

Blood Relations in Korean Society

By Abito Ito

Situated in the East Asian cultural sphere, South Korea has several traditions in common with China and Japan. At the same time, however, it has developed a highly integrated ethnic society based on its own culture and traditions.

The Japanese people have so far shown strikingly little understanding of Korea's unique ethnic traditions. Today, however, the rapid expansion of economic exchanges between the two countries has increased opportunities for Japanese to negotiate with Koreans or use Korean employees to conduct business in that country. As a result, many Japanese businessmen who have lived in Korea have now come to realize that there are fundamental differences between the two countries in social life, and particularly in human relations.

The classical socio-anthropological hypothesis is that the most basic social relationship is kinship. When we compare human relations in Korean and Japanese society from this standpoint, we find that the differences are indeed pronounced and significant. Whereas a "bilateral kinship system" prevails in Japan, in Korea "patrilineal descent" is the dominant organizing principle. In short, Japanese and Korean societies belong to entirely separate systems so far as the most fundamental social relations are concerned. Yet this is a fact which is not commonly known.

"East Asia" obscures uniqueness

It has become common for people to stress only the similarities between Japan and Korea within the context of East Asia. It is undeniable that historically Japan has been culturally influenced by Korea and China in many ways. However, as far as kinship systems are concerned, Korea belongs to a tradition originating among the horse-riding nomads of Eurasia. It is a tradition extending through central and western Asia, with Korea located at the extreme eastern end. In sharp contrast, Japan, situated across the Tsushima Strait from Korea, adopted aspects of the patrilineal ideol-

ogy of the Asian continent, but fundamentally clung to the bilateral kinship system prevailing in Oceania and South-east Asia.

In Korea, a person's position in the patrilineal kinship network is determined at birth. This position can never be altered by any factor throughout that person's life. The ascribed status based on patrilineal descent is fundamental to the way Koreans conduct their social life. It determines the order of importance and ranking in all social systems and organizations. By inheriting his father's surname, a man is registered as a member of the clan. Depending on the place of residence, each segment of the clan organizes a local lineage called a *munjung*. Clan members refer to the "genealogical document" in order to confirm the distance of kinship from one to another. Some clans have distinguished historical or legendary heroes as their founding fathers. Some even trace their lineage back to the mythological age.

Until Korea was divided into North and South, most clans had kinship networks that covered the entire country. Under the kinship system, blood-related Koreans unite and cooperate with one another as a single body in each area. At the same time, there is continuous inter-regional mobility via the kinship relationship, with the result that highly centralized integration has been achieved in all aspects of Korean life—political, social and cultural.

The patrilineal tradition has imparted virtually every social organizational unit, from the family (*chip*) and village community to the workshop and corporation, with characteristics not found in Japan.

Let us study the Korean family (*chip*) first. The patrilineal relationship expands through parent-son relationships and brotherly ties. Nothing ever severs these bonds. Therefore the *chip* is an integral part of the kinship network and it can rarely function autonomously. In this respect, the Korean *chip* is different from the Japanese family. Because of blood relationships which cannot be disavowed, the *chip's* outside relatives always take an interest and intervene in its affairs. If the *chip* rejects their intervention, it would be targeted for censure fatal to its

social life. In addressing their own *chip* problems, members must always take into consideration outside relatives. At the same time, a *chip* is allowed to depend on relatives whenever the necessity arises.

Chip not stable business unit

Although great importance is attached to blood ties and their succession, that is not necessarily the case for the continuation of the *chip* as a common body for the pursuit of livelihood. The Chinese character for "house" is used in Korea to refer to *chip* and in Japan to refer to "family," or rather "household." In Korea, however, the character actually refers to the patrilineal relationship. Unlike the Japanese family, the Korean *chip* has almost no concept of family business, family tradition, family precepts and family treasures. In Korea's world of traditional industrial arts and cultural attainments, special skills and knowledge are seldom inherited and handed down as family secrets to succeeding generations. It is also rare in Korea for the social reputation and commercial relations cultivated by one's ancestors to be inherited and handed down to succeeding generations, as is the case with old, established stores in Japan. Koreans do not have such symbolic concepts as the Japanese *noren* (business goodwill). Except for the illustrious head families of *yangban* (noblemen), people move far more frequently than in Japan, not only in cities but in farm villages as well. This is because blood ties are not affected by place of residence. Shop names and logos associated with their sites are almost never found in Korea.

As is evident from the above, the Korean *chip*, unlike the Japanese family, is not an autonomous and stable unit for business activities. Accordingly, it is seldom the social base for inheriting skills or sustaining stable commercial relations and reputations. This apparently has contributed to the immaturity and insecurity of the nation's small- and medium-sized enterprises.

Abito Ito is an assistant professor in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Tokyo and a specialist in social affairs of East Asia, particularly South Korea. He has authored various books and articles on South Korea.

