

# **Restructuring the Family in the Context of Modernity and Globalization: A Sociological View of the Japanese Family Today**

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## **Keyword**

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## **Abstract**

The family has been the most significant subject of enquiry in sociology over many decades, although the family has been reconstructed by globalization. A sociological theory of globalization must necessarily consider both global integration and local differentiation. For instance, discussions about compressed modernity emphasize the plurality of modernity because of the different historical and cultural contexts of each society. At the local level, the nation-state has continued to play a dominant role in relation to the institutional and ideological construction of the family system. Functions that were hitherto part of the family system are being reconstructed within the global system. This paper reviews recent debates about the transformation of the family in modern Asia in reference to social systems theory, and proposes a theoretical agenda about the reconstruction of the Japanese family today.

## **1. Introduction**

The family is one of the most substantial social systems in the analysis of modern society. To understand its characteristics, the pre-modern family was thought to be a comparatively inclusive system of many functions in an orderly hierarchical social structure, which was reconstructed in the course of modernization. The process of functional differentiation, however, reformed the family system into a more limited and smaller functional social system, as Durkheim introduced the concept of organic solidarity in the new modern industrial society (Durkheim 1984=1893).

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Former family systems, such as kinship, clan, lineage, totems, and ancestor worship in pre-modern society were examples of a multi-functional system that represented society as a whole to the members within it. Belonging to the family, for the individual in the past, was perceived as belonging to the tangible small society that demonstrated multiple functions in relation to other family members.

The functional approach to the study of the modern family aims to identify the ways in which the family system is an integral part of the modern social system, through a range of investigations. These include identifying the unique functions that are given to the modern family system and maintained within it; understanding how the functions of the system are altered in times of social change; and what problems or malfunctions emerge within it. Furthermore, the functional approach has demonstrated how the family system is re-integrated into other systems in a series of structural couplings. For instance, the modern family system is coupled functionally with the legal, educational, and economic systems. Consequently, the family system is implemented structurally through national and private institutions such as social security, the educational system, and public health assistance. Talcott Parsons, in his theory of the social system, identified the family as a prime system for producing one's personality (Parsons et al. 1955). In his theory, the modern family is functionally differentiated as a unique sub-system that is especially responsible for the initial socialization of individuals in modern industrial society. It is the system where individuals internalize the basic social norms that are necessary to sustain the modern social system.

Parsons' radical theorization of the sociology of family led to considerable theoretical elaboration in the mid-20th century. However, it was also much exposed to scrutiny, because of its assumptive reductionism (based on the western nuclear family) and its normative characteristics which are difficult to integrate with the more dynamic social change of the second half of the last century. For instance, there are common critiques that Parsons' theory of the social system unlikely integrates everyday social change and its diversity (Luhmann et al. 2013=2002), and normalized the gender division of labor in the family (Kanbara 2001). Social theory today needs to accommodate ongoing social change and dynamic relations among social systems. Even today, the family system is an independent social system maintaining its individual functions, but the system functions by coupling with/decoupling from other social systems, contingent upon social circumstances at each stage. Most importantly, one must be aware that those structural couplings will occur beyond cultural or national boundaries through globalization. In so doing, one can also

enquire into the functional differentiations (or changes) that can be observed in a comparison between similar social systems in different modern societies (e.g., Asian and western societies). To what degree can one find a common theoretical agenda of globalization in modern societies, considering regional differences? Family systems are systematically differentiated by regional or national differences, but they also experience common social processes through borderless globalization.

This paper proposes issues for future debates on the Japanese family today in reference to social systems theory. In addition, the paper considers contemporary globalization (Robertson 1992) in its theoretical exploration of the Japanese family in the course of modernization. Since Niklas Luhmann controversially elaborated social systems theory in the last few decades of the 20th century (Luhmann 1995=1987), social systems theory's functional approach still requires examination in the context of globalization. Meanwhile, national boundaries continue to be crucial in restructuring both institutional and organizational systems in society, while a national social system's functional components may be partially but radically reconstructed through national-regional boundaries.

