, resulting from its gigantic size, density, and sociocultural heterogeneity. And they point out the incompatibility between large extended family relationship and the assumed atomistic man in the city. Therefore, there has been a widely held opinion that the nuclear family in urban area is isolated from larger kin groups (see Chekki 1973: 23; Bock et al. 1975: 31). This proposition has been under severe criticism. Conditions of urban life may encourage separate residence for each conjugal unit, but these conditions do not necessarily sever all contacts with kin. Rather, developments in communication and transportation systems may facilitate the maintenance of interaction among interrelated, but separate nuclear or conjugal households. In fact, numerous studies indicated that many families in the cities in highly industrialized societies maintain wide-kin ties (Sussman 1959; Adams 1968). Therefore, Rosenmay (1968) and Ishwaran (1959) argued that the extended family, disintegrating, is becoming more important to

the individual because of the difficulty in developing satisfying primary relationships outside of the family in urban environment.

The important issue concerning the impact of urbanization upon family, therefore, revolves around the following question: Does the nuclear family found in urban areas tend to be isolated unit relatively cut off from its extended kin network?

Thus far, two different perspectives concerning family change has been examined in terms of implied assumptions, general theoretical backgrounds, and derived propositions. The focus of the discussion has been on the so called classical nuclear family theory advanced by a series of social scientists from Durkheim (1947) to Parsons (1959). The theory assumes that the nuclear family is functionally appropriate for a modern industrial economy and the family in urban society is a relatively isolated unit. As have been indicated in the foregoing discussion, the theory has been challenged as to its general validity because numerous studies have revealed the absence of the predicted trends. Unfortunately, these studies have not contributed much to formulation of a new general theory of family change yet, because they have not always produced comparable data. Furthermore, it may be possible that the observed various adaptations are simple reflections of temporary initial changes vis-a-vis industrialization/urbanization. Therefore, more empirical data are needed on the structure and function of family undergoing change due to various industrialization and urbanization conditions.

### KOREAN FAMILY IN TRANSITION

Korea has been undergoing a rapid process of industrialization and urbanization during the past two decades or so. The population of Korea living in urban areas was 28 percent in 1960: it increased to 55 percent by 1979. Also, the turn from stagnation to rapid economic growth through industrialization has been apparent since the early sixties. For example, per capita GNP, a widely used index of economic growth, has risen to 1,242 US dollars in 1978 from 95 dollars in 1961. Rapid industrialization has been largely responsible for this growth, as the share of manufacturing sector in GNP rose from 13 percent in 1961 to 22 percent in 1971.

The present paper is aimed to examine some changes in Korean family system that are presumed to be undergoing changes due to industrialization and urbanization. Specifically, the changes in family structure will be examined in light of the classical nuclear family theory: industrialization and urbanization will undermine large traditional family, reducing them to some version of conjugal system isolated from the extended family.

To see whether the predicted trend indicated in the theory is evident, a comparison of the distribution of various family types in 1955 and in 1975

was made. At this point, it would be proper to remind that Korea had experienced an accelerated rate of rapid economic growth due to industrialization especially during the period of 1961 – 1975. Also, the twenty-year time span between 1955 and 1975 seems to be a long enough duration to find any significant change in family patterns.

As can be seen in Table 1, it appears that the Korean family is moving towards conjugal or nuclear type of family. During the twenty-year period, the proportion of the conjugal type family had increased by 8 percent whereas the proportion of the stem family had decreased by 11.2 percent. Also, a slight increase in one-person household was noted. Thus, Moore seems to be right when he said, “wherever any movement toward industrialization occurs, the family system moves toward some kind of ‘conjugal’ pattern.” However, one has to be cautious in interpreting this trend. There are some qualifications to be made in relation to the observed trend.

We should note that the conjugal family was the most prevalent type of family already in 1955. In fact, the common belief that large extended family living was predominant in traditional Korea has proven to be a myth. Even in the past nuclear families were present along with lineally-extended families. These nuclear families were the ones’ formed by younger sons, i.e., the non-heir sons, who were obliged to live separately from their

TABLE 1. Family types in Korea (1955 and 1975)

Year Type	I – Person family	Conjugal family			Stem family			Other forms of extended family (V)	Other
		I	II	Total	III	IV	Total		
1955	3.2	56	7.5	63.6	24.8	5.9	30.7	1.4	1.1
1975	6.4	67.9	3.7	71.6	15.9	3.6	19.5	3.7	2.1

Source: Choi (1980: 48)

- I. Married couples only and/or married couples with offsprings.
- II. Type I family plus unmarried relative(s) of the household head.
- III. The typical Korean stem family which is consisted of parent(s) and married eldest son and with or without unmarried siblings.
- IV. Type III family plus unmarried relative(s) of the household head.
- V. Parent(s) living with married offsprings and their children. Included in this category is the family where parent(s) living with one of the sons except the eldest son who is married.

parents upon or after their marriage. The reality of the traditional Korean society was such that it could not possibly realize the Confucian ideal of multi-generational extended family system in its entirety. Under these circumstances the basic pattern of Korean family was either stem family or conjugal type of family. Furthermore, since only one son, i.e., the eldest son, out of possibly many sons was expected to remain in the parental

home, the proportion of multi-generation extended families had to be much smaller than that of the conjugal type of families. But this does not mean that there had ever been such a thing as a nuclear family system in traditional Korea as is found in Western society. Families of procreation very seldom located themselves in a distant place from the families of orientation due to the limited geographical and occupational mobility. Very often they belonged to the same village. It was also not unusual for the younger sons to seek economic aid from their parents even after the marriage. In other words, branch families were not entirely independent of the family of orientation. There were no essential differences between parents and their younger sons in their relation with each other even after their separation (Lee 1974). Therefore, the increased prevalence of the conjugal type families alone does not fully support the notion of functional 'fit' between nuclear family and industrialization.

