

# ECONOMY OF LOVE AND GRATITUDE, OR WHY DO ELDERLY SAKHALIN KOREANS CARRY ON SUPPORTING THEIR ADULT CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN?<sup>1</sup>

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This article is about love, help and compassion. It provides an account of inter-generational support that goes against the widely publicised and encouraged practice and understanding of filial piety (Sung Kyu-taik, 2005); it goes against the image of the elderly as a dependent, passive generation waiting to be helped; and finally it calls for a wider approach to the problem of inter-generational exchange of support in Korean society.

When elderly Sakhalin Koreans were finally allowed to return to South Korea, I expect few people, apart perhaps from they themselves, considered the impact of the repatriation on the relationship between generations and the possible exchange of support and care. When I began my research in September 2005 I expected the main question to be the provision of care by the children. However, contrary to stereotypes of inter-generational relationships and filial piety in Korea, it turned out that one of the main issues that the elderly were dealing with at the time was the provision of support for their children and grandchildren. This I thought demanded some attention. In the article below I am going to present some of the narratives that I collected during my fieldwork, and possible explanations for this pattern of exchange. However, before I present my argument, allow me to provide the reader with some background information about this little known community.

## **Brief history of migration and repatriation of the Sakhalin Koreans**

Most Sakhalin Koreans are descendants of the Koreans who were forced to move to Sakhalin by the Japanese from the second half of the 1930s up to the end of the Second World War. In the early part of the mobilization the men were encouraged to sign a two-year contract to move and work on Sakhalin in the coal mines. However at

the end of the two-year period they were still needed in the mines and most were not allowed to return to Korea. They were, however, allowed to bring some members of their families over from Korea to Sakhalin, for example parents or siblings. During the second part of the mobilization, particularly towards the end of World War II, the men were simply forced to go to Sakhalin. By 1945 approximately 150,000 Koreans were moved to Sakhalin (Choi Ki-Young, 2004; National Folk Museum of Korea, 2001).

At the end of the war Japan withdrew from Sakhalin, control of which it had lost to the Soviet Union, but most Koreans were left behind on the island. This was mainly due to two factors. First of all, the Soviet Union, exhausted by the war, needed the labour force and was not eager for the Koreans to leave, so it blocked the repatriation of Koreans and initially also of the Japanese. The second factor was the attitude of the Japanese government towards its former citizens of Korean descent. While during the late 1940s Japan made an effort to repatriate ethnic Japanese people from Sakhalin, it claimed that Koreans lost their Japanese nationality in accordance with the Cairo Declaration (Choi Ki-young, 2004), and Japan held no responsibility for their welfare. The additional difficulty was that many of the Koreans became stateless people: no longer Japanese citizens, with no Korean passports, especially after the Korean War, and often unable or unwilling to obtain Soviet citizenship.

The Koreans on Sakhalin, but also Koreans in Japan, campaigned for repatriation to Korea. However despite many efforts, permanent repatriation only became possible in the 1990s, and even then it was permitted only for the select few. It was only in the late 1990s and in the year 2000 that a larger group of 1352 Sakhalin Koreans was allowed to return to Korea. Their repatriation was co-funded by Japan and Korea. While the Japanese Red Cross paid for the cost of the travel from Sakhalin and the building of the apartment complex near Seoul where some 900 Sakhalin Koreans settled, the Korean government provided the land on which the apartments were built and the living allowance that the Koreans received. Crucially for my research, despite the efforts made by the Sakhalin Koreans, only the first generation, in other words only the elderly people, was allowed to return to Korea permanently.

What is understood by the first generation in this case has not been static. Initially these were only people born up to 1935, but at first, when it was discovered that only the first generation was allowed to return, people were reluctant to move away from their families in their old age to what now seemed like a foreign country. As a result the first generation was redefined to include people born up to 1945—this means that some of the now middle aged and elderly children of the forced labourers were allowed to settle in town an hour's train ride from Seoul. However, once the whole apartment complex was filled with people, the first generation was redefined again, and now it again includes people born up to 1935. While only the elderly were allowed

to move to Korea permanently, the children are allowed to visit for a maximum of 3 months at a time (or 1 year if the elderly require care).

