

東アジアにおける「プリンセス症」の社会的メカニズムの考察*

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A Look at the Societal Mechanism for “Princess Syndrome” in East Asia

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1. Introduction

The author was first introduced to the term *공주병 kongju byon* or “princess syndrome” while studying as an international student in South Korea. He wrote about the topic briefly in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Comparative Politics in East Asia/Political Science course at Keimyung University 啓明大学, in Spring 1999. Through this paper, the author would like to revisit the topic and expand on the sociological reasons or the mechanism for the behavior and attitude behind this social phenomenon. Especially with evidence of “princess syndrome” being acknowledged beyond the borders of South Korea and being referenced in popular culture, social media, and music, the author finds modern relevance in this topic.

2. “Princess Syndrome” Overview

How would it be like to live at home, all expenses paid for, without a care or commitment in the world? Wouldn't it be nice to not have a job or school to wake up for and stress about, no studies burdening you with heavy texts to read and papers to write, not even any clubs you belong to that take away your precious time? You could sleep until whenever, go to bed at any hour, fill your day with whatever triviality best suited you at the moment.

This author has always felt the presence of unspoken assumptions/expectations, both on his own and from the environment that he was raised in that he was to work to better himself

whether it be through furthering his education, getting a job, or dedicating time to some worthy pursuit or another. At the very least, in the Western civilization he grew up in, being a mere “bump on the log” was rarely desired, and even more seldom put up with. Despite the complaints about the toil and stresses of daily life that frequently come from anyone who has ever endeavored to earn an honest living, the author feels confident saying that he is not alone in his sentiments.

During the author's study abroad in South Korea, he was informed about the “princess population” by others and by his own observations. A portion of the “princess syndrome” candidates the author believes is based on the lack personal identification relating to occupation ties. Such individuals are lazily drifting along on the air currents of time without any intended direction—the female youth who are neither studying nor working, except for perhaps an occasional temporary *arubaito* or part-time job, and living off their parents, often in the same home.

3. “Princess Syndrome” in East Asia

“Princess syndrome,” known as *kongju byon* *공주병* in Korea, has become common terminology to describe certain members of the modern Korean societal landscape. Princess syndrome is also called “princess sickness” or “princess disease”. The definition of princess syndrome is somewhat subjective as different types of “princesses” create variables that distort definitions. However, the overall definition of a “princess” as being a woman that thinks she is beautiful or is adored by as such by society or

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by her own prescribed standards and the images created by society. Moreover, a woman who is labeled as a princess has convinced her ownself of her royalty “princess” behavior is a neologism used colloquially in East Asia to describe the condition of egocentrism, narcissism, and materialism in women (Lo, 2009). However, men with a similar outlook are less commonly described as having “prince syndrome”. This author believes this might be based on societal forces on gender roles.

Princess syndrome is known in Chinese as 公主病 and is Romanized as *gōng zhǔ bìng* or in Cantonese Romanized as *gūng jyú behng* (Princess Sickness, 2019). Rapid economic growth throughout Asia is considered to correspond to a rapid rise in materialistic or consumerist attitudes as upper classes have invested heavily in their children, who have since become accustomed to material wealth (USI, 2016). In Hong Kong, China, Macau, Taiwan, and Japan social scientists attribute low birth rates making parents focus their energies on their children. According to research, China’s *one-child policy* alone has contributed to their children being spoiled which is further compounded by a widening economic gap causing social inequality reflected through the perceived attitudes of the elite classes in China (Hu & Yun, 2013). Social mobility in East Asia is often based on academic achievement. For that reason, parents have placed pressure on children and micro-manage their child’s academic career and emphasize academic achievement. Social scientists have suggested that this pressure on academic achievement results in dependence and developing a lack of responsibility.

Princess syndrome has been somewhat informally endorsed in popular culture and music in East Asia. A song titled “Princess Syndrome” or 公主病/*Gōng Zhǔ Bìng* was included in Taiwanese singer Jay Chou’s March 2013 album *Exclamation Mark*. Japanese musician Masa further popularized this princess syndrome concept with his song “Disease Princess”. This title was switched to “Princess Disease” as a song recorded by British Power Electronics group Whitehouse on the

album *Cruise*. The term being readily used as a topic for popular music also reflects its cultural relevance.

4. The Societal Mechanism of “Princess Syndrome”

The social forces that create princess syndrome are partly attributed to paradigm concerning low work ethics and societal expectations. After all, princesses don’t have to work. As according to the cultural anthropological studies of Lebra Sugiyama (1996), identity is established by what the person *does*. An individual establishes their identity by what they *do*. The individual is who he/she is by formal and informal references to blood ties, geographical ties, and occupational ties. Identity is directly established by references to occupational ties—a scientist, a teacher, a factory worker, a student, etc. denote who the individual is by their occupation. Being a self-alleged “princess” does not create an adequate reference to establish identity.

