

Living Arrangements and Support among the Elderly in South-East Asia: An Introduction

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Population ageing seems poised to replace population growth as the major demographic issue of public, political and scientific concern

Five years have passed since publication of the September 1992 theme issue of Asia-Pacific Population Journal that focused on social and economic support systems for the elderly in Asia. Since that time, interest in population ageing and its consequences for coming generations has increased considerably. Indeed population ageing seems poised to replace population growth as the major demographic issue of public, political and scientific concern in the twenty-first century (Lutz, Sanderson and Scherbov, 1997). In the developing world, this is likely to be the case earlier rather than later throughout much of East and South-East Asia where declining fertility rates are rapidly approaching or have already reached the replacement level.

The future ageing of the population and the challenges it poses for governments and society are already receiving serious attention in many ESCAP countries. Although in most, the process of ageing is still at an early stage, the inexorable trends are now widely known. For example, in South-East Asia, the region where the countries covered in the following articles are all located, the current 1997 population aged 60 years and older is projected to grow by two and a half times by the end of the first quarter of the next century and by more than five times by mid-century. The result will be an increase in the elderly population's share of the total population from 7 per cent currently to 12.5 per cent in 2025 and 21 per cent by 2050.¹ One reflection of this emerging concern has been a substantial expansion of relevant research and analysis designed to guide informed and sound policy formulation. Indeed ESCAP has played an active role in promoting research related to ageing in the region (see appendix on page 16 for a full list of the resulting reports). Moreover, recent annotated bibliographies issued by ESCAP provide convenient guides to much of the expanding research and analysis effort (United Nations, 1996a and 1996b).

As our introductory article in the 1992 theme issue stressed, analyses of issues related to population ageing and the implications drawn for policies directed at coping with this phenomenon need to be based on solid empirical evidence rather than casual impressions and preconceptions (Knodel and Debavalya, 1992). This view has been echoed in a recent overview of the ageing situation in Asia issued by the International Labour Office (ILO, 1997). As Hermalin stresses in his article in the present issue (see pages 71-84), carefully conducted representative surveys of older persons, focusing on the full range of determinants of their socio-economic well-being and health, play an especially important role in this respect. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) Population Programme both recognized this as early as the first half of the 1980s and sponsored multi-country surveys (Andrews and others, 1986; Andrews, undated; Chen and Jones, 1989).

Starting in 1989, the Population Studies Center of the University of Michigan initiated efforts to coordinate collaborative quantitative and qualitative research in a number of the countries in the ESCAP region. This endeavour involved promoting further analysis of existing data sets including some of the ASEAN and WHO surveys as well as assisting new data-collection efforts building upon the earlier experiences. The four country studies presented in this theme issue of the Asia-Pacific Population Journal are all part of this effort.² Each article presents findings from detailed surveys conducted between 1995 and 1997 that were specifically designed to examine the socio-economic well-being and health of older persons and to document their familial and extra-familial support arrangements. In the cases of the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, they cover nationally representative samples; the Viet Nam article draws on two regional surveys, one from the northern and the other from the southern part of the country, that together represent by far the most thorough efforts to date in that country to collect such data. Although the articles for each of the four countries have their own emphases, their common connection to the Population Studies Center has permitted some degree of coordination in the analyses, thereby facilitating greater comparability in the results they present than was possible in the 1992 theme issue of this Journal on ageing.

As the World Bank (1994:4-5) stated in its recent comprehensive review of global old-age security arrangements, the challenge for most governments of developing countries facing population ageing is "to move toward formal systems of income maintenance without accelerating the decline in informal systems and without shifting more responsibility to government than it can handle". The article in this issue by Chan on Singapore's experience in instituting a government programme (see pages 35-50 provides an important example of how, in practice, recipients may utilize the assistance in ways that differ from the original intentions behind it. Thus, the social and economic reality in Singapore is such that the elderly continue to rely on family support rather than use their provident funds for their daily living expenses. As the 1997 ILO review stresses, documenting and understanding the existing informal systems of support based within the family and how these systems are themselves changing is a prerequisite for developing appropriate and effective social and economic policies addressing the elderly.

The present theme issue is intended to meet this need. Its focus is on living arrangements and sources of social and economic support of the elderly. The attention given to living arrangements reflects the central role coresidence between

elderly family members and younger generation adults, especially their own adult children, has traditionally played in the familial support systems in the region. Moreover, as extensive qualitative research conducted as part of the University of Michigan project has shown, the actors themselves often view living arrangements that permit access between the two generations crucial to their own well-being (see Knodel, 1995).

