

Social and Economic Support Systems for the Elderly in Asia: An Introduction

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Whatever the future may bring, a pervasive familial system of support and care has persisted despite major social and economic change

It is now widely recognized that the demographic trends of the past decades in many developing countries, and particularly those in Asia, are leading to unprecedented increases not only in the absolute numbers of older persons but also in the relative share of the population that belong to the elderly age groups. At the same time, rapid social and economic changes are underway that are widely assumed to have profound implications for the circumstances under which the future elderly will live. These changes include declines in the number of children couples have, greater longevity, increased involvement of women (the predominant providers of care) in economic activities outside the home, physical separation of parents and adult children associated with urbanization and age-selective rural-to-urban migration, and ideational change, especially the spread of western-style individualism through the mass media and public education (Martin, 1989 and 1990; Caldwell, 1982).

In the case of most Asian countries, the family is the traditional social institution for the care of the elderly who live and work with their children. Most observers believe it is in both the Government's and the future elderly's interest to preserve this familial system of care and support. As a result, interest has increased in formulating policies and programmes designed to ease the adaptation of the swelling numbers of elderly to the on-going process of socio-economic change, to minimize the assignment of responsibility for elderly members to non-familial institutions and to help Governments to cope with the potential problems that could ensue (Kinsella, 1988; Martin, 1990 and 1991; Selvaratnam, 1989). Developing informed policies for the future requires a thorough understanding of the current arrangements for support. Despite its importance, however, systematic research on the elderly and their support systems in developing countries has only recently begun (Selvaratnam, 1989; Kinsella, 1990; Hasimoto, Kendig and Coppard, 1992).

Impressionistic accounts of the elderly and their circumstances or ones based mainly on ideological and theoretical views can be quite misleading if not verified by actual data derived from systematic data collection procedures. Consequently much of the current 'received wisdom' regarding the elderly serves as a risky basis for formulating policies to cope with population ageing. It is all too common to decry the deteriorating situation of the elderly in the face of rapid social change without examining whether there is solid empirical evidence to substantiate this. While objective measures of support for the elderly and their conditions of life have their shortcomings and, in particular, are not necessarily revealing of the quality of the care and interactions involved, they are an essential starting point for making realistic assessments of where the elderly currently stand and where they are heading. Predictions based on social theory are no substitute, especially since they are so often derived from preconceptions that have not been empirically grounded in the first place (Hasimoto, Kendig and Coppard, 1992).

This special issue of Asia-Pacific Population Journal focusing on the social and economic support systems of the elderly helps to meet the need for more solid information on the current circumstances of the elderly in Asia. Empirical studies are presented covering six of the region's most important countries: China, Indonesia, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In three cases (the Philippines, the Republic of Korea and Thailand), data are presented for nationally representative samples. In the other cases, substantial samples of sub-national populations are utilized. Each of the studies defines the elderly as the population aged 60 and older, but in all cases considerable information is provided according to different age groups within the elderly age span. For most of the articles, the data presented have either not been available previously or have been re-tabulated for the purpose of conforming to the theme of this special issue. Thus collectively, the articles represent an important and substantial contribution to advancing our knowledge and understanding of the prevailing social and economic systems of support for the elderly in Asia.

Following this introduction, and prior to the presentation of the country studies, Karen Oppenheimer Mason provides a comprehensive overview of many of the important issues concerning the elderly and the current state of thinking and theorizing about them. She raises the critical question about the impact of social and economic change on the support of elderly family members and how this interplays with gender issues. Her article serves well to set the framework within which the results of the specific country studies that follow can be interpreted.

The article on China by Jersey Liang, Shenzu Gu and Neal Krause is based on a very recent survey of elderly in the Wuhan area and covers a broad range of support both received and given to the elderly. Unlike the remaining studies, which are intentionally descriptive, this study models social support and statistically tests the proposed model with the data collected. At the same time, the article contains valuable descriptive information that provides the reader with a good basis for understanding key parameters of the family support system.

Lita Domingo and John B. Casterline provide the first comprehensive description of living arrangements of the elderly in

the Philippines to be based on a large nationally representative sample. The survey is quite recent having taken place in 1988. They also draw on an earlier sub-national survey which focused more directly on the elderly and their life circumstances in order to go beyond physical living arrangements and examine the contacts that the elderly have with their children. Moreover, they bring in qualitative data from a recent series of focus groups sessions to provide additional insights into the way those constituting the family support system view it.

Next Ik Ki Kim and Ehn Hyun Choe provide a comprehensive overview of the support exchanges involving Korean elderly. Data on both family and government support are discussed. They rely primarily on a large national survey of elderly undertaken in 1984 but they also draw on other more recent sources for comparison and for providing information otherwise not available. Their article is unique in providing some limited data for two different time points as they are able to draw on the 1981 and 1988 Korea Gallup surveys for this purpose.

The article on the familial support system in Thailand by John Knodel, Napaporn Chayovan and Siriwan Siriboon provides an overview of living arrangements of the elderly as well as support provided by non-co-resident children based on a nationally representative survey conducted in 1986. As with the previously mentioned article, insights into the thinking of the elderly and their adult children based on qualitative data from focus groups sessions are also provided. Preferences regarding the gender of the co-resident care-giver are specifically addressed.

