Guest Editorial Preface

Family Policies to Respond to Social Changes in East Asia

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The family institution has been drastically changed in East Asia as a consequence of fundamental changes in social and economic conditions, as well as in the ideologies and social morals of people. Most everything related to family structures or social relationships has been through great transformations. Such basic indicators as the ageing of population and the decline in marriages and the number of children or numbers of reported cases of domestic violence give some idea just how drastically the situation has changed. However, after all this the family institution remains a major social unit in all East Asian societies providing support across generations especially in all areas of welfare, but it is also serving important functions in a wide area of activities ranging from culture and education to economy and politics.

As the changes are so obvious and it is easy to grasp the multitude of consequences it is no wonder that the issues related to family have become highly contested political issues. Consequently, the social policies in East Asia have tried to address the problems. The East Asian governments have produced an impressive amount of short-term and long-term plans to deal with issues related to families. However, as said, there are deep ideological differences when it comes to interpretations on what is the best course to deal with issues and whose responsibility it is to act. For instance, there are very different opinions about how the public policy should respond to such problems as the domestic violence. The lack of consensus also means that the issue of backlash is always present. While East Asian societies have introduced various forms of allowances to support families there also many examples how changes in government have been followed by termination or drastic reduction of those programs on the basis that government is not responsible for private matters, even if the consequences are very much public in their nature. The recent change of government in Japan (essentially Liberal Democratic Party returning to power with the assistance of Kōmeitō) immediately made clear that there will be cuts in social welfare benefits to the families receiving need-based assistance and that other reductions are likely to follow in social welfare. Already the previous government reversed its policy and thinking on Parental Allowances and started to cut the assistance when to political climate started to turn to a more conservative one. After all the Japanese election of December 2012 was won with the agenda of nationalist foreign and defense policy, pro-nuclear energy policy and anti-globalization trade and currency policy. This kind of policy agenda and
ideological position leaves very little room for welfare issues or support for families. If family support is regarded in the end as non-political and private, or a matter of wasteful spending and vote buying, there is very little that can be done to alleviate problems and even help victims, as in the cases of domestic violence. The traditional conservative political view in East Asian societies easily leads to ignorance of welfare issues or relegates them within the administrative system to make them eventually somehow disappear. Playing for time is no policy – or at least it is not a good policy. The ideological opposition to economic benefits to families is most of the time justified by austerity grounds. The message is that families should take care of themselves and the government is for something else. That something else obviously covers especially economic policy and taxation. It is still rare in East Asia to regard social policy as an investment to better future for everyone and support something that people are entitled to receive for a number of good reasons.

Happy families are the ideal and there is a good reason to support that with policy tools as societies at large as well as individuals stand out to benefit from that. However, it should also be admitted that families do also fail sometimes and that modern societies have an ever-increasing number of people who just do not fit into the family structure and who have bitter experiences of family life. For instance, persons who flee abusive or failed family relationships still often meet the expectation that they should suffer anything for the sake of “common good”, whatever it is. Part of the problem is that “individualism” has especially in East Asian societies the ring of egoistic and self-interested mentality and when the family is not any more fulfilling its role of supporting and protecting its members all that is left are individuals with their individual problems. This issue introduces both happy and unhappy families in East Asia and a great variety of policies, both successful and still embryonic ones, to deal with problems involving families and family risks.

The first article of this issue, by Lih-Rong Lillian Wang, Yun-Tung Wang and Peishan Yung discusses the use of social quality as a framework for analyzing social development in Taiwan. Instead of using economic development model to analyze social development social justice, equity and solidarity would provide far more meaningful criteria in order to improve social welfare policy. The social quality approach has its merits both in Europe and in East Asia and this article demonstrates how the social development has progressed by using this criteria. One interesting finding is related to the lack of development in social cohesion, something that has great political significance in Taiwan. Overall, the article provides a wealth of insights about social policy and social development in Taiwan and its theoretical approach introduces alternatives that help to increase the significance of policy studies in general. Furthermore, this approach shows that social quality approach is relevant also outside Europe and in democratizing Taiwan it is exactly what is needed.

The next article by Naoko Sôma, Jiyoon Park, Sun-Hee Baek and Akemi Morita deals with the teenage pregnancy and its support system in Korea. The meaning of teenage pregnancy is rapidly changing due to very low fertility in Korea. The former practices of abortion and adoption, including overseas adoptions, are being replaced by support to childbirth and childrearing. The number of teenage mothers who have chosen to take care of their children is increasing. However, they are still facing many obstacles, such as insecurities of education (drop out), poverty, and labor insecurity, and the insecurity related to the development and future of their child. The limited welfare policy of South Korean welfare state, private sector (NGOs) and social networks have been supporting them. From
2012, welfare state introduced the national support system for them. It seems the Korean government has been actively seeking a better solution to several interconnected problems and in the process is gradually changing the meaning of teenage pregnancy in Korea. However, much still needs to be done to meet the needs of teenage mothers and their children.

Reiko Ogawa analyzes in her article how the family and care work are facing social change and globalization in Japan. The article shows how changes in family institution and society are having deep consequences for care work and how the issue is tied to the issue of globalization and immigration. The care for the elderly in Japan has been gradually shifting from private sphere to public one while ageing of the society has proceeded very rapidly. Meanwhile, the entry of migrants into care work force has had its impact on care work. Currently Japan does not have much of an immigration policy which would include social integration policies, while migrant labour has become significant labour reserve within care work. Since the care needs cannot any more be met solely by the families or the domestic labor market, globalization of care has become reality for the foreseeable future. The author argues that what is needed now is a strategy to upgrade the social status of care work and acknowledge the contribution of the migrants in providing both paid and unpaid care.

Finally, Kana Takamatsu in her research note analyzes the situation of family and poverty eradication in Myanmar. Myanmar is in a very different phase of social development compared with most other East Asian societies. However, its social development is also increasingly closely linked with other societies in the region. Moreover, due to its different path of social development it provides an interesting point of comparison when analyzing East Asian social issues and traditions. Poverty eradication and reduction are still major issues in Myanmar and the research note shows that they are related in many ways to family institution. Migration is the strategy of survival among the poor rural families and, therefore, the social issues of rural Myanmar have wide consequences in Myanmar and elsewhere. The research note provides a wealth of information about changing family structure and social values in Myanmar. Moreover, interviews of immigrants in Thailand and Japan are used to illustrate the thinking and situation of immigrants and their reasons to go abroad, usually relating to an obligation to support their families to survive.

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