A Comparative Study on Supporting Elderly Parents in Asian Cities:  
Attitudinal Differences among Female Students  
Yoshiko Someya

Abstract

This paper looks into the differences of attitudes towards supporting elderly parents among female students in six major cities in Asia. For this purpose, surveys were conducted among female university students in Seoul, Hong Kong, Nanjing, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and Tokyo. The filial expectations of mothers to the respondents were also asked in the questionnaire. Results showed that the respondents perceived that mothers prefer to be taken care of by their daughters more than their sons in all the cities. Secondly, a majority of the female students intend to give cash assistance to their mothers, except for the Japanese respondents. Thirdly, the attitudes towards supporting elderly mothers are not always related to the level of economic growth of their countries. Finally, hiring foreign domestic helpers is taking an important role in these countries except for Japan, whereas such private arrangements are quite common in Singapore. From this survey, we can see that the attitudes of supporting elderly parents are influenced by welfare values and cultures in these countries. Also, it is observed that the maternal lines are stronger than the paternal lines in supporting elderly parents among the major cities in Asia today.

Key words: elderly parents, intergenerational support, social security


要 約

欧米より経済発展の遅れたアジア諸国では、現在も親孝行意識が強く存在している。その背景には、家族主義、宗教の影響が強いこと、また社会保障制度の発展が遅れたことがある。しかし近年のアジア諸国では、親孝行の意識が減り、子世代が親孝行を担うことが難しくなっている。

発展の続くアジア主要都市において、老親への生活支援、介護の役割を持つ女性に注目し、女子大学生の親孝行意識、母親からの期待、また自分の老後に関し、2011～2012年度にアンケート調査を実施した。対象はソウル、クアラルンプール、香港、南京、シンガポール、東京の6都市の大学である。調査結果については、2014年9月に東京女子大学で開催された第24回日本家族社会学会大会の国際セッションで報告したが、本稿はこの調査結果と報告全体をまとめ、さらに考察を加えたものである。

調査から、1. 多数の母親たちは、息子より娘に老後支援の期待が強い。2. 東京以外の大多数の女子大学生は、就職後毎月親への送金を予定している。3. 東京とソウル以外の女子大学生は、「どんなことをしても親を養う」という意識が強い。4. 日本以外は、外国人漢で援助者が高齢者介護の重要な役割を担い、シンガポールでは政策の一環とされている。5. またアジア諸国でも、社会的価値観に基づく福祉国家の型が見られた。

キーワード：老親、世代間扶養、社会保障

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In recent years, economic developments in Asia have been outstanding. Concomitantly, the life styles, social values and public consciousness on many issues are also changing. On the other hand, cultural practices and religious beliefs are firmly rooted in the society and they do not change so easily. Hence, caregiving for elderly parents is still heavily dependent on the family and historically, women have always been regarded as the primary caregivers. Filial piety to elderly parents has been highly valued in Chinese and Korean cultures, and also in Japan. These values are considered to be quite similar to Islamic values and beliefs. Responsibility of caregiving for elderly parents is strongly related to the independence of elderly persons in terms of finance or health, including the availability of social services.

For the above reasons, this research aims to investigate the impact of changing attitudes of female students towards supporting elderly parents in different generations and countries. Because the role of caregiving for elderly parents is traditionally considered to be a female responsibility in many countries, the survey research was conducted among female undergraduates in each city; more than 200 respondents in six major cities in Asia participated in the study from 2011 to 2013. Participants’ cities included Seoul (209 samples), Kuala Lumpur (356), Nanjing (210), Hong Kong (212), Singapore (214), and Tokyo (211).

The universities involved in this research were the Seoul Women’s University, Kangnam (江南) University, Kyonyong (建陽) University, and Sookmyung (淑明) Women’s University in the Republic of Korea, Universiti Putra Malaysia in Malaysia, City University of Hong Kong in Hong Kong, Ginling Women’s College (金陵女学院大学) of Nanjing Normal University in China, National University of Singapore in Singapore, and Tokyo Woman’s Christian University (東京女子大学) in Japan. This research was funded by the Institute of Women’s Studies, Tokyo Woman’s Christian University from FY 2011 to 2013, and part of the research was funded by the Ministry of Education from FY 2010 to 2013.

I. DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES AND SOCIAL MEASURES IN ASIA

Population ageing and longevity in Japan is the highest in the world. The percentage of 65 years old and over in Japan reached 7% in 1970, and was then categorized as “an ageing society” by the United Nations, and it reached 14% in 1994, which is then known as “an aged society.” It took 24 years for the share of the older population to double from 7 to 14% in Japan. This was much shorter than western developed countries such as France (114 years), Sweden (82), USA (69), Italy (55), and UK (46).

