

## On the changes in the Korean family institution in the past century

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*This small-scale study aims to trace the changes that have occurred in the Korean family institution in a time span of about one hundred years, more specifically, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Korea opened its borders to foreigners, until the present, as well as to identify the causes that have led to these changes. The theoretical framework I will employ is thematic analysis, defined by Berelson (1952, 18) as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication”. The data subjected to analysis come from a number of novels authored by Korean and Korean-American writers, such as H. Lee (1997) *Still Life with Rice*, S. Park (2011) *This Burns My Heart*, and N.J. Cho (2018) *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, to mention just a few. The reason behind opting for literature as a source of information is that I consider it to be a cultural product of particular socio-cultural circumstances inextricably linked to history. The fragments from the novels have been analyzed in terms of some of the identified themes, such as the status roles created by marriage in the Korean culture, the involvement of men in the house chores and child-rearing, in-laws’ attitudes towards their daughters-in-law, and the chances of married women to keep their jobs, divorce, to mention just a few. The primary data is supplemented with information coming from the Korean society trend survey, conducted by Statistics Korea. The findings of the analysis will reveal a slow, though obvious change in the family institution, which could be attributed to factors such as the Western influence, the spread of Christianity in the peninsula, as well as the massive industrial, technological, and economic development of Korea.*

Keywords: *family institution, status roles, changes, South Korea, thematic analysis.*

### 1. Introduction

As stated by Ponzetti (2003, vii), “[o]f all the institutions that have shaped human life, marriages and families have been the most important”. Researchers usually study these two institutions together, as there is a certain kind of relationship

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between them, in the sense that marriage brings about the emergence of a family, which is considered to be the basic unit of society. As Russell contends:

Marriage is something more serious than the pleasure of two people in each other's company; it is an institution which, through the fact that it gives rise to children, forms part of the intimate texture of society, and has an importance extending far beyond the personal feelings of the husband and the wife. (1929/2009, 32).

At the same time, both marriage and family institutions create status roles that are sanctioned by society. Confucianism, the century-old ideology embraced by the majority of Koreans, considered the family to be the foundation of society. The individual people are merely members of the family unit, who have the duty to fulfill the social roles prescribed for them during various life stages.

Due to the fact that the available literature seems rather limited and tends to focus either only on a short period of time, namely the period after the end of WWII and the beginning of the 1970s (Roh and Ireland 1972), or on particular aspects of family life, such as domestic violence (Kim *et al.* 2010), in this paper, my intention is to offer a wider perspective on the Korean family institution and the changes it has undergone in a time span of about 100 years, since the moment when Korea opened to Western influence. As these changes went in parallel with the socio-economic transformations of the peninsular country, having both positive and negative outcomes, another objective is to identify the causes that have brought about changes in the family institution.

The roadmap of the paper is as follows: section 2 briefs the reader on the Korean family at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In section 3, I will offer a view on the theoretical framework employed (i.e. thematic analysis), the research methodology and the research questions that guided the analysis. In the analytical part of the paper (section 4), I will take a look at fragments excerpted from a couple of literary masterpieces authored by Korean and American-Korean writers, which illustrate the main changes in the Korean family institution in the past 100 years. The conclusions of the research are presented in section 5.

## **2. The Korean family at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

In order to better understand the changes that occurred in the family institution in the modern era, a look at the traditional Korean family is necessary. Since the

distant past (in the Silla/Shilla period<sup>2</sup>, 57 BC – 935 AD) until the present, the purpose of having a family has been considered to be the continuation of the lineage. Because of this, a woman's role in marriage was solely that of producing a son, whose achievements would be, in a sense, his father's achievements, thus ensuring the continuation of the latter's life (Russell, 1929/2009). At the same time, as the Korean society was focused on ancestor worship, it was absolutely imperious that a family should have at least one son who would carry out the ceremonies related to this practice/ritual. This led, among others, to the preference of sons over daughters, to the extent to which, in many cases, sex-selective abortions and female infanticide were performed. Also, the preference for boy offspring brought about various attitudes and practices, which would impact the Korean family institution.

Until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Confucianism, the century-old ideology adopted from the Chinese, was "systematically imposed on the Korean society" (Kim 2006, 221). In Confucianism, the patriarchal family as an entity is considered to be more important than the individual members. The role of the latter is to maintain the household based on two important principles dictated by Confucianism, namely that males should dominate females and that the elderly members should be treated with everlasting devotion and respect by their children and grandchildren in exchange for their love and care (filial piety). The first principle confers male superiority over women in the patrilineal family, an ideal that became very prominent at the end of the Joseon period.

The typical type of family in Korea was the patrilocal<sup>3</sup> stem family. According to the Marriage and Family Encyclopedia (<https://family.jrank.org/>) "[t]his type of family consists of two families in successive generation, a father and a mother living in the same household with the married eldest son, his wife and children" (no page).

Confucianism segregated the two sexes into different worlds, both in terms of living places, as well as of responsibilities. This segregation occurred because of the Korean social system, which defined the role of women as "within" and that of men "outside" (of homes). The Korean word for wife is *anae*, which translates as "the inside person", whereas that for husband is *nampyeon*, "the outside person". The houses families lived in were divided into "(...) the *anbang*, the inner room, near the back of the house next to the kitchen. The men's quarters, *sarangbang*, was separated from the women's *anbang* by sliding lattice screens covered with paper" (Lee 1997, 30). This house division showed just how separate men's and women's lives were. From an early age, young girls and boys were properly trained to stay in their respective quarters with their own kinds. Moreover, as the women's

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<sup>2</sup> The pre-modern history of Korea is divided into three important periods: Silla/Shilla (57 BCE-935 CE, Koryo CE 918-1392, and Chosun/Joseon (CE 1392 -1910) Dynasties.

