The Liminality and Pluralism of Neo-Familism in South Korea: The Effects of Industrialization on Social Change

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Celebration of Scholars 2017: Exposition of Student & Faculty Research, Scholarship & Creativity

Introduction
Under the context of South Korean industrialization, neo-familism presents an argument contrary to conventional sociological discourse about industrialization: neo-familism in South Korea developed as a reaction to the social changes of industrialization, unexpectedly reinforcing familial ties rather than disintegrating them. This concept is not restricted to the perception of family, for it extends past kinship to include the pursuit of the social mobility and status that is linked to regional and school ties. Neo-familism can also be interpreted as the consequence of the accidental pluralism that is found in the coexistence of the Confucian, instrumental, affectionate, and individualistic familisms. As a whole, neo-familism possesses a liminality that places South Koreans in a world between tradition and modernity. In the work of anthropologist Victor Turner, liminality is a phase of transition—a state of ambiguity between two different conditions. The different conditions in the case of South Korea are tradition and modernity, and the compressed timeframe in which social changes occurred—and are still occurring—represent the concept of liminality.

Background

- **Industrialization**
- **Social Change**
  - Gender
  - Elders
  - Education
  - Work
- **Neo-Familism & Accidental Pluralism**
- **Liminality**

Types of Familism

- **Confucian Familism:** Stemming from the values of Confucianism practiced during the Joseon Dynasty, it is a version of Confucianism that is more-or-less adapted to the dynamics of modern South Korea. The major distinctions of this ideology are an emphasis of the multi-generational family, patriarchal respect orientation, and females as homemakers.
- **Instrumental Familism:** This emerged out of various survival strategies that revolved around the utilization of family during the heat of industrialization. Family relationships are confirmed not through affection or otherwise domestic interaction, but through strategic use. Major examples can be seen in education, marriage, and in corporations.
- **Affectionate Familism:** As large companies and factories began taking over the economy in the 1960s and 1970s, laborers were subjected to varying degrees of suppression, exploitation, and alienation. With the industrial society becoming quite demanding and burdensome, families came to act as a body of psychological protection. Women represented the emotional integrity of a family, and as such they were expected to provide comfort to their husbands.
- **Individualistic Familism:** This often manifests in the decision of career over domestic life. As it is around the world, it is becoming increasingly more common for women (and men) in South Korea to put off or forego marriage and/or children in exchange for establishing themselves in their careers. Additionally, it has become especially prevalent in feminist ideology given that feminists are critical of the traditionalist roles of women in the home versus the workplace.

Discussion
The liminality that has emerged out of neo-familism is one that envelopes Korean society as a whole. Park Chung-hee triggered a sort of unintended trickle-down effect of neo-familism, eventually leading to its spread by the working class. Society’s conditioning to the significance of school and regional ties in workforce recruitment resulted in the prestige and competitiveness of the top universities in Korea as well as the merit of working for a conglomerate. The Chaebol (conglomerates) who embody industrialization and the push to modernity also embody the liminality of Korean society in that they are at the same time still quite traditional and their structure is highly hierarchical. In the transition between the societal and familial levels of neo-familism, liminality continues to emerge: society’s expectation of families to provide elder care persists, though the elders themselves are beginning to prefer independence; some women are critical of gender inequality in their workplaces, yet are tolerant of it in their own households; students are expected to be high achieving but may exchange it for their mental health, and the path of non-salaried work or a vocational career is not necessarily considered success by students nor society. Industrialization led to abrupt social changes that forced different ideologies and ideals to coexist as neo-familism in a state of liminality, and it has yet to be seen how the neo-familism will transform when this liminality reaches its imminent resolution.

Acknowledgements & References
A special thanks goes to faculty advisors Stephen Udry, Daniel Choffnes, and Katharine Koreman.