Until recently, with the exception of Japan, populations in Asian countries were relatively young. However, these populations are ageing steadily and reaching “the ageing society” level. In addition, the speed of population ageing is expected to accelerate rapidly after 2020. Because of the one-child policy in China and the declining birth rates among other countries in the region, population ageing is happening far more quickly. As a result, marked demographic changes are expected in Asia in the mid-21st century.

Korea’s older population exceeded 10% in 2014 with a birth rate of 1.29, which is lower than Japan. It is one of the countries with the lowest birth rate in the world. The speed of population ageing in Korea is the fastest in the world at this moment and it took 18 years for the country to develop from “an ageing society” to “an aged society.” As for Singapore, older persons make up 10.2% of the total population; the birth rate was 1.29 in 2012 and decreased further to 1.19 in 2013. A characteristic of Singapore’s population is the high ratio of non-citizens which was over 40% in 2013 and the fast rate of population ageing.

Population ageing, social changes and social policies
are strongly inter-related. As the economy develops, life style changes, medical care improves, education advances, and so on. These changes result in extended longevity of people and decline fertility rates. We can see similar characteristics in the times of economic development and the trend of population ageing among these countries.

II. JAPANESE WELFARE MEASURES FOR ELDERLY PEOPLE

In Japan, where the aged population is the highest in the world, many social measures were developed in response to social changes. These include public pensions, social security measures, universal medical/health insurance, social services for elderly people, and others. Until 1961, only those who worked in the public sector, educational institutions, and a limited number of corporations were entitled to receive pensions after retirement with the same going for medical/health insurances.

In 1961, universal pensions known as “Kokumin-ne-nkin (the Basic Public Pension)” and universal health insurance which is called “Kokumin-kenkouhoken (the Universal Medical Insurance)” were enacted. These insured the total population for basic medical care and financial security after retirement. Although it was not enough to meet the financial needs of the elderly people, pension payments started in 1981, after 20 years of its implementation. As for universal pension, payments started for the population aged 65 years and over regardless of their years of contribution. People who did not contribute sufficient number of years were still entitled to receive the minimum payment as a basic pension to all Japanese citizens aged 65 and over.

These two universal measures were the significant social measures during the marked economic-growing era of Japan. In 1971, a free medical care plan for the elderly people started. It provided the elderly people with complete free medical care. However, it was discontinued in 1983 because of increasing medical cost and growing elderly population. The free medical plan was converted to 10% co-payment of total medical fees and the ratio became the same as the working population. The fees gradually increased according to the rise of total health expenditure for the country. The co-payment for 75 years old and over went up to 20% in 2014. In addition, the co-payment for the top income bracket became 30% which is as same as the rest of the population now.

Family structures and family roles have changed during the past period due to prolonged life expectancy. Caregiving for frail elderly parents has become very difficult tasks for family members particularly to women. Since the 1980s, more married women have entered the workforce and family size has declined. Therefore, elderly care has become a major source of stress for working women. In order to reduce the ex-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Comparison of 6 Nations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>127,560,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>5,000,400</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>2,924,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>531,200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>715,500</td>
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<td>China</td>
<td>1,350,695,000</td>
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Data from "WHO World Statistics, 2012 edition."
cessive responsibility on caregivers, social services for the elderly people started expanding in the 1990s.

A ten-year project on health and welfare for the elderly (the Gold Plan) was enacted in 1990. This was a universal welfare measure, but fees were adjusted according to income levels. In addition, services were provided to elderly people who needed care under the auspices of the municipal governments. Ten years later, the Long-term Care Insurance started in April 2000. This is a mandatory insurance for those who are 40 years old and over. Monthly contributions are deducted from either monthly salaries or public pensions according to income levels. The eligibility for receiving services for persons who are 65 years and over will be assessed by assessment teams.

Different services were provided according to the assessed level on 7 levels: the five-care levels and the two assisted levels. The maximum amount of care services is provided according to the levels and 10% of total fees per month is charged to the users. Although each municipal government operates the insurance plans, services are also provided by the private sectors. Half of the total funds are paid for through the insurance premium and both the national and local governments will each pay a quarter.

Because of increasing service needs, the fees of care services for the users who have the annual income over ¥2,800,000 per persons and ¥3,460,000 for couples increased from 10 to 20% from April 2015. As the population ages, there will be more demands for services. Although the plan is expected to face serious financial difficulties in the near future, the Long-term Care Insurance plays a significant role in the care of the elderly people in Japan.

