Matrifocality in Korean Society: Hindrance or help towards gender equality?

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ABSTRACT

Matrifocality, which literally means ‘mother-centeredness’, should not be confused with matriarchy or matriliny. Matrifocality usually occurs in societies where man folk are absent for various reasons and women have to fulfil the double role of mother and breadwinner of the family unit. However, I would argue that it existed in patriarchal Confucian-orientated Korean society even in the pre-modern age, and that it has gained strength in ever-changing but persistently male-dominant contemporary South Korean society.

The ideology of namjonyŏbi (honoured man, subservient woman), derived from the Confucian cosmology, still permeates in most sectors of Korean society. Despite the much improved women’s status in recent years in terms of legal rights, the traditional concept of male superiority is a long way from being eradicated, but analyses of the past records and contemporary case studies suggest that matrifocality in Korean society is not a paradoxical figment of feminist imagination.

Will matrifocality in the Korean family structure help or hinder in achieving gender equality in Korean society? It can be said to be a double-edged sword. While it is an ideology that restricts women from political participation and public activities, confining them to the domestic circle, it is underpinned by respect for women, which may help restore a higher social position once held by them.

INTRODUCTION

The mother figure has always been important in Korean society: the ideal womanhood is defined as hyŏnmo yangch’ŏ (wise mother and good wife) in Korea, which originated in Japan where ‘good wife’ precedes ‘wise mother’ (Pae 2007, 169). The reason for the reversal of the word order is that traditionally to the Korean woman being a mother is more important than being a wife, which testifies to the strong presence of matrifocality in Korean society (Pae Ibid.). Even during the Confucian orientated patriarchal Chosŏn dynasty, when women’s subordination to men was sanctioned by the prevailing cosmology, paradoxically matrifocality was clearly present in the family structure. It has been further strengthened by the recent economic development and social changes (Pae 2007, 167-171).

Matrifocality, which generally refers to the mother-centred form of family, should be distinguished from matriarchy or matriliny. Since matrifocality per se is not a kinship system in the usual structural sense as matriarchy, it can be found within a variety of kinship types. It occurs in families in which the role of the mother is structurally and culturally central and this centrality is legitimate.

With the introduction and subsequent establishment of Neo-Confucianism in Korean society from the 14th century, the Korean people’s everyday life has been strictly guided by Confucian ideology. Ancestor worship playing the pivotal role in society, filial piety has been considered a prime human virtue (Yi Nŭngwha 1926/1990, 484; Lee
Kwangkyu 1975; Choe Chaesŏk 1982; Pae 2007, 161 & 164). Since filial piety does not distinguish between male and female parents, a woman’s power was largely derived from her sons.

This paper discusses how Korean women maintained the central position in their family mainly through their sons’ filial piety under Confucianism. It examines the current situation of the position of the mother in the family through domestic economic structure and other important issues, such as the children’s education. It then attempts to analyze the effects of matrifocality in gender equality, in light of the changing women’s position in society, the shifting male and female roles, and the marriage pattern in contemporary Korean society.

**DEFINITION OF THE TERM**

The term ‘matrifocality’ was first coined by Smith (1956) to refer to the black family structure in British Guiana. Since then matrifocal families have been identified in diverse societies ranging from urban England (Bott 1957), Java (Geertz 1961), the poorer sections of Naples (Parsons 1969) to African American communities (Smith 1973). However, matrifocality per se is not a kinship system, since it can occur in a variety of kinship types. It is therefore important to distinguish matrifocality from matriarchy or matriliney.

According to the Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology (1986), it refers to ‘mother-centred family forms which are usually defined by the absence or weak roles of the father and the corresponding emphases on the female role in the domestic group.’ It is therefore sometimes taken to refer to the family in which the husband/father is absent, incapacitated and/or un/underemployed, such as the black families in the Caribbean countries, and the economically underprivileged African Americans (Stack 1974). The matrifocal family often carries negative connotations (Tanner 1974) owing to the implications that females become family heads through the necessities which are beyond their control.