<sup>3</sup> Patrilocal is the custom in which a married couple settles with the husband's family.

quarters were considered sacred, no men were allowed to trespass. Apart from that, women were not allowed to walk and work outside their homes during the day (unless they were farmers). They could exit their houses only late at night, during a curfew, when men were supposed to stay at home. This was a means of preventing women from interacting with men who were not members of their own families. In terms of gender roles, for the Korean woman the family was her primary focus. As a wife, she was supposed to obey her husband, to work hard to please her in-laws, and to bear a son, which would ensure the continuation of the lineage. A young wife's failure to produce a son was considered lack of filial piety, which brought about a lot of hardships for her, both from her husband (who might often cast her out and find himself a second wife or a concubine) and from her parents-in-law. Husbands, on the other hand, were supposed to be the breadwinners of the family, without getting involved in family matters or in raising their children.

Confucianism also imposed on women a set of rules, which were to be followed strictly. At the same time, it also required women to avoid "the *chilgo chiak*, or 'seven evils', which were disobeying their in-laws, failing to have sons, committing adultery, exhibiting jealousy, having a hereditary disease, talking excessively, and committing larceny" (de Mente 2017, 1074). If they committed any of these sins, their husbands and in-laws had the right to discard them, which had tragic consequences for these women. As they could not return to their parents' home because they would shame them and make them lose face in the community, their only way to survive was to become prostitutes.

Korean marriages, especially in the Joseon period, irrespective of whether they involved members of the higher class (*yangban*<sup>4</sup>) or of a lower-class family, were match-made (*jungmae*), arranged to benefit the families. Thus, very often the parents of the spouses-to-be would match them at a very early age. Such early marriages, devoid of love, would lead young men to search for pleasure outside their homes or divorce their wives, a "luxury" woman did not have. While widowed or divorced men had the right to remarry, their female counterparts were denied this right. There was, nevertheless, a subversive way out of this situation: they could be kidnapped. This custom, known under the name of *bossam* or "sack-marriage", was quite frequent in the Joseon society (1329-1910), when widows were expected to be devoted to their deceased husbands and to continue serving their parents-in-law. Consequently, they were prohibited to re-marry. In most of the cases without their consent, but occasionally with their approval, widows would be wrapped up in a sack and taken to the man who wanted to marry them. It

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<sup>4</sup> *Yangban* is a term referring to the hereditary aristocracy in Korea, which was made up of landowners and government officials (Seth, 2010).

was only in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century that the ban on Korean women's re-marriage was eliminated.

One other piece of information which may also come as a surprise to a Westerner is that Korean:

married women were never really considered members of their husbands' families because their bloodlines were different. They were considered outsiders and were tolerated only if they produced male children and served the husbands' families, particularly their mothers-in-law, diligently and without complaining. (De Mentès 2017, 617)

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of these family-related aspects started changing. The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought Korea tremendous upheaval, such as the Japanese colonization (1910-1945), the Korean War (1950-1953) and the subsequent division of the country into North and South Korea, the transformation of the country from an agrarian to an industrialized urban one, as well as the crisis in 1997. All these events have contributed to changes in both the Korean society as a whole, as well as in the family institution in particular, as will be illustrated in section 4 of the paper.

### 3. Research methodology

#### 3.1. Thematic analysis as a theoretical framework

The approach I have considered suitable for this study is *thematic analysis*, "a descriptive qualitative approach to data analysis" (Vaismoradi *et al.* 2013, 399), defined as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79). The aim of thematic analysis is "to examine narrative materials of life stories by breaking the text into relatively small units of content and submitting them to descriptive treatment" (Sparker 2005, quoted in Vaismoradi *et al.* 2013, 400). Unlike *content analysis*, to which it is very similar and which relies more on the interpretation of data, thematic analysis is more descriptive in nature. Qualitative description is valuable not only for the knowledge it imparts, but also because it is a means of establishing meaning and of producing solid findings (Sandelowski 2010).

According to Vaismoradi *et al.* (2013, 399), the main characteristic features of thematic analysis are as follows:

<b>Aims and concentrations</b>	Analyzing narrative materials of life stories
<b>Philosophical background</b>	Realist/essentialist and constructionist, factist perspective
<b>Analysis process</b>	Description and interpretation, both inductive and deductive, emphasizing context, integration of manifest and latent contents, drawing thematic map, non-linear analysis process, no peer checking

As De Santis and Noel Ugarizza (2000) contend, thematic analysis involves the search for and identification of common threads in recorded communication, that extend across an entire corpus.

The data used by researchers in thematic analysis could be in the form interviews or focus groups. For the current study, I have chosen to analyse a couple of novels authored by Korean and Korean-American novelists, which are representative for the investigated topic and which have “a clear historical time frame” (Baker 1994, 106), namely the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These ‘texts’ are actually “written communicative materials which are intended to be read and understood by people other than the analysts (Krippendorff 2004, quoted in Cohen *et al.* 2018, 674).

Once the sample data has been decided upon, the next step was to extract from the afore-mentioned novels fragments/paragraphs and to ascribe them a name/theme. This is what Cohen *et al.* (2018), and Baker (1994) call *coding*, i.e. “the ascription of a category label to a piece of data, decided in advance or in response to the data that have been collected” (Cohen *et al.* 2018, 668). The categories/themes I have obtained are: *husbands’ attitudes towards their wives, showing/not showing feelings in marriage, in-laws’ attitude towards their daughters-in-law, separation/divorce, preference for sons over daughters, age of marriage, number of children in the family, discrimination of working mothers, and co-habitation*. Due to reasons of space, only the first five themes would be subjected to analysis.

The theoretical framework and research methodology (to be presented in the next section) were meant to enable me to offer an encompassing picture of some of the changes that affected the family institution in Korea in the past century.

### 3.2. The data

As mentioned previously, the data employed to illustrate the changes in the Korean family institution are novels authored by Korean or American Korean writers, books that have either been written in or translated into English. The reason for opting for this kind of data is that, very often, literature helps us better understand a

particular culture. The novels employed are: Helie Lee (1997) *Still Life with Rice*; Eugenia Kim (2009) *The Calligrapher's Daughter*; Samuel Park (2011) *This Burns my Heart*; Cho Nam-Joo (2018) *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*; Kyung-Sook Shin's (2010) *I'll Be Right There*, and Han Kang (2015) *The Vegetarian*. Apart from these, secondary sources were also employed to provide a holistic image on some phenomena.