Initially, the paper reviews the idea of "compressed modernity" in order to characterize the unique legacy of institutional structures and ideological aspects of family systems in (East) Asia. Compared with the idea of family in western societies, the family in Asia has a strong ideological and institutional linkage with national systems. The comparative analysis of the family in Asia demonstrates that there are varied consequences of structural differentiation in modern society. Social theory has seldom been concerned about this issue. However, referring to "traditional" family values in Asia is an inadequate description of the differences between Asia and the West, since Asian "tradition" is mostly a discursive construction at the time of the introduction of western modernity to Asia. It was particularly the case in the course of the building of modern nation-state in the region. Such "traditional" family cultures are unlikely to be the reason modernity in Asia today has resulted in alternative family systems from western societies. Finally, the paper discusses a possible approach to debating the reconstruction of the Japanese family today. There is an argument that compressed modernity is applicable to the characteristics of the modern Japanese family, in relation to nuanced cultural and social differences from other Asian societies. After reviewing this argument, the paper amends it to say that the institutional understanding of the Japanese family within the national frame has a considerable impact on the current reconstruction of the Japanese family. It is also necessary to understand changes in

the family in the light of its functional re-formation at the global level, in structural re- and decoupling with social functions beyond national borders.

## **2. Compressed Modernity in Asia**

The family has been the most popular mechanism used to describe regional cultures and traditions across the world, and comparative studies have also characterized modern family systems, which emerged after the shift from traditional society to modern industrial society. However, there is an argument that this comparative-historical approach should be scrutinized in the Asian context, for it is reasonable to say that, regardless of regional differences, modernization in Asia is a result of the complex entanglement between traditional Asia and the modern West. In Asia, trajectories of modernization are historically different from western societies, and this warrants careful articulation in sociological theory. In addition to these historical complexities, globalization, through its advanced (and rapid) transnational social systems such as economics, politics, and cultures, has recently affected societies across geographical and national boundaries. Our “sociological imagination” (Mills and Gitlin 2000) as to family, is now necessarily elaborated in such circumstances.

Generally speaking, social theories are constructed on the assumptions of a modernized society, and these theories are apt to explain the development of modernity as a linear transformation from pre-modern to modern. For instance, in the early stages, one remembers Durkheim’s notable theory of modernization (in Europe) as a replacement of mechanical solidarity with organic solidarity, and the development of individualism. In his “Division of labor in society” Durkheim (1984=1893) identified functionally differentiated social organizations, and noted that this process resulted in the development of structural individualization in society, on the premise of the growth of individualism among society’s members. Recent theories of late modernity or second modernity are likely to assume the further development of individualism (Ulrich Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). For example,

Individualization is a compulsion, albeit a paradoxical one, to create, to stage manage, not only one’s own biography but the bounds and networks surrounding it and to do this amid changing preferences and at successive stages of life while constantly adoption to the condition of the labor market, the educational system, and the welfare state and so on (Beck

and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:4).

It would be axiomatic to say that the idea of institutionalized individualism has been widely recognized in the theory of modernity since Durkheim. The progress of modernity is an ideological development of individualism as the basic structure of society. Modernity also reconstructs all social institutions (e.g., education, law, and social security etc.) at the individual level.

However, Chang Kyung-Sup questions the relevance of the theory of modernization in the Asian context, arguing an experience of “compressed modernity.” He explains:

Compressed modernity is a social situation in which economic, political and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner with respect to both time and space, and in which the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements leads to the construction and reconstitution of highly complex and fluid social system. (...) Compressed modernity can be manifested at various levels of human experiences – e.g. personhood, family, secondary organizations, and urban spaces, as well as social units (including civil society, nation. etc.) (Chang 2014=2013:38-39).

Actually, time-space compression is a common trend in the development of modernity (Giddens 1990), and this argument leads us to deeper insights into modernity. First, it denotes modernity as a comprehensive process of functional differentiation in society, regardless of its geographic and historical differences. Second, the process of functional differentiation is more complex than the linear process of modernization assumed in early social theories. Accordingly, there is a possibility that “[I]ndividualization has thereby taken place irrespective of the formation of individualism as its spiritual and cultural basis” (Chang 2014=2013:38). Articulating this perspective in the concept of compressed modernity, Chang expresses the perception of the family in South Korea today, as the rise of what he calls individualization without individualism. He comments, “[I]t is essential to note that *defamiliation*, risk-averse individualization, and demographic individualization do not have to be preceded by positive individualism as a generic social culture” (Chang 2014=2013:41). In compressed modernity, individualization does not always accompany individualism in the development of institutionalized individualization, as noted by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) as an essential component in the development of modernity in Europe. It could be the case that, in social systems theory, individualism in western

modernity can be structured as a symbolic medium that enables communication between systems.