This definition is problematic, however, since it does not take into account the division of the male and female spheres, and the roles that they play in a particular domain. In societies, where there is a clear demarcation between the spheres of male and female, the mother’s role in domestic sphere is usually much stronger than that of the husband/father. In these mainly patrilineal societies, men have jural and economic power in the public sphere, but wield little influence in the domestic sphere, which includes housekeeping and childrearing. I would argue that ‘matrifocality’ can exist in this type of situation through analysis of the Confucian family structure.

Matrifocality should not necessarily be defined in terms of a dysfunctional family or a temporary state. It can be found in a variety of socio-economic contexts, and can also be said to be an integral part of an overtly patriarchal society. However, some generalities can be drawn despite variations in socio-economic settings in which it occurs.

According to my definition, in the matrifocal family the mother has authority, influence, responsibilities and solidarity of the domestic group, as well as their affection and loyalty. There may or may not be the male head of a family, who has politico-jural power in the society although he plays a peripheral role in the domestic domain.

An important feature of matrifocality is that its priority of emphasis is placed upon the mother-child relationship, while the conjugal relationship is expected to be less solidary and less affectively intense (Smith 1973). Tanner (1974) also points out the emphasis on the mother-child bond in a matrifocal society.
MATTRIFOCALITY IN PRE-MODERN KOREAN SOCIETY

It is a truism to say that women have long held a low social status in Korean society. The concept of namjon yŏbi (honoured men and subservient women) has been so firmly embedded in Korean people’s psyche, both male and female, that it has provided a simple explanation for the severe gender inequality that has prevailed in all sectors of society. It was derived from the Confucian ethics and cosmology, which governed every aspect of daily life during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910).

There is, however, documentary and historical evidence to suggest that women’s status in pre-Confucian Korean society was not always that low. During the Shilla period (57 BC – 935 AD), there were three queens (not queen consorts), namely Queen Sŏndŏk (632-647), Chindŏk (647-654) and Chinsŏng (887-897). Although the family system has long been patriarchal and patrilineal, there is strong evidence to suggest that uxorilocal marriage was prevalent in Korean society, at least for the first years of marriage (Yi Nŭnghwa 1926/1990, 120-124). According to Yi, this custom of namgwi yŏga (the man entering his wife’s natal home) existed from the ancient times in Korea, and carried on throughout the Koguryŏ period (37 BC – 668 AD), down to the Koryŏ period (910-1392). This age-old custom was severely criticized by prominent Confucian scholars during the Chosŏn dynasty. Yang Sŏngji deplored this custom in his book Nuljae-jip, and Chŏng Tojŏn lamented in Sambong-jip that this custom of the man living at his wife’s natal home made the wife think lightly of her husband, relying on her parents’ support, so it had the effect of yin dominating yang, which he insisted was totally against the absolute cosmological law. The father-in-law of Yi T’oege (1501-1570), one of the greatest Confucian scholars, moved into his wife’s family home after marriage, which according to Chŏng Sun-mok (1991, 42) was quite common in those days, and eventually inherited the old man’s estate after he died without a son. So it would appear that the custom never died out entirely despite the repeated kings’ orders prohibiting it, which were issued in the 7th year of King Sŏnjo’s rule (1567-1608) and the 25th year of Yōngjo’s rule (1724-1776). The trace of that widespread practice still remains in today’s language; the Korean phrase for a man getting married is ‘changa tŭlda’ which literally means ‘entering into his in-law’s house’ (Yi Nŭnghwa 1926/1990, 120). Women joined their husbands’ kin as mothers later in life, often as matrons in charge of their own households. Women also inherited a share of their own parents’ property, as in the case of Yi T’oege’s mother-in-law, which accorded them an important social and economic role.

Confucianism was adopted by the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) as the guiding ideology for social organization.1 The Korean version was based on the literal interpretation of and the rigid adherence to the Neo-Confucianism developed in Sung dynasty China in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It had an overwhelmingly negative impact on the status of Korean women, who had previously enjoyed a much higher status.

Engels’ (1884/1972) well-known theory about virtually universal male dominance links it to the development of private property from the original communal ownership, men’s exclusive ownership of it, and the subsequent relegation of women’s work from what he calls social production to personal domestic slavery. According to him therefore women’s lowly position is a phase in the developmental history of the family structure, which can and will change with the prevailing economic and social conditions.