In this theme issue, Hermalin in his article on policy lessons from research, correctly cautions that it is essential to distinguish between the forms and functions of particular arrangements and to recognize that our ultimate concern is with the well-being of the older members of society and not simply with the maintenance of any particular form. Thus, to judge if changes in the structure of the support system merit sounding alarms requires evidence about the extent to which the newly emerging forms are more or less able to serve the functions of the forms that they are replacing. This is particularly true with living arrangements, since some alternative arrangements to literal coresidence may well serve similar functions with respect to meeting the needs of both generations while also enhancing their privacy. Thus, understanding the meaning of observed changes in living arrangements of the elderly requires more than just the mere documentation that such changes are occurring. Likewise, unchanging living arrangements could mask changing content of the relationships among household members. Indeed, all the surveys that serve as the basis for the country-specific articles that follow are rich in data that will permit addressing these questions in future analyses.

With that said, monitoring trends in the living arrangements and other forms of familial support is an important starting point. And given the centrality of coresidence with adult children in contexts where alternative non-familial arrangements are largely lacking, this feature merits particular attention. Fortunately the new surveys on which the following articles are based provide more complete evidence than has ever been available for these particular countries or, for that matter, almost any other country in the region.

Table 1: Levels and trends in living arrangements among the population aged 60 and older

Country and year	Nature of sample	Percentage living with any child (with or without others)	Percentage living alone	Percentage living only with spouse
Philippines				
1986	Subnational	74	3	5
1988	National	68	4	10
1996	National	69	6	8
Singapore				
1988	National	88	2	3
1995	National	85	3	6
Thailand				
1986	National	77	4	7
1995	National	71	4	12
Viet Nam				
1996	Red River Delta	74	7	13
1997	Ho Chi Minh City and nearby provinces	82	5	5

Sources: The most recent figures for each country and the two regions in Viet Nam are from the country-specific articles in the present issue of this Journal; Philippines 1986 and Singapore 1988 are from Casterline and others, 1992; Philippines 1988 and Thailand 1986 are from Knodel and Debavalya, 1992.

Table 1 presents some basic indicators of living arrangements based on the following articles. In the case of the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, it is also possible to make comparisons with earlier surveys and thus to have some indication of trends (for Viet Nam there are no earlier equivalent surveys for comparison). In all four countries, levels of coresidence with children are high, ranging from 69 per cent in the Philippines to 85 per cent in Singapore according to the most recent surveys. Likewise, the percentage of elderly who live alone is very low in all the countries surveyed. Even the percentage of elderly who live only with a spouse is quite modest. Thus, the very substantial social and economic changes that have engulfed South-East Asia over the last several decades have not yet resulted in major changes in coresidence with children as the predominant form of living arrangement for older persons in each of these countries.

There is some suggestion that coresidence might be declining, although the trends indicated by the surveys shown in table 1 are only modest. In the case of the Philippines, there is some uncertainty as to the trend, since the only prior survey specifically directed at the older population was based on a sub-national sample in 1986 (as part of the ASEAN Population Programme). If the results of this earlier survey are compared with the 1996 survey, also directed specifically towards the older population, there appears to be a modest decline in the percentage of elderly persons living with one of their children.

However, analysis of a national survey in 1988 that formed the basis of the article on the Philippines in the 1992 theme issue of this Journal indicated a slightly lower level of coresidence than found in the new 1996 survey. In the case of Singapore, an earlier survey taken in 1988 indicated that 88 per cent of the Singaporean elderly lived with one of their children compared with 85 per cent doing so in 1995. With the level remaining so extremely high, however, this is hardly evidence of a major change. Thailand shows a modest decline in the percentage of elderly coresiding with a child, i.e. from 77 to 71 per cent over a nine-year interval, but again the level even in 1995 is still quite high. In the case of Viet Nam, although the surveys are regional and there are no earlier data to serve as a comparison, the levels of coresidence are high enough to suggest no major decline is likely to have occurred.

Although the results suggest remarkable persistence in coresidence in these countries, it is possible that more rapid change could characterize the coming decades. The article by Natividad and Cruz on the Philippines (see pages 17-34) presents rather surprising findings on the attitudes of the elderly as to what they view as the preferred living arrangements for older persons in different marital statuses. The results suggest less support for coresidence than would be implied from actual living arrangements. Moreover, recent evidence indicates more pronounced declines in coresidence in at least two other ESCAP member countries not covered in the following articles. In Japan, the percentage of elderly living with any child fell from 77 per cent in 1970 to 60 per cent by 1989 (Hermalin, 1995). Even more dramatic is the apparent decline of coresidence in the Republic of Korea, where the percentage living with any child fell from 78 per cent in 1984 to 49 per cent just 10 years later. Thus, the modest changes evident in table 1 for the three countries for which trend data are shown could possibly presage more dramatic future declines.