Through the discussion about compressed modernity in South Korea and potentially in other Asian societies, Chang attempts to differentiate modernization in the following ways. First, in considering the different trajectories of the building of modern nation-states in Asia, he insists that modernization is by no means a single linear process of the development of individualism. While he agrees the idea that individualization is a common characteristic of modernization, he regards individualism as a symbolic medium uniquely developed in European (western) modernity. Instead, referring to the advent of “institutionalized familialism” or “family-centered modernity” in South Korea (Chang 2014=2013:42), he demonstrates how the idea of family has engaged with the reproductive ideology of nation-building (e.g., as a supplemental institution that substitutes for possible national welfare schemes, such as exist in western societies). This has resulted in the growth of a sense of individualization without individualism. Consequently, ideological individualism has never been a part of the modern familial or national-institutional structure in South Korea, although individualization has increased. Chang concludes that the growth of individualization as risk aversion, as well as *defamilialism* in South Korean society, is a reflection of compressed modernity. Second, South Korea and Asia have had different relationships to globalization from the late 20th century. The theory of compressed modernity stresses that Asian societies, South Korea in particular, have experienced a compressed transformation from the first modernity to the second. According to Beck and Lau (2005), the second (or late) modernity is characterized as a further development of the individualism that is necessary as a cosmopolitan collectivism against oppressive global forces (e.g., growth of sub-politics in global society in his argument). Late modernity appears in society after the adequate conditions of reflection of modern individuals in the first modernity. In contrast to the evolutionary process of modernity, these compressed circumstances provide an explanation for the fact that the construction of the modern welfare state on a national basis (a goal primarily of western societies) has been overtaken by the shift to neoliberal national reform in the course of globalization.<sup>1</sup>

### **3. Familialism: Traditional Asian Value or Modern Family Ideology?**

There is a common understanding that Asian societies are traditionally family-oriented

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussions of Asian modernity, see chapters in Ochiai and Hosoya (2014=2013) and Beck et al. (2011). The theoretical relevance of compressed modernity is explored further in these texts.

compared with western societies. However, this conventional idea of the “traditional” Asian family needs to be scrutinized in the context of modernization in Asia. Ochiai (2014) asserts that Asian families in general tend to be characterized by *familialism*, in contrast to the modern western family. In this context, Asian families are family oriented, rather than individualistic (Ochiai 2014=2013:79). Asian society is a collective of families, rather than a society of modern individuals (ibid.). For example, there is a strong family-oriented tendency in society. Family norms and collectives have first priority ahead of other social collectives, such as the economic or political collectives that highlight the division of labor in modern society (Durkheim 1984=1893). Second, familialism is often considered as a type of ideological conservatism that remains in modern society, in contradistinction to radical social change, or the liberal democracy of modern society. Third, this term is used to stress the idea that all collectives and structures of society are represented through familial norms and language. For example, this view is significant in the description of Japan’s “ie” system, and the pre-war patriarchal nationalism of the Emperor system. Even after the war, Japanese companies were characterized as large families because of the policies of lifetime employment and generous welfare for employees.

However, Ochiai argues that this familialism does not come from Japan’s cultural traditions. She also disputes the view that Asian familialism is rooted in Asia’s western modernization since the 19th century. Citing several studies of the history of modern families in Asia, she concludes that there is no single shared culture common to the entire Asian region (Ochiai 2014=2013:79). Given so-called familialism exists in Asian societies, nuanced definitions are needed across the region. Further, the discourse of familialism in society can be seen to some extent in the writings of every society of the world, such as western European societies in early modern time, East and South European society, and even Islamic society today. Most importantly, modern welfare states (particularly in early stages of development) include welfare in national policy, and provide support to family units, rather than on an individual basis. In this policy, the gender division of labor and care for aging remain family concerns. In particular, comparative research on national welfare schemes in modern states demonstrates that this welfare system was formally dominant in southern Europe and East Asia, and produced the present predicament of low birthrates due to the persistence of the gender division of labor in society (Esping-Anderson in Ochiai 2014=2013:79). For this reason, it should be apparent that ostensibly traditional family values or familialism cannot adequately explain the cause of regional differences in modernities. Familialism may be a product of modernization, regardless of the period.

