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# A Failure to Deconstruct the Traditional Family

*Miuna kouna*, KBS Soap Opera<sup>2</sup>

*Miuna kouna* is the name of a soap opera recently broadcast on KBS, which attracted a very high audience rate, over 40% every evening. This soap opera gave its viewers the opportunity to think about what families truly mean to them. By analyzing the soap, viewers can reflect on the variety of possible family models.



The soap consisted of the story of two families, the Pongs and the Nas. Mr Pong, who has only a daughter, Su-a, is the head of a big company. After his first wife dies, Mr

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<sup>2</sup> Sept. 3, 2007-May 2, 2008

Pong meets his first love, Tong-ji, again and marries her. But Mr Pong's mother does not support their decision to get married and has a distant relationship with her son's new wife. In the process, Tong-ji's son, Kang Paek-ho, becomes Mr Pong's stepson. Mr Pong's mother also does not like her new stepson.

Mr Na is a typical conscientious high government official. Mr. and Mrs. Na have a son and daughter named Sŏn-jae and Tan-pung respectively. One day, Sŏn-jae deserts his girlfriend, Chi-yŏng, and marries Su-a for reasons of ambition. In contrast, Tan-pung chooses the earnest and right-minded Paek-ho instead of a prosperous doctor who specializes in plastic surgery. The soap opera ends with two contrasting images of happiness: the ordinary happiness of the relationship between Tan-pung and Paek-ho and the simple new life of Sŏn-jae, who has embezzled company money and served time in prison and who now regrets his mistakes.

Although *Miuna kouna* eventually endorses the traditional family and metes out poetic justice, the soap also deals with a variety of Korean social issues. These include such things as divorce and remarriage, illegal foreign residents, and the discord between management and labor. The viewers watch a series of scenarios in which the characters undergo emotional conflict and try to solve their problems. The conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is finally resolved by Mr Pong's mother's opening her heart to Tong-ji and warmly admitting her into the family. Sonya, the Russian girl who comes to Seoul to achieve her dreams, meets a warm-hearted Korean man, marries him, and finds happiness. Su-a, who has shown herself to be indiscreet and selfish, finds a way to express her love at the end. The soap opera also does not forget to convey the lesson that real happiness does not come from material success but rather from inner contentment. Like many other family dramas,

*Miuna kouna* finishes with all the characters overcoming their difficulties and winning for themselves a happier life.

The producers of *Miuna kouna* were clear that the purpose of the soap opera was to deliver a message about the real meaning of the family. Above all, they emphasized the fact that families cannot be formed simply on the basis of strong blood ties or a shared family name. Instead, they said, it is only when each family member can understand and share the other's pleasure and pain that a real family is formed. Ironically, however, a key moment in *Miuna kouna* is when the secret of Paek-ho's birth is revealed. The fact that Paek-ho is Mr Pong's real son is a source of relief to the family and serves to enlarge their happiness. Paek-ho is recognized after he gains the family name, Pong. Ultimately, it is not 'Kang Paek-ho' but 'Pong Paek-ho' who inherits Mr Pong's family business. Making Paek-ho turn out to be Mr. Pong's real son proves that the blood ties are still seen as very important in building family relationships.

Some people say that a variety of family models are now acceptable in Korean society. More young people are getting married later, the divorce rate is going up, single parents are seen bringing up children by themselves, and baby adoptions are no longer kept secret. However, the message of this soap opera would appear to be that blood ties and a family name are still critical. The idea that it is right that a son passes on the family name still exists; the idea that baby girls are preferred when adopting has not been challenged. In the world of TV, there is often a trade-off: interesting plots make for more exciting viewing, but familiar plots attract more viewers. One suspects that the producers of *Miuna kouna* changed their original plot design in order to accommodate the more predictable interests of the wider public and avoid potential

controversy. The soap opera finally choose conservatism and a safe conclusion. By making the plot hinge on the importance of blood lines, the original pledge to use a progressive storyline to deconstruct the traditional family was not kept.