III. WELFARE MEASURES FOR ELDERLY PEOPLE IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Singapore is highly developed and the average annual income is one of the highest in the world. Singapore has developed welfare measures in a different way from Japan. The financial and physical care for elderly parents largely depends on families. For financial and medical security in retirement, the Central Provident Fund was started in 1995. It covers the individuals who are in formal employment. The employees contribute 14.5% and employers provide 20% of each month’s salary. The accumulated money goes to an individual fund that can be spent for medical payments, housing purchases and monthly pension payments after the age of 50. The fund can also be utilized for medical fees for the family. However, the CPF is only entitled for persons who are employed in the formal sector.

Taking care of elderly parents is mostly regarded as the responsibility of the children, and not the government. In 1995, the Maintenance of Parents Act (Chapter 167B) was enacted. It requires children to take care of parents who are 60 years and over if they need monthly financial support. If children fail to do this, parents have the legal right to bring their children to the court. The political value on welfare is quite similar to that of America that emphasizes small government and strong individual responsibilities. The Singapore government has taken the way which seeks to create “minimal public welfare with low taxations.”

As for Korea, the Universal National Pension started in 1988. After 20 years, the pension fund matured and payments started in 2008. In addition, the Universal Medical Insurance started in 1989. These two key universal schemes have already been enacted. However, pension payments are rather low and not sufficient for supporting the life of the elderly people. Fifty percent of medical costs are covered by the insurance, but the rest has to be paid by the users. So, only people who can afford private medical insurances can subsidize their whole medical expenditure. In fact, the medical fees are still quite high for a majority of elderly persons. As social and life styles changes have occurred very rapidly in Korea, the attitudes towards the caring
of elder parents have changed dramatically too. Although basic social measures exist, a majority of elderly people are still living in hard situations.\(^{(6)}\)

### IV. FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS WITH FEMALE STUDENTS IN SEOUL

Focus group interviews were conducted with thirty female students at the Seoul Women’s University in October 2010. Each group consisted of 10 female students. An additional three group interviews were conducted at the Kangnam University in March 2012 and each group consisted of 5 female students. Each group interview took about one hour and a half and the interviews were interpreted from Korean to English or Korean to Japanese. Questions asked were: 1) what is the situation of the living arrangements for your grandparents?, 2) who is taking care of frail grandparents?, 3) who will take care of your mother when she needs care and what will you do for her in the future?, 4) does your mother expect your support and/or care in her later years?, 5) which will you prefer to live with your own parents or your parents-in-law, if married?, and 6) are you willing to support your own parents financially in the future?

Summary of outcomes from interviews.

1) Some of their grandparents are gone already. Others are living with their children’s families, living with spouses or living alone. In fact, there is a variety of living arrangements and there is no particular pattern that dominates. The mother’s generation tend to live with their husband’s parents and to take care of them, but mothers today do not expect their daughters to do so.

2) After getting married, female students do not wish to live with or nearby their parents-in-law, but prefer to live with or nearby their own parents. Married daughters also want their mothers to help with child care.

3) The mother’s generation do not utilize social services and/or nursing care facilities for their parents, but they want daughters to utilize social care for themselves. In addition, mothers prefer to live with their daughter’s families rather than that of their son’s.

4) Many students think that daughters should take care of their mothers and should live together or nearby their parents. Also, a majority of them want to give their parents money monthly after graduating from university and obtaining jobs, because their parents paid a great deal for their education and do not have enough money for their later years.

5) Some of their mothers wish to return to their hometowns in the countryside in their later years. In Japan, this tendency is more common among the older men than older women who are less interested in returning to the countryside. The difference occurs due to varying kinship relations, in which mutual help in the community still exist in the rural areas in Korea.

### V. THE OUTCOME OF THE SURVEY RESEARCH IN THE 6 MAJOR CITIES IN ASIA

The survey research in 6 cities, Seoul, Nanjing, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and Tokyo was conducted between 2011 and 2013. Questionnaires were developed based on the focus group interviews in Seoul in 2010. In the graphs, the 6 cities are referred to as nations. Data collected include: ① living arrangements, ② care needs for grandparents, ③ mothers’ preferences in their daughters for support in later years, ④ the attitudes of female students towards supporting elderly parents in the future, ⑤ the attitudes of female students towards financial supports to their mothers after obtaining jobs, and others. Data were analyzed by using SPSS. We can see interesting outcomes from the comparisons among 6 major cities. Among them, 7 questions were chosen and presented here. The
As for Figure 1, it shows the mother’s preference for living with daughters in later years. It shows that among the 6 cities, Japanese mothers scored the highest on “no particular preference” and this made up 55.9% of the respondents. On the other hand, the highest preference of “living with daughters” is in Malaysia at 40.2%. The preference of Japanese mothers to live with their daughters is 14.9%, while that of the Korean mothers is even lower than Japan at 12.1%. For Korean mothers, the highest preference is “living nearby daughters” at 43.0%.
Figure 2 (question 6) shows the mother’s preference for care in later years. This is a common tendency among the 6 nations. “Care by daughters” is the highest in every country. The highest is Malaysia at 77.7% and the lowest is Korea at 41.6%. Also, the preference for utilizing “care facilities” is the highest in Korea at 28.7%. The expectation for daughters is the highest and the daughters-in-law is the lowest in all countries.

