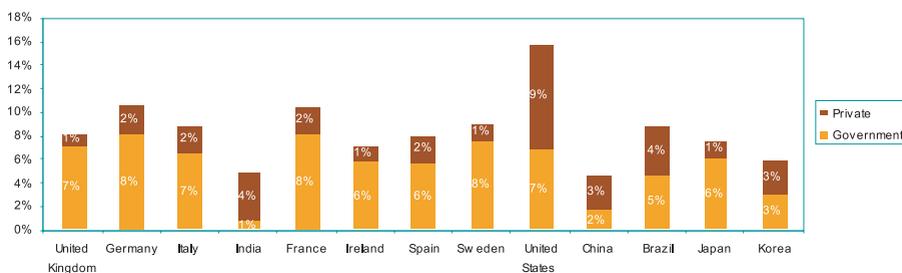


LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AND INTER-GENERATIONAL RELATIONS IN A RAPIDLY AGEING KOREA

DAVID PRENDERGAST

‘Rules of obligation’ surrounding the concept of filial piety have long informed some of the key structures and strictures of Korean society. What is now happening to these ‘rules’ and ‘rights’ is a subject of great discussion, especially as South Korea begins to grapple with the problems and realities facing a rapidly ageing society.

In July 2000 South Korea was officially designated as a ‘greying society’ when more than 7% of its population reached the age of 65 years or over. Only six years later this had increased to nearly 10% of the population, with expectations that the country would be reclassified as an ‘aged society’ in 2019, when this figure was projected to exceed 19%. This will then continue to rise. Considering a relatively high life expectancy of 74 years for men and 81 years for women and the lowest fertility rate in the world at 1.28 children per woman, predictions are that Korea will become one of the oldest societies on the planet during the first half of the twenty-first century. By 2050, well over a third of all Koreans will be 65 or over, but even more startling will be the growth in the numbers of oldest old, with more people turning 90 than



Government and private expenditure on health as a percentage of total GDP, 2005.

Source: World Health Organisation, 2005

being born (Howe et al, 2007). Adair Turner recently pointed out in his keynote speech at the World Demographic Congress that for many ageing countries the challenge is implementing an adequate pension system. For countries facing an age tsunami such as Korea, Japan and the Ukraine with low fertility rates but unlikely to realise significant immigration, he argues the situation is more serious. Whatever the situation in coming decades, it is clear that South Korea will have to invest a much greater proportion of its GDP on health than its current 6%.

What are the implications for older people in Korea? Chunghee Sarah Soh (1997:191) suggests that the nature and perception of retirement in Korea is gradually changing from a 'traditional life cycle model' to more individualised and diverse 'Western linear life course' trajectories. Like Sorensen (1986; 1988) before her, Soh also points towards the increased likelihood of people working after retirement. A decade later this view is very much supported by the evidence. In 2003–4 South Korea

Table 1: Distribution of the older population, 2005.

	Total pop	65+ pop	% of population aged 65+
Cities			
Seoul	9,762,546	710,844	7
Busan	3,512,547	303,936	9
Daegu	2,456,016	196,522	8
Incheon	2,517,680	178,728	7
Gwangju	1,413,644	101,180	7
Daejeon	1,438,551	100,905	7
Ulsan	1,044,934	55,849	5
Provinces			
Gyeonggi-do	10,341,006	752,603	7
Gangwon-do	1,460,770	187,994	13
Chungcheongbuk-do	1,453,872	175,580	12
Chungcheongnam-do	1,879,417	267,799	14
Jeollabuk-do	1,778,879	252,885	14
Jeollanam-do	1,815,174	320,750	18
Gyeongsangbuk-do	2,594,719	374,420	14
Gyeongsangnam-do	3,040,993	329,820	11
Jeju-do	530,686	55,403	10
Whole country	47,041,434	4,365,218	9

Source: KNSO

had one of the most economically active older populations in the world with over 31% of its seniors working in comparison to Japan at 20%, the USA at 14% and the UK at 5.5%. Soh's perspective is given some backing by Kweon Sug-in (1998) who reviews the decrease in the number of multi-generational co-residing families during Korea's modernization, a trend especially apparent in the 1990s. In 1980 approximately 81% of older people lived with a child, by 2004 this had fallen to 44%. The situation is made especially acute due to rapid migration contributing to a very unequal distribution in the relative numbers of older people in rural areas as demonstrated in Table 1.