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1 According to Deuchler (1977 & 1992), it was a gradual process; the total confucianization took more than a century.
To Neo-Confucianists, however, women’s subordination was an unquestionably natural and proper phenomenon, based on the unchangeable absolute cosmological law. They believed that the human world had to be in equilibrium with the cosmic order, otherwise disasters would befall it. To be in complete harmony with the universe, humans must observe the rules of the moral imperatives, which are commonly known as samgang (the three basic bonds) and oryun (the five moral rules in human relations). Samgang meant that subject should obey sovereign, son should obey father, and wife should obey husband. Oryun decreed that there be loyalty between sovereign and subject, intimacy between father and son, distinction between husband and wife, order of priority between junior and senior, and trust between friends. Thus all human relationships were vertically structured; there were no horizontal relationships, even between friends, since they were either one’s senior or junior. These rules governing human relationships stressed the hierarchical order of the world, and formed the basis of the social matrix.

Correlated with the hierarchical order of society was the notion that each human being had to recognize his/her proper position in society and stay there. In cosmological terms, heaven (yang) dominated earth (yin) and correspondingly, male had precedence over female. Female subordination was thus cosmologically sanctioned, and was considered essential for the proper functioning of human society. A woman had to follow her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her eldest son after her husband’s death. To prevent sexual passions from interfering with this order, the Confucianist drew a sharp distinction between the man’s outer or public sphere and the woman’s inner or domestic sphere.

The wife in theory assumed authority in the domestic sphere. Housekeeping was analogized to the administration of the state. Domestic peace and prosperity depended on the way a wife exerted her authority. The domestic sphere, however, contained a female hierarchy, and existed within the framework of the lineage.

Neo-Confucianism emphasized the concept of lineage as the fundamental device for social organization. In Chosŏn dynasty Korea, a lineage was patrilineal descent group that traced its origin from a common ancestor, and was identified by a common surname and ancestral seat. Lineage membership was genealogically traced through the male line to the founder of the lineage. He and his direct agnatic descendants were regularly honoured by memorial services. Ritualized ancestor worship was an essential institution that emphasized the line of descent as well as the sense of community of living members.

Marriage was the most important contractual institution in Confucian society. According to the Confucian Book of Rites, marriage was intended to be a bond of love between two surnames, with a view to securing the continuation of the family line. Therefore, the purpose of marriage and the most important duty of a wife was to produce sons for the continuation of the lineage. Mencius said, ‘There are three ways of being a bad son. The most serious is to have no heir.’ As a result, the intergenerational relationship between father and son is given priority over the conjugal union, and chastity on the part of the woman was of paramount importance. Although monogamy was the legal practice, virtual polygyny in the form of concubinage was the reality (Ch’oe 1999, 42). Sexual inequality was so great that while a woman’s infidelity was punished by ‘honour killing’, i.e. cruel murder or forced suicide by her family to preserve the family honour, and widows were not allowed to remarry under any circumstances, men enjoyed total sexual equality.

2 In Confucian society, a public display of love between the opposite sexes, even between a married couple, was subject to gossip, ridicule, ostracism and occasionally more violent forms of punishment for this reason. See Hsu (1948, 228).
freedom. Women were firmly instructed not to be jealous of their husbands’ affairs or concubines, and the wife’s jealousy was one of ‘the seven deadly sins (ch’ilgŏjiak)’\(^3\), which were legitimate reasons for her expulsion from her husband’s family. That was a fate worse than death to the woman, since it meant social death to her.