## **The community**

In South Korea, Sakhalin Koreans live in a dedicated apartment block an hour from Seoul. The apartment complex is designed for some 900 people and consists of eight accommodation blocks, administration and a community centre, where music classes, concerts, health checks and other events are organized on a regular basis. The apartments are designed for two people, and are quite comfortable. The elderly receive a living allowance from the Korean government. During my fieldwork a couple was receiving an equivalent of \$700 per month, and a single person received \$400, which taking into the account the cost of living in Korea is not a lot of money, especially in winter when the heating bills go up. Despite that, some elderly manage to provide substantial support for the children and grandchildren left behind on Sakhalin, which is what I am going to discuss in the article.

## **I cannot watch her suffer**

It was a cold January Tuesday, but the usually empty administration building was full of people. Elderly women wrapped in woollen shawls brought over from Sakhalin, men with warm hats or caps on their heads.<sup>2</sup> They were queuing at the weekly money exchange, organized by one of the Korean banks. They were waiting to buy dollars. It was a good time to do so, as the American currency was at its all time low, but why did they need dollars? The few younger people present, depending on the stage of their visit, were either selling dollars in order to have some money while waiting for the first pay cheque, or they were buying dollars to take or send home. But why the elderly? Winter was not a time when the elderly usually visited Sakhalin. Who on earth would want to go there in winter??

In this queue of people I came across one of my best informants, Grandfather Dmitri (73).<sup>3</sup> “Selling or buying?” he asked. “Just checking the exchange rate”, I said, “and you? Not going to Sakhalin are you?” “No, no, no. I’m just buying dollars to send to my granddaughter in Moscow. To buy, what you call it ... a printer.”

Later that day we sat down in the deserted *noin bang*, and carried on talking about the granddaughter. She was the pride and joy of Dmitri’s life. She was so smart and clever, and whenever they would see each other on Sakhalin she would spend so much of her time with him. Dmitri said:

You know, these dollars that I bought today, I will send them to Russia through my wife’s sister. She is currently in Seoul, working in a shop, but she will be going to Sakhalin soon.

So we'll send the money through her. I have three children, two sons and a daughter, but I guess I help the daughter and her daughter the most. I mean, take the granddaughter. She is studying in Moscow, in one of the best universities in the country. I know that she is studying very hard, and that life in Moscow is very expensive. And you know, now in Russia some people are very rich, but not my granddaughter. So when I imagine that other female students are dressed in new, fashionable clothes, and my girl can't afford to buy a new scarf or whatever, my heart bleeds. It hurts to imagine such a thing. So I have to help her! Besides she is smart. If she was not smart I would not help her. Why would you help a stupid person? The last time we talked she said that she needs to buy a printer, so that's what I will help her to do.

Being generous was considered a virtue by elderly Sakhalin Koreans. The term was used to praise children and people, and questioning somebody's generosity also spoke of condemnation and moral decay. People would disapprovingly say, "Since we moved here people became stingy", and then follow this with a story. In the case described above we can see that Dmitri is behaving like a good person, like a good grandfather should. But the force that appears to activate his generosity is not just rational consideration of what it means to be a good grandfather but love for his granddaughter and a compassion for her situation. Compassion was an argument frequently used by my informants, both male and female, to justify their actions—it was out of compassion that they helped, it was out of compassion that they moved away, finally it was out of compassion that some were planning to return to Sakhalin. Only sometimes were formal rules described, but then usually it was within a discourse of tradition and how things were in the past. Compassion served both as a mechanism and motive for being generous, as well as justification of one's action.

The notion of compassion, and worrying about others, though particularly children and grandchildren, was ubiquitous. It was explained to me that it was only natural that parents should worry about their children, adult or not, as even if they are doing well something is always going on, either at work or at home; and it was natural for children to worry about their parents, though less so than parents worried about them. Again this was seen as to be expected, by both generations, as the children by now had their own children and often grandchildren to worry about.