The age ratio divergence between major urban areas and their surrounding provinces is quite striking. In 2005 18% of the province of Jeollanam-do was 65 or over, contrasting with 7% for its major city Gwangju. With geographical variations such as these in mind let us move to the local level and examine the residential patterns that emerged from a small survey I conducted in 2000 among older people in Buan County and Jeonju in the province of Jeollabuk-do.

From Table 2 a number of tentative insights about residential patterns arise.

- At 45.5% my findings suggest a relatively low rate of older-person-only households 45.5% in comparison to the national figure of 49% in 2000. This had risen to 56% just four years later (Howe et al, 2007).
- Elder-only households are more common in the country town of Buan than in Jeonju city—partly due to differences in housing prices and availability.
- Amongst widows of the city-based sample the historical preference to live with

Table 2: Residential Patterns of Elderly Men and Women in Buan and Jeonju (2000).

	Senior Only	Living Arrangements					TOTALS
		With eldest son	Second or other sons	With daughters	With unmarried children	Moves between children	
Buan Men	0	0	0	0	1	0	1 (1.5%)
Buan Couples	31	9	1	0	3	0	44 (67.7%)
Buan Women	2	6	8	2	0	2	20 (30.8%)
Buan Totals	33 (50.8%)	15 (23.1%)	9 (13.8%)	2 (3.1%)	4 (6.2%)	2 (3.1%)	65 (100%)
City Men	2	1	1	0	0	0	4 (11.1%)
City Couples	9	5	0	1	6	1	22 (61.1%)
City Women	2	6	2	0	0	0	10 (27.8%)
City Totals	13 (36.1%)	12 (33.3%)	3 (8.3%)	1 (2.8%)	6 (16.7%)	1 (2.8%)	36 (100%)
TOTALS	46 (45.5%)	27 (26.7%)	12 (11.9%)	3 (3.0%)	10 (9.9%)	3 (3.0%)	101 (100%)

Source: Prendergast (2005)

their eldest son *once* co-residence becomes necessary is more pronounced than in Buan where the choice of sons for those not wishing to migrate is more restricted.

- Residence with married daughters continues to be a little used option, despite the changes in the inheritance laws.

These patterns are interesting viewed in relation to the stated expectations of older people. When I asked participants living in elder-only households in Buan why they did not live with a child, many replied that it is more comfortable to live separately, reflecting a reluctance to move from a situation of relative independence and freedom. Some argued that life in children's households is too constraining whilst a few felt that they did not want to become a burden on their children, as with Mr. Lee, a 78-year old farmer living alone and working with his wife on a small farm in the Tong-jin district of Buan county:

No they can't farm. They go to work elsewhere. I don't want to be a burden on my son. Even now I send rice and vegetables to them. I won't go even though my son would take me into his home. I will die here. One day my son and my daughter-in-law tried to take us into their home, they bought a bed and decorated a room, but I did not go ... I can't promise strictly until the end, but now at present I won't.

The fact of children migrating to other areas was often cited as a reason for living alone by many participants. However, as common as the fear of imposition was the explanation that they did not wish to leave their lives, possessions, and friends for an uncertain life in the city. Others bluntly stated that they did not need their children and could manage well by themselves. Mr. Song, a retired elementary school principal, wryly explained that in his case he and his wife chose not to live with his son because 'it is convenient to live separately from our daughter-in-law'. A retired farmer I interviewed told of how he already sees his children regularly:

Once a month I go to Seoul to check my health, and then I visit all my children. I don't live with them as they live their own lives. However if I am dying I will go and live with them. Or if my wife dies, or I die, then we will go and live with our eldest son.

Many interviewees were keen to impress that whilst they preferred independent living, this might change with their circumstances, such as the onset of a serious illness or the death of a spouse. In many cases, this was not just a form of self-assurance concerning their future welfare but a desire to demonstrate that regardless of their current residential situation their children faithfully felt their obligations and displayed *hyo* (filial piety); co-residence as an option was available but not chosen.

In response to the question of which child they would choose to live with in the future, a large majority mentioned a preference towards their eldest son's household. As already seen, this expectation was supported in practice in Jeonju. In this case, my

survey findings support Sorensen's conclusions about the return to a stem formation at the end of a family life course, in spite of the high ratios of single generation elder-only households.

The situation in Buan is more equivocal, with widowed mothers who chose to live locally more likely to live with younger married sons than with eldest sons. This of course reflects a different range of circumstances and choices—in the absence of pre-established ties of obligation, developing commitments through property might persuade a particular son to remain in or return to the area.

