

On This Topic

Individualization and Community Reconstruction

Sang-Jin HAN

The three papers included in this special issue represent the first outcomes of a global network project funded by the National Research Foundation of Korea and launched in June 2017, with experts in Korea, China, and Japan. The project deals with the relation between individual and community, not simply as a regional problem, but as a fundamental question to sociology. Sociology was born out of modern transformation, deeply interested in grasping the essential characteristics of modern social orders. Of particular significance in this regard is the emergence of the individual and individualism, as witnessed by such expressions as possessive individualism, inner-oriented men, and transcendental subjectivity. How this individuality interacted with the emerging forms of social life—mediated by social classes, interest groups, and collective movements—constituted a key question to sociology. Likewise, the relation of individual freedom and community solidarity could have never escaped sociological attention. Sociology kept two trends in balance: on the one hand, sociology has shown the individual as becoming more and more liberated from traditional bonds, while on the other hand, sociology has

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Sang-Jin HAN is a Professor Emeritus at the Department of Sociology, Seoul National University, Seoul, Korea. E-mail: hansjin@snu.ac.kr

also shown individuals as embedded in social relations, both primary and secondary. Nothing could be more foreign to sociology than presupposing individualization and socialization as a binary opposition.

However, these days a long-standing trademark of sociology, that is, the balance of attention to individuality and sociality as two complementary aspects of human life, seems to have been seriously damaged. Individual empowerment has swept over Western sociology, penetrating deeply into every corner of society. Even the family is now seen more and more as an arbitrary and contingent institution, or voluntary association, subject to individuals who can freely decide whether they want to be part of it or not. The prevailing idea for many is now that people can choose the type of family they want to be part of, including the same sex families, in the same way they can choose commodities at a market. This individual empowerment reflects many profound social changes. Phenomena that have contributed to paving the road towards one-sided individual empowerment include: the sovereignty given to the consumer in a consumer society; digital communication creating an unlimited space for individual journeys of knowledge and imagination; the legal definition of the individual as the only bearer of rights; image politics destroying the firm social basis of party politics; the radicalization of human rights in the direction of individual empowerment; and neo-liberal advocacy of the free market and free trade. Consequently, Western discourse on individualization appears pessimistic because while it mainly focuses on why and how individuals become dis-embedded from community, it is unable to explore how they can be re-embedded into community life. Given the fact that sociology attempted to grasp “the social” and present it as the basis of politics and economy, the so-called “disappearance of the social” seems to deny the *raison d'être* of sociology. This is a serious challenge, indeed. Is it possible to keep this ambition and develop it further? The answer depends on how we see the fundamental presupposition of the neo-liberal outlook, which defines all communities without exception as a potential obstacle to individual emancipation.

The epistemological landscape of East Asia is very different in this regard. In view of the pluralities of world perceptions and value orientations,

self-centered forms of individualism, individualization, and individual empowerment, however hegemonic they may currently be, may be nothing but reflections of a Western bias. Therefore, it would be better to seek to understand the relation of individual and community from the perspective of complementarity, rather than binary opposition. The antinomy between individual freedom and community solidarity is foreign to East Asia, and the breakdown of community as a consequence of one-way individual empowerment cannot be considered healthy. Perhaps, as a potential competitor with the West with regard to the second modern further transformation, East Asia may provide a good opportunity for regaining the original insight of sociology today seen from the perspective of both individual and communities.

With this reasoning as a foundation, this special issue investigates individualization and community reconstruction as concomitant changes in East Asia. This concept originated in an ideas-gathering seminar at Seoul National University in November 2017, held as a kick-off meeting for a global network research project on “Individualization and Neighborhood Community Reconstruction in Seoul, Beijing, and Tokyo: From the Perspective of Risk Society.” Though the research was proposed with a dual focus on individualization and community reconstruction, in the kick-off meeting, we decided to pay more attention to community reconstruction. This was because no research has yet been made on this subject, whereas the dynamics and consequences of individualization have been thoroughly investigated (as Young-Hee Shim’s paper in this issue shows). There is no doubt that individualization has moved very fast in Japan, Korea, and China. What remains to be seen is whether individualization runs as a one-way development, as in the West, or it accompanies the concomitant trends toward the reconstruction of community, either as a bottom-up movement or as a policy goal taken by city government.

Our research has been greatly inspired by experiments of neighborhood community reconstruction in the metropolitan cities of Seoul, Beijing, and Tokyo. These experiments have emerged from different historical and political contexts. Care should be taken to avoid hasty conclusions or generalization. Furthermore, most of these experiments are very new, thus

many ambiguities, uncertainties, and fluidities are found, particularly in the case of Qinghe in Beijing, which nevertheless attracted our attention. The Seongmisan experiments in Seoul show a fascinating combination of bottom-up movement, with democratic and participatory orientation, and the Seoul Metropolitan Government's commitment to the policy of neighborhood community reconstruction. In the case of Japan, the Setagaya experiment in Tokyo also attracted our attention. Thus, we wanted to collect case studies of these experiments as the first step of our research. This was one of the main goals of the ideas-gathering seminar.

