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Changes in the Korean Family as Seen in the
Movies
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I. Why the Family?

Everyone dreams of a happy home. The home is where you can look at children's faces and relieve stress, where the children can look at their father and dream about the future, where the wife spends time happily with her family. In the language of TV ads, the happy home is all about children laughing and having fun on a green lawn. Or it's the father who, in the cold winter, wraps his scarf around his wife's neck, who wraps it around the grandfather's neck, who wraps it around his granddaughter's neck, who wraps it around her father's neck again. It's the home overflowing with love. However, you imagine it: the home is where everyone treats each other with love, and for this reason is comforting and comfortable. Everyone wants to live in such a home.

Reality however is far from image. Fathers, exhausted from work, rarely see their children, who are equally worn out from studying. The mother, busily looking after her husband and children, is tired, too. In the contemporary home it is hard for the family to sit down and have a meal together once a week, let alone once a day. The problems don't stop there. If the home is to be a place of relaxation, regardless of finances, the members must be in a horizontal relationship of equality, and understand and take care of one another. But while so many problems originate in the traditional family system, the major problem is the vertical hierarchy centered on the family patriarch. The situation has improved but the patriarchal order is still alive in many aspects of society.

As a child, I really wanted to know why my parents treated me differently from my siblings, just because I was the eldest son. Another thing: I wondered if I would really have to support my parents and take care of all family matters when I grew up. When I began my film studies it was these personal matters that stimulated my interest in the family as portrayed on the screen. The family system as seen in the movies reflects the Korean situation. The movies may not reflect reality, but as they show what the majority desires they can be said to reflect the near future. While movies may not be directly related to real life, a close relationship undeniably exists. Movies provoke thoughts about the family in reality and whether movies can help solve problems in reality.

The purpose of this article is to examine the family system in Korea as revealed in movies after the country's liberation in 1945. Though the family is a subject of discourse in many different fields, this article focuses on the patriarchal family system, which I believe is the cause of one of the biggest problems in Korean society: Whether it comes from the influence of military dictatorship or the Confucian social order, members of Korean society are placed in a vertical line of command. The person at the top makes all the decisions and the countless people below must do whatever he says. I believe this organization is rooted in the patriarchal family system. Hence this article aims to dissect that system, to explore portrayal of the system in film and the relationship of the film version to real life. In other words, this article is a critique of a system that emphasizes a vertical order and sheds light on the possibilities of various alternative family types.

II. Fall of the Patriarch, Rise of the Wife and Children

Strangely enough, the strictly patriarchal family did not appear in Korean movies from the beginning. The same was true for Korean movies during the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910-45). Except for clearly pro-Japanese movies that unabashedly promoted a family system centered on the emperor, few movies asserted the authority of the household head. In the melodramatic movies of the time where people sold out family and love for money, the father had no power. Looking back, the lead in the movie "Sweet Dream" (*Mimong*, 1936, director Yang Ju-nam) was a radical figure, a woman who followed her own desires. Why, when the Confucian tradition clearly remained in society, were movies unable to portray the father as the head and leader of the family? In other words, why did the patriarchal family system seem to weaken rather than strengthen? For the answer we should look to a movie that was a great sensation in its time: "Madame Freedom" (*Jayubuin*, 1956, director Han Hyeong-mo).



The appearance of "Madame Freedom" in 1956 was paradoxical and shocking. It's not easy to understand how such a movie could be made and become a huge hit just three years after the Korean War had stopped. People were still suffering. In the tragedy of fraternal war more than three million people lost their lives and countless children were orphaned. It was a time when the first thing on people's minds was finding enough food

to stay alive. So how are we to interpret the runaway success of a movie about the wife of a professor who developed a passion for dance and has an affair with a younger man?

The lead role was an ordinary housewife, Oh Seon-yeong (Kim Jeong-nim), the wife of a professor who began to change after she started working in a store selling imported goods. She goes to a dance party with a friend and, attracted by the young man next door, she begins to learn to dance. She is not the only one who goes astray. Her husband, Professor Chang (Park Am), begins dating his student-cum-typist. But the conclusion is unexpected. The professor is able to make a clean break and return to the family, but Seon-yeong goes as far as having an affair with the young man, though she eventually realizes her mistake and returns home as well.

In some respects the story is so simple. Rather than the story, the important thing is the way the screen portrays Korean society overcoming the wounds of war and moving gradually toward modernization. It is completely different from movies made in the 1940s, showing the changes in South Korea after the war and the rapid influx of American popular culture. Naturally the movie shows more than that. It reflects Westernization in the people's way of thinking. The people wanted Western ways and modernization, to be exact. They wanted Korea to become like the United States or France. But modernization in the colonial period and the 1950s was not something that happened from within but from without. The men, powerless in the face of modernization from external forces, were not worthy of being family heads. On the other hand, modernization made women comparatively free. For women who had been oppressed under Confucian values it was only natural to express Westernized desires.

Perhaps that is why the women in the movies appear so liberated. Of course men also felt new sexual needs and other desires under the waves of Westernization and modernization, but women were more aggressive in expressing changes. The women in the movies go on picnics, go out dancing, seek out expensive goods, and enjoy themselves. That the professor's wife, a symbol of conservatism, is the manager of an import store has many implications. But in "Madame Freedom" the woman realizes she was wrong and returns to the family fold and the temporary escape ends in an unsatisfactory compromise. The home as portrayed in this movie is an uncomfortable place caught between the patriarchal system and Westernization.

Even in the popular TV dramas of the 1960s the patriarch has little power in the home. Unaware that times have changed the father is pushed aside by the new generation, which focuses on the children. This is what happened in most family dramas of the time. The many movies featuring Kim Seung-ho as the father are a prime example. The first half of these movies contained various episodes of conflict between family members and the second half employed melodrama to resolve those conflicts. The important point in these movies was the father's inability to act as the patriarch any longer. They were pushed aside by change.

"Under the Sky of Seoul" (*Seoul-eui jibung mit*, 1961, director Lee Hyeong-pyo) was the prime example of this kind of movie. The herbal doctor Kim Hak-gyu (Kim Seung-ho), the fortune teller Park (Heo Jang-gang) and the real estate agent Noh (Kim Hi-gap) are old-timers in the lane in which they live. They come into conflict with some newcomers in the person of Choi the doctor (Kim Jin-gyu), Kim's daughter Hyeon-ok (Cho Eun-hee) whom he is engaged to marry, and Kim's son Hyeon-gu (Shin Yeong-gyun). The old-style patriarch Kim Hak-gyu grows envious when he hears that Dr. Choi is running for city council, so he empties his bank books and runs for the election, too. When Kim leaves home in despair after failing to be elected, Dr. Choi

pays off his debts and marries his daughter.

The movie shows that the old-fashioned Kim cannot beat new generation Choi. It signals the fading of the old generation and the coming of the new, as the traditional herbal medicine loses out to the new imported Western medicine. It is the old generation Kim who runs for election despite the opposition of his children only to end up shaking up the whole family. Thus the old generation is relegated to history and the new generation takes over.

So in the movies of the 1950s and early 1960s the patriarchal system was on unsteady ground. In the 1950s the women who embraced Western values broke free from patriarchal oppression and followed their desires. In the early 1960s the patriarch gives way to the new generation. The major players in South Korean society are now the new generation who seek Westernization and modernization.

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