Figure 3 (question 7) shows the mother’s expectations for support in their later years. The similarity among the 6 nations is that the care by daughters is much more highly expected than that of sons. The expectation of care by children is the lowest in Korea.

As for Figure 4 (question 9), it shows the students’
attitudes towards financial support for their parents. It means cash support for parents after obtaining jobs. Although more than 40% of Japanese female students are willing to give cash every month, higher percent of daughters in other countries wish to do so ranging from 60 to 95%. Malaysians recorded the highest intention for cash support, and Hong Kong and Singapore follow closely.

Figure 5 (question 11) shows how female undergraduates plan to support their parents’ later lives. The highest answer on “do every way” is very high except for Korea and Japan at 20.4 and 33.7%, respectively. Other countries ranged from 84.0 to 92.0%. Interestingly enough, the highest is Singapore which is the richest among the 6 nations. As for Korea and Japan, the most common answer is “based on parents’ financial ability.”

The question 12 (no figure) is for the students’ expectation of support in their own later years. It reflects the female undergraduates’ expectations for their children in their later years. The expectation for support in their later years by their children is higher in Hong Kong and Singapore and lower in Korea and Japan. Particularly, “no support if possible” is the highest in Korea by 42.0%.

The question 13 (no figure) is the attitudinal differences towards supporting elderly parents between the students themselves and those of their mothers. The response for “very changed” is the highest in Malaysia by 33.0% and others ranged from 5.1 to 13.4%. The most common answer is “some change.” It varies from 67.0% in Korea to 32.5% in Malaysia. Overall, the generational change is not so significant between the students’ generation and that of the mothers. It is seen that the most significant change could have occurred in the generations between their mothers and grandmothers.

The outcome of this study in the 6 major Asian cities showed that mothers’ expectations for support in their later years from their daughters are significantly higher than those of their sons in all the cities. In addition, daughters are neither willing to live with nor nearby husbands’ parents after marriage. However, they show some preferences for living with or nearby their own parents. This shows that the paternal lines in Asian traditions are weakening and the maternal lines are tightening.
VI. CONCLUSION

In summarizing the outcome from the group interviews and survey research, we can see attitudinal differences and similarities in supporting elderly parents among the 6 cities. Attitudes can be influenced by social changes, but they seem to be strongly affected by welfare measures which each country has implemented. Welfare measures are also based on political values in each country.

In general, the developments of social measures are highly linked to the levels of economic developments in the nations, which was stated by Donald O. Cowgill in the 1970s. However, we can see the outcomes which are not directly related to the economic development and financial wealth of the nations, but very much dependent on their political values. It is the same phenomenon which Esping-Andersen observed in the European welfare states.

Among 6 cities in this research, the average income is the highest in Singapore. Since the Singapore government has emphasized on family responsibilities, welfare measures for elderly people are not well developed compared to Japan. Caregiving for elderly is not socialized but charity organizations are subsidizing to meet their needs. It is the welfare pattern of a minimalist welfare and the small government. It is quite the similar welfare regime to the United States, which Esping-Anderson classified.

Japan has developed social measures for elderly people in accordance with increasing elderly population, although they cannot meet all welfare needs yet. In Korea, modernization affected the attitudes towards supporting elderly parents for a short period and welfare measures are insufficient to meet their needs. As for Hong Kong, it entered into the ageing society in 2014 where the aged population reaches over 14% and the longevity is the same as that of Japan. Hong Kong has many similarities with Singapore in terms of land and population size, as well as the levels of economic development. Since the Hong Kong government united under the Chinese government, it seems that it is now in a difficult situation to develop its own welfare measures.

In Singapore, Hong Kong, and even in Korea and Malaysia, foreign domestic live-in helpers are taking on an important role in family care. They are employed mainly from the Philippines and Indonesia. It is a very different way of meeting care needs for elderly people from that in Japan. Employing foreign domestic helpers by private families are now functioning to meet the care needs in these countries. However, population ageing is starting in these two developing countries and their economies will grow in the future. For these reasons, it is quite certain that hiring domestic helpers from neighboring countries will become difficult in the near future.

In fact, in addition to industrialization and financial wealth, the pattern of development of welfare measures for the elderly people and the varying degrees of these developments have significantly affected the attitudes towards the support of elderly parents.

Notes

(5) Ibid.
(6) Takayasu, Yuichi (2013), “Shoshi Koreika no Daimonndai (A big issue on population ageing),”
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