Industrialization and Mental Health in Korea

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Western sociologists have developed theories on social change and its impact on culture. Industrialization, urbanization, and modernization are the kinds of social change that it is most frequently debated would make a disruptive impact on culture. For example, it is said that such change would bring about the destruction of traditional value systems. People would be isolated and alienated. The differentiation of industries and increasing specialization of jobs would force each individual to be limited to doing on small part of the making of a product instead of permitting him/her to control the making of a complete product and have a sense of the whole. Nuclear families would increase in number; extended families, decrease. Among other things, the result would be that people would be surrounded more by strangers in unfamiliar places and the alienation process would lower individual self-esteem. Korea is indeed in the process of rapid change, of urbanization and industrialization. This is against a background of Korea's having maintained a strong Confucian value system with an effective family-centered tradition for thousands of years. Basically, I am trying to answer two main questions in this paper:

1. Would the changes in Korean society – industrialization and urbanization – uproot national and/or individual identity? Would urbanization dissolve the ties of extended families with a resulting increase in the number of nuclear families, or would Korea gain an image of itself as being a nuclear family nation? Should Korean people be and feel alienated in a society which is involved in the process of rapid industrialization? Should the western way of thinking related to all of the known sociological theories about the modernizing of a society be applicable in Korea? If not, what path should Korea follow, and what are the characteristics of the changes that we see in Korea that we do not see in western industrializing societies? Does Korea have her own unique problems arising from specific changes in her own culture?

2. Has the change in social structure due to industrialization and urbanization caused or modified individual psychopathology? Do we see any new psychiatric symptoms? Has social change increased certain symptoms? What about coping devices people have adopted? Do we see any social deviance that is causally related to the process of industrialization? Do we see more delinquents? Are there more drug addicts? More alcoholics?

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

In the last two decades, Korea has made great progress in the economic realm. The GNP per capita was $1,406 in 1978. This rose to $2,000 in 1984. The national annual growth rate was reported to be 7.5% in 1984. Despite strong government control, the rate of population growth has been explosive. In 1970, Korea had a total population of 31,000,000. In 1986, the population reached 41,000,000. In 1968, president Park Chung Hee initiated the construction of the first two-lane highway between Seoul and Pusan. The total length of the highway was 428 km. In 1976, Korea had 10,912 km of paved highways; in 1984, 23,664 km. The construction of highways has changed the form of the nation, it has decreased the size of the nation (100,000 sq km) to a size even smaller. The urban population has increased greatly in the last two decades, e.g., 5,535,000 people lived in Seoul in 1970, and 8,364,000 in 1980. It is now approaching 10 million.

Urbanization is a very obvious phenomenon. In 1978, the total number of farm households was 2,161,000 a number which declined to 1,973,000 in 1984. A total of 208,000 farm households disappeared in five years. During the same five-year period, the farm population decreased by 1,868,000. Many young farm hands move to big cities, thus changing their lifestyles greatly. Statistics also show that the ratio of nuclear families to extended families has dropped, as was predicted. The lifestyle of city dwellers has changed drastically. For example, there were 50,000 privately owned cars in Korea in 1975. In 1984, the number went up to 364,000, approximately a sevenfold in-
increase. The streets of Seoul, in fact, the shape of the entire city also, have changed dramatically. People who went abroad to live ten years ago are somewhat lost upon their return to the city. The changes have been incredibly rapid. (Kor. Stat. Yearbook 1985)

THE CHANGES AND THEIR IMPACTS

Urbanization

The migration of farmers into big cities has been a problem. Farm communities are now short of working hands, particularly of young workers, for many have already left villages for big cities to find jobs. An average farm household income was approximately $6,500 a year in 1984. Compared with what it costs to farm, and considering the hard labor involved, this is a very small amount. Since most of the farmers owe money to banks and to the government, they must rely on side incomes. Growing vegetables the year around in vinyl greenhouses has helped to increase their income. They raise animals for extra income, but this is not an effective enterprise due to the hopeless competition they face against big industries that own bigger, modernized animal farms. Naturally, a young man in the country looks for a better future and opportunities in the city. This trend will continue. Such migration of people to the cities has broken extended families into nuclear families, but because of the small size of the country it has not scattered people long distances apart.