But in fact decisions regarding support at times of need are not based on empathy only. What I observed among Sakhalin Koreans was that within the same narrative both empathic, emotional, care-based arguments and very rational, justice-based arguments would be used. For example in one case elderly parents helped their wayward son (he had a gambling problem, and lost two apartments due to gambling debts, including the apartment left to him by his parents): out of compassion for the grandchildren, but after a prolonged discussion, the decision was made to help him buy a mechanical digger with which he could learn to earn a living and value work, rather than to help him buy a flat. Similarly, Grandfather Dmitri (see the narrative

below) distributed help not only according to how much love and compassion he felt for his children, but according to how much he saw his children as deserving or in need of his help. No matter how much he loved his children, he did have a definite idea of what a fair division of help was.

Compassion itself can also be seen as rational and growing out of life experience, as well as immediate emotional engagement and closeness with the people obtaining support. After all only a fool, after a long life experience, would not be able to understand such and such struggles, for example of providing for a whole family. That awareness translated itself into a certain pattern of action and obligations. Or as Grandfather Dmitri put it, “if you know that your children are hungry, you have to help them.”

Compassion does not happen every time simply out of a good heart. It would be a mistake to think that decisions based on compassion are not in some way rational. Psychologists have shown that in fact emotions and especially empathy and compassion are invaluable in making such decisions (Pizarro, 2000). Emotional responses, just as values, are after all shaped to some extent by the culture within which one lives or is brought up (for example see Lutz, 1986; Lutz and White, 1986), and within a particular context make a lot of sense. The same happens with compassion. Emotions are evaluative not only as reaction to particular situations but also as part of a moral discourse (White, 1990). Similarly, compassion is not just about feeling for the other, but also evaluating his or her situation in a wider context. Compassion is in fact a very complex concept as it combines elements of emotions, evaluation and a moral value. This makes it very rich in meaning, both within discourse and everyday practice.

## **Distribution of help—justice, common sense, need and love**

Grandfather Dmitri continued:

I have three children but I give the daughter the most. I mean last year, me and my wife, we gave about 8,000 dollars to the children. Out of that I gave \$5,000 to my daughter. My oldest son was a little upset that I gave her so much. He thought it was unfair. That was because his son also went to the university in Moscow and he wanted me to recognize that the grandson was also a clever child. He wanted me to give the grandson some money “*na dorogu*” (for the journey in Russian). So I gave him \$1,000 to shut him up and keep the peace between him and the other children. My oldest son is a very rich man. He owns a business of his own and earns a lot of money. He told me that he spends \$2,000 a month on utility bills alone, so you can imagine how much he is making. But he wanted money for the grandson! But it is my daughter who needs our help most. She is a nurse, and her husband died, and she is bringing the granddaughter on her own. She works so hard, but nurses earn a pittance and she is poor. So we help her. And her older brother helps her from time to time too.

My youngest child, also a son—well he is a bandit that one. He just can't keep a job. He worked in the factory where I used to work, but that was closed down, and since then he does not have permanent work. He works in one place, then he gets bored and leaves it. And he's got a small child. He is not responsible at all. When we left Sakhalin for good, I left him our house and a new car. And guess what he did—he smashed the new car, last year, and nearly killed himself! Why should I help him if he cannot manage what he already has got? During my last visit I gave him \$1,000. I could have given him more, but he would just drink it all or spend on some stupid stuff. He should learn how to work!! Well, you know, in secret I actually also left a \$1,000 with the oldest son, for the youngest one. So when he comes begging for help, he does not go hungry. But I don't want him to know about that money, or he would just demand it all at once!

Fair distribution of support (and gifts) can be a headache, as there are competing notions of what 'fair' means, and at the same time giving support is one of the few avenues opened to expressing one's love for one's children over a long distance. In the example above Grandfather Dmitri wished to distribute his support according to the notion of fairness based on need and deserving. It was not left unchallenged by his eldest son, who although not in need, thought that he also had a claim on his father's help. That the son's reaction was not unique or unexpected, can be judged from the fact that women planning gifts for their children and grandchildren would try to be as supportive to each person in equal measure: thus some felt guilty that they were only able to buy a computer for one set of grandchildren and not the others, while another elderly woman would buy the same fishing equipment for all her sons, even though only one was mad about fishing. The jealousies that unequal distribution provoked were as much about the things given as about the parent's love. And yet at the same time, monetary support was usually distributed towards the child (or other kin) in greater need, even though parents usually claimed to love all the children the same.

