

Introduction: Risk and Sociological Research in Korea and Japan

JAEYEOL YEE | SEOUL NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
SAWAKO SHIRAHASE | THE UNIVERSITY OF TOKYO

This special issue includes seven papers dealing with diverse social risks in Korea and Japan. In contemporary society risk became a keyword that reveals the nature of modernity each society has achieved. For example, the recent histories of the two countries cannot be written without describing catastrophic disasters such as the Hebei Spirit Oil Spill in *Taeon* and the *Daiichi* Nuclear Accident in *Fukushima*. Nor is it possible to discuss the relevance of social policy without mentioning the growing burden of aging populations. Diverse risks such as natural and human disasters and environmental, economic and social risks became keywords for social scientists as well as terms used in everyday dialogue in both countries.

As societal risks are embedded in a society, they inevitably reflect the nature and peculiarity of the society: As the risks in the West reveal the characteristics of Western society, the risks in Asia reveal the structural characteristics of Asian societies. The recent discourse of “risk society,” especially in the West, reveals growing skepticism of traditional beliefs on social progress propelled by rational and scientific development. We are witnessing the growth of uncontrollable risks, which is an oxymoron, as a risk is defined as a calculable and controllable threat. Contemporary risk is the result of the previous accumulation of human intervention in natural, economic and social environments. Risk society is not just a riskier society but a society facing a new type of risk.

As Beck succinctly described, “de-bounding” is the key feature of new risks: de-bounding in space, time and social coordination. Spatial de-bounding blurs national boundaries; for instance, Koreans are suffering from the polluted fine dust coming from China. The radioactive leak from a nuclear explosion threatens not only the domestic fishery industry but also the whole world. Without international cooperation, no nation-state can solve these problems. Temporal de-bounding is caused by the growing gap

between cause and effect in risk formation. New risks, including genetically modified organisms and heavy metals accumulated in the human body, may turn out to be detrimental after generations of incubation. A pension system generously designed for the babyboom generation may overburden future generations. Social de-bounding is caused by the complicated interdependence in the social division of labor. As everything is both a cause and an effect, irresponsibility is an inevitable outcome of a risk society. As the production, distribution and consumption of risks are intermingled, the simple and direct attribution of responsibility is no longer possible.

Asian societies underwent profound change in terms of the advent of a risk society. Yet, they are also confronted with unique risks pertaining to domestic historical legacies. One such risk often found in Korea is the failure of social coordination, an apparent result of compressed modernization and the rapid expansion of the social division of labor without a profound change in the mindset of the people. Scholars have identified compressed modernity as an important source of risks. Accelerated development was coupled with high-risk strategies on the part of government as well as business. As a result of this obsession with speed, rapid development was naturally coupled with high risk-taking. In a risk-taking society, current cost-saving outweighs "future liabilities." Speed was chosen over safety, and scale was pursued rather than value. In many cases, good results justified illegal procedures. The rapid growth during the 1970s led to a series of disasters during the 1990s; the lack of preparation in exposing the financial sector to the global market resulted in the economic crisis in 1997. Also, growing labor migration and the unbridled flow of capital throughout the world created new financial and social risks.

In a similar vein, Miwao Matsumoto pays attention to the structural causes of the Fukushima accident by illuminating the astonishing similarity with the little-known but serious accidents that occurred immediately before World War II. His concept of structural disaster focuses on the science-technology-society interface, and his contextualization of the sociological implications of the prewar accident against Fukushima reveals the importance of the social and organizational aspects of a risk society. While Matsumoto's research is an example of the persistence of organizational path dependence, Hye-Kyung Lee's paper, another example of the science-technology-society interface, shows that policy makers sometimes learn from previous failures by reacting to a focusing event. By comparing the *Saemangum* reclamation project in Korea with a previous project at Lake *Shihwa*, she traces the learning process of policy makers. The drastic

empowerment of civil society and the sensitized public perception on the ecological value of tidal flats are believed to be the main causes of the policy change.

A rapidly aging population is a source of societal risk in both Japan and Korea. Sawako Shirahase deals with this issue in Japan. Her research, based on a rigorous analysis of micro-data, shows that economic inequality among the aged population is becoming more differentiated, depending on their previous labor market status as well as household type. The same issue is dealt with in Keong-Suk Park's paper. She examines the relationship between family changes and declining family support for the aging population. Park interprets the process as a political conflict between authoritarian patriarchy and resisting wives and daughter-in-laws. In contrast to typical welfare states observed in continental Europe, where the burden of family in welfare provision was gradually socialized and replaced by state welfare, welfare is less socialized in Japan and Korea; thus the family is expected to assume responsibility. The fast dissolution of the old social model, based on the lifetime employment of the breadwinner and family-based welfare, creates growing strain in the provision of welfare.

The subjective aspect of social risks is dealt with by Shogo Takegawa and Eun Young Nam. Takegawa's paper traces the change of public attitude toward social policy in Japan during the 2000s. What he found is the wane of neo-liberalism, as a response to growing poverty and inequality, but mixed signals on specific social policies constructing a welfare state. Nam's research shows that experiences of social risks around the 1997 economic crisis in Korea has left trauma in people's subjective well-being and middle-class identification.

In contrast to the previous papers focusing on the systemic risks pertaining to social life, Hong-Jung Kim argues that there are newly emerging risks in the domain of intimacy. His cultural interpretation of film and discourses of risk society reveals that the child in contemporary society has become a risk-totem: the child has become a conflicting image of both a precious and priceless being and a calculable and measurable risk in the case of abduction.

All seven papers deal with diverse risks in contemporary Korea and Japan. However, there are some differences. Japan has higher risk potential caused by earthquakes, while Korea is virtually free from seismological considerations. Yet the papers included in this issue show that Japan and Korea, with some time lag, share many similarities in terms of social risks: especially the aging of the population and the rapid change of the family

structure produce similar problems in the underdeveloped welfare regimes. For instance, a high suicide rate reveals deep-rooted frustrations in the people of both countries. The growing gap between a company-based welfare system and the lagged development of social welfare based on the Bismarkian model reflects an unprepared response to the growing new social risks. As invited coeditors of this special issue, we hope this issue will serve as a starting point for exciting collaborative sociological research in the future.

JAEYEOL YEE is Professor of Sociology at Seoul National University. His research areas include organizations, social networks, risk and disaster, and social quality. His recent publications include a co-edited trilogy on social networks entitled *Social Networks and Social Structure* (2004), *The Transformation of Korean Society and Social Networks* (2006), and *The Structure and Problems of Network Society* (2007). He also co-authored two books on social quality entitled *Reading the Korean Social Trend: The Change of Social Quality after Economic Crisis +10* (2009), and *Risk Society, Risk Politics* (2010). These were all published in Korean by Seoul National University Press. Address: Department of Sociology, College of Social Science, Seoul National University, 1 Gwanak-ro, Gwanak-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea 151-742. [E-mail: jyyee@snu.ac.kr]

SAWAKO SHIRAHASE is Professor of Sociology, the University of Tokyo. Her main research interests include social stratification and demographic change with a cross-national perspective and comparative studies of welfare states from the analytical framework of gender and generation. She is the author of *Thinking about Inequalities in Japan: A Comparative Study of Ageing Societies* (in Japanese, 2009, the University of Tokyo Press) and the editor of *Demographic Change and Inequality in Japan* (2011, the Trans Pacific Press). Address: Sociology Department, The University of Tokyo, Hongo 7-3-1, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo, Japan 113-0033 [E-mail: sshiraha@l.u-tokyo.ac.jp]