### 3.3. Working hypothesis and research questions

The hypothesis in the paper is that all historical, cultural, and social events that occurred in the peninsular country in the past 100 years had affected all aspects of the society, the family institution included. Derived from this, the following research questions have been formulated and guided the analysis of the fragments excerpted from the afore-mentioned novels:

- 1) Which aspects of the family institution underwent more changes?
- 2) Is there any chance for the Korean wives to enjoy equality and equity with their husbands?
- 3) Which socio-historical factors contributed to the modernization of the Korean family?

## 4. Changes in the Korean family institution

The analysis of the fragments from the afore-mentioned novels will proceed according to the themes I have identified and also in a chronological manner, starting with the Japanese colonization of Korea (1910-1945), moving on to the period after the Korean War (1950-1953), and ending with the modern times.

### 4.1. Husbands' attitude towards their wives

According to the Confucian custom, at the beginning of the previous century, once the young couple got married, the wife had to leave her parents' home permanently and follow her husband to his parents' house, where she would be under total control of both her husband and her in-laws. In most of the cases, the new wife enjoyed the lowest position in her husband's family; she was treated as a servant, having to satisfy the needs and orders of her husband, parents-in-law, and of her siblings-in-law. The wife was often reduced to the role of childbearing and housework, being mistreated and abused in her new home. She had to endure all this at least before the birth of her first son, which "gave her some status in her husband's family" (Matles Savada and Shaw 1992, 105).

Married women would rarely visit their native families; the only occasion when they were allowed by their husband's family to do so was then they were on the point of giving birth to their babies. As Kaur (2004, 2601) points out:

women face the early period of their marital lives without the solace of being able to pay frequent visits to their natal home. Until they build up local support structures they have only the husband to turn to, whose treatment of them may vary. It is very likely that such women are at the receiving end of more intensified violence in patriarchal cultures where the daughter-in-law is anyway at the bottom of the totem pole.

Many of the Korean husbands would have extra-marital affairs, neglecting their roles as heads of the household and fathers. According to Broude (1994), Korean men could introduce in their household concubines, who served them as sexual partners during the time when their wives were pregnant or nursing their babies. In the novels employed for the current study, the husbands' attitude towards their spouses and the extent to which they abused or helped them, especially after giving birth or in their daily lives, varied from family to family. Thus, in Lee's (1997) novel *Still Life with Rice*, in which the plot starts in the 1920s, we encounter two non-traditional examples of husbands: Dukpil and Mr. Park. The former is the husband of Hongyoung, the novel's main heroine, whereas the latter is married to Hongyoung's Crippled Sister. Although both couples experienced *jongmae* (arranged marriages), they enjoyed a happy life together, despite the historical and social hardships they were confronted with (the colonization of the country and the poverty Koreans lived in). Dukpil would treat his wife more as an equal, encouraging her "to share her thoughts with him" (Lee 1997, 77); he would praise her to the point of stirring his mother's rage at his show of emotions, would provide his wife with strength and inspiration in winning his mother's approval, and would show his gratitude for her effort to offer him a son, as illustrated below:

- (1) (...) he came back quickly balancing a tray of *miyok kuk*<sup>5</sup> (seaweed soup). He was serving me. I was speechless as he placed it carefully on my lap. (...) When I thought he could show me no more affection, he lifted the spoon, blew on it, then fed it to me. In that moment, I knew I loved him absolutely. It was a love separate from passion, a love that surpasses the flesh and would flourish long into old age. (Lee 1997, 89)

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<sup>5</sup> This kind of soup was served to new mothers, in order to restore the needed nutrients and help them in breastfeeding their babies (Lee, 1997).



Mr. Park, a servant in the Hongyeong's parents' family, agreed to marry the middle daughter of the Baeks despite her physical disability, as this marriage would increase his status and fortune. Considering that his crippled wife could not fulfill her domestic duties, as was expected of her, one might think that Mr. Park would treat her badly. But this was not the case. Despite his long hours of work as the family servant, he always found time to spend with his wife, bought her candies and fabric to make herself new clothes. His devotion for his crippled wife culminated with the purchase of second-hand bicycle, which he updated in order to be able to show her the world. And when his wife became big with child and was incapable of moving from one room to another, he would carry her on his back.

But these are exceptional situations. The norm during the Japanese colonialism, just like in the period before, was for the wife to be marginalized and treated like a servant. This is the unfortunate case of the youngest sister in the Baek family, whose husband, a womanizer, a brute, and an alcoholic, would beat her and would side with his mother when this attacked her.

A generation later, after the Korean War (1950-1953), when Hongyeong and Dukpil's eldest daughter, Dukwah gets married to Jaehak, a young man who had studied in America, she is surprised to see that he treats women in a different way than other men. While the Korean tradition requires that women should walk behind their husbands and enter buildings after them, Jaehak shows courtesy in letting his wife and her friend pass first through the door. He tells them that "[i]n Ah-meh-li-ca, I learned that it is the man who must open the door and wait for the woman to go first" (Lee 1997, 297). Of course, the young women were flattered because all the Korean men they had met always went in first. On the other hand, they also felt a bit odd, as they were not used to such a special treatment.