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In the previous section, Chang identified the historical differences between Asia and the West in the course of modernization. He argued that, as a result, Asian societies now face the reconstruction of social system in compressed modernity. There are several arguments in response to Chang's use of compressed modernity to explain the difference between Asian nations and their western counterparts. Some argue that Chang's emphasis on historical differences in each society calls for further theoretical elaboration (Ochiai 2014=2013; Yui 2011). Instead of pointing out historical differences in modern societies, as briefly discussed at the end of the previous section, social systems theory provides another theoretical explanation, based on the integration of different modernities, without the reduction of differences among them. This approach, which is a variant of modernities, suggests that contingent structural couplings occurred differently to each regional organizational system (e.g., the state). Social systems theory describes society as the social system that involves the possibility of meaningful communication, and society is sustained insofar as communication among social systems takes place, in conjunction with earlier communication, or in reference to subsequent communication (Luhmann 1989-1986:146). In this sense, a social system is understood functionally, not institutionally. It is a set of meanings that draw a distinction from the environment, reducing the complexity of the world (Luhmann 1989=1986:17). Each functional social system, coupling structurally, keeps a chain of communication with others. These structural couplings in society are reflexive, contingent upon coupling with others in the social environment, which explains why social change and its diversity routinely occur, sustaining particular structures, or modes of communication.

This theory provides a different understanding of Asian modernity than compressed modernity. Beyond geographic or historical differences in each society, societies today comprise a coherent social system in the context of globalization as its functional basis. In the globalized world, there are technically uncountable possibilities for communication among social systems. In this global *Gesellschaft*, all possible instances of communication are different modes of contingent structural couplings. On that basis, the present family system may have been created from *autopoietic* self-reproduction. In western societies, this particular functional system has maintained communication during the last few decades with other social systems such as law, education, politics etc. through individualism as a symbolic medium for communication. Thus, social systems theory may include social differentiation (compressed modernity or Asian modernity) and integration (modern industrialization and contemporary globalization) within a coherent theoretical framework. Given that historical differences among societies can

be interpreted as different trajectories of communication among social systems, the different experience of modernity in the age of globalization can also be theorized as a consequence of contingent functional differentiations and structural couplings in societies.

#### **4. The Japanese Family in (Semi) Compressed Modernity**

As discussed above, in many Asian societies the alleged traditional cultures and ideas of the family were invented (or created) in the encounter with western modernization, rather than existing historically. That is, the apparently “traditional” values of the family in Asian societies (including Japan), are a result of compressed modernity. Debates about the family today lead us the following points of inquiry about the (re)construction of the family. Further, situating compressed modernity in the debate about modernization naturally draws our attention to its linkage with the most remarkable social change in our modernity: globalization.

It is feasible to say that the family in Japan today has been constructed in the process of modernization. However, in order to describe the modern family in Japan, it is increasingly important to identify the Japanese context of modernization, with its different socio-historical contexts, as well as its cultural traditions (Koyama 1995). Further, even in the age of globalization today, as Robertson argued in the late 20th century when globalization was in its infancy, it provides us with regional integration (literal globalization) and differentiation (the facilitation of the growth of new local cultures). Considering socio-historical conditions, how is the family being reconstructed between the national and the global spheres? The decline of fertility rates and the rise of risk-averse individualization in the family are distinctive family trends. Is it necessary to include them in a coherent social theory of differentiated modernities and integrative globalization?

Chang elaborated his theory of compressed modernity to discuss the family in contemporary South Korea, although he attempted to apply it to Japan as another Asian case (Chang 2014=2013:57). Compressed modernity is a very useful concept in examining modernity and the family in other Asian societies. In the same book, which includes comparative studies of families in Asia in modern times, Emiko Ochiai argues for an alternative understanding of modernity and its outcome for Asian families. Investigating common trends such as the decline of fertility rates in East Asian states, she finds that the trajectories of modernization in (East) Asia call for a new theoretical assumption to be explored (Ochiai 2014=2013:67). To do so, she examines different

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periods during the rise of the modern family in each state, focusing on the different timing of fertility decline in Europe and Asia. While the first decline to lower fertility rates took place in Europe between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the first Asian decline occurred in the 1970s and 80s, although Japan experienced it earlier, in the 1950s. Fertility rates next declined in Europe at the end of 1960s, and Japan in the mid-70s.<sup>2</sup> In order to explain the different sense of modernity represented by this gap between Europe and Asia, Ochiai introduces the idea of compressed modernity, which produced different outcomes from modernity in Asia, to explain why the time between the first and second waves of fertility rate decline was shorter in Asian societies than in their western counterparts (Ochiai 2014=2013:69).