Marriage was everything for a woman, since without it she had no social identity. The wedding was, however, an important rite of passage fraught with danger (Van Gennep 1960), an occasion for sorrow rather than joy for her (Freedman 1967). From then on she severed all her ties with her natal family and joined the family of total strangers.\(^4\) Since the marriage was officially exogamous and virilocal in Chosŏn society, the young bride began her married life as an outsider. She often received harsh treatment from her mother-in-law,\(^5\) as well as being subjected to the total subordination to her father-in-law and her husband. Here Korean, Japanese and Chinese societies differed from one another. China had a system of joint family and equal property division among all sons, indicating egalitarian relations among them, as a result of which quarrels often broke out among sisters-in-law in China.\(^6\) Korean and Japanese societies made a hierarchical distinction between the successor and the non-successor. Japan had a system of a stem family and one-male inheritance (Nakane 1967). Korea had a joint family system and one-male inheritance, but younger brothers also inherited half the share of their eldest brother, so in Korea inside the extended family, there also existed brotherly hierarchy.

The birth of a son changed a woman’s life. She fulfilled the most important duty as a wife, and acquired the privilege and authority of motherhood. She finally achieved full affiliation to her husband’s lineage through consanguineal ties of her son. As she got older and came to a senior position in the family so her influence grew. In the domestic sphere at least she was in control. Even when her husband died and she supposedly came under the authority of her eldest son, her age and her relationship with her sons often enabled her to wield power. If she was senior in generation and age in the family she would almost certainly be treated as the family head. He sons would defer to her on most matters. Since her sexuality no longer posed a potential threat to the continuation of the lineage, old age gave woman at least a measure of equality with man. Post-menopausal women are considered honorary males in other patriarchal societies such as the Mundurucu of Brazil and the Hua of New Guinea. In Confucian society, however, her power derived through her having sons. Without sons, she was doomed to powerlessness and eventually extinction, since nobody would make offerings to her soul after her death. With sons her importance to the family was established, her existence after death assured, and she became as immortal as did her husband.

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\(^3\) Ch’ilgŏjiak (‘the seven deadly sins’ or ‘the seven-outs’) are (1) pulsun kugo (not obeying parents-in-law), (2) mujū (producing no sons), (3) umhaeng (licentiousness), (4) chilt’u (jealousy), (5) akchil (bad disease), (6) kasıl (talkativeness) and (7) tojŏl (thieving). In return she was protected only by ‘three-not-outs’, which ruled that she could not be sent away if she kept three years’ mourning for either of her parents-in-law, if her husband’s family had become prosperous after she was married into it, and if she had no home to return to.

\(^4\) Freeman describes (1967) how Chinese brides were wept over at her wedding by her kinswomen. Borrowing Douglas’s symbolism (1966), tears are purifying, therefore the ceremonial weeping of the wedding can be interpreted as exorcising evil spirits and wishing the bride luck in her new life.

\(^5\) The often observed harsh treatment of a young daughter-in-law was explained by Freedman (1967) as something to be endured by her on her way to the solid matriarchy of old age and widowhood. It was a rite of passage (Van Gennep 1960), fraught with pain and hardship for the young bride.

\(^6\) Freedman explains (1966) the quarrelsomeness of Chinese women; ‘As a result of a marriage system in which women were bodily and jurally transferred to the families which acquire them as brides, when a married woman fought, she fought for herself, for her children and for her husband.'
Therefore, in Confucian society it is vital for a woman to produce at least one son to acquire authority and power, since it is mostly derived from her sons’ filial piety (Hsu 1948/1971; Freedman 1958 & 1966 & 1979). This situation is also found in many societies, such as the Tallensi (Fortes 1957 & 1959/1983 & 1960/1970 & 1976), who hold similar views on filial duty to those of the Confucianists. In typically patrilineal and patriarchal societies, such as those of Korea, China and Japan, and also the Tallensi, the relationship between father and son is overtly one of severe dominance and submission. The son owes obedience and deference, and a distance is called for between the two men (Freedman 1958 & 1966). On the other hand, the relationship between mother and children, particularly sons, is an extremely affectionate and close one. Wolf (1970) claims that a woman has a close relationship with her son in Confucian society, since she must establish her power in a more subtle fashion, a mother’s authority not being so clearly stated. In Korean society at least, I do not think a mother’s devotional love for her children has any such conscious motive. It is more instinctive, derived from the low-priority relationship with her husband. This close mother-child relationship gives Confucian society a matrifiocal quality, since the father’s influence is marginalized at least in the domestic sphere.