Table 2 also shows a portion of older people living with *unmarried* children. At 16.7% the city-based sample was considerably higher than Buan at 6.2%. This is partially a result of urban unmarried children being *more* able to find work or access to higher education close to the natal household than their counterparts in Buan. It may also be a result of them being *less* able to find affordable independent accommodation due to the much higher cost of housing in Jeonju.

Older generations in Korea are still far from regarding themselves as passive recipients of welfare or the machinations of their children. Many parents are able to persuade their children to reside with them through the canny use of resources as in the following story of Mrs. Oh.

Mrs. Oh considers herself to be a housewife but has made a small fortune through private investments and real estate deals. She has three sons, the youngest of whom has moved to America. As she moved into her 60s Mrs. Oh decided that she would like to enter old age with her family around her. She and her husband therefore built a three-storey house in Jeonju and invited her two sons and their families to take a floor each. The idea was that the families would have some degree of privacy, but would share some meals, bills, and costs of living. Mrs. Oh also suggested that this arrangement would also allow her to help with the considerable demands of caring for her infant grandchildren, whilst in turn providing her and her husband with support in their later years.

Mrs. Oh actively created the conditions for this domestic arrangement—she had the means to select an expensive residential location, within close commuting distance of her sons' work. Few in Buan have a geographical advantage such as this, but many try to maintain some form of the stem family through retaining control of the family land and means of production. On the other hand, those who do choose to move in with one of their children often attempt to bring resources with them in the form of property, investment, or labour—as in the following account of a widow who decided to consolidate her assets in order to move in with her oldest son, at the expense of other family members.

Mrs. Yi lived together with her husband and his parents for 13 years until his father died. Soon after the death Mrs. Yi's mother-in-law decided that she wanted to sell the family house and move twenty miles away to be with her eldest son. Her explanation was that she and her husband had been too poor to help much with her oldest son's education

and the proceeds from the sale of the house would make up for this. This greatly upset Mrs. Yi who felt she deserved something after all the years of hard work she had put in caring for her parents-in-law. She exchanged some harsh words with her mother-in-law, but was dismayed when her husband simply kept out of the argument. Eventually in the interests of family harmony the eldest brother held a meeting and it was decided that the house would be retained and they could continue living there. Mrs. Yi says that she admires him for doing this, but still feels betrayed by her mother-in-law who would have gone ahead and sold the house, if such a fuss had not been made. Several years later, her mother-in-law asked if she could move back but Mrs. Yi ignored her request.

Other elderly parents living with a child described how they try to help out with the costs of living by working, as with one grandmother who sells seaweed and salt in the markets of Buan:

My son moved from Seoul to look after me when I got sick. He now works as a government official. He doesn't like me working in the market but I want to do so because I want to make regular money that I can put aside for him. My son does everything for me. He is a *hyoja* (filial) son. I have a rice field of about 600 *p'yŏng* that I will give to him after I die, and he will also have the money I save up by working here. All my money goes into my son's bank account because if I died and it was in my own name then my sons-in-law would want some of it.

Less obvious but equally tangible economic benefits of co-residence were occasionally outlined as in the case of parents who lost a spouse or child in the Korean War (1950–1953) and are now eligible for a range of government benefits ranging from pensions to extremely low interest mortgages.

Domestic work and childcare is another route through which many older people in Korea negotiate their status and role within the kin network. There is a tendency in Buan for some older people to invite young grandchildren to live with them, often for several years. This was occasionally explained as being a way for them to help relieve financial stresses on the young family, but more often informants suggested that this arrangement was made to allow children to enjoy life in the countryside prior to the important middle school years when access to the highest possible standard of education takes priority over quality of lifestyle.

The role played by the elderly in terms of childcare in Korea must not be underestimated, especially as more women enter the workplace and there is a shortage of skilled reliable or affordable professional providers of childcare. The services of mothers and grandmothers, whether on the husband's or wife's side, were thus frequently in high demand and it was not unusual to see adult children not only requesting their parents' aid, but competing with their other siblings for it.

It is fairly common to see older people rotating between the different households of their offspring as and when needed or for a change of scene. Most frequently this enabling role declines as infants get older or the younger section of the family

becomes more settled and financially independent—but there are frequently occasions when the aged parent is in demand much later in their grandchildren's development. Mr. Lee, a locally based lawyer who attended Jeonbuk National University in the late 1980s recalls how because of the distance from Buan, his father decided it best to rent a small house for him and his siblings whilst they studied.