The new round of surveys on which articles in the present issue are based provide more detail on living arrangements than has been the case in earlier surveys. In recognition that living adjacent to a child or nearby can serve many of the same functions as coresidence, each of the recent surveys except for Singapore provides information about the location of the nearest non-coresident child. Thus some elderly persons who are not literally coresident in the sense of living in the same dwelling unit with any of their children live next door to a child and in most cases such a situation is likely to involve close ties between the two households. When this is taken into account, an even higher level of interdependent living arrangements prevail than is indicated by literal coresidence alone.

In the Philippines, the percentage who live with any child or adjacent to a child is 77 per cent compared with 69 per cent who live in the same household with a child. In Thailand, among the elderly with a least one living child, 74 per cent coreside in the same household with a child compared with 84 per cent who either coreside with or live next door to a child (see Family Support and Living Arrangements of Thai Elderly by John Knodel and Napaporn Chayovan). If we also consider seeing a child daily as an indicator of nearby living, fully 90 per cent of Thai elderly parents either coreside with a child or have daily contact with one. The two regional surveys in Viet Nam also indicate that non-negligible proportions of the elderly who do not coreside with a child nevertheless live next door to the child (see Living Arrangements, Patrilineality and Sources of Support among Elderly Vietnamese by Truong Si Anh, Bui The Cuong, Deniel Goodkind and John Knodel). Thus, in the Red River Delta, 84 per cent of elderly parents live with or next to a child and in Ho Chi Minh City and surrounding provinces, 91 per cent either coreside with them or live next door.

The articles on all the countries but Singapore attempt to delve more deeply into the issue of how large a proportion of the elderly appear to be deserted or at least outside the conventional familial support system. In each case, the answer appears to be a very small proportion. Of course, to the extent that any elderly persons are deserted is a matter worthy of concern. But it is at least somewhat reassuring that many elderly persons who live alone or only with a spouse are still receiving support or assistance from their children or other family members. At the same time, this does not necessarily mean that there are only a few elderly in these countries who are vulnerable in terms of their economic situation or their health. As the ILO report points out, it is often the poverty of the extended family as a whole that poses the major threat to elderly members (ILO, 1997). Thus, to adequately assess who the most vulnerable elderly are, additional analyses are required. They are likely to show that vulnerability needs to be thought of more broadly than in the narrow sense of desertion. Those who have serious economic or health needs are likely to be found across the whole spectrum of living arrangements. In all three countries, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam, there are substantial numbers of very impoverished families. Under such conditions, coresidence cannot eliminate many of the circumstances that undermine the well-being of elderly family members.

Each of the new surveys also provides detailed information about the children who coreside with parents. It is thus possible, for example, to compare the extent to which the elderly live with sons or daughters. As Karen Mason (1992) stressed in her review article about family change and support of the elderly in Asia, which was included in the previous theme issue on ageing of this Journal, there are two major types of family systems in Asia: the patrilineal systems found in East Asia and the northern tier of South Asia, and the bilateral systems found in South-East Asia and the southern tier of South Asia. In this context, the countries covered in the current issue of this Journal, and the ethnic groups in Singapore, reveal very striking differences in terms of the gender of the children with whom the elderly coreside.

Table2: Behavioural indicators of gender preference for coresident children

Ratio of elderly who live with a son to elderly who live with a daughter					
Considering:					
All children	coresident	Single coresident	Ever married children	coresident	

Philippines (1996)	-	1.32	.84
Singapore (1995)	1.59	-	-
Chinese only	1.72	-	-
Malay only	1.06	-	-
Indian only	1.35	-	-
Thailand (1995)	.73	1.03	.58
Viet Nam			
Red River Delta (1996)	2.53	.90	8.15
Ho Chi Minh City area (1997)	1.35	1.07	1.74

Source: Calculated from results presented in the country-specific articles in the present issue of this Journal.

Note: - means that the data are not available from information in the articles.

Table 2 shows the ratio of elderly persons who live with a son to the ratio of those who live with a daughter for each of the four countries. Ratios over one indicate that living with a son is more common than living with a daughter, while ratios below one indicate the opposite. Table 2 distinguishes coresidence with single children from that with ever married children. The ratio of elderly persons who live with ever married sons to the ratio who live with ever married daughters most clearly reveals differences in the patrilineal compared with the bilateral family systems to which Mason referred.

