

Commentary

Halma-Shock: The Shadow of Korean Familism and the Sociocultural Construction of Grandmother-Motherhood by Kim Hee-Kyoung

Giuseppina De Nicola*

In this paper, titled *Halma-Shock: The Shadow of Korean Familism and the Sociocultural Construction of Grandmother-Motherhood*, Kim Hee-Kyoung analyzes the grandparents' role "as agents who oversee the parenting of their grandchildren." Specifically, the article looks at the emerging role of *halma* (a combination of *halmoni*, grandmother, and *omma*, mother) "who undertake intensive mothering of their grandchildren despite not being their mothers."

In order to better understand the spread of this new phenomenon, the author relies on the concept of familism, which explains many phenomena in Korean society. In the language of sociology, familism is a tendency to consider the family and kin as predominant over the rights of the individual and the interests of the community. Political and social changes have given new meaning to familism. Postmodernism and post-materialism are terms used to address this transformation; today familism implies a revival of the importance attached to the family, even as it exemplifies a new understanding of family relations. Familism is the term used to encompass the more widespread everyday conviction that the family is important, and that

* Assistant Professor, Italian Institute of Oriental Studies, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy.

there is a need to promote programs to defend family health and institutions. South Korean familism combines the acceptance of traditional family relations and the postmodern conception of personal relationships, which has a narcissistic individualism component, an individualism that transcends the family context in which Tocqueville (1835) situated modern individualism. I believe that in this sense, South Korean familism relates *inversely* with the concept of *interpersonal trust* mentioned in studies conducted by Almond and Verba (1963, 1980) and reconsidered by Inglehart (1977, 1990).¹ It is then possible to speak of a third meaning for the term familism. It refers to an attitude of confidence and moral compromise exclusively with members of the family group. This definition derives mainly from the concept of *amoral familism*, a behavioral pattern found in traditional countries with a less-developed economy and a historical experience of domination (Banfield 1958). It implies establishing loyalty and cooperation ties only with those who belong to one's own family group. If interpersonal trust attitudes lead to association with others and having confidence in them to establish goals, familism implies support and reserve in one's own group. If interpersonal trust means opening towards the outside and depending on that outside, familism implies dependency on the family group and reserve inside this group. In sum, interpersonal trust is an indispensable condition, although not the only one, in forming secondary associations, a basic requirement to trespass the barriers of the primary group and be able to establish ties and obligations with those who are different from one's own group.

As Kim explains, grandparents are involved in their grandchildren's upbringing because, on the one hand, adequate public childcare support is lacking; in particular, there are few childcare facilities available to working parents. On the other hand, parents lack confidence in the alternative of turning to babysitters because they are unreliable and, above all, they are "not bound to the family blood." This behavioral pattern confirms the impact of *amoral familism* on beliefs related to the conception of family organization in Korea.

The paper also points out that familism had a huge effect on mothering. South Korea has embraced, as much as other industrialized countries, the

¹ Following Almond and Verba (1963), interpersonal trust refers to a favorable general attitude towards other people; a tendency to perform and choose social activities that involve other people; and high esteem for generosity and trust as personality traits.

ideology of “intensive mothering.” Intensive mothering has three key tenets, as Hays (1996: 122–129) argues. First, it demands that women continue to be the primary, central caregivers of children: “There is an underlying assumption that the child absolutely requires consistent nurture by a single primary caretaker and that the mother is the best person for the job. When the mother is unavailable, it is other women who should serve as temporary substitutes.” Second, intensive mothering requires mothers to lavish copious amounts of time and energy on their children. Indeed, Hays argues, intensive mothering is “construed as child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive.” Third, intensive mothering takes a logic that separates mothering from professional paid work, which supports the notion that children and the work of mothering are completely outside the scope of market valuation because children are now considered innocent, pure, and “priceless,” deserving special treatment due to their special value within the private sphere of the family. The patriarchal institution of motherhood has exploited the tenets of the intensive mothering ideology. The fear of being labeled a “bad” mother has driven Korean mothers to strive for unrealistic goals, which reinforce the ideology of intensive mothering. “Superwoman,” “helicopter mom,” “manager mom,” “tiger mom,” and “kangaroo mom” were just few of the neologisms that started to circulate in South Korea from the 1990s onwards to define mothers who had to take care of their children’s education. “The importance of properly educating one’s children was further cemented as part of mothering,” as Kim Heekyoung underlines.

In contemporary South Korean society, *halma* are trapped between familism and intensive mother ideology. A growing number of children are being raised by their grandparents as the number of double-income families is rising. “According to statistics, in Korea, 50 percent of working parents leave their children with their grandparents for daycare. This increased to 63.8 percent in 2016, which reflects that six in 10 double-income families heavily rely on the grandparents to look after their children” (Bae 2018).

Over four years (2014–2018), the author conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews with *halma* to explore the context in which their identity as grandmother-mother is constructed. Among Kim’s important findings is that South Korean familism has taken the form of *utilitarianistic familism*. This type of familism prioritizes familial interests, utilitarianistic considerations in the structuring of intrafamilial relationships,

utilitarianistic recruitment of familial members and the dilution of authority relationships between family members. *Halma* is being used as main caretaker for her grandchildren by their parents. The shifting from grandmother role to that of main caretaker has limited her status within the use of patriarchal gender norms: she must fulfill her sense of responsibility and at the same time live with her sense of guilt, as much as the ideology of “intense mothering” requires. At the same time, she often faces criticism from younger mothers for her way of educating the children and, at the same time, she criticizes their parenting methods. Parents today are also impacted by changes that see society as a set of independent subjects who show solidarity only with their present experiences. Postmodern individualism is quite extreme. It is a sense of independence from one’s ancestors and descendants as well as from the rest of society. It reduces the temporal perspective to exclusively autobiographical limits. In this context, on one side, young parents need their parents, but, on the other, they basically refuse their legacy. I believe that we can define the current South Korean familism as *duty-bound familism*. Today the South Korean family still depends on its members, who develop their expectations and life projects reflecting the external trends but subordinate them to family needs. This situation will continue until structural changes diminish the mediating role of classical identification groups, such as the family. Confucian familism, instrumental familism, affectionate familism, and individualistic familism co-exist in South Korea, and South Korean families navigate diverse traditional, modern, postmodern, and global social trends.

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