

The Post-Confucian Korea: Destroying Hierarchies in Kim Yong Ha's "Oppa Came Back"

Authors : Steven D. Capener

Abstract : The 1997 Asian financial crisis was a watershed event in Korea as it necessitated changes that began an unravelling of many of the norms and traditions that had served to underpin society. Divorce skyrocketed; the era of lifetime employment was over; women came out the home to become, in many cases, the main breadwinners; competitive forces were exacerbated; and traditional sources of authority began to crumble. All of these changes weakened the power to structure human relations of the Confucian Three Bonds and Five Relationships (삼강오륜). Since then, this "de-confucianization" has only become more pronounced with women increasingly refusing to marry, partly in protest to what they perceive as entrenched gender inequality, married couples eschewing childbirth resulting in the lowest birthrate in the world, and diminishing inheritances eroding the traditionally strong sense of filial piety (효) of children toward parents. The result of all this can be seen in the continued weakening or outright crumbling of the hierarchies codified in the Three Bonds and Five Relationship, which have served as a social template in Korea for centuries. In his 2004 work "Oppa Came Back," writer Kim Yong Ha depicts what he apparently sees as the "post-Confucian" family in a wickedly funny portrayal of what Korean society could look like if traditional bulwarks of prescriptive values suddenly collapse and are not replaced with tenable alternatives. In the short story, Kim subverts all the traditional hierarchies while leaving the desire to dominate these hierarchies intact. This produces the picture of a Korean family governed by the new values of money and physical power. After laying out what can be identified as major cultural changes in what could be called "traditional" society," the article uses a close reading of Kim's story for its implications regarding a possible new, dysfunctional version of Korean society. It seems apparent that Kim's story is a cautionary tale of the pitfalls that lie athwart the late-modern Korean landscape. These changes have important implications in the areas of education and socio-political philosophy. The conclusion focuses on possible alternatives to this post-Confucian conundrum.

Keywords : post-confucian, three bonds and five relationships, traditional society, hierarchies

Conference Title : ICKS 2024 : International Conference on Korean Studies

Conference Location : Singapore, Singapore

Conference Dates : July 04-05, 2024