**MATRIFOCALITY IN NEWLY-INDUSTRIALIZED CONTEMPORARY SOUTH KOREAN SOCIETY**

The Confucian family ethos still prevails in contemporary South Korean society despite the recent industrialization. Filial piety is still considered by many to be as the supreme human virtue (Lee Kwangkyu 1975; Choe Chaesŏk 1982; Pae 2007, 161 & 164). As stated earlier, filial piety has never discriminated against women, even under the most rigid Confucian system. The Korean mother-child relationship is as close as ever before, but has to be distinguished from Anglo-American ‘momism’. In the former society if a grownup man is extremely attached to his mother, he becomes an object of mild derision, since an adult is conceptualized as one who ‘has cut the apron string’. However, in Korean society, he is admired for his filial piety. The recent social changes have neither affected nor weakened this important element in Korean family life. Moreover, since these days married daughters are no longer considered ‘married outsiders’ in their natal families as previously, a woman receives filial piety from both her sons and daughters. This has strengthened the matrifiocal nature of the Korean family.

Despite the great changes in the social and family structure, the division of male and female spheres is still largely intact. Intensified competition in the social sphere has increased the stress level of the men, who are left with even less time to give to their family, often alienating them from the children. The onus of the children’s education has fallen entirely on women. In fact, a woman and her children’s education have become so inseparable that a woman who has a child preparing for the university entrance exams is often excused from many onerous other tasks. Since education is all important in moulding one’s values, a woman can wield great influence on their children to the point of manipulation. This again is a contributory factor to the matrifiocal element of the Korean family.

Another important aspect of the modern Korean family structure is the management of the family finances. An English acquaintance of mine with a Korean wife told me a few years ago, ‘I knew Korean women are no blushing violets despite the popular myth, but I was shocked when my wife expected me to hand over my entire pay packet to her. I had to put my foot down there.’ It is quite usual for women to take charge of household budgets in modern Korea. In most households, rural or urban, the husband
hands over his entire earnings intact to the wife, who then administers him an allowance for his personal expenditure. Its origin and developments have been explored by some anthropologists, and various causes, such as the rural precedents, financial demands of maintaining a middle-class lifestyle, etc. have been cited (Janelli & Janelli 1996). My interpretation would be that this system originally stems from male arrogance, i.e. a man thinks that it is beneath his dignity to concern himself with petty household matters. It was probably more relevant in the early days of modernization of Korea, when most men’s income fell far short of being sufficient for their families’ needs. Therefore, the distinctly unpleasant task of trying to make ends meet fell on the ‘lowly’ women. In reality, however, and particularly as a result of the country’s newly-found economic prosperity, women have acquired a tremendous power in the domestic sphere as well as in society itself. Of course it cannot be said that Korean women have the total economic power because of their management of household budgets, since important financial decisions are made by men and men can still command their wives to give them whatever they want. However, the control of money has given women opportunities to make a lump sum through forming a mutual finance association with friends, and taught them a business sense. More importantly, it has strengthened the pivotal position of the mother in the family.

Great changes have been taking place in the women’s status in South Korean society in recent years. In January 1990 the government promulgated the law, decreeing equal inheritance for both sons and daughters. Although son preference is still prevalent, educational opportunities are open equally to male and female children. There has been a gradual increase in women engaged in professions, which used to be entirely the domain of men, such as medicine, law and diplomacy (Ch’ŏn 2003). This trend will continue more markedly in the future.

The family pattern is already showing a sign of change. The marriage pattern has undergone great changes in recent years in Korean society. Long gone are the days when marriage was an alliance of convenience and propriety between two comparable families in terms of social standing. These days the wishes of the couple themselves are the most important factor in marriage, even in those arranged through professional matchmakers, who are still active and doing good business. Love marriages between two young people who meet at school, work and through social activities, etc, are becoming so common that parental objections do not have the same clout as they used to until quite recently.