Moreover, modernization has diminished the size of the country. Between Pusan and Seoul, for example, there are shuttle service flights every thirty minutes during commuting hours, and every hour for the rest of the day. The flight time is fifty minutes. There are several commercial bus lines which have buses departing every fifteen minutes between the two cities. Naturally, people still feel close because of a readily available means of transportation. Although many extended family households have separated into smaller units, frequently those units actually are located within the same city. For these reasons, urbanization has not resulted in geographically wide separations of families and the closeness of a big family has been maintained to a degree. People do not complain of being away from their extended families. I even wonder if such distancing has not improved their relationships. Young conjugal families are proud of their independence, as are the parents who can afford to manage multiple households, the accomplishing of which is a symbol of family prosperity.

Traditions

Farmers in Korea still rely on the lunar calendar for planting and other farm work. The members of the younger generation and older city dwellers as well do not follow the lunar system. Such important days as New Year’s Day, Choosuk (15 August), Borum (15 January) are, however, remembered and celebrated. It is interesting to note that people in the 1960s did not celebrate the lunar holidays as much as they do nowadays: the government prohibited the celebration of lunar New Year’s Day at that time. Families celebrated lunar holidays privately on a small scale. But now in the 1980s, things are quite different: people don traditional dress and get together with relatives. Bus tickets must be purchased far in advance. Extra buses, chartered by industries, and even the government, are mobilized to carry the respective company and government employees for the occasion. These days are designated as official holidays, or as semi-official days off. The government, in fact, encourages people to participate in traditional ceremonies. Ancestor worship and paying respect to parents on their memorial day is a common practice, regardless of one’s religion. Industrialization and separation of families has not caused the loss of traditions. In fact, old customs and rituals have come back strongly, perhaps with new meaning.

Family structure

Goode hypothesized that industrialization should (1) increase the number of families, (2) decrease the number of extended families, and (3) cause the numbers within a family to decrease. (Goode 1964). The family types that he considered reflected traditional family values and behaviors. To demonstrate that they are right, of course, the theory requires statistical back up. Paul Kwong, collecting his data in Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore, tried to test part of Goode’s hypothesis: industrialization increases the number of nuclear families. Analyzed, that data failed to show that part of Goode’s hypothesis to be correct. (Kor. Instit. for Population and Health 1982).

But data compiled by the government census bureau in Korea indicated that Goode was right. In 1960, 60% of the total number of families were nuclear families; by 1970, up to 72% were. The percentage of extended families dropped from 37 to 27 during that ten-year period. In 1970, the average number of persons per Korean household was 3.35, a figure which dropped to 4.62 in 1980. Thus, statistically, Goode’s hypothesis was supported by Korean data. Now, the next question is an ideological one. We

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simply do not yet have the means with which to evaluate the impact of the changes on family concept. The relationship between this actual increase in the number of nuclear families and the self concept of Koreans seeing their society characterized by a big family structure needs further clarification.

In my view, the self-image of being a society with the traditional big-family system has not been destroyed in Korean society, despite the decrease in the number of big households. The geographical situation of Korea might be one of the factors. More fundamentally, the increase in the number of nuclear families and the decrease in the number of extended families has not affected the psychological make-up of the family structure.

Thus far, it seems that the rapid economic growth and modernization of Korea has not deeply affected traditional mindset. Possibly, the expansion, the increase in goods, has modernized Korean society only in appearance. Such growth, a growth so expansive in nature, may not yet constitute a true transformation of this society. What the industrialization has truly done to Korean society, how it has affected its potential and future development, has not yet been established. In that sense, Korea may have become modernized, but it may not have developed a self-image to match reality. It appears that the family structure has changed, but the traditional values and ideological concept of the old Korean family system have not.