At that time my grandmother came to live with me and make the food. When I went to Jeonju to university, my younger brother also came to go to high school, so she came to look after us. It was the cheapest way. Two brothers cost a lot and we would have wasted a great deal of money if she had not come. My father asked her to go with us. She was happy as she could make food for her grandsons, and then in the vacation she would come back to our village. She was proud of living in Jeonju.

Conclusions

Thus from the perspective of the older generations there are a number of alternatives concerning what route to take in the various stages of old age. The most common response was the iteration of the ideal stereotype of the filial eldest son and his wife who reside and look after their parents in old age. However, when examined further it became apparent that whilst this image of a standard set of rights and obligations influenced the norm, the patterns and preferences concerning care of the aged were much more complex, frequently depending on a variety of factors, including location, resource management, and parental choice. The majority of cases nowadays suggest that neither the eldest son nor his brothers tend as a rule to remain permanently in the parental household and it is no longer within the ability of a parent to demand a child stays. More commonly, people who wish their offspring to remain or return have to do so by developing commitments with attractive offers as with Mrs Oh. Many of those living alone liked the idea of being able to claim a right of residence with their children, especially their eldest sons. Whether or not this right actually exists, it is clear that many who did make the move to their children's households, found they either felt obligated or more comfortable if they were able to bring resources with them. Often these were material, but domestic labour, work and childcare were frequently seen as contributions of even more importance.

In addition, as Sorensen points out, the actual age of the retired parent is an important element in this analysis, especially in relation to the length of the working lifetime. As the general health and longevity of the population increases, it can be expected that the ability to postpone infirmity and dependency in old age will lead to a tendency for the stem family to reform at a much later stage in the life-course than was previously the case. Such a return to co-residence is much more probable following the death of a spouse, though this is not necessarily a determining factor. Stem family re-formation is also likely to involve a considerable re-negotiation and

contestation of the boundaries and definitions of power and authority amongst the family members; perhaps much more visibly than if the family had maintained a continuous stem formation. Worry and uncertainty about the prospect of re-entering joint family life was frequently evident amongst my elderly informants, though this tended to be more pronounced amongst those who felt they had least to contribute. Many postponed the move until much later in the retirement process or put it off entirely, whilst others attempted to improve their position in the new household by bringing in their own financial or material resources, labour or access to services.

This paper represents a small part of the ageing picture as it stood at the start of the twenty-first century in Korea when only 7% of the Korean population was over 65. As we have seen this is rapidly changing and the country is on course to become one of the most aged societies in the world. Gerontological and ethnographic research in Korea on subjects such as social, healthcare and pension revision, changing inter-generational relations, the experiences and expectations of ageing, and appropriate provision of home care and long term residential care has been developing but is still fledging in scope. Current efforts by academics, government and business urgently need to be supported, integrated and expanded as the age wave approaches.

References

- Howe, N., Jackson, R., and Nakashima, K., 2007. *The Ageing of Korea: Demographics and Retirement Policy in the Land of the Morning Calm*. Washington: CSIS Reports
- KNSO, 2005. 'Distribution of older population'. Korea National Statistical Office. <http://www.nso.go.kr/>
- Kweon, Sug-in, 1998. 'The extended family in contemporary Korea: Changing patterns of co-residence'. *Korea Journal*, Autumn 1998 (38), pp. 178–209
- Prendergast, David, 2005. *From Elder to Ancestor: Old Age, Death and Inheritance in Modern Korea*. Folkestone: Global Oriental
- Soh, Chunghee Sarah, 1997. 'The status of the elderly in Korean society', in Formanek and Linhart (eds.) *Ageing: Asian Concepts and Experiences: Past and Present*. Vienna: Verlag Der Osterreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften Wien
- Sorensen, Clark, 1986. 'Migration, the family, and the care of the aged in rural Korea: An investigation of a village in the Yongso region of Kangwon province 1918–1983'. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* (1), pp. 139–61
- Sorensen, Clark, 1988. *Over the Mountains are Mountains: Korean Peasant Households and their Adaptations to Rapid Industrialization*. Seattle: University of Washington
- Turner, Adair, 2007 (unpublished). 'Population ageing or population growth: What should we worry about?' World Demographic Association, St Gallen, Switzerland
- World Health Organisation, 2005. 'Government and private expenditure on health as a percentage of total GDP'. <http://www.who.int/healthinfo/statistics/indicators/>