The nuclear family with a small number of children living in a high-rise block of flats is the norm among city-dwellers in contemporary South Korea, who have hegemony over the rest of the country. Families with more than three children are unusual among the younger generation urbanites. However, ancestor worship being still embedded in many people’s lives, the traditional boy preference, verging on boy-mania, still persists, and no fewer than 30,000 female foetuses are said to be aborted each year after ultra-sonic scans (Pae 2007, 194). As a result, as of 1994, the number of boys born is 15.4% more than that of girls, compared with the world average of 10.5%, and this ratio is said to be the highest in the world (Pae Ibid., 194). But the attitudes have been changing in recent years, and it is not considered such a great tragedy not to have sons, as a woman can now be the legal head of a family and offer ancestral sacrifices. I have often heard young women promise their parents to perform ancestral rites after their death.

7 In 2003, the first woman head of the Ministry of Justice, Kang Kûmshil and the first female career diplomat ambassador Kim K’yongim (to Tunisia) were appointed, which attracted considerable media interest.
Against this background, matrifocality is strengthened, the mother being indispensable as she plays the pivotal role in the family in every way, even though the main breadwinner of the family is still mostly the husband/father. But as stated earlier, the management of the household budget is done entirely by the wife, who in many cases takes over the whole wage packet of the husband, these days often electronically straight into the couple’s joint account, leaving the husband no leeway for siphoning the money elsewhere without his wife’s knowledge. Although the original reason for this arrangement was to relieve the man of the tiresome and difficult task of making ends meet with insufficient income, with the dramatic increase in the national GNP, women have unwittingly acquired considerable power.

Although their opportunities in the public sector are still very limited, the women have succeeded in making their husbands depend on them. As a result, by the time a Korean man reaches the middle age or beyond, his wife has usually become the most important figure in life. There are several jokes told by both men and women, which bear witness to this interesting phenomenon. When a middle-aged or elderly man is asked what the five most important things in his life are, his answer is apparently (1) waip’ŭ (Korean pronunciation of the English word ‘wife’), (2) anae (a Korean equivalent of ‘her indoors’), (3) chip saram (literally ‘person at home’ i.e. wife), (4) manura (a familiar term for wife), and (5) aedüi ëmma (Kids’ Mum). According to another joke, when a child is asked what the five most important beings are in his/her life in order of importance, the answer is (1) Mum, (2) Granny, (3) The family dog, (4) Dad, and (5) Granddad. Although those are only jokes, there is an element of truth in them, as the proverb goes, many a true word is spoken in jest. However, the fact that people laugh merrily at them suggests that they consider this phenomenon unnatural and puzzling, hence a joke, suggesting male superiority and dominance is still very much a reality in Korean society (Kim Ch’ŏl 2003).

Despite the pivotal role that women have succeeded in acquiring in the domestic circle, discontentment and disillusionment are often felt by middle or upper class women, even by those with higher education who enjoy a high material standard of living, and in many cases more acutely by them (Sŏk 1997, 159). Korean women have learned about the power of money in the modern times through experience, and have become obsessed with money, seeing it as a means to achieve their liberation (Ko 1991, 231). While the five most important things in a middle-aged man’s life are all his wife, hers are apparently: (1) ton (money), (2) kŭmjŏn (coins), (3) hwap’ye (currency), (4) sup’yo (cheques), and (5) yegŭm t’ongjang (savings accounts). Some try their hand in making money, often with disastrous results, although a few succeed. However, most contend themselves with engaging in creative activities such as calligraphy, painting, flower arranging, etc., but few achieve financial independence through them. Oddly enough, the women’s desire for public life expresses itself in their outings; so it is very difficult to contact them in the daytime, as they are out most days, engaging in some activities and always keeping busy. Incidentally, that contributes to the very bad traffic congestions in cities, especially the capital Seoul.

The high level of discontentment among married women causes a sharp increase in divorce; the divorce rate being the highest among the couple in their 20s. An interesting new phenomenon is a significant number of so-called ‘twilight divorces’, between couples in their 50s and 60s, eight out of ten such cases being instigated by women after years of suffering in silence living with chauvinistic husbands (Pae 2007, 197). ‘Pension divorce’, started by the wife immediately after the husband’s receiving a lump sum retirement fund, is also on the increase.
The increase in divorce means there will be more families with female heads, since the custody of the children is usually given to the mother. There is also a high mortality among men in their 40s and 50s, particularly among successful urban executives in Seoul, through stress, excessive smoking and drinking, etc. Apart from that, the normal life expectancy is longer for females than for males in Korea. Since there still persists the ethos that ‘a virtuous woman does not serve two husbands’, among older women, widows tend not to remarry. All these factors will contribute to longer periods of widowhood for more and more women resulting in more families with female heads.