Nevertheless, while compressed modernity is likely a common experience in (East) Asian societies, Ochiai notes that Japan's modernization occurred in a different manner than in the rest of Asia. She states:

If we think of the period between these two fertility declines – when fertility was stable and at around the replacement level – as the golden age of modernity, then the length of this period was about 50 years in Europe, 20 years in Japan, and almost nonexistent in the rest of East Asia (...) From the demographic point of view, we can see very clearly the compression of modernity that Chang Kyung-Sup pointed out. Areas in Asia outside Japan have gone through this compressed modernity, while Japan having a “semi-compressed modernity,” and this provides an explanation for the experiences these regions would later undergo (Ochiai 2014=2013:68-69).

In addition to her assertion of a different experience of compressed modernity in Japan, Ochiai explores differentiated compressed modernities by examining the functions of (East) Asian families in relation to patterns of childcare and elder care provision (Ochiai 2014=2013:83). Her team's research in six countries in East Asia revealed different structural couplings of the family system with other social systems. In particular, in several societies, such as Singapore and Taiwan, the family system is strongly integrated with the economic system, and these tasks are carried out by foreign migrant domestic workers sourced through the global market.

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<sup>2</sup> As a result, Yui argues, in his critical review of compressed modernity, social theory today needs to be rethought to take account of the global nature of society (Yui 2011:229-232). It needs a substantial consideration of regional histories before modernization and of global modernization.

Ochiai notes that the family system in Japan is still some distance from coupling with the global economic system in a straightforward way, but the intake of foreign domestic (or care) workers has been debated recently by the Japanese government (e.g., Yuuki 2015). Therefore, in (East) Asia, the family today is diverse within its inclusive familialism as a result of compressed modernity, while, irrespective of the region, it is being reconstructed by the significant impact of the neoliberal global economic market (Ochiai 2014=2013:84). The results suggest that, in a global society, family systems today will lead increasingly to structural coupling with the economic system beyond national borders. As this investigation reveals, sociological inquiries need to be carried out across local and global contexts. Globalization affects the whole world, while “glocal” societies are increasingly active in highlighting regional distinctions. One must construct sociological theory today in the context of modernity (Yui 2011).

In that context, I propose another sociological agenda about the Japanese family today. For example, the perception of family in Japan is being reconstructed partly through a wider recognition of international parental child abduction to/from Japan, after the breakdown of an increasing number of cross-national marriages. Achieving shared parenting and joint custody in separated families has become a key concern in reviewing the Japanese family today. In these cases, particularly meaningful functions that derive from the “global family” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2014=2013) appear to be reconstructing Japanese family system gradually, prior to any actual reform of its institutional structure in the nation (e.g., family law reform). In an elaborated functional approach to social systems theory, one would be able to observe the manner in which our society is changing structurally, including regional differentiation and global integration within the social system. The sociological exploration of the family system remains the most substantial means for understanding social processes.

## **5. Conclusion**

Social theory today needs to investigate the different processes of social change: regional differentiation and global integration. They occur simultaneously, and their dynamic interaction is reconstructing society today. The modern family system and its functional change has been the most useful topic to explore the process of modernization in social theory. Even today, the study of the family system is a key concern, in relation to its functional differentiation, as well as institutional or organizational coupling with other social systems. The family system in early

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modernity experienced functional differentiation from other systems because of its reduced interactions with them. Then, in the development of the modern nation-state, the family system was again reconstructed through structural couplings with other social systems. The family today is defined and maintained in relation to every system of society, such as economic, legal, political, and educational systems etc. Additionally, globalization has created a new agenda in the (re)construction of the social system. It is no longer relevant to theorize society within a single national framework, nor effective to imagine an orthodox functional approach to its theoretical premise. Social systems theory must be pragmatic in order to understand our society as it exists today. Integrating (not but reducing) regional and national modernities and global experiences, in addition to institutional problems and transformations: thinking of the family in this vein remains the most substantial sociological agenda.

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