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THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN KOREA: COMPARATIVE AND DYNAMIC PERSPECTIVES

In recent years there has been a spurt in research efforts to compare the quality of life across a number of different countries and regions (Estes, 1998; Freedom House, 2001; Prescott-Allen, 2001; Tang, 2000; United Nations Development Programme, 2000; World Bank, 2000). In response to growing public interest and involvement in the globalization of human life, individual scholars and research institutions have attempted to assemble and analyze comparative data on the quality of citizens' lives in various parts of the world (for a comprehensive review of these efforts, see Hagerty et al., 2001). As part of the rising global research movement for human betterment, this special volume of *Social Indicators Research* features the changing quality of life in South Korea (hereinafter Korea), a country known as one of the most politically influential and analytically interesting new democracies (Diamond and Shin, 2000).

KOREA'S PLACE IN A CHANGING WORLD

Throughout the globe, Korea has long been known as one of the four dragon states or economic miracles in Asia (World Bank, 1993). Along with its three neighbors – Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan – Korea transformed one of the world's poorest economies into an economic powerhouse within a single generation (Kim and Hong, 1997). It is now a country with a population of 46 million, and a Gross Domestic Product (hereinafter the GDP) larger than that of ten of the 15 states in the European Union. It is also the only non-Western country that was recently admitted to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (hereinafter the OECD), the exclusive club of industrialized countries.

More recently, Korea has been known for its spectacular rebound from the worst economic crisis since the Korean War of almost



half a century ago (Haggard, 2000; World Bank, 1998). In the last two months of 1997, Korea became a symbol of the Asian financial crisis that shook financial markets from Hong Kong to Wall Street. With the largest rescue package ever (57 billion dollars) from the International Monetary Fund (hereinafter the IMF), Korea was quickly transformed from an economic powerhouse into a ward of the international financial community. Two years after its humiliating rescue by the IMF, it regained its economic health, and successfully reclaimed its status as an economic powerhouse commanding the world's 11th largest economy. For the past five years, moreover, Korea has carried out a broad range of liberalizing economic reforms in order to transform itself from its age-old crony capitalism, which caused its economic meltdown, into a fully competitive and transparent market economy (D. Kim, 1999). Within all of its major economic organizations, ranging from the business conglomerates known as the *Chaebols*, through commercial banks and labor unions to state enterprises, major restructuring has been taking place.

The Korean political system has been undergoing, for more than a decade, a successful transformation from military rule to a representative democracy (Shin, 1999). By extricating the military from power, Korea has fully restored civilian rule. On every level of government, from the central to provincial and local governments, free and competitive elections are regularly held to choose governors and legislators. These democratically elected governments have consistently maintained and even expanded political rights and civil liberties. Among new democracies in Asia, it is the first country to have peacefully transferred power to an opposition party. It is also the first Asian democracy, in which its government and ruling political parties have tried to reform a recalcitrant news media by means of tax audits and fair trade practices. Within the vast continent of Asia, Korea has become a most vigorous democratic political system.

Ideologically, Korea has been undergoing a period of deep and profound transformation. Since the election of Kim Dae Jung as President in December, 1997, the country has been pursuing better relations with the Communist North (Moon and Steinberg, 1999). In the wake of his "Sunshine Policy" toward the northern half of

the Korean peninsula, South Korea's citizens have been freed from the age-old ruling ideology of a right-wing dictatorship featuring opposition to Communism both in principle and in practice. They are no longer forced to subscribe to the government's equating of democracy with anti-Communism. The Korean people are now freely developing new values and ideals for themselves, along with attempting the unification of a divided nation in which they have lived their entire lives.

For more than 30 years, the people in this divided nation have experienced successive waves of deep and rapid transformations. These transformations have affected the cultural, economic, political, and all of the other important aspects of living within their country. Obviously, these changes have secured their country a prominent position in the international community, including membership in the United Nations and the OECD. As an Asian model, one combining prosperity with democracy, the country remains a major player in the global wave of political democratization and economic liberalization still in progress (S. Kim, 2000).

