

REVIEW

by Associate Professor Yana Mancheva, PhD,
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of the dissertation of Aneta Rumenova Dimitrova “Family Relations and the “Education” Factor in the Republic of Korea – between Confucian Traditions and Modernity”,
submitted for a PhD degree in 2.1. Philology, scientific specialty “Languages of the peoples of Asia, Africa and America (Korean language and society)”

Aneta Dimitrova’s dissertation examines many outgoing problems of modern society in the Republic of Korea, which have been outlined for decades, but little has actually been done. Numerous studies in Korea and around the world have been researching the specifics and problems of the modern Korean family, gender equality, the peculiarities arising from the over-aim for education. In Aneta Dimitrova’s thesis she attempts to fill in missing points in research already done by tracing and explaining the relationship between the existing problems, on the one hand, and on the other - to find the cause in the influence of Confucianism, analyzing the traditional and modern state of family and education in the Republic of Korea.

The dissertation consists of 184 pages, of which 150 pages are the main text, 20 pages of appendices and a detailed bibliography of 110 titles of monographs and articles

and 54 media sources. The structure of the thesis is logically constructed, coherent and well-grounded – the text consists of three chapters, each of which ends with a summary that supports the clarity of the presentation. The introduction (3 – 13 p.) consists of a brief presentation of the Confucian ideology and its influence on Korean society; the purpose, tasks, object, and subject of the study are clearly explained, and two hypotheses are also formulated. There is a correctly presented complex research method - component and comparative analysis, as well as synthesis, comparison and summary (8 p.) Regarding the subject of the study - the traditional and modern Korean family, and from the point of view of the emphasis Confucianism places on education, additional approaches - functional and systemic - are presented. The idea is covered theoretically and explained with the most important concepts of the study – family functions, family system, etc. After reviewing the materials related to her research, Aneta Dimitrova substantiates the relevance and uniqueness of her text, one of the prerequisites for this is that it examines contemporary phenomena that are undergoing changes at the present moment and which are not yet widely studied not only in Bulgarian, but also in Korean studies worldwide. An important part of the introduction is the justification of the used terminology - mainly in relation to the terms “traditional” and “modern”, as well as “Confucianism” and “Neo-Confucianism”.

The first chapter of the dissertation, entitled “Nature and Features of the Korean Family” logically begins with a presentation of the traditional family, especially from the time of the Joseon dynasty, and the author traces the transformation from traditional to modern/contemporary, analyzing which of the Confucian values have been preserved in unchanged form, which have been transformed and which have disappeared. The chapter’s content is precise, thus for the purpose of the study, some of the main Confucian views that influenced the formation of the traditional understanding of family are presented. An important part of the chapter examines the specific features of relations in the modern family - on one hand, the relations between spouses, on the other - between parents and children, as well as between daughters-in-law and parents-in-law, who carry perhaps the heaviest Confucian burden for women both in traditional but also in modern Korea. The

last part of the chapter highlights the new phenomena in Korean family relations, and here the object of the research is primarily the unmarried couples which is common around the world, but also specific Korean and East Asian phenomena such as *kirogi kajok*, the weekend couples and the “imported” wives which to a big extent change the face of the modern family. Aneta Dimitrova outlines the main factors for the modern change of the Korean family, summarizing them in three categories - urbanization, modernization and Western influence, but the analysis made strengthens the dissertation’s thesis that, despite the changes that have occurred, Confucian values continue to “dictate relations, views and expectations” (p. 56) in Korean society.

In the second chapter of the dissertation, dedicated to education and its influence on family relations, Aneta Dimitrova emphasizes the extremely important role of education in Korea, which dates back to the time of the Joseon dynasty and continues in modern time Republic of Korea. Although all religious-philosophical teachings in Korea contribute to the development and spread of education, the influence of Confucianism, which places it at the core of society, is undeniable. According to Confucianism, education is the highest goal and aspiration for the individuals and society, and its achievement ensures a rise in the social hierarchy - an attitude that exists in the Republic of Korea till nowadays. Its influence and importance grew even more during the Joseon Dynasty, when a good knowledge of Confucian Classics was tied to exams to enroll for bureaucratic positions and success in society as a whole. Quite logically, the author comes to the conclusion that although at the beginning of the 20th century Korea was forced to abandon the Confucian education system and adopt the Western model of education, the thousand-year-old tradition of Confucian education “is seen as the matrix of the current civil service exam, as well as to that for university admission” (Dissertation Summary, p. 14). In this chapter, the study of some “interesting” contemporary phenomena is particularly valuable - for example, “shadow education”, the *hagwon* educational institutions, which the author quite truthfully perceives as the successors of the one-time private Confucian academies *sowon*. The role and functions of the mother in the education of the children are also extensively presented