However, support was given not only when it was needed. Sometimes it was given out of what was seen as a kind of morbid common sense. 'You can't take it all with you' was almost a mantra with which people justified the giving of support. Grandfather Chung (75) argued:

Me and my wife—well we manage to save about 200, and sometimes 300 dollars per month. We are old and we do not need much. Pretty much the only thing that we buy is food. We saved enough money to pay for our funerals, and to pay for the children to come to the funeral, there is also some money set aside for medical costs. So why else would we keep more money? It does not make any sense. I could die tomorrow, and I can't take it with me. So it is better to give it to the children, even though they protest at our gifts. At least they can put it to some good use, spend it on the grandchildren or something.

Grandfather Dmitri put it more succinctly:

There was this old man here. And he needed an operation. So one year he spent 10,000 dollars on his operation, but next year he needed another operation. He had cancer, or something. I don't know. He wanted to live so much. But after 6 months he died anyway. And I think it was stupid and wrong for him to spend so much money on himself. It would have been far better if he gave it to his children. After all, at this age you can't expect to live for a long time after an operation. I would never do such a thing as he did. I would rather give the money to the kids. In any case, didn't he know how hard it is to live on Sakhalin?

## Care and reciprocity

I thought that perhaps people were actively helping their children because they were expecting some form of reciprocity, particularly care, in the future. However, this turned out to be more complex than that. Again Grandfather Dmitri provided me with an interesting insight:

My wife still works, I only stopped recently. Last year I was still working. I stopped because I'm old. How long can you work for? I decided that I needed some rest. Maybe I'll find some work later on. It is lucky that I am still quite healthy. My wife complains of joint pains, but still works. That's good. That keeps her busy and keeps her moving. But others here! You don't see them. Sick, old people hiding in their flats. They don't go out anymore. I keep telling all the guys to learn how to cook. Some don't even know how to cook rice! What will they do if their wife dies? There are some widowers here, and some don't know how to cook. Who will look after them? Will the children come over? What are they thinking of expecting the children to come over and look after them. The children have their own lives, their cares, their own children. They can't just drop everything and come and boil some rice! Me and my wife, we had a serious conversation about the future. I mean, what future? All of us could die just the next day. But anyway we talked and we agreed that if one of us dies, then the other should return to the children. You can't expect them to come permanently here, and they would be worried. In any case, when I get really old, I don't want to go to the nursing home. It is like the army there! Get up at 7, eat at 8, go to the loo at 9! I don't want that. If I live to be really old I will go back to Sakhalin and live with my eldest son. Even before we came to Sakhalin he was asking me to move from the village to Yuzhno-sakhalinsk, to live with him. He is rich, he can afford to look after us. In any case it is natural that he should look after us. It would not be strange to him, as his grandmother (my mother), lived with us almost throughout our married life.

Grandfather Dmitri was by no means exceptional in that he kept supporting his children. Many men and women of his age group did. He was, however, quite exceptional in that he openly expected his son to be willing to look after him. Most elderly were very adamant in stating that they did not want to be a burden on their children and did not want to be looked after. At least not until the last, final days, as

after all it would be nice to have your children by your side as you die. People were afraid that if their children had to look after them, this would mean some deprivation for the grandchildren, also it was recognized that care is very difficult to combine with full time work. Moreover, it was firmly stated to me, if they remained on Sakhalin or elsewhere in Russia, they would not be able to live on their retirement pension, and would have to ask their children for assistance. And not just once in a while but every month. That, I was told by some people, would be unbearable.