Some decades later, as a result of the American influence spread by those who studied in the U.S. and also by the American soldiers stationed in Korea both during WWII and the Korean War, one might expect that the relationship between spouses would be based on equality rather than on male dominance. But old habits seem to die hard. In this period, women also started to get out of the confines of their in-laws' homes, as they had jobs. In some exceptional cases, it was the women who were the breadwinners of the family, something that diminished the status of the husbands, being a blow to their face. Soo-Ja, the heroine in Park's (2011) novel *This Burns My Heart*, is an example in this respect: her husband, Min, did not work a day after their marriage, on grounds of a 'bad back'. This health issue was used to explain to their daughter, Hana, "why unlike other men his age, her father didn't have a job, and it helped explain to others why Soo-Ja was the one earning their bread" (Park 2011, 165). But when Soo-Ja decided to buy a plot of land from an estate agent with the money she partly earned and partly got from

her parents, a transaction that implied her dealing with a man who was not part of the family, Min got furious:

- (2) 'What do you think you do to your husband when you say things like this' asked Min. 'Isn't it *my* job to decide? It's bad enough I have to ask my wife for money?' (Park 2011, 165)

Though Min enjoys the lavish life that his wife provides him with from her long hours of work as a receptionist in a motel, where she is on the point of being raped by a customer, he still embraces the old Confucian belief that men deserved respect and honour, while wives should be submissive. For him, just like for his father (and other traditional Korean men), women "were like grass: to be stepped on" (Park 2011, 91). What the fragment above shows is that despite a change in roles, Min still adhered to the Confucian ideal of men's superiority over women and asked submissiveness from his wife.

#### **4.2. Showing/not showing one's feelings in marriage**

For a long period of time, Korean people were advised to suppress their emotions and not to show their feelings openly. In pre-modern Korea, showing one's feelings was considered immoral. At the root of this socially conditioned behavior was Confucianism, which considered that "emotions, including love, were disruptive to the harmony of society and should therefore be suppressed" (de Mente 2017, 623). On the other hand, as most of the marriages in the 1920s were arranged, the spouses seeing each other for the first time only on the day of their marriage, their relationship was quite distant. Moreover, in certain situations, the age gap between the bride and the groom was quite big. This deprived the couple of any kind of affection, their married life being well captured by the Korean proverb: "By day, like seeing a stranger, by night like seeing a lover". The proverb also emphasizes the idea that the purpose of marriage was to produce a male heir, who should carry on the family line, "not to provide mutual companionship and support for the husband and wife" (Matles Savada and Shaw 1992, 100).

In Lee's (1997) novel, despite the fact that the characters were also the "victims" of the traditional matched-made marriages, as they came to know each other better, they realized that they really loved each other. Lee Dukpil, Honyoung's husband, genuinely loved his wife, complimenting her on every occasion and keeping his eyes stuck on her, much to his mother's disapproval, who kept telling him:

- (3) It's improper to stuff a woman with such praise. She will see your weakness and use it to seek power on you. (...) Repress your emotions, or else people will think that you are uncultured. Women are not meant to be companions to men. (Lee 1997, 75)

On one occasion he even told his wife that he wished for her to be happy, something that husbands seldom thought about in those times. On the other hand, his wife, Hongyeong, was not insensitive to his kind treatment and started developing feelings for him (as we have seen in excerpt 1 above), being well aware of the fact that she was not allowed to share them with him.

- (4) It seemed almost immoral to declare our affection, but I savored every exchange. The only way I knew how to return his sweetness was to wait diligently on him. I folded his clothes just the way he liked it, and stored them with fragrant flowers and leaves. I learned to cook all his favorite spicy dishes, dropping in an extra chunk of meat or fish. All these things I did to please him. (...) Cautiously, I bottled up these feelings, concealing them from him. I feared he might think he had married a foolish woman. (Lee 1997, 75)

These fragments from Lee's novel show that the spouses had different ways of showing their feelings to each other, again in accordance with the gender hierarchy dictated by Confucianism: the husband declared his affection verbally, while the wife made recourse to non-verbal means, not to be considered too blunt or foolish.

Eugenia Kim's *The Calligrapher's Daughter* (2009) is set in the time of the Japanese colonization of Korea. Najin, the calligrapher's daughter, had been married to her husband shortly before his departure to America, where he spent 11 years. As the Japanese controlled the mail, Najin did not receive any letters from him for all this while, so that at a certain moment she started wondering whether she was widowed or divorced. When the Americans debarked in Korea at the end of WWII, with the help of an American soldier Najin manages to get in touch with her husband. The couple is reunited in Korea, where her husband was sent as a soldier in the American army. Their encounter reflects again the Western influence, this time in the expression of feelings:

- (5) 'Najin', he said. Overcome, he embraced me fully. I stiffened, then I realized that naturally he'd become even more Westernized. Being outside, I couldn't relax into his embrace, but he held me long enough (...) for me to feel his warmth radiating through his many garments. (Kim 2009, 365)

Haptic behavior was totally unaccepted in the Korean society at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that is why when Najin was hugged by her husband, she was a little shocked. But immediately she realized that his behavior could have been influenced by his long stay among the American people, who are known to openly express their attitude through touching (hugging, hand-shaking, kissing).

Starting with the 1960s, the Korean people became more exposed to American movies and to foreigners' courting behavior. Under this influence, the young Koreans began courting each other, walking hand-in-hand in the street, and showing publicly their feelings, despite the fact that the older generation (which Dukwah and her husband belonged to) could hardly approve of.

The new socio-cultural era of the late 1990s and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century made women more daring in expressing their feelings towards men. While until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a verbal declaration of emotion on behalf of women would have been unimaginable (as we have seen in example 5), emulating their Western peers, many modern Korean women tended to feel less bound by the patriarchal rules and tried to live a new life. Examples of such women would be Seungyeon, a female character in Cho's (2018) *Kim Jiyoung. Born 1992*, who as a college student dared confess her feelings to a group mate, Daehyun. The latter eventually became Jiyoung's (the heroine's) husband:

- (6) He couldn't remember how they ended up there, but he'd run into Seungyeon who suddenly said she liked him. She liked him, she had feelings for him, she had said, sweat pouring, lips trembling, stammering. Daehyun gave her an apologetic look, and she instantly folded. 'Oh, you don't feel the same. Got it. Forget what I said. Forget this whole thing happened. I'll treat you the same as before, like nothing happened'. (Cho, 2018, 8)