The results indicate that, of the areas included in table 2, the most strikingly patrilineal pattern by far is found in the Red River Delta of northern Viet Nam. In the Ho Chi Minh City area of southern Viet Nam, there is clearly a higher likelihood of residing with an ever married son than an ever married daughter, but the pattern is far less pronounced than in the Red River Delta. In contrast, in the Philippines and even more so in Thailand there is a greater tendency to live with married daughters than married sons. In the case of Singapore, interesting ethnic differences are evident. Although we cannot distinguish single and ever married children, the Chinese are very distinctly more likely to live with a son than with a daughter, while the Malay are almost equally likely to live with a child of either sex. Ethnic Indians in Singapore are in between the two extremes. In the three other countries where information on single coresident children is available, differences in the percentage of the elderly who live with single sons compared with single daughters are at most only modest. This reflects the fact that the gender considerations regarding the appropriateness of coresidence of particular children emerge strongly only following their marriage. Throughout the region, it is normatively appropriate for single children of either sex to live in their parental home.

The extent and strength of preferences for coresidence with children of one sex over the other have important implications for the future of familial support systems in the region. In each of the four countries covered in this issue, fertility has either fallen to or below the replacement level (Singapore and Thailand) or is in the midst of an on-going decline (the Philippines and Viet Nam). The impact of the sharply reduced family size on the availability of children eligible for coresidence for the future generation of the elderly will depend on how flexible they are with regard to the sex of the coresident child. For example, current family size preferences among reproductive aged adults in both Thailand and Viet Nam suggest that a substantial majority of the future elderly may have only two children (Knodel and others, 1996; Phai and others, 1995). As research reported in the previous theme issue on ageing of this Journal indicated, Thais more commonly prefer to live with a daughter than a son but can be quite flexible in this respect (Knodel, Chayovan and Siriboon, 1992a). This combined with the fact that few Thais expect to have fewer than two children, means that lower fertility levels in and of themselves are unlikely to have a major depressing effect on the level of coresidence (Knodel, Chayovan and Siriboon, 1992b). If in contrast the future elderly of Viet Nam maintain a strong patrilineal preference and insist that coresidence must be with a married son, limiting families to two children will have a substantially greater impact in reducing the availability of children who are eligible to coreside with parents.

Although this introduction has focused on living arrangements, we note that each article includes considerable information on support exchanges between the generations. Measures of these exchanges as presented in the following articles, however, are more difficult to compare than those of living arrangements. At least some measures in each of the countries suggest high levels of support provided by children to parents. They also indicate that substantially smaller but still non-negligible proportions of elderly parents still provide some forms of support to their children. In each country, over 80 per cent of parents received some form of material support other than money from their children. Receiving visits at least on an annual basis is almost universal. Results are more mixed with respect to the provision of monetary support and some puzzling differences appear. For example, in both the Philippines and Thailand, over 80 per cent of elderly parents receive some money, but far more in Thailand report receiving substantial amounts than in the Philippines, even though the amount of money defined in the surveys as substantial was fairly similar. Likewise, Vietnamese elderly persons in the Red River Delta are far less likely to report aid from children in terms of money or major purchases than in Ho Chi Minh City and surrounding provinces. It is difficult to judge to what extent such differences are genuine or instead reflect differences in the survey instruments and their implementation.

Overall, the following country-specific articles illustrate how much more we now know about the elderly population in Asia than just a decade ago. Given that the surveys on which the articles are based are all very recent and cover a wide variety

of topics besides those treated in the present theme issue of this Journal, future analyses are certain to continue to expand our understanding of the circumstances in which population ageing is taking place. Thus, governments of countries in the ESCAP region are having increased access to solid and comprehensive research that can serve as a guide for them as they turn to the formulation of appropriately informed policies and programmes.

Endnotes

These figures are based on the 1996 assessment by the Population Division, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis.

The papers on the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand were written in connection with the project, "Rapid Demographic Change and the Welfare of the Elderly", and the paper on Viet Nam was written as part of the project "The Vietnamese Elderly in a Time of Change". Both are projects of the Population Studies Center and are funded by the U.S. National Institute on Aging (grants R37AG07637 and R03AG14886, respectively).

The figures for the Republic of Korea are based on the 1984 Korean Elderly Survey and the 1994 Survey of the Living Status of Korean Elderly (Kim and Choe, 1992; personal communication from Cheong Kim). Both surveys were conducted by the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs (KIHASA).

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