In South Korea, while the trend for living separately from your children is growing (Kweon Suk In, 1998:187), it is very much the children who are expected (especially by the state) to look after their elderly parents. This is officially justified by the state as part of Korean Confucian tradition of filial piety, but I suspect is just a strategy for solving the problem of elderly care, in the rapidly greying Korean society. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that most South Korean elderly, unlike the Sakhalin elderly, do not receive a retirement pension. Filial piety and the care for the elderly, in Korea is often discussed and expressed in terms of reciprocity (Janelli, 2004; Sorensen, 1988; Prendergast, 2005). While people might no longer refer to the reciprocity for the 'gift of life', but rather reciprocity for care received as children, some argue that the idea of looking after the elderly as part of reciprocal relations remains strong, although the prospect of inheritance is also not without its influence (Prendergast, 2005). Sakhalin Koreans seem to turn this on its head. Not only do many of the younger elderly continue giving more than they receive, for the most part they do not expect their adult children to reciprocate. They wanted the children to express their gratitude, but other than that the money—as most help took the form of money—was simply to be used wisely. The giving was very much about being compassionate and generous, rather than in anticipation of future care. Even in the case of Dmitri, who after all did expect his eldest son to look after him (or at least be ready to do so), he expected care from the child to whom he gave the least: after all it was the youngest one who received the family house, and it was the daughter who received most of the current help. Here the expectation of care was built on something completely other than reciprocity. In part it could be portrayed as tradition—as after all he was expecting care from the eldest son, in part it was seen as a natural thing to do—as this is what the man grew up with, and finally he was financially the most capable of the three children to provide care. The notion of reciprocity did not enter the calculation at all.

Contrary to that argument, however, I did encounter the view that duty and reciprocity was part of everyday life, and to some extent part of the inter-generational exchange. Some people, though very few, were planning to return to Sakhalin later on in life, precisely in order to receive support from their children, and they would refer to the idea of reciprocity and duty when justifying this, rather unusual for



the settlement, position. However inter-generational reciprocity also had another dimension that was not directly expressed in the language of duty.

Grandmother Lara (69), one of my closest informants and in a way my adopted grandmother, was planning to return to Sakhalin. She would certainly return after her husband's death. She loved her husband dearly, but he was in his mid-80s and she knew that she would outlive him. She would go mad, living here all alone. In any case she wanted to return to Sakhalin while she could still be useful for her children:

You see I miss them. I want to go there, and cook for them. (*Lara was an amazing cook.*) I want to help them with everyday things. I am old, and sick, but while I can do something for my children I want to be able to do that. So that when I am really old and sick my children will love me. I do not want to return to Sakhalin when I am no longer of any use to my children and grandchildren. They would accept me of course, but it is difficult to love a person who was absent for a long time, and then suddenly returns and expects love and attention.

There are several important points here. One is that contrary to now classic writing on the gift (e.g. Mauss, 1990) reciprocity is expected to work within a relatively short period of time. Usually when inter-generational relations in traditional Korean society are presented in terms of reciprocity, there is a considerable time delay involved between the time when both children and parents need a lot of assistance, as after all it takes time for the children to grow up, and the parents to grow old (Sorensen, 1988). The second, in my view more important point, is that what one is dealing with can almost be called economy of gratitude and love. It is gratitude and love that is expected in return for help, more so than any material return (see Candace Clark, 2004 and Hochschild, 1989). And it was the breach of the economy of gratitude that sometimes caused a conflict between generations, rather than lack of material reciprocity.

The gifts and help from the Sakhalin elderly were not so much a part of reciprocity, as they were a part of remaining in their children's and grandchildren's everyday life and retaining their memory and love. The gifts maintained the relationship, nourished it. The aim of the gift was not some future exchange, but the person who received it (Ledeneva, 1998; Frow, 1994), though that of course depended on the people and the gifts involved. One has to recognize, that apart from being an element of compassion or exchange of support within a family, as described below, the generosity of elderly parents had another aspect, namely that giving was a great source of satisfaction and sense of self worth (Kim Hye-Kyung et al., 2000). I was told on several occasions that the adult children objected to the parents' work and gifts. The elderly were chided—"you should rest!" But nonetheless they continued to work (see also MacKinnon, Gien and Durst, 2001).