Justification for such princesses could be based upon societal pressures and by the role women in East Asia have taken for generations as obedient mothers and wives, and they are simply following suit and waiting around to be married. Certainly there could be a measure of displacement brought upon by undertones of oppression and sexism in many East Asian societies. However, no matter the causes, the princesses in East Asia represent a part of a cultural phenomenon.

In social media and conversations with fellow foreign colleagues, accusing words and phrases began needling up everywhere, pointing their barbs at the different princesses in this new and growing generation in East Asia. Princesses are described as being apathetic, cute, unproductive, materialistic, superficial, and commercialized. Cultural anthropologists have often wielded some of the sharper spears, and unflatteringly defined the age bracket of East Asian women as representative of an increasingly consumer-minded society. The role of the princess is to service the economy. Not to make products, but to consume them; or more precisely, to symbolize their consumption. The princesses are, colloquially,

off the production line, lacking any real referent in the economy of postmodern East Asian society.

Dr. Nancy Rosenberger (1995) keys in on the term passive resistance in reference to social changes. Rosenberger asserts that rather than fulfilling their traditional nurturing roles, young modern East Asian women were turning to their own individual needs, or perhaps more often wants; going against the grain of societal norms and gradually, although not aggressively, forcing change in the system. Rosenberger further states that “a woman’s body itself becomes a site of global culture, signifying her elite status as a member of the cosmopolitan, and overwhelmingly Western, global community by participating in the main activity of global culture through the consumption of global products” (Rosenberger, 1995: 148–9).

Countries in East Asia such as South Korea have become a post-industrial consumer society, and women’s bodies appear to have taken on new meaning as consumer bodies. Neo-Confucian culture has perhaps contributed to the princess syndrome. Confucian culture places great reverence on discipline and function of the body. Confucian culture believed the body was sacred since it was bequeathed by one’s parents, in accordance with filial piety, the body had to be respected. However, the Neo-Confucian culture has changed as in the case of South Korea where over the past two decades the proliferating of plastic surgeries and various other manipulations of the body is culturally acceptable as women seek a “princess” look (Kim, 2016). Eye surgery to have a more Western look is perhaps one of the most profound changes in plastic surgery.

Changes in the economy resulted in a radically different lifestyle for many East Asian women, leaving the country’s youth with a lack of history and role models relevant to their lives today, as well as an abundance of generous parents and grandparents recoiling from the scarcity they themselves grew up with and consequently contributing to the affluence of their children and grandchildren. Moreover, many East Asian young women in the stage between graduation

from high school and marriage are coping with this change in society augmented by the growing awareness of women’s rights and lifestyles influenced by Western standards. Their situation is not simply a matter of the decline of content in the face of an increasingly form-focused consumer culture, nor solely a different, more *national* form of resistance against society’s strict expectations as Rosenberger contends. Instead, this author believes it is a combination of the two views, one inevitably leading to the other in a web created by governments, Western influences, existing East Asian thought and culture, and the media.

East Asian traditional culture echoes strong elements of sexism and governments have designed a path for women that severely limit their future options in careers and in the home. An increasingly Western-influenced media enters the scene and plays with the images of freedom, sophistication, worldliness, and the individual; none of which are instilled facets of East Asian cultures and society. Much of this propaganda is literally and figuratively sold to the female consumer audience in the form of fashion, products, and trips; causing the targeted audience to focus more on their individual interests during leisure time (non-leisure time is usually committed to the group; be it the maternal family, the nuclear family, school, or job) and in turn increase the amount that East Asian women consume. Young East Asian women look at the obvious divides in their future options; a low-paying job with little status and lots of leisure time devoted to their wishes, a husband and child-devoted existence, or a high paying, high status job with no time for family or leisure. With such limited and potentially depressing options they obviously turn to the most attractive route filled with images of freedom and leisure. This promotes the creation of an unproductive society rather than actively work toward women’s emancipation.

The society that surrounds today’s East Asian youth is a different world from that of each nation’s grandparents and parents lived in. Children whose parents were born before

the mid-1950's, have two generations of elders who knew scarcity first hand, and who have tried to instill in their children and grandchildren ideas of conservation and thrift. However, these young people are also the beneficiaries of at least grandparental indulgence, since people now in their sixties and over still prefer not to spend money on themselves, but rather want to provide treats for grandchildren. It is these children who are said to have their pockets regularly filled by their grandparents and parents, and thus to have relatively large amounts of money to spend on themselves. There is a gap between the parents of these children who did not in their own youth experience such lavish donations, and their affluent offspring.