Another factor to be considered is that the conjugal family category surveyed in 1975 includes those families that may be called as "potential lineal families." As noted above, the eldest married son was supposed to live with the support parents in the past. However, these days economically stable families often allow their eldest sons to live separately from parents. This separation usually presupposes that the son will rejoin the parents when parents get old and are unable to support themselves adequately (Oh and Lee, 1980: 227). Since the separation is temporary in its nature, such nuclear family can be regarded as a "potentially lineal family". Unfortunately, we do not have data concerning the extent of the prevalence of this kind of nuclear family at this time. However, a consideration should be made with respect to this type of nuclear family if we are to assess the true meaning of the trend towards increasing prevalence of nuclear family pattern.

There is also evidence showing that a fairly large proportion of newly married couple do experience living with parents, mostly with the husband's, before they set up their own nuclear households. In a sample survey, 36 percent of the total nuclear households surveyed took neolocal residence after living at the husband's parental house for varying periods of time (Lee 1971a). This is partly due to the economic situation of the young. However, at the same time, it may be an indication that preference for a lineally-extended family still persists in Korea. A 1979 Korean government survey on the attitude towards old-age dependency among the Korean adults over 15 years old found that 59.8 percent of the people interviewed preferred to live with a married child when they get old. Among those who belonged to 25 - 34 age bracket, the proportion was 52.4 percent (Economic Planning Board, Social Indicators in Korea 1981: 222). Figures such as these seem to suggest that the Korean traditional family system will not alter drastically within a short period of time, although the

Korean family system is undergoing gradual changes under varying forces of modernization.

Considering all the factors combined, the following conclusions can be drawn tentatively: 1) The tendency favouring neolocal residence is increasing in Korea; 2) However, the conjugal type of family in Korea is not identical with the nuclear family found in Western society; 3) Also, there seems to be no direct and immediate relationship between industrialization and the emergence of nuclear family pattern, because neolocal residence was widespread in traditional times; 4) The notion that the prevalence of the conjugal or nuclear type of families renders a crucial test of the disruption of the extended family relations is misleading, because household composition itself is not a sufficient proof for the disorganization of the extended family relations; 5) The notion of disruption of the extended family system can be supported *only if* the separate households are proven to be isolated units from each other. This, of course, is related to the question that was raised earlier in conjunction with the impact of urbanization upon family structure. If we find isolated nuclear type families in urban-industrial centres, and demonstrate weakened ties among actual or potential (i.e., ascribed by cultural norm) members of the extended family, then, we may argue forcefully for the thesis concerning disorganization of the extended family system due to societal modernization.

Many studies on urban Korea have indicated that there is an increasing tendency of neolocal residence. However, the ties among the members of separated households related by lineage, i.e., parents, their married children, and married siblings, remained very strong as indicated by frequent interaction, mutual aid, and participation in the family ceremonies. Also, some studies identified the 'inner circle' kin network which generally included second and third cousins as an important social unit in Korean urban setting (Lee 1971b; Cho 1975). Indeed, although urban Korean families tend to maintain nuclear family households, there was no sign of weakened ties among the actual or potential members of the extended family.

There are also evidence showing that urban life does not weaken solidarity among close relatives in spite of the fact that the high social and residential mobility and competitiveness of urban life has the effect of limiting frequent contacts among relatives. A striking example is found in an anthropologist's observation of the rural migrants in Seoul slums. According to him, he was astonished by the constant stream of visitors from the countryside to the residents of slum areas. The migrants also paid visits to their home villages on holidays (Brandt 1973). Also, Moon (1972) found that the kinship system was a great help in residential location and job placement for the migrants in industrial and urban centres.

The findings all point to one direction: Industrialization and urbanization seem to cause a trend towards 'nucleation' of the Korean family, but

it did not reduce the family unit to a truly independent nuclear family that is isolated from the extended family ties. Koreans living in urban-industrial centres are very much committed, not only to their nuclear family, but also to kin beyond their immediate family.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Thus far, changes in the family structure and composition in Korea have been briefly examined in relation to urbanization and industrialization. Since the focus of discussion has been very limited as it has not dealt with the process of familial change in its entirety, it would be unfounded to speak of future directions of family change in Korea. At this point, Korean family system appears to be in a transitional stage. Korean family is becoming more and more nuclear in its composition, but the extended family and kin ties tend to be reinforced by mutual attachment and assistance. Thus, the theoretical grounds for family change in the process of industrialization and urbanization reflected in the classical nuclear family theory have not been proved to be valid in the Korean experience.

Although the forces of tradition seem to remain strong at this point of time, we must be very cautious in predicting the future trends in family change, as many forces operate today to weaken the Korean people's commitment to the traditional family system and values. The rapidly changing economic basis of the traditional family, the conflict between kinship obligation and the new conjugal ideology, and the spread of democratic practices on the grass-roots level are only few elements which may operate in the future affecting the course of familial change.

We also must allow for generational factors when we try to forecast further changes in family patterns. Those who have formed family so far are largely the persons who were born around and before 1950. The persons who were born after 1960, when a rapid process of industrialization and urbanization began, will soon be beginning to marry. If socialization process of this generation was expected to be different from that of the previous generation(s), due to, for instance, the increased geographic and social mobility of their family of orientation, it can be expected that this generation will be much more free from tradition orientations towards the family than are their predecessors. The nature of the change, however, remains yet to be seen.

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