Korean family system: values and concepts

To understand the Korean family, the following historical perspectives are important:

1. The Korean family has a long history of family-centered lifestyle dating back over four thousand years. A strong religious background of Confucian teaching during the Lee dynasty solidified the core of patriarchal tradition. In this teaching, loyalty to the king and devotion and respect to one’s parents are the two primary virtues. Of the two, devotion to one’s parents takes precedence.

2. Family-centered interpersonal values originate from the concept of Hyo (孝), devotion to parents. Therefore, a family maintains its harmony and integrity as well as its strength by this philosophical backbone. The value of Hyo, the devotion to parents, pervades every segment of society, including both religious and secular sectors to form a unique traditional Korean culture.

3. Until Christianity was introduced into Korea in the 19th century, every segment of Korean society was indoctrinated in Confucian teaching, which served as a religion.

4. During the thirty-six years of Japanese domination, the traditional family value system was neither properly challenged nor evaluated.

5. Then came the era of modernization and the industrialization of the ’60s and ’70s. It came so rapidly that the conflict of the traditional values of the family system and the rationalism of modern consciousness did not have the opportunity to clash with full impact. Instead, the traditional thought, that we, as a family, should be together was altered and updated to a new materialistic promise that is a common goal of an industrialized society. The new slogan is thus, we, as individual family members should all live well altogether. Today, the traditional family-centered consciousness is very strong among Koreans. Take for example any big industry in Korea. You find the control of such family-oriented forces behind the management of the corporation. The unity you detect comes from a unity of blood, or family, relationship. In addition to this family-oriented unity, the sense of achievement and performance, the two elements of success in an industrialized society, reinforce the growth of the family. The family slogan is “Let’s make strides and live well.” The motivation comes from a desire for the prosperity of the family. If one asks a woman who works in a factory why she works, the most likely answer she/he receives is “I work to save money so that my son (or brother) can go to college.” Many bosses of big industries urge their employees to unite and work hard, “after all we are a big family.”

Alienation and anomie

In recent years, there has been a strong trend in support of the search for the roots and traditions in Korea. Intellectuals, students, and other young people lead the way in stressing Korean national identity “we must find our roots and keep them,” they say. They reject the kinds of influence that have come from outside. Radicals even shout, “Yankee, go home!” These voices are getting louder. The government, that has adopted more western views in the past, has shifted its policy. It claims that we have to have laws and systems that are suitable for Koreans. We can not simply copy western systems. The search for Korean identity is a common theme of literature, art, and other culture activities today.

I believe that such trends reflect the increasing sensitivity of people to the changes accompanying industrialization. We may be witnessing the way in which the whole society is trying to cope with the changes. The social structure is changing rapidly toward segmentation, specialization, bureaucratic
controls, and an emphasis on technical advancement. People sense the changes, uncertainties, possible isolation, alienation; and experience a loss of respect for the norms of society (anomie). People are anxious, tired, lonely, and strained. Where can they turn, naturally? They turn to the traditional home, or the concept of home, in order to rest, hide, and reduce their stress. They want to feel more at home. As I mentioned before, the family unit has been a communal body for centuries. It dwells deep in the heart of Korean people as a cultural resource. Now it has been remobilized as a resource for people who are looking for balance in order to cope with the tensions of rapid industrialization. Experiences with tension that come from rapid social change have also turned people to traditional religious structures to reduce that tension.

Democratization and equalization

President Syngman Rhee of the first republic was indeed a strong patriarchal figure. He was literally called the national father. He held tremendous power and control, all centralized. He demanded the absolute obedience of his people. The leadership of President Park Chung Hee of the third republic was characterized by a strong anti-communist stance. He held centralized power and ruled the country with strict authority. President Park engineered a nationwide move toward industrialization, emphasizing the economic independence of Korea, and the moving away from an American aid-oriented, dependent economic system. To justify the economic independence, he stressed the establishment of a foundation of Korean national identity, a foundation on which “we can build a free democratic system.” This was neither a free democratic system nor a true nationalistic conservative ideology. President Park personally held power and control, and he used it from his office, ignoring the functions of other executive branches. His office became the powerhouse, and the government bureaus served only to supplement his orders. Again, strong patriarchal control was the essence of his government. An authoritarian government with that much power was only possible because it was based on the traditional patriarchal family system with conservative concepts of loyalty to the king and devotion to one’s parents.