The final article by Gary Andrews and Monique Hennink provide new data for three countries based on surveys undertaken in 1990 as part of a cross-national study of ageing sponsored by the World Health Organization. The data for Indonesia and Sri Lanka are based on sub-national samples whereas for Thailand a quasi-national sample was canvassed. Comparative results are presented on living arrangements, social activities, and care and support.

Table: Indicators of living arrangements of the population aged 60 and older in six Asian countries

Country	Nature of sample	Year of survey	% living with one of their children	% living alone	% living with spouse only
China	Sub-national	1991	66	9	21
Indonesia	Sub-national	1990	67	6	n.a.
Philippines	National	1988	68	4	10
Republic of Korea	National	1984	78		21
Sri Lanka	Sub-national	1990	84	3	n.a.
Thailand (1)	National	1986	77	4	11
Thailand (2)	Quasi-national	1990	77	4	n.a.

Notes: All data are taken directly either from articles in this volume or calculated from information contained in them. For the Republic of Korea, the two categories of living alone and living with spouse only are combined into a single category. Thailand (1) refers to the results in the article by Knodel, Chayovan and Siriboon; Thailand (2) refers to results in the article by Andrews and Hennink. n.a. = not available.

Examining the results of the country studies, it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that, whatever the future may bring, at least until recently, a pervasive familial system of support and care has persisted despite major social and economic change. Thus, a comparison of living arrangements indicates that the majority of elderly in all six settings co-reside with children and very small proportions live alone (see table). In no country do as many as one-tenth of the elderly live alone or less than two-thirds live with children. In addition, in none of the four countries for which the relevant data were available does more than a modest proportion of elderly live with their spouse only. Also, when appropriate information is presented about contact with children (as in the cases of the articles on China, the Philippines and Thailand) it is apparent that a substantial share of non-co-resident elderly see their children very frequently, signifying in all probability that they are living in close proximity.

When the results on living arrangements reported in the studies in this volume are compared with the living arrangements of elderly in the more developed countries in the West, a very clear contrast emerges underscoring just how different the nature of the familial system of care and support is between Asia and the West. It is not uncommon to find 25-40 per cent of the total population aged 65 and above in Western countries living alone (Kinsella, 1990). Many others live only with a spouse and relatively few live with their children. For example, only 14 per cent of Americans aged 65 and older in 1975 lived with one or more of their children while fully three-fourths lived either alone or with a spouse only (calculated from DeVos and Holden, 1988). These figures are a stark contrast to those reported in the studies included in the present issue.

While co-residence does not automatically imply that the elderly are receiving adequate care, living together with a child

often results in a very comprehensive interdependency between generations. Thus, living arrangements and in particular inter-generational co-residence is of special significance and typically occupies the lynch-pin in the family support system in Asian countries. Nevertheless, non-co-resident children and other kin can be of great assistance. Together, the co-resident and non-co-resident children provide a great deal of material support including financial help to their elderly parents as evident from several of the studies. In the Republic of Korea, almost three-fourths of the elderly report family members as a source of support for living expenses and in most cases this involves financial contributions from their children. In Thailand, a minimal estimate indicates that among elderly with non-co-resident children, about two-thirds are provided with money and with other forms of material support.

The elderly not only receive support and services from others but also provide them. Understanding their contributions to their families is important in assessing and enhancing their role in the context of social and economic change. Documentation of these contributions is provided in several of the articles. Indeed, given the wide range of ages typically defined as the elderly years, some children of the youngest elderly are likely to be primarily dependent on their parents at the time of any cross-sectional survey. Nevertheless, even when the children are all adults, elderly parents often continue to make valuable contributions in the form of services, such as child care, house-keeping, cooking and house minding, many of which are facilitated by co-residence.

Probably the most important issue to be considered regarding the elderly in Asia is their future status with respect to support. This issue is reviewed in detail by Karen Oppenheimer Mason and thus need not be discussed at length here. When reading the country studies in this collection, it is worth keeping in mind the two contrasting positions that are typically put forth: one asserting that modernization, and more particularly, the social changes currently taking place are undermining the widespread support provided by families to their elderly members which is currently evident; the other stressing that Asian societies are starting from an inherently different cultural, social, structural and economic base than the developed countries of the West and thus the familial support system for the Asian elderly is not likely to resemble the Western model any time soon (Hasimoto, Kendig and Coppard, 1992). According to this latter perspective, the strongly ingrained cultural basis of family responsibility for support and care of the elderly will lead to the persistence of the present system or at least to a transformation quite different from that characterizing the elderly in the West.

Whether or not fears of imminent abandonment of the elderly are well grounded or seriously exaggerated is not of mere academic importance to countries of the region. Given the rapid increase in the absolute size of the elderly population that is certain to occur in the coming decades, any meaningful shift of responsibility for their welfare from the family to the state will require massive outlays of government funds at levels that almost certainly exceed the capacity of most of these countries. Thus, the future role of Governments in the region in providing support for the elderly is still quite uncertain and will depend on how well the family as primary supporter and care-giver for the elderly continues to fulfill this role. The articles included in this special issue of Asia-Pacific Population Journal provide the start for making more solid judgements about these matters that will be of increasing future significance.

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