

Patriarchy in East Asia: A Comparative Sociology of Gender. Sechiyama Kaku. Translated by James Smith. Leiden: Brill, 2013, 329 pp., ISBN 2213-0608.

SECHIYAMA KAKU'S BOOK, English translation of his 1996 book in Japanese, offers a more nuanced analysis of the models of East Asian patriarchy understood by most scholars to be homogeneously belonging to the Confucian cultural sphere. A deeper scrutiny reveals counterintuitive findings that illuminate the cultural specificity and universality of the different models of patriarchy in East Asia.

Common to East Asian models of patriarchy is the allocation of gender roles, where men and women are expected to engage in productive and reproductive labor, respectively. Along with this universality are a multitude of models of patriarchy that cut across and transcend political and economic systems, and sociocultural norms. In the case of Japan, Confucianism had little to do with the modern and contemporary models of patriarchy. Instead, it is more of a function of capitalist development and a conscious effort of the state to institute an ideology that sets the role of married women in reproductive labor and men in the productive sphere. The emphasized role of the mother on housework is also a characteristic inherent in Japanese patriarchy.

The book consists of ten chapters grouped into three parts. Chapters one and two lay down the theoretical framework used in analyzing the discourse on patriarchy—how it is conceived in cultural anthropology, sociology, marxist feminism, history, and psychoanalysis. In his discussion, Sechiyama highlights two important elements in understanding patriarchy in the context of East Asia: gender and generation (22). Having said this, the author defines patriarchy as, “a comprehensive set of relationships and norms characterized by...gender-based and... generation-based allocation of set of roles and an unequal distribution of power” (24). Chapter two traces the emergence, transformation and anticipated disappearance or resilience of the “housewife” in East Asian

societies. Sechiyama conceptualizes modern and contemporary housewives vis-à-vis modern and contemporary patriarchies in East Asia, in both capitalist (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan) and socialist (China and North Korea) societies.

Chapters three and four deal with unearthing the universality and specificity of patriarchy in Japan, with primary focus on the role of the housewife and her changing labor participation in both productive and reproductive realms. Sechiyama traces the birth of the modern housewife and the factors that contributed to its emergence. Critical to this discussion is the “good wife, wise mother” ideology misconstrued by most scholars as a product of Confucian influence in Japanese society. A peculiar feature of contemporary patriarchy is that Japanese women are allowed to engage in both productive and reproductive labor.

Chapters five, six, seven, and eight examine the types of patriarchy in four East Asian societies—South Korea, Taiwan, North Korea and China. Using a plethora of data gathered from archival research and official statistical documents, Sechiyama argues the following: (1) China and North Korea both have socialist political systems and managed economic systems (at least in the beginning) but gender-based allocation of roles and unequal power was more striking in the latter compared with the former; (2) South Korea and Taiwan have transformed into liberal democratic states with free market economic systems (albeit South Korea came in later than Taiwan) yet more married women chose to become housewives in South Korea than in Taiwan. Moreover, the labor participation of Taiwanese women does not follow the “M curve” unlike the case of South Korea.

One of the strengths of the book lies in the applicability of its analysis to policy formulations especially in addressing the current issues and problems facing the East Asian region (chapter nine). These include declining birth rate, ageing, and shrinking labor force. For Taiwan to address its declining birthrate and shrinking labor force, the author proposes that it may be best to utilize the labor of senior citizens, whereas for Japan and

South Korea, encouraging women to participate in the labor force by expanding their employment opportunities might be a more feasible option (285). Considering the sociocultural norms in each society, such policy options may perhaps be more sustainable solutions to initially augment the labor force requirement as against the massive labor migration option discussed by Vogt (2007), among others.

The last chapter of the book offers a comprehensive synthesis on the findings and assertions about the multiplicity of models of patriarchy in East Asia that cannot be explained by Confucian influence or even political and economic systems alone. Patriarchy, Sechiyama argues, should be treated as an independent variable that serves as one of the catalysts of gender relations and gender-role allocation particularly in East Asian societies.

Sechiyama opines that setting aside the discussion about men and putting primary emphasis on housewives are validated because “the man’s main role in the family has almost always been that of the breadwinner, the member the others rely on to earn a living” (28). I disagree. The focus should be on the power relations between the subject of subordination (commonly women) and the source of domination (men) so as to cast a wider perspective and better understanding of patriarchy. Treating the patriarch as a static concept in the power relations within the household posits a dangerous tendency to silence many voices, denying diversity of identities and experiences among men in societies. Analysis should not be restricted to the ideological and representational hegemony of the elite male breadwinner. Roberson and Suzuki (2003) and their cohorts have compiled critical essays about the politics of multiplicity of Japanese masculinities. Such should be excellent complementary readings to this work.

Nonetheless, Sechiyama’s analysis—which is based on voluminous statistical data and a wide array of documents compiled through archival research—as well as his proposed theoretical framework, is an outstanding contribution to the discourse on patriarchy in East Asia.

References

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