here - although even today in the Republic of Korea the father performs the function of the head of the family, in practice the role of the mother in all family, domestic and household matters is much more important and good preparation for further realization in life and society is almost entirely in the hands of the mother. In the chapter, Aneta Dimitrova well illustrates what this excessive desire for education, the “over-ambitions” leads to - first of all, family alienation, family separation, the unbearable educational burden for Korean students – children enrolled in the educational system in an earlier age as possible. This analysis has been supported by a solid amount of statistical data – in terms of negative consequences such as sadness, depression, suicide among young people, debt, divorce, alcohol use in the wider framework of families. As a result of the excessive striving for education and climbing the social ladder, the prerequisites for the emergence of the divided families *kirogi kajok*, the impoverishment of families, as well as the difficulties in finding a marriage partner are also presented.

In the third chapter, dedicated to the relationship between the sexes and the reflection of Confucianism on the modern reality in Korea, Aneta Dimitrova’s view is strongly presented - here she points out precisely some of the most worrisome problems of modern society, which are studied on the basis of the latest data from political and social life - first of all, inequality between sexes, “inherited” from the Confucian ideals of traditional society. Confucian patriarchal views come into serious conflict with the modern world - as Aneta Dimitrova points out “Korea ranks 102nd out of 156 countries in the category of gender equality” (p. 101). After extensively examining and analyzing women’s issues in contemporary Korean society, the dissertation also draws attention to the South Korean government’s attempts to address gender discrimination, culminating in the creation of the Ministry of Gender Equality and the Family in 2001. After being incepted, the Ministry has been criticized on the one hand by women for not being effective enough in protecting their rights, and subsequently by men for “promoting feminism” (p. 109). In fact, as Aneta Dimitrova herself points out, the original Korean name of this Ministry should be translated as “Ministry of Women and Family”, which indeed departs from the

idea of equality embedded in the English translation. After the analysis, it turns out that although it sounds paradoxical, the institution that was created to establish equality actually causes more opposition and conflict between sexes. In the same chapter, the author thoroughly explores the problems of the younger generation in Korea, the generation that is more actively trying to “shake off” the Confucian burden of traditional society, whose main victim is women - among these problems, a good illustration in the thesis are for example the small spy cameras that are placed illegally and secretly in public restrooms, hotel rooms, etc. in order to record videos mostly with women, as a consequence of which making these videos public in one way or another leads to serious psychological trauma for the victims, and even suicidal cases. Aneta Dimitrova discovered that subsequently, fears of similar types of abuse develop into a wider fear of socializing, isolation from society (the solo culture, which has spread even more as a result of the Covid pandemic), refusal to date, marry and have family and children, etc.

In the conclusion of her dissertation, Aneta Dimitrova concisely summarizes the results achieved, presenting the main contributions of her thesis, among which I would particularly highlight the triple connection that the dissertation makes between Confucianism, family relations and education as one of the reasons for the contemporary problems of the South Korean society and secondly – the study of newly emerging social phenomena such as solo culture (with many varieties such as *honjok*, *honbap*, *honsul*, etc.), the *sampo* generation, concepts such as *4P*, *gold miss*, etc.

As particularly valuable for the dissertation, I would point out the three appendices - the dictionary of terms related to family relations and new social phenomena in Korea, which will be useful not only for Koreanists, but also for a wider circle of specialists and I would define as contributing; the extremely interesting proverbs and expressions related to the family, which the author collected partly during fieldwork, all with translation and some with explanatory notes; and the appendice №3 presenting statistics related to the family, which further facilitate the understanding of the text.

In her work, Aneta Dimitrova used rich bibliographic, factual and statistical material, which is evident from the large number of monographs, articles, official documents, pages of official institutions in the Republic of Korea, indicated in the bibliography. An indisputable contribution of the work is the clear, accurate, precise language she uses. The information and citations are presented correctly and clearly.

Finally, I would like to add a few formal but important clarifications - the dissertation meets all the requirements for a scientific paper, as the author has submitted a dissertation summary that correctly reflects the content of the dissertation. Aneta Dimitrova has seven publications related to the topic of her research, as well as active participation in Bulgarian and international scientific conferences and student seminars.

In conclusion I would like to say that based on the excellent qualities of the dissertation, I express my positive assessment and propose to the respected scientific jury to award to Aneta Rumenova Dimitrova the educational and scientific degree “Doctor”.

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