While in the first half of the previous century, husbands very rarely touched their wives (apart from the moments when they poured their rage on them or to satisfy their sexual needs), in modern Korea men and women, even outside marriage, show their feelings towards each other not only by verbal messages, but also through haptic behaviour, like kissing, embracing or holding hands, as the following excerpt from Kyung-Sook Shin's (2010) novel *I'll Be Right There* reveals:

- (7) 'Can I kiss you?' Dahn asked. I didn't say anything. Dahn's lips hesitantly brushed my cheek, my forehead. After a moment, he brought his lips to mine. They were warm and sweet. (Shin 2010, 32)

### 4.3. In-laws' attitude towards their son's wives

As mentioned previously, in-laws had control over their daughters-in-law, even if the latter came from a wealthier family. In most of the cases they treated them as servants and would express openly their feelings towards them. An example in this respect is the mother-in-law of Hongyeong's Baby Sister, who after having taken away all her possessions, started shouting at her daughter-in-law:

- (8) You are useless to me. You are not better than a pig who eats my food and rolls around in her own shit. At least I can slice the pig's throat and cook it for dinner when it gets too fat (...). All you are good for is your father's wealth. Go fetch for me an expensive jeweled box. Do as I desire or die for all I care. (Lee 1997, 99)

Hongyeong, on the other hand, being supported by her husband, worked hard to win her mother-in-law's approval. Being aware of the fact that if she failed her expectations, mother-in-law had the right to turn her out in disgrace, Lee's heroine was determined to stay by her husband's side:

- (9) I woke up an hour earlier each morning, to get a head start on the day's chores. Slowly, her complaints faded, for I taught myself to anticipate every need before she realized it herself. On a rare occasion there was even a hint of affection in her voice. (Lee 1997, 79)

This hostile attitude of the in-laws towards their daughters-in-law is still encountered in the period after the Korean War, a period depicted in Samuel Park's novel *This Burns my Heart*. The dream of the main female character, Soo-Ja, is to become a diplomat and to travel, even if this means going against her parents' will. But her dream is shattered by her unexpected marriage to the eldest son of a factory owner, whom she married only to be able to study (her conservative parents were against the idea of their daughter becoming a diplomat, trying to convince her to choose a more appropriate profession, namely that of a teacher). In an attempt to make her change her mind concerning marriage, Soo-Ja's father reminds her of the fact that as the oldest son of the family, Min (her future husband) is expected to bring his wife to live with his parents (remember that the traditional Korean family was a patrilocal one) and this will have negative consequences on her life:

- (10) 'He is unacceptable in every way. And he is the oldest son. *Do* you know what this means to be the wife of the oldest son?', asked her father coming close to her. 'You would have to be responsible for the entire family. *Do* you know how much work that is, having to serve your in-laws?' (Park 2011, 50, emphasis in the original)

When Soo-Ja arrived at her in-laws' house, she soon came to realize how much truth was in her Father's words related to how she would be treated there. Her mother-in-law wanted Soo-Ja to fear her. When the heroine becomes big with child, Min's mother imposed certain restrictions on Soo-Ja: not to read books, not to receive visitors, not to wear clingy clothes, not to get near rotten meat (for fear the baby would be a girl).

- (11) Interestingly, though Soo-Ja, her restrictions did not extend to her chores as a daughter-in-law. She still had to scrub the laminated floors of the house everyday – floors that had to be clean enough for them to sit, eat, and sleep on – as well as wash everyone's clothes, many of which were white and also had to be cleaned daily. Those activities were not thought to affect the sex of a baby, her mother-in-law explained. (Park 2011, 91)

Not only does Min's mother treat her daughter-in-law as a servant, but she also speaks ill of her to Min, telling him lies about Soo-Ja. The young woman hoped that her husband would side with her, but this was not the case. He accused her of acting nice towards his mother in front of him and of being abusive to her when the two women were alone. His anger increased to the point where he turned his hand into a fist, threatening to hit his wife, but then he calmed down and said to her: "I'm not going to hit you, Soo-Ja. I'm not my father" (Park 2011, 89), a statement that provides a clue concerning the atmosphere in Min's family, where the Father was a tyrant. The latter did not waste too much time in showing his character to Soo-Ja, when he demanded her to ask her parents for more money, so as to contribute to the household expenses.

- (12) 'Know that I can kick you out of here any day, for any reason,' barked Father-in-law. 'No one will question me, and if they ask, I can say you were lazy, or dirty, or drank too much. They would side with me, you know that.' Soo-Ja's eyes burnt with anger, thinking about the shame that would bring to her parents. 'Either way, know that from this day on, everything you eat, every piece of clothing on your back, is there thanks to my charity. I will keep strict accounts, and every day that passes, you will owe me more and more. And I will be able to ask more and more of your father. (Park 2011, 94)

The in-laws feel entitled to treat Soo-Ja like a slave also due to the fact that she failed to give birth to a son; she failed in filial piety by bringing a daughter into the world. Considering the hardships of her life, the novel's heroine gave up the desire of having another child. Her decision stemmed from her modern conviction that "children have to be born out of love, not out of necessity" (Park 2011, 91).

Another female character who failed in filial piety by giving birth to a daughter, much to the disappointment of her husband and of her husband's family, is Kim Jiyoung, the heroine of Cho Nam-Joo's (2018) eponymous novel, whose plot unfolds in contemporary Korea. Jiyoung (a young mother who suffered from post-partum depression that was enhanced by the news of a friend's death on giving birth to her second child), who lived with her husband in Seoul, in a nuclear family, went to visit her Busan-based parents-in-law at Chuseok<sup>6</sup>. Once in Busan, they all had lunch, after which the young wife did the dishes and went with her mother-in-law to shop for the food necessary for the harvest celebration. The next day, both women prepared lots of goodies for Chuseok and waited for Jiyoung's sister-in-law's family to join the meal. On seeing the numerous dishes, Suhyun (Jiyoung's sister-in-law) scolded her mother for having exhausted herself and Jiyoung. The old lady feels offended and disappointed and asks her daughter-in-law whether she felt it was too much for her. The 'deranged' daughter-in-law, impersonating her own mother, replied: "Oh, Mrs. Jung. To tell you the truth, my poor Jiyoung gets sick from exhaustion every holiday!" (Cho 2018, 9).