The elderly provided all kinds of support. Some gifts were seen simply as gifts—

to make people happy, and to make sure they remembered about each other. But other gifts took the form of the provision of support. Even money took on different meaning depending on the circumstances. Sometimes it was simply seen as gift, especially if the receivers did not need it, or it was given to grandchildren as a reward for being good students. But sometimes the money given by the elderly was a matter of survival for the recipients, and in such cases it was also deemed by the elderly as natural and obvious that they, provided they were capable, should help. Such assistance from parents to adult children is not uncommon in Russia, where parents support their own children long after the children set up their own families (David Anderson, 2004:20) and the senior members of the family (especially in urban areas) are expected to sacrifice themselves in order to support the younger ones (Caldwell, 2004). The ethos among the Sakhalin Koreans (and one that is also reflected in literature on Russia, for example see Barsukova, 2006) was that the person who is in need should receive help from the person who is capable of giving help, particularly a family member, with no reciprocity expected where it could not be given. At the same time people did feel somehow obligated and certainly grateful for the help received. But once a person was seen as capable of doing something for others, it was seen as very wrong for him or her to refuse to help. One of my younger informants who was a carer deeply resented the fact, that he, as the most successful of his brothers and sisters, helped them out throughout his life, with no expectation of reciprocity and very often out of his own initiative, but now that he needed some help his siblings refused to cooperate, even though by now they could make an effort.

Assistance especially among kin is and was also important in Korea (Kim Hogarth Hyun-key, 1998; Sorensen, 1988; Brandt, 1971; Chun Kyung-soo, 1984; Prendergast, 2005; Kendall, 1996), and parents in South Korea do carry on helping their adult children to some extent, especially in the early part of their married life. The difference between past and present was that in the past for the most part mutual assistance was exchanged within the patrilineage, and now the importance of affines is growing (Kim Song-Chul, 1998). Sakhalin Koreans also involved all types of kin in their network. I was told that on Sakhalin, in the beginning there were so few kin, that every kin, no matter how distant, from whichever side of the family, became very important, but when explaining their generosity to their adult children they would argue that they do it because this is how it is in Russia. There, in Russia, the grandmothers were supporting the grandchildren 'for ever'. When Asian tradition was mentioned (and it was called by them the Asian tradition), it was to argue that elderly parents continue to support their adult children because the Asian tradition encourages dependence—'that children should not become independent as soon as possible, as American children do.'

However despite the fact that a lot of the younger elderly helped their children, and that it did fit into the expected and accepted mode of behaviour, it was not seen

in terms of duty. Elderly parents, I was told by one of my informants, “do not have a duty to help their children. Your duties to your children are to raise them, educate them, marry them off and help establish a household. But by the time you are old, that is already done. So you do not have any duties to your children.” This view was not unexpected. But what surprised me was the view expressed by the elderly Sakhalin Koreans, that the adult children do not have any duties towards them, because everything (assistance with hospital visits, some very limited household assistance, etc.) has been taken care of by the administration of the settlement. The only duty that was explicitly expressed was for the children to attend the funeral of the parents. Or sometimes I was told that it is important for the children to live well and be good people, that this was their duty towards their parents. One may argue that by stating the lack of practical duties of children towards their parents, the elderly absolved them from condemnation, as due to the distance between them it was very difficult to provide any sort of assistance. I was inclined to think that this rather reflected a very practical and pragmatic approach to life. It shows how changing circumstances and therefore changing needs impact on ethical norms: you do not expect or demand help where it is not needed. I was told by some people that on Sakhalin, while there were very few inter-generational households, the children were expected to help their parents when the parents needed help. And yet in the context of other conversations it became apparent that the elderly had some very practical problems on Sakhalin—for example bringing coal to heat their flats, removing the snow or simple lack of money. So regardless of the expectation, not all the elderly were helped by the children. This again was not necessarily seen as a shortcoming on the part of the children, but rather a result of internal migration on Sakhalin and the fact that the children and their partners were very busy working and looking after their own families.