In spite of rapid industrialization and modernization, Korea has been delayed in its development, because of the purposeful inhibition of democracy. Korea must improve the quality of people’s lives. It must develop systems that decentralize power. Local communities must recover their autonomy so that they are able to function and fulfill their potential. The improvement of lives of people of one class does not guarantee democracy. Korea needs a new middle class of citizens who are capable of being involved in democratic processes and responsible for them. People need new interpersonal relationships and experiences that will awaken them so that they are able to truly appreciate the values of human rights. Recently, however, we have begun to hear the voices of intellectuals, church members, students, consumers, and labor union members. In Hi Sup, in his The Structural Changes of Korean Society stated that “modernization brought changes of society in the direction of democracy, industrialization, urbanization, and equalization. Consequently, cultural directions moved from collectivism to individualism, where individual self and rights are realized and idealized. This also implies that the political structure heads toward democracy in a broad sense, the economic structure toward industrialization, the morphological structure toward urbanization, and the cultural structure toward individualism and the expansion of self.” He concluded by commenting that what we see today is an imbalance, primarily due to the great amount of speed with which change has taken place within the last two decades: “A tension has been created between the developmental value systems of industrialization and those of democratization and equalization. There also has developed an imbalance between urban and rural. Because the rich have become richer, the polarization of stratifications has worsened. The maldistribution of wealth has increased, resulting in the dissociation of social structure and value systems. Social elites who managed systems were unable to catch up with the speed of social differentiation because of their inadequacies in managing skills and their lack of experience” (In 1982). Needless to say, society now demands a balance of power, equal rights for its members, and a true democratic process.

INDUSTRIALIZATION AND MENTAL DISORDERS

Unfortunately, I have been able to find no systematic study in which the impact of industrialization or urbanization on mental disorders in Korea has been measured, although there have been a few psychiatric epidemiological studies in which urban and rural populations have been compared.

Thus far, I have found no specific or unusual psychiatric symptom or disorder that I can relate to the process of industrialization. There is an interesting
report on the prevalence of somatization disorders, the rate of which is high in Korea (2.1%). It shows no significant difference, however, between urban and rural populations (Lee et al. 1985).

We have always had problems of drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, adult crime, and other forms of social deviance, and the magnitude of these problems has remained unchanged during the last two decades.

Two recent epidemiological studies have revealed that the prevalence rate of alcoholism is high (22.2% and 16%) among Korean adults (Lee et al. 1985; Lee et al. 1985).

CONCLUSION

1. Urbanization is an obvious phenomenon in Korea with marked decrease of farm households in last ten years. Urbanization has dissolved extended families with a resulting increase of nuclear families. Statistically, the number of extended families has decreased, whereas the number of nuclear families increased in last ten years.

2. The changes of Korean society, urbanization and industrialization, have not affected the psychological make-up of family structure. Today, the traditional family-centered consciousness is very strong among Koreans. Modernization of Korea has not deeply affected traditional mindset of people.

3. In recent years, there has been a strong trend of stressing Korean national identity. Old traditional customs and rituals have come back strongly. The search for Korean identity is a common theme of literature, art, and other cultural activities.

4. The emphasis of national identity reflects the increasing sensitivity of people to the rapid changes of industrialization. The change of social structure – specialization, segmentation, technical advancement and bureaucratic control – has created uncertainties, anxiety, alienation, isolation and a sense of loss of people. Naturally, people turn to traditional home, or a concept of home, in order to rest, to feel secure and to reduce their stress. The family unit has been a communal body for people for centuries.

5. Now, Korean people need an improvement of the quality of life. The society, therefore, now demands a balance of power, equal rights of its members, and a true democratic process.

6. Thus far, there was no study in which the impact of industrialization on mental disorders has been measured in Korea. There is a need for a well designed longitudinal study to clarify this question.

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