Many issues were raised during the processes of the seminar, paper revision, and evaluation. Questions arose as to whether the perspective of risk society can serve well for the empirical research of the relation between individualization and community reconstruction, and the concept of social governance is clear-cut and can be properly applied to this research. As stated above, the relation between individual and community goes back to the origin of sociology. Seen today, however, there are good reasons to investigate this relation from the perspective of risk society because a vicious cycle is in operation. Individualization, particularly as we find it today, enforced by economic crisis and the decline of welfare resources, makes individuals ever more vulnerable to insecurity and desperate over the issue of how to survive, thus making them unable to take care of the members of the community to which they belong when they need help. These linkages lead to the disintegration of community, like the family, due to the increasing pressures of survival. The breakdown of community, in turn, makes individuals more and more isolated and helpless when they confront risks and dangers. To the extent to which a flourishing community is assumed to be an important condition for individual development, the cries for community reconstruction are likely to burst out in response to risk society. Seen in this way, the experiments of neighborhood community reconstruction in East Asia can be interpreted as a kind of preventive measure, aimed at the vicious cycle characteristic of risk society. This interpretation is theoretically innovative and substantively relevant given the harsh reality of risk society. The project participants wanted to show the relative advantages of this interpretation compared with other more or less

conventional approaches.

As to the concept of social governance, confusion may arise because this concept is not yet clearly articulated. Despite abundant discourses on governance, no clear-cut concept of social governance is available by which we can explain its historical formation, characteristics of value orientations, rules of operation, and typologies. Confusion may be further complicated by the fact that the Chinese party-state began to use the concept of social governance (*shehuizhili*) to explain the major shift of state policy from social management to social governance through its official declaration in 2013. The declaration made it clear that it was no longer possible to tackle the many pressing uncertainties the state faced as effectively as they wanted with the state bureaucratic systems alone. Thus they advocated a new paradigm of social governance which opened up the space of participation to nonstate actors such as experts, NGO leaders, opinion makers, and business leaders. They also elevated the necessity of working out better solutions to potential crises and risks, but in such a way that state power and its legitimacy would remain intact. Certainly, the Chinese view converges into a more general view of social governance. However, this study does not adopt the Chinese definition of social governance because, to put it simply, the experiments of community reconstruction in Seoul and Tokyo go beyond the Chinese concept of social governance.

Social governance differs from state governance. Perhaps, state governance is closer to the Chinese experiments so far, meaning that state actors still play the primary role in decision-making. In contrast, the experiments in Seoul and Tokyo may come closer to social governance, embracing bottom-up channels of participation and decision-making. Nevertheless, the Chinese experiments have been included within the conceptual parameter of social governance because they exhibit some of its characteristic (as the paper by Qiang li, Lu Zheng and Hao Wang in this issue shows). Thus, the concept of social governance is used across this project not as a fixed concept but as a flexible category which can be extended from one case to another. For example, we can speak of a particular type of social governance dealing with particular issues, such as the social governance of foods safety, community security, adult isolation,

crime control, and children's education. These are just as conceivable as the social governance of environmental protection and climate change.

The special issue offers only three papers out of seven revised after the kick-off seminar. The seven papers included the three case studies of Seoul, Beijing, and Tokyo respectively and the papers dealing with individualization, the historical background of social governance, the single issue-oriented social governance, and a comparative study of Seoul and Beijing. As the guest editor for this special issue, I worked to coordinate and evaluate the papers according to the principles previously announced. I wanted to keep the quality of the papers high for the journal. Thus, I examined the extent of logical consistency and substantial quality of the submitted revised papers. In doing so, I noticed some difficulties that the authors might have encountered. Though the experiments are novel and attractive in many respects, they are yet so new that neither previous study nor data collection has progressed well to stimulate a new research and a coherent academic research paper. How to link the perspective of risk society and social governance is also demanding and challenging. Despite all these circumstances and difficulties involved, I came to the conclusion not to take the case studies of Seoul and Tokyo even though I acknowledged considerable progress made by revision. The paper dealing with the left-behind children in rural areas in China, as a social risk closely associated with the peasant workers in cities is another case. This represents an important topic for the single-issue oriented social governance. However, the revised paper still lacks the substantive information of social governance, mostly covering the supply side information of social workers. Consequently, among the candidate papers, four papers passed through the peer review process. The three papers are published in this issue and the fourth paper on comparative study of Seoul and Beijing is supposed to be published in the next summer issue.

The three papers included may not be sufficient to reveal the vision and ambition outlined in this short introduction. Yet it is hoped that they sensitize attention to the profound meaning of the topic of this special issue, which goes back to the origin of sociology and is reactivated by the new theoretical perspectives of risk society and social governance. This is

most visible in my paper “The Historical Context of Social Governance Experiments in East Asia: The Challenge of Risk Society,” which recounts how risk society emerged and unfolded in East Asia and attempts to clarify why the perspectives of risk society and social governance are crucially important for this research. The paper written by Young-Hee Shim, “East Asian Patterns of Individualization and Its Consequences for Neighborhood Community Reconstruction,” attempts a systematization of the research done on individualization, explores why the Western discourses of individualization are problematic, and examines how experiments of social governance have emerged in East Asia as a response to risk society. Finally, “Bringing the Society Back In: The New Qinghe Experiment and Social Governance in China,” written by Qiang Li, Lu Zheng, and Hao Wang, is the only case study included in this special issue and it provides a wealth of historical information and sociological analysis.