## **Tradition, obligation and change**

Grandfather Dmitri:

My father died very long time ago, when I was a young man. But my mother lived for a long time, and most of the time she lived with us. I am the eldest son you see, and in the past it was the tradition among Koreans that the eldest son should look after the parents and all other members of the family. Anyway, as I say, she lived with us for most of the time, and she died in my arms. Why most of the time and not all the time?? Well, that was her own fault!!! You see, when I got married, and my wife moved in, my mother was still running the household. So me and my wife, well—we gave her all our earnings. Every month we would give her everything. But there never was enough money in the house! When I wanted to go out for a drink with the lads, I asked her for money—and there never was any. I did not understand what was going on?? At that time I earned a decent salary, so did my wife. I finally lost patience when one day there was not enough

money for me and my wife to go to a cinema. Cinema at that time was very cheap! It was the cheapest form of entertainment. So I confronted my mother! And you know what the truth was?? There was not enough money for us, because she kept giving our money to all my siblings, who by then had moved out from the house! I said—why on earth should I be supporting them? They are adults, they are working! That is enough! From that time onwards I gave all my money to my wife, and told her to run the house. Very soon there was enough money for everything, for example for a scooter. My wife is an excellent housekeeper. But my mother felt insulted. And so after a while she moved to one of my brothers, then one of my sisters. She would stay a while with all of my siblings, but at the end she came back to us. That is because my wife was very kind to her, and we looked after her the best!

You know, after all these years, I wanted to combine *chesa* for my father with that of my mother. It is a lot of work, especially for the woman of the house, to prepare everything. But my wife would not allow that. She did not want to insult the spirit of my mother. You have to respect your parents, you have to remember them. Even if all you put on the table is a glass of water.

It would appear, then, that mothers helping adult children (both sons and daughters) were not just a fairly recent phenomenon brought on by the shortages around the period of *perestroika* and afterwards (as some of my informants said), but something already existing in the Sakhalin Korean community relatively early on. Dmitri's mother probably never learned to speak Russian properly and her contact with the culture would have been limited. It could be argued that in helping all her children she was doing what the household of the senior brother is supposed to do—help all the siblings, and after all she was running the household of her eldest son. The idea that the eldest brother should help his other siblings was something that the parents of my elderly informants encouraged, but something that some of the eldest brothers resented, and as one can see sometimes rebelled against. Which brings me to the question of how much force specific moral prescriptions such as 'help your siblings' or 'help your parents' have. Here what I want to point out is that within everyday discourse of a good life and moral values, particular situations will be evaluated from different points of view and using different moral discourses, and so the obligation to help siblings will be balanced and limited by the obligation to support one's own family. Or in other situations claims to help will be made on various grounds—if the 'language of duty' does not work, the 'language of compassion' should. People might challenge certain norms, they might reinterpret them *et cetera* in order to adapt them to the changing reality of life. But at the same time, people do come to accept the responsibilities that come to them with their position.

While the notion of choice, negotiations and reinterpretation of kinship is quite popular among modern studies of kinship, particularly related to obligations between various members of the family (Strathern, 1992), choice does not always seem to be an option. One summer evening I accidentally met with Grandfather Dmitri as he

was walking to a PC *bang* (internet café). While I knew that he had a computer and enjoyed playing computer chess I was quite surprised to see him on his way to an internet café:

It is because of my nephew, he explained. You see my nephew, he asked me to register him on an internet game. He wants me to get him a password. It is really strange but you need a Korean ID number in order to be able to obtain the password. Anyway I did that, and I even bought a mobile phone so that they could send it to me (and I don't need the mobile for anything else). And I gave my nephew the password and he tried to log in, but it does not work. Do you have any idea why? I spent so much money on that—I had to buy a mobile, then I had to go to the PC *bang*, so much money! But I could not say “no” to my nephew you see. After all an uncle is an uncle!! I could not say no. Especially as I am the senior uncle of the family.

The example with the computer game is perhaps a trivial one, but the problem of obligation is not. That people do negotiate their obligations, interpret them in different ways and finally sometimes refuse to meet them is obvious, but that does not mean that obligations do not have a certain power. If they did not, they would not have to be negotiated nor would the refusal to meet them cause condemnation and conflict, though that of course would depend on the particular obligation involved and its context.