Unlike the old days, when a widow handed over the financial affairs to her eldest son or outsiders if he was too young, these days she herself tends to take over her dead husband’s affairs. I have witnessed many cases of successful continuation of business ventures by widowed mothers. To give a few examples, Ms. H, who was an ordinary housewife and mother, took over her husband’s touristic business after his death. She not only successfully carried on the business, but also expanded it further to include overseas tours. Another woman had an advantage of having run a small furniture company of her own, when her husband, a man in his 40s, suddenly died of a heart attack. She sold off her shop, took over his motor parts business and within a year turned it into an even more thriving business than before. The third case concerns a woman, who suddenly got widowed in her 40s. Although she had had no previous commercial experience, she successfully ran her dead husband’s small hotel. I met her at a shamanistic ritual she sponsored to pray for good luck and the repose of his spirit. I would attribute their successes partly to their experience of daily management of household budget, which taught them discipline and control as well as a measure of business sense.

Equal rights for men and women may still appear to be a distant dream in Korean society. However, whenever opportunities present themselves, a mother will occupy the central position in her family, not only as a recipient of affection and loyalty of the domestic group, but in the cultural and structural sense as well. In future a female head will not be considered an anomaly, as she has tended to be up to now. In actual fact, there already exists a section of Korean society, albeit marginalized and still ostracized, in which female heads of families occur frequently, namely the shamanistic community. There, matrifocality exists blatantly, the mother of the family having full financial control and responsibility, authority, influence, and solidarity of the domestic group (Hogarth 1998, 1999). Ironically enough the female shaman/mother does not always have affection and loyalty of her family that most Korean mothers receive, because of the social stigma long attached to her profession. The matrifocality in the shamanistic household is largely due to the often-unstable marriage of the shaman. In light of the increased divorce rate, early widowhood due to the longer life expectancy of women in mainstream Korean society, matrifocality in the Korean family structure, which has so far been largely latent, may well emerge overtly in the future.

CONCLUSION

In discussing matrifocality, it is important to point out that it refers to the ‘mother-centeredness’, not ‘female dominance’. What is presupposed here is therefore that the central female is the mother of the children of a domestic group. I have discussed how matrifocality can be found in overtly male-dominant Confucian society such as pre-modern Korean society. In a Confucian society, there exists a strong emotional involvement in the mother-child relationship, while the conjugal relationship tends to be deemed of secondary importance (Hsu 1948/1971; Wolf 1970). Under Confucianism, therefore, the centrality of the mother in the Korean family was largely based on this close
mother-child relationship, the filial piety and affection of her sons. However, in modern Korea, the mother not only still receives filial piety from her children of both sexes, but also takes control of the household finance and the all-important education of the children. The father, under increasing pressure of the newly-industrialized society, plays even more diminished role in the domestic sphere.

Matrifocality even in traditional Korean society is clearly reflected in an old Korean saying, ‘If your mother is a stepmother, your real father becomes a stepfather’ (Tieszen 1977). This matrifocal element, which nevertheless has been a latent, albeit integral, element in the Korean family structure, has been strengthened in recent years in the face of changes in social norms, behavioural and marriage patterns in favour of women.

Will matrifocality in Korean society help or hinder in achieving gender equality in Korean society in future? It can be said to be a double-edged sword. The underpinning respect for women in theory should help them to regain the higher social position once held by them. Up to now, however, it has been an ideology that has restricted women from political participation and public activities (Yang 2003, 84), confining them to the domestic circle. In future, as more and more opportunities are available to women to be successful in their own right in mainstream society instead of through their husbands and sons, matrifocality, which essentially emphasizes the supreme importance of motherhood, an exclusive prerogative of women, may well help further improve women’s status in Korean society.

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