The emerging global order has helped to create an increasingly competitive social system that values its own economic criteria while neglecting welfare concerns that, as such, are widely acknowledged. The real political agenda is very different from the rhetoric and from the needs and expectations of people. The East Asian societies have developed their own democratic political cultures and with them their own models of welfare societies. However, these models are still very much work in process and these issue sheds light on many issue areas that have proved to be difficult for East Asian social systems to cope with. However, the comparisons to Europe show many similarities and, indeed, the East Asian problems in the field of health and welfare can be used to illustrate that we are dealing with problems that are part of global patterns while the individual cases show great variation reflecting different cultural and historical backgrounds.

The articles in this issue also share the focus of social risk. The low priority placed on welfare issues in many societies in terms of expenditure has meant that societies have neglected the needs and voices of groups that are for one reason or another in a position of weakness. The health and welfare related risks have often a perceived element of individual choice tied to them while the social reality can make this choice really small. What makes the study of social risks so important in the East Asian context is that studying social risks and groups of people who are particularly vulnerable reveals much of the societies in question and a deep understanding of these societies as well as a truly multidisciplinary approach is needed to make the social issues of East Asia comprehensible in their own and in a broader global context. The articles of this issue have a common theme as dealing with issues that have not been dealt with full attention of the decision-makers. Some of the groups in question are not small or marginal or even underprivileged by any means. However, it is interesting to analyze how, for instance, the interests of women and children so often get so little attention in the actual political agendas of societies that, after all, are quite wealthy by global standards and also democratic, with the important addition that the citizens are well educated and should be well-aware of the importance of issues that affect the family institution and the very continuation of human societies. Even when family is let to take care of its own affairs and is expected to play its traditional role, and is, therefore, ignored in public discourses, it continues to be an important social and political force. When we talk about social risks the
division between home as private and society as public does not make any sense: modern risks and social problems are shared by the whole society and there is no real option of turning a blind eye – a realization that is the essence of social reflexivity.

This issue has for articles that all tackle the issue of East Asian risk societies and more specifically families at risk. Family as a social institution stands everywhere between ‘public’ and ‘private’ and in the East Asian context there is a long tradition of emphasizing the social responsibilities of both individuals and families. However, the role of family has gone through major transformations everywhere and this issue contributes to a better understanding of the changes taking place in East Asian societies.

This issue starts with the article of Kataoka Yoshimi analyzing the changing Japanese families and, in particular, the individualized family as a form of risk protection and adaptation to rural life. The article analyzes the changes that have taken place in families of the rural areas in Shimane, a Prefecture that is often seen epitomise the Japanese traditional society and traditional values. Especially in farming villages of Japan, the traditional ‘ie’ system did not lose its influence as a major principle of uniting and maintaining a family and it is interesting to note how the old Japanese family institution is capable to playing a major function in terms of adaptation to changes in society. The Japanese rural areas are far from isolated from global pressures and changes in Japanese society. In fact, areas that are experiencing depopulation and are left behind from economic growth are very vulnerable to change. It is also worth noticing that even in Japanese rural areas people there is a lot of different kinds of migration taking place and people are closely connected with the rest of the world. Also farming and forestry are closely related to global economic trends and, at least, the Japanese politicians are keenly aware of the need and political pressure to make even far more drastic changes to Japanese agricultural policies. When the interests of Japanese export industries and rural areas are weighed it is easy to guess who has to compromise more. Kataoka’s article demonstrates how farming village families and individualization within families create a flexible mechanism that helps to adjust to social changes. Furthermore, her research also adds to an understanding of more universal issues of the changing role of family institution and individuals in contemporary world where the rural Japan is actually far more closely connected with the rest of the world than many people would not first acknowledge.

The article by Tsai Pei-Yuen analyzes how low fertility problem can be identified as a type of new social risk and how the issue is influencing social development of Taiwan. The low fertility problem very good example of a risk where individual risk becomes a social risks and where individuals’ choices have common effects on the society. Many individuals’ decisions of not having children are directly threatening the sustainability of economic development and the welfare system. Secondly, an increase in the fertility rate of the whole society cannot be done by only a small number of individuals so it is beyond individuals’ control to change the situation and there is a need for collective actions or policies to deal with the problem. In this case the society woke up to the issue and there was a public concern and debate, and more particularly, the government of Taiwan, has took up the challenge and recognised the need for effective policy response, including their swift enforcement. For instance, the Taiwanese government has implemented policies that help families to reconcile work and family responsibilities. However, the situation is very much still evolving and it will be interesting to see how effective the Taiwanese government policies will be and whether these government policies will translate into major change in such a very intimate individual choice as having children. Most likely the issue will remain a major issue
in future and the other East Asian societies have a good reason to pay close attention to the Taiwanese low fertility policy responses.

The next article by Henglien Lisa Chen analyzes the risks to families of the availability of care for their older family members and how the risk has been mediated in different societies. In the research Taiwan represents the East Asian experience while Britain and the Netherlands are used to provide a comparative European counterpart. The choice of societies is interesting and provides very interesting results as it illustrates that in many key respects Britain and the Netherlands are very different societies in terms of care for the elderly and the care profession itself. It is also very interesting that there were marked similarities in both the Taiwanese and Dutch approaches to adapting to the individual’s routine and normality in the case of informal family care while Britain seems to have very different emphasis. All in all, the research show how the informal and formal care all the time cross the line between ‘public’ and ‘private’ and in this particular case Taiwan is dealing with very similar issues with Europe and the Taiwanese solutions are far from unique from an European perspective. As for the general outcome of the research, the Dutch older people studied were the most satisfied with their lives in terms of the living environment, the extent of accessibility to social intervention, participation and feelings of loneliness. Taiwan came second and England came a distant third. The important message of the study is that, regardless of location, helping informal carers extend their ability to carry out their role improves their well-being as carers and reduces the demand for formal care services.

Finally, there is the article by Ann Buchanan analyzing the family risks from the perspective of protective factors and looking the situation very much from the perspective of child protection. Her view is that positive family relationships are the most important ‘protective’ factors in mitigating risks at every age. However, some families will need state support in order to carry out their protective role in mitigating the risks experienced by both the young and the old. Except where there are major child protection concerns, a state/family partnership approach is likely to be more acceptable, more effective and more economic than residential state care. Her research sums up the importance of family in mitigating risks and shows delicate is the issue of co-operation and support between the state and families. Buchanan also discusses the impact of Confucian ethics and how in Confucian Societies the duty to care for elderly members of one’s family is generally felt to be nonnegotiable. However, there is also much evidence that the relationships between adult children and their parents has already fundamentally altered in many East Asian societies. The Confucian societies too, will have to develop state organisations to work in partnership with the families. However, the traditions do still have an impact and this whole special issue has demonstrated how the East Asian societies are using the strengths and experiences of their family institutions to cope with new risks and risk society. However, the family institutions are under many pressures and the cases introduced in this issue give a good idea about the challenges that lay ahead and about the importance for the public sector to understand how important family institution is for any policies.

Note on Conventions

Japanese names in this issue are written surname first, followed by the given name. Japanese words are Romanized using the Hepburn system.

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