Nonetheless, an increasing number of Koreans question whether their country has truly become a better place within which to live (*Joongang Ilbo*, 2001; Yang et al., 1998). There is no doubt that these changes have brought about a greater degree of material goods and services along with personal freedom for a more comfortable living. These same changes have also brought about a substantial rise in alienation and dehumanization, not to mention a phenomenal rise in public violence and environmental pollution (Park and Kim, 2001; Shin, 1980; Tang, 1998). More than ever before, the country has become vulnerable to massive international movements of capital, as evidenced by the Asian financial crisis five years ago. Solely on the basis of the data that relate to the material aspects of Korean life, it is, therefore, difficult to determine whether the quality of Korean life has been genuinely enhanced during the past three decades of cultural, political, and socio-economic upheavals.

This special volume of *Social Indicator Research* is designed to examine the exact nature of these changes and explicate their human meaning for a comprehensive and dynamic account of the quality of life within Korea. What notable changes have taken place in the various objective conditions under which the Korean

people live? Which particular conditions of life have become desirable and undesirable? How do the Korean people feel about their own private and public lives? What particular aspects of their life experiences are positive and which are negative? What kinds of specific life goals and values do the Korean people cherish most for their own existence and that of their country? How do positive and negative life experiences vary across the different segments of the Korean population? How do value priorities vary across the population segments? How have those priorities changed over time? How favorably or unfavorably do the various conditions of Korean life compare with those of other countries? These are the questions that we have explored in the individual articles that immediately follow.

PREMISES

A number of premises underlie the crafting of articles that this volume brought together. The premises are derived from theoretical and empirical research on quality of life. First, it is conceptually assumed that the quality of life is an evaluative property (Allard, 1976; Nussbaum and Sen, 1993; Storrs, 1975). The term “quality” is often used in a non-evaluative, descriptive sense in order to distinguish one particular attribute or character from others. In exploring the quality of Korean life in flux, however, the word “quality” is used as an evaluative term admitting of degrees of desirability or value. Among the various elements of life, only those to which people impute value are included in the parameter of life quality.

Second, it is assumed that human values vary considerably in preference and priority across the different segments of the same population (Cantril, 1965). As they are not only socialized into different life styles, but also command varying kinds and differential amounts of resources, people in different life situations do not always cherish the same things for themselves and their country. Even when they value the same things, they oftentimes assign different priorities to them. The priorities they assign to their values, moreover, shift over time. According to Ronald Inglehart (1977), the great valuation on the acquisition of personal wealth and achievement has been slowly giving way to freedom, equality, and accommodation to nature. In Korea today, “after decades of rushing,

there are calls for a more leisurely lifestyle” (*New York Times*, 2001: p. A7).

Third, it is assumed that quality of life is a multi-dimensional phenomenon involving much more than a set of economic conditions and commercial relations. Because human needs, unlike the needs of other forms of life, consist of biological, social, psychological, and growth components, their satisfaction requires more than material and impersonal resources, such as love, recognition, freedom, participation, and fulfillment (Campbell et al., 1976; von Wright, 1972). Viewed in this light, quality of life comprises not only material welfare, but also psychological or subjective well-being. One cannot make a comprehensive and balanced appraisal of life quality, relying solely upon the Gross National Product (hereinafter the GNP) and/or other economic and social indicators, which measure the desirability of life conditions alone.

Fourth, the two dimensions of life quality – objective and subjective – are assumed to be, by and large, distinct entities (Frey and Stutzer, 2002; Lane, 2000; Mullis, 1990). People evaluate their life experiences either positively or negatively, according to their own conception of what is good and right in life. Their evaluations also depend upon how they compare themselves with other people. As a result, there is no extensive relationship between people’s sense of well-being and the objective circumstances of their lives. Many affluent people feel as unhappy as their less well-off counterparts. At the same time, many poor people feel as happy as their rich counterparts. Subjective feelings of well-being and ill-being, therefore, cannot be inferred accurately by objective indicators of life conditions. Such subjective feelings can be measured accurately only by asking people directly to what extent they find those conditions pleasant or unpleasant, and/or fulfilling or disappointing.

Finally, it is assumed that the production of more material goods and services do not necessarily enhance one’s quality of life (East-erline, 1973, 1995; Inglehart and Klingemann, 2000; Max-Neef, 1995). Only up to a certain point can greater production, of such material resources, have a favorable impact upon people’s lives. Beyond that point, however, more production does not necessarily make for a greater quality of life; instead, it can detract from the overall quality of life by causing congestion, pollution, over-