In Japan, it is not rare to adopt an unrelated person to become the heir of the family and perpetuate the family business. A Korean family business, however, would flatly refuse. To begin with, a family business in Korea is seldom recognized as a stable enterprise. Even when relatives are welcomed into the management, it is regarded as a transitional step on the way to developing the business into a larger concern.

Individuals in Korea try to base their identities on the continuation of the blood relationship. In establishing social identity this takes clear precedence over other factors, such as inborn talent and career. This in turn is closely related to Confucianism, which prizes inner virtues and spiritual life but slights external qualities, such as skills and accomplishments in business deals. In traditional Korean society, the practice of Confucian virtues in daily life earns social honor and prestige. *Yangban* noblemen practiced Confucian virtues in actual life, and their lifestyle remains deeply rooted among today's Koreans, although their lifestyle is now white-collar oriented.

Korean society does not place great value on the artisan spirit, or praise a man who finds spiritual fulfillment in mastering a skill. Attainment of higher skills generally cannot serve as the base of an individual's personal identity. Given this tendency to regard crafts, arts and commerce as lowly occupations, people try to shift to other work as soon as they can afford it. Accordingly, mobility from one occupation to another is very high compared with Japan, a factor helping impede the formation of technology.

Freedom and competition outside network

The patrilineal descent principle clearly demarcates kinship relationship. Korean social behavior accordingly is always based on differentiating between blood kin and others not related by blood.

In Japan, regional communities, such as a farm village, are organized as cooperative entities to ensure mutual security and safety. However, in the farming districts of Korea, only those related by blood enjoy such unity. Should there be plural *munjung* in a farm district, there is always the possibility that village or local community unity will become a matter of secondary importance, because top priority is reserved for the interests of the *munjung*.

In urban districts, the fact that people



The alma mater spirit: alive and well in Tokyo for Koreans abroad

hail from the same village or graduated from the same school has been instrumental in establishing firm human relations next in importance only to blood relations. The network established on these terms serves not only as a base for reliable social relationships but also as a spiritual prop. On the other hand, contacts with people outside these categories are often marked by distrust and insecurity. Because of this underlying distrust, Koreans can establish free, impersonal and even strategic transactional relations with people outside the above-mentioned categories, without being swayed by principles, standards and emotions. Judging from transactional relations alone, Koreans appear to be extremely egoistic. But behind this behavior lie kinship principles and blood relations which are beyond the individual's control. These standards must be maintained.

In Korea, human relations within an organization are built on the degree of personal intimacy with the person who is in a pivotal position—whether blood-related or not. Not only the transfer of authority and decision-making mechanism, but also the flow of information within the organization, the loyalty of component members and workshop morale are very often influenced by such personal ties. People closely related to the pivotal person are loyal to the organization, display high morale and do not readily change jobs. In contrast, those who are not so closely related or have no personal connections with the pivotal figure are less loyal, apt to have lower morale and are prone to switch jobs. They must use their networks of blood relations, birthplace ties and school affiliations to find better opportunities outside the organization.

Organization values aggressiveness

On the surface, Korean organizations appear similar to Japanese organizations. Korean organizations, however, generally stress the network possessed by each member. A sense of belonging to abstract systems, standards and organizations which leave out these specific per-

sonal connections is considered void of identity and therefore unrealistic. Thus, whereas in Japan the members of an organization are required to pledge wholehearted loyalty bolstered by a strong sense of belonging, it is relatively easy in Korea for anyone to join or quit any organization. Koreans praise those who aggressively seek opportunities to display their ability while preserving their kinship networks. They are not impressed by those who dedicate themselves entirely to one organization and rely on it for lifetime security.

In Korea, social outings to enhance the fraternity of members of the *munjung*, the establishment of associations of people hailing from the same province, and alumni associations going back to middle and high school are very common. Alumni association meetings enjoy extremely high attendance rates. It is not unheard of for prestigious schools to set up alumni liaison offices in Seoul and other big cities, stratified by year of graduation.

In Korea, labor mobility from one company to another, as well as from one profession to another, is also very high. Moreover, the composition, scale and business of an organization are always subject to change under the influence of personal connections with people outside the organization, depending on the judgment of top management.

The factors which ensure continuity and security in Korean society therefore are first, blood relations, followed by hometown ties, and then alumni ties. Outside of these relations, freedom of choice and mobility are ensured and respected. It is this which gives Koreans their dreams, that imparts vitality to their social lives, and enables them to adapt to current necessities.

The true nature of Korean business management must be understood in the light of these special features of Korean society. It is necessary to remember these deep-rooted fundamentals of Korean society, not only when we seek to understand the background factors that have sustained the economic development of the country, but when we try to forecast the long-term trends and potential of the Korean economy.