What Jiyoung's statement as well as the previous two excerpts highlight is the fact that, indeed the wives of the oldest sons are more exploited than the other daughters-in-law, a feeling experienced also by Suhyun, her sister-in-law, who was supposed to prepare the food for the ancestral rites, although people would seldom hold the ancestral rites at home. The hardships the eldest sons' wives had to endure stem from the fact that the eldest sons are responsible for carrying over the line from one generation to another. They were also in charge with honoring their ancestors, their wives having to prepare all the necessary food items for the ceremony, without being allowed to participate in it. At the same time, a couple's most important duty was that of producing a male heir.

#### **4.4. Separation/divorce (*ihon*)**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, separating from one's husband was unconceivable. It was only men who had the right to divorce their wives if they

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<sup>6</sup> Chuseok refers to the autumnal harvest, when Korean families prepare food for the ancestral rites.

committed one of the seven evils mentioned in section 2 of the paper. In traditional Korean families, women would not consider initiating divorce from their husbands for at least two reasons: first, they had no means of subsistence outside marriage, and second, if they got divorced, they had no legal rights over their children, the husbands usually getting full custody. But rather than committing suicide because of the brutal treatment of her husband and leaving her children in his care, Hongyeong's Baby Sister (a character in Lee's novel *Still Life with Rice*) decided to leave him and join her sister in China. On seeing Baby Sister with her children, unaccompanied by her husband, Hongyeong, who abode to the traditional family principles, poured her discontent on her sister, pointing out to her the consequences of such an act:

(13) H: Whoever heard of such a disgraceful thing [to leave one's husband]? There is not much for a woman outside her husband's house. You must go back to him for the sake of your children's future.

BS: I refuse. I wish to be free of him.

H: Can you ever be truly free? Without a husband, a woman becomes an outcast with no rights of her own. Only through a man and son is she made free.

(Lee 1997, 143)

An issue that emerged in the Korean society after the Korean War, especially starting with the 1960s, was *ihon*, 'divorce'. "The possibility of *ihon* (...) is only one part of the changing scene for Korean wives" (de Mente 2017, 60). The social changes that occurred in the peninsular country included love-based marriages, the decline in the stigma attached to divorced women, and a strong desire of both spouses for happiness in marriage. But as women grew more and more independent, as a result of employment outside home and also of the feminist ideas pouring from the West, a significant rise in the divorce rate could be noticed, though the society still strongly discouraged it. Soo-Ja, Samuel Park's heroine, at a certain point in her early marriage considers leaving Min, having numerous reasons for doing so: Min's father taking financial advantage of her own father, the fact that her husband sided with his parents when they treated her badly, or his lack of a job to support the family. But her maternal responsibility is much stronger than her freedom: "I'm not going to give up just because I'm not happy (...). I have Hana to think of. She needs her father" (Park 2011, 135). Despite the fact that she lives in a modern world and is a product of the modern educational system (she is a college graduate), Soo-Ja is the victim of the traditional family and gender hierarchies, which impact her live. She struggles hard to be a good wife, a good mother, and a



good employee, but the Korean society is not yet ready to support such women. Moreover, she was well aware that her spouse, Min, was a much better son than a husband, in the sense that he respected more his parents than he respected her and all she did to support her family. For Min, filial piety was much stronger than his feelings for Soo-Ja. As she realized that things started changing in Korea, that there could be other kinds of relations between husband and wife, Soo-Ja decides to separate from Min, being well aware of the stigma attached to divorced women. Eventually, after trying to make things work for him and his wife in America, Min realized that his desire to be a good son was much stronger than his feelings for his wife and daughter and grants Soo-Ja the divorce.

The fact that the Korean society still frowns upon divorced women is also illustrated by He-Hwa, Soo-Ja's friend, who on being suggested to divorce her violent husband, responded: "Soo-Ja, you know how people treat a separated woman. Nobody will have tea with me or meet my eyes when I walk by them. I would hate to become some kind of pariah" (Park 2011, 98).

When Soo-Ja took the decision to leave Min, she knew she might lose custody of her daughter, as until the early 1970, in case of a divorce, fathers got the custody of the children irrespective of their gender. Despite this right, her husband decides to pass the custody over to Soo-Ja, as some kind of compensation for miserable life he offered her. In 1991 a new version of the Family Law gave women the right to claim custody of their children if they divorced their husbands. This shows that modernity did enter Korea, even if very slowly.

In modern Korea, despite the fact that love is in many cases the basis of marriage and that more and more couples decide on their own on their partner, due to the long working hours, the demands of the society, and the high level of competitiveness, the divorce rate has increased steadily. According to Statistics Korea, while in 1990 there were 45,694 cases of divorce, in 2013 the number almost tripled (115,292 cases), in 2021 decreasing to 101,673 cases, with a rate of 2 per 1,000 people. This tendency seems to go hand in hand with the growing number of marriages that are more individual (than family) affairs. Tudor (2012, 322) pointed out that "[f]or many years, divorce was considered unconscionable, and social pressure strongly discouraged it. A couple at war, or no longer in love, was expected to stay together for the sake of family unity and honor". But starting with the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when women became economically independent, they have no longer been doomed to remain in unhappy marriages. After her divorce, In-hye, one of the female characters in Kang's (2018) *The Vegetarian*, reflects on the reasons that led her to this decision:

- (14) For the first time she became vividly aware of how much of her life she had spent with her husband. It had been a period of time utterly devoid of happiness and spontaneity. A time which she'd so far managed to get through only by using up every last reserve of perseverance and consideration. All of it self-inflicted. (Kang 2018, 161)

Nowadays, an almost equal number of husbands and wives ask for a divorce when they feel their union does not work. Moreover, the divorce patterns have changed in Korea: couples divorce more often because of marital incompatibility than because of conflict with the in-laws. "This suggests that conjugal ties have become more crucial in maintaining a marriage, while the traditional kin relationships have declined in importance" (*Marriage and Family Encyclopedia*, family.jrank.org).