## Conclusion

No single explanation can be given as to why elderly Sakhalin Koreans continue supporting their children. Even within a single case study one can explore different possibilities. What I wish to show is that when discussing inter-generational exchange of support in Korean families one needs to move beyond the themes of reciprocity and children supporting their elderly parents. The practice and reasoning behind exchange of support, particularly one provided by the older generation, is more complex than merely reciprocity and duty, although these also feature in the discourse.

What deserves further attention is the role of emotions in arguments concerning everyday morality. Emotions, being less bound by talk of rules associated with the language of duty, provide a flexible tool with which to practise kinship in a changing world. Moreover I believe that the role of emotions in exchange of support is not a recent phenomenon in the Sakhalin Korean culture, but can be traced back to pre-war Korean society. Just as it is argued in the film *Unreliable People*<sup>4</sup> that Koreans living in Kazakhstan managed to preserve ancient songs and some old linguistic forms, it could be argued that Sakhalin Koreans display practices that come from pre-war Korean society, and are not merely influences of the Russian or Soviet culture, though of course Soviet culture did have an impact. Proving this point, however, would require further research.

At the same time, I would argue, duty cannot be disregarded as a force in exchange of support, but what has to be remembered is that duties too are subject to circumstances and change. One has to recognise then that both duty and emotions play a role, and interplay with each other, in the practice of being a good parent and child.

Finally, what the generosity of the Sakhalin elderly repatriates illustrates is the balancing of the relationship with their children over a large distance, and the use of distance itself in managing their cares and obligations towards family members remaining in Russia. The distance is used to limit not only the extent to which the elderly have to help their children, as it is more difficult for the children to claim the help of their parents when they are out of sight and a long distance away, but also to limit the extent to which the children have to help their parents. At the same time generosity is maintained in order to demonstrate the attachment between family members, to maintain a distant presence and to allow for a demonstration of love. That is a matter of choice and one that goes beyond people's notions of obligation and duty. This makes the generosity much more powerful than everyday assistance between kin that is both taken for granted and cannot be refused.

While the elderly argue that the children have few if any obligations towards them, they are aware of the fact that towards the end of their days, they might either need a lot of help financing their health care, or in fact they might need day to day assistance from their children,<sup>5</sup> whether on Sakhalin or in Korea. Being cared for by their children demands risk and sacrifice, be it on the side of the elderly or the children, as it either means that children are risking their work and family life on Sakhalin by spending extended periods in Korea, or that the elderly have to move back to Sakhalin, and have to give up their flats, pensions and the company of their peers in Korea. It is also inevitably linked to being a burden. Through their generosity, and use of distance, the elderly manage the economy of love and gratitude in such a way as to lessen the impact of being a burden on themselves and on their kin, yet at the same time secure love as well as care.

## Notes

1. This article would not be possible without the generous support from the Korea Foundation.
2. Sakhalin Koreans maintained that this is how you can tell them apart from local South Koreans. South Koreans were deemed not to wear hats in winter, whereas Sakhalin Koreans did, because this is what they were used to on Sakhalin.
3. Russian pseudonyms are used through out. Just as it is common for Korean students to use English names when studying in the UK, the Sakhalin Korean elderly had Russian-use names, with which they would introduce themselves to me. Russian names were also used by

the elderly in conversation with each other. In fact sometimes they would know the Russian names of their friends, rather than the Korean ones. The interviews were carried out in Russian.

4. Chung, Y. David (dir). (2006). *Koryo Saram—The Unreliable People*. A documentary film about the Soviet Koreans in Kazakhstan. Directed by Y. David Chung, filmed and edited by Matt Dibble, Executive Producer Meredith Woo.
5. Among the Sakhalin Koreans it is particularly the daughters, and not the daughters-in-law, that take on themselves caring for their parents in their old age. If sons look after their parents, they look to their sisters for help, rather than their wives, as a woman's loyalty is seen as first to her own parents, and only then to parents-in-law.

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