This author is certain that there is a battle going on in the heads of many parents whether to make their offspring experience some of the hardships that they know or to let them enjoy what they themselves were not able to. Similarly, while it is common for students in Western countries to at least contribute toward either the cost of their education, their leisure and fashion pursuits, or both, most of the princesses are free to save their finances for clothes and fashion.

This generation gap is amplified by the absence of history and role models relevant to the youth's lives. Princesses choose to assimilate their experiences in terms of popular culture because their pasts are only available in the forms of its artifacts. Living in homes where the family is always distant, they feel even more compelled to fill the familial and historical gap in their lives. Sitting in the affluent lap of current society, on the knees of past generations who they cannot relate to, it is no surprise that young people often lead lives lacking in content.

Not only do the princesses of East Asia lack historical context and role models, but the options available to them are pitifully few. These alternatives aren't merely the result of societal expectations, but of actual governmental policies that serve to mold the path of women to best benefit the country's economic needs

and goal. Government policies outline the following life course for women. After graduation from high school, junior college, or university, women are expected to work full-time and enjoy leisure on the side, preparing to settle down later. Women are expected to marry and have children in their late to mid-twenties, and, although they might continue to work, as mothers they must show significant support for their children's education from pre-school years on. This support is deemed best given if women become housewives depend economically on their husbands. After children are in school, preferably junior high, women are expected to return to work with lesser responsibility that allows flexibility to fulfill household functions; part-time work and hobbies appear to fit well. Yet women are expected to also be ready to care for needy elderly in her family and for her husband when he retires.

It is important to notice that in this outline, it is irrelevant what degree of education the woman completed; her life course is still expected to conform to one ideal. Female graduates from junior college, who constitute the majority of women university graduates, usually go on to jobs in nursery schools, nursing homes, office ladies, sales clerks, or wives. None of these jobs are particularly intellectually demanding, and some do not require an education beyond high school. Even in four-year institutions, women shy away from math, science, law and engineering, perhaps already aware that these majors are not going to serve them in their probable future lives. Instead they stick to the humanities and education. The author was surprised to see how very few women engineers there are in Japan. The author has observed that 工学部 *kougakubu* departments of local universities are almost void of female students. This is very unfortunate for both current students and for the future of the country.

Whether consciously or not, young East Asian women realize how depressing it is to have one's abilities so marginalized. This is where the media jumps in, helping to make a bridge between young women's hopes and reality, creating a substitute for a tangible past and

promising a smooth ride into the liberated future. Why take the raft and struggle across the rapids of hard work and emancipation when such an easier option exists? As an alternative to the difficult struggle for status in the male-dominated company world, women can obtain status simply by becoming a princess, buying the right clothes and accessories, by spending time and money on the “right” look, by becoming “worldly” with foreign brands. It’s easier and a lot more enjoyable. After one’s education is finished, the magazines reproduce the idea that young women should work, but not to save money for family, company or nation—they work so that they can become princesses.

5. Conclusion

Women cannot have freedom and equality within their families and the workplace, so they turn to the next best thing; freedom and equality in leisure time, in what they buy and wear. Consumer culture identifies what we desire with what we are. Consumer culture not only provides young women with consolation and a substitute for the hard path one must take to earn the freedoms that those in Western culture may take for granted, it also eggs youth on to put off that scary adult world of responsibility for as long as possible, increasing the time that they work to consume.

The position of the young unmarried women in contemporary East Asian societies represents greater freedom than that of the young man. Young women, by virtue of the strength of their oppression and exclusion from most of the labor market and thus from active social roles, have come to represent in the media the freest, most un-hampered elements of the society.

In the shadow of generations of tradition and a government attempting to sway their futures, the alternatives available to young East Asian women are often grim. Rather than accept their “fate,” instead they often take the candy that the media dangles in front of them, savoring the flavor of freedom and status over oppression and discrimination, the carefree and childish

over responsibility and adulthood. Young women choose to work to become princesses. However, if all of the young ladies in East Asia become princesses, then this author believes they will soon realize that the flavor of the candy fades quickly, and a more permanent solution is desirable. Princess syndrome developed in the minds of the young ladies in East Asian countries as displacement and for the fact that they are not satisfied with their role in society. However not everyone is willing to accept fate or even conform to the princess population and is working to increase the freedom of women everywhere. Support at both a societal and institutional level would benefit the plight of women making an effort to succeed in life and in the workplace.

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