#### 4.5. Preference of sons over daughters

Confucianism considered the birth of sons a woman's supreme duty to her husband, her family, and the society as a whole. The reason behind this was the fact that sons would ensure their father's ancestral rites, guaranteeing in this way their own spiritual eternity. On the other hand, Koreans believed that sons would bring prosperity and honour to the family. The desire to have sons was so strong, that quite often women made recourse to post-natal female infanticide or abandonment and pre-natal sex-selective abortion. One character in the novels under scrutiny, who tried to abandon her baby-daughter was Baek Hongin, Hongyeong's mother in Lee's novel *Still Life with Rice*. After giving birth to a son and a daughter, she brought into the world a second daughter (Crippled Sister mentioned in section 4.1.) whose health started deteriorating. The parents called a shaman, a herbalist and the best physician, but to no avail. Consequently, one day, the girl's mother decided to take her somewhere to die, thinking that if she let her live, she would become a burden for her older brother's family and would end up as an outcast in the streets. But two days after Hongyeong's Crippled Sister was taken out of the house to die, her mother brought her back and her father dedicated more time to her than to any of his other children.

In modern times, with the emergence of non-invasive procedures employed to detect the sex of the baby, such as the amniocentesis (employed in the 1950s) and the sonogram (starting with the 1980s) (Rahm 2020) led to a surge in prenatal sex determination, which was followed by sex-selective abortions. One of the victims of such a procedure was Kim Jiyoung's mother, who had to abort a third daughter. As Cho wrote:

- (15) Abortion due to medical problems had been legal for ten years at that point, and checking the sex of the foetus and aborting females was a common practice, as if 'daughter' was a medical problem. This went on throughout the 1980s, and in the early 1990s, the very height of the male-to-female ratio imbalance. (Cho 2018, 19)

Some of the fathers in the novels under scrutiny adopted another method of gender discrimination, either permanently or at least for a while, namely selective neglect which materialized in not giving their infant daughters names when they were born. This was the case of Calligrapher Han (in Eugenia Kim's 2009 novel, *Calligrapher's Daughter*), who in 1910, when his wife, who had lost four children before, brought into the world a baby girl, could not hide his disappointment – "the disappointment he'd tried to hide when he saw she'd borne a girl – he could find no meaningful name to mark her on this earth" (Kim 2009, 27). Eventually, the daughter was named Najin<sup>7</sup> only when she turned 5 years of age.

On the other hand, not all fathers who had sons were very happy with them. Sons were more pampered than daughters, and because of this, they thought they could rebel against their parents and against Korean traditions. An example in this respect is the calligrapher's son, Ilsun (Kim 2009), who as a child became very self-confident and conceited, speaking evil of his tutor; he would spend money on betting in school and after getting married, would seek pleasure in the teahouses. The disagreements between father and son were caused by the former's old-fashioned convictions and strict treatment of the children, which led to a relationship that would gradually become more distant. Another disappointing son was Hongyeong's Older Brother (in Lee's *Still Life with Rice*), whose second wife was caught stealing. As larceny was one of the 7 sins for which women could be kicked out of the house, he was expected by his parents to do discard his wife, but he didn't, a behavior that stirred his father's fury:

- (16) It was his duty to punish his wife. But failing to rise to this position, he gravely disappointed Father. In Father's eyes, Older Brother was not the true man he had hoped his son would be. (Lee 1997, 56)

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<sup>7</sup> Actually, the girl got her name while attending an autumn festival organized by the American missionaries. A Ms. Gordon asked the girl for her name, but she had none. A Korean woman, who knew why the girl had no name, told Ms. Gordon that the little one was the daughter of the woman who came from Nah-jin. The American woman, whose Korean was pretty rudimentary, assumed this was the girl's name, and from that moment on, the Calligrapher's daughter was called Najin.

This disappointment is related to the idea that sons are the pillars of the household, and a person who is not able to fulfill his duties does not stand the chance to become one.

In Lee's novel we witness a change of attitude concerning the parents' preference for male children. Hongyeong's parents lost two sons before she was born. Despite the fact that her mother wanted another son, the daughter was welcomed by her father, Baek Hongin, who chose a very beautiful name for her, Baek Hongyong: Baek linked her to her father's ancestral tree, "*Hong* represented 'big' and *yeong* was the sign of the dragon, the mystical beast" (Lee 1997, 27). Two generations later, Hongyong's son-in-law, Lee Jaehak wanted "a little daughter for the first child (...), then a son or two" (Lee 1997, 299). He was overjoyed when he got her. On the other hand, Hongyong herself was also happy to have a granddaughter.

- (17) Surprisingly it did not matter; *the old way of thinking* had left me. I would openly love her with all my heart and soul, the love I had deprived my own children, because a parent's duty is to discipline children, and the grandparent's privilege was to spoil them. (Lee 1997, 305, my emphasis)

Even in the modern era, despite the many social changes that occurred in the Korean society, sons (and males, in general) are still treated preferentially. An example in this respect comes from Cho's Novel *Kim Jiyong Born 1982*, where the pampering of the son of the family stirs the rage of Eunyoung, the heroine's eldest sister:

- (18) 'There is one person under this roof who never lifts a finger', Eunyoung blared at her brother, and the mother stroked his head.  
 'He's still a baby'.  
 'No, he's not! I've been taking care of Jiyong's bags, school supplies and homework since I was ten. When we were his age, we mopped the floor, hung laundry, and made ramen<sup>8</sup> and fried eggs for ourselves.'  
 'He's the youngest.'  
 'You mean he's the son'. (Cho 2018, 48)

Cho's novel also brings to light another paradox of modern Korea: despite of the traditional expectation for women to bear children and continue the lineage, the society puts a lot of pressure on them both when they are pregnant and also after

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<sup>8</sup> *Ramen* is a noodle dish, specific of China, Korea, Japan, and other Asian countries.

they have their babies: at the work place, male colleagues would start talking behind their backs, calling them 'mum-roaches' (because after birth, these women will have to live off their husbands' wages), on the public means of transportation they are not offered seats and have to face insolent remarks of the kind "About to pop and still taking the tube to go make money – clearly can't afford a kid" (Cho 2018, 128).

Another point worth a mention, which highlights the changes that occurred in the Korean society, as revealed by Cho's (2018) novel is that when couples legally register their marriage, they need to hand in a form in which to specify the surname their child would bear. Apparently, in the late 1990s, a law was passed according to which children were not supposed to take the patriarch's name, as it was customary, but could also be given the mother's family name. And despite this law, very few families seem eager to adopt this new procedure, for fear that people would think that there might be some story behind it and also that the children would be picked on for having a different family name to their father. This shows again that Confucianism still has a strong hold on the Korean society.

## 5. Conclusions

A key feature of the Korean identity is the centrality of the family. This means that the family strongly influences one's public and personal life. But throughout the last century, the size and structure of the family along with traditional patterns of cohabitation have been fundamentally transformed by *industrialization, urbanization, modernization* and *education* (Chung and Das Gupta, 2007).

As Chang (1993) contends, the process of **modernization**, which shaped the family structure, started in earnest after the Korean War (1950-1953), when the American soldiers helped the southern part of the peninsula. As we have seen from some of the fragments above, Korean people started marrying out of love, they opted for the nuclear family, while women became involved in industrial labour. All these indicated "a tendency to pursue change and progress at the expense of traditional values" (Chang 1993, 37). Westernization was based on three important phenomena. First, we have the spread of Christianity. The Christian missionaries (Catholic and Protestant) established schools for both boys and girls, taught the Korean people Western civilization, and also enabled some young Koreans to study abroad. The impact Christianity had on family was to change traditional customs such as the match-made marriage, the marriage ritual (many young couples nowadays marry in a Western style ceremony), as well as to abolish the concubine system. But these changes led to the decrease of kinship ties. The second element

which contributed to changes in the family institution was the establishment of modern law, which “prescribed the predominance of the individual over the family as the subject of a juristic right/duty” (Chang 1993, 43). Thus, the patriarchal family as an institution became weaker and weaker. What this meant was that sons did not have to support their elderly parents any longer and that they would not be responsible for carrying out the ancestral rituals. But, as expected in an Asian society, the modern law was favourable only to men, not to women. Women had no legal rights; they continued to depend on their husbands and sons. It took them quite a long time to gain legal rights as individual human beings, but the admirable thing is that they did that themselves. Finally, the last driving force that brought about changes in the Korean family is modern education. While traditional education was performed at home and was meant only for boys, modern education, being the responsibility of the government, encourages both boys and girls to study. Whereas traditional education focused on filial piety, meant to ensure family solidarity, modern education encouraged the academic development of the individual. The level of education achieved by each individual was extremely important in choosing a life partner. Many young women’s parents aimed at their daughters’ “marrying up”, i.e. finding a spouse with a higher degree of education, which would also ensure better living conditions to the newly-created family.

As far as the *industrialization* of the country is concerned, it started after the Korean War, when the country was in a dire situation. Textile factories and later on electric appliances factories appeared, which attracted people from the countryside. This also led to a mass migration from the rural to the urban areas and to the hiring of not only men, but also of women. This led to the slow disappearance of the stem family and the emergence of the nuclear one. As a result, the eldest daughters-in-law started having a better life, in the sense that they were not at the mercy of their in-laws, they were not “slaves” in their homes and they could dedicate more of their time to their husbands and children, even in those situations in which they also came to have a job of their own.

Returning to the first research question of this study (i.e. which aspects of the family institution underwent more changes), the analysis of the fragments revealed that due to the factors enumerated above, the women’s status and roles have been the ones that changed to a high extent. At the beginning of the 1980s, the Korean wives were quite different from their mothers and grandmothers in many respects. Nowadays, many women have jobs, they mingle with male colleagues, they try to navigate their way through family commitments and job expectations. Still, a great number of Korean women, despite having a university degree, decide to be housewives, to be in day-to-day care of their children’s

education and to administer the family's finances. Very often, they are in charge of social events that imply the participation of their entire families. One event, which is still the obligation of men, but which is not as strict as it used to be, is to lead the rituals that honor the ancestors.

As mentioned in the first section of the paper, filial piety for wives consisted in giving birth to sons, otherwise they could have been divorced or replaced with a concubine. Nowadays, birthing a son is not any longer a necessary condition for Korean wives to maintain their status. Moreover, if they are dissatisfied with their husbands' or in-laws' treatment, they have now the right to get divorced and to claim the custody of their children, which is one part of the changing situation of Korean women.

A century ago, developing and showing affection and love for each other was taboo in the family. Nowadays, young Korean couples are as romantic as their counterparts in other corners of the world, and it is not expected of men only to express their feelings, but even women can also do that freely.

Filial piety is still strong among the Koreans, who are committed to their extended families and relatives, but who "do not consider it necessary any longer to sacrifice themselves in order to serve them" (de Mente 2017, 621), as was the case of Min, Park's male character in the novel *This Burns My Heart*.

Despite the modernization of the country, many Koreans still hold on to traditional values such as son preference. Nevertheless, the demand for sex selection has disappeared completely. The reasons behind this are "the changes in family norms, the country's economic growth, and the improved status of women in society" (Rahm 2020, 148). In current Korea, where the birth rate hit a record low in 2021 (according to *Korea Times*, August 24<sup>th</sup> 2022, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/09/119\\_334961.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/09/119_334961.html)), the government is offering young couples all kinds of incentives to help increase natality. An example in this respect is the decision to provide parents of infants with the monthly sum of one million won as of 2024, in order to avoid a demographic crisis.

In conclusion, I would say that the traditional family institution in South Korea has been slowly challenged by the various socio-historical factors. What is important to add is that one should not regard these changes from the perspective of an individualistic Westerner, but rather from an Eastern collectivistic standpoint.

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