Old-age Psychological Wellbeing in Developing Southeast Asia

Asian Family Matters

Changing Family in Asia Cluster
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This brief is intended to provide an overview of research produced by the Changing Family in Asia Cluster at the Asia Research Institute.
Living arrangements and family support for older persons have become increasingly important policy concerns in developing and rapidly aging Asia. Thus, formulating a sound elderly care policy for the region would benefit from an empirical examination of how living arrangements, particularly coresidence, and intergenerational support are associated with old-age psychological health. While there is considerable evidence that Asian elders who are living alone experience greater risks of depression than those living with a spouse, children, and/or others, our understanding remains incomplete regarding the association between psychological wellbeing and intergenerational coresidence—the most common form of living arrangement among elderly parents in Asia.

Two research gaps from past research are noteworthy: Firstly, existing research tends to overlook the fact that in Asia, aging parents living independently often have at least one child living nearby. Arguably, the so-called network family arrangements can provide the benefits of coresidence without the cost of family conflicts or independence loss. Secondly, there is a dearth of cultural diversity in previous research, which is based primarily on Confucian societies (e.g., China, Korea). Prevalent in these societies are a patrilineal kinship system and a practice of patrilocality in which elderly parents coreside with a married son and his wife. The practice of patrilocality is considered a manifestation of filial piety and is believed to benefit old-age psychological wellbeing, independent of intergenerational support. A comparative analysis of older-aged populations that includes diverse kinship systems can add cultural nuances needed to comprehensively theorise the relationship between coresidence and psychological wellbeing in developing Asia.

In this article the authors have examined how intergenerational coresidence, gender of the coresident child, and location of the nearest non-coresident child are associated with mental health of older parents in Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand. In so doing, they have analysed nationally representative data from the 2012 Myanmar Aging Survey, 2011 Vietnam Aging Survey and 2011 Survey of Older Persons in Thailand. The comparative perspective from Southeast Asia where various kinship systems coexist can help to fill the pertinent research gaps mentioned above.
Empirical results suggest that coresidence with child of culturally preferred gender significantly improves the emotional health of Vietnamese and Thai elders but with different implications. In Vietnam where a patrilineal/patrilocal kinship system prevails, living with a married son is more beneficial to parents’ mental health than other forms of living arrangements. Meanwhile, in Thailand where a bilateral kinship system is widely practised, coresidence regardless of the child’s gender improves old-age psychological wellbeing, but living with a daughter brings greater psychological benefits than living only with a son. As shown in the image, in Thailand, daughters are usually the primary caretaker of elderly parents and are more favoured for coresidence. They are typically perceived to be emotionally closer to parents, more dependable, and more skilled in providing personal care for elderly parents.

Evidence points to the importance of understanding the dominant kinship system that may shape normative filial obligations and gender role expectations within the family – a significant point absent in the existing literature. In Vietnam and Thailand, the positive association between coresidence and elderly wellbeing holds even after intergenerational support is controlled, suggesting that the cultural value of culturally preferred coresidence goes beyond practical functions. In Myanmar, results indicate that, once intergenerational support is controlled, elderly living without coresident or nearby children are not worse off in their psychological wellbeing than those coresiding with a child. For all three countries, no evidence was found in support of network family arrangements as a complete substitute for coresidence in terms of promoting old-age psychological wellbeing after filial support is controlled.

This study highlights important cultural nuances for theorising the nature of the relationship between living arrangements and old-age psychological health. Future policies should focus on allowing families to provide support for elderly parents including accommodating their preference for living arrangements and should be sensitive to cultural influences, particularly preference for gender of the coresident child, that can play a role in affecting types and quality of support and in turn, old-age psychological wellbeing.

Editors of this issue Tharuka Prematillake Thibbotuwawa and Saharah Abubakar
RESEARCH CLUSTER ACTIVITIES

Upcoming Events


Call for Papers – Deadline extended to 31 August 2015

This international conference focusing on the care and well-being of elderly in Asia aims to explore issues relating to the ensuring of quality and adequacy of long-term care in the familial context. Some issues it seeks to cover include:

• How have sociodemographic changes in the family impacted on government role in long-term care?
• What are the barriers older men and women face in accessing long-term care in the family?
• What barriers do caregivers face in providing long-term care for the elderly?
• To what extent does the cultural value of filial piety impact differently on men and women as “carers” and the kind of quality of care they provide to their elderly?

For further details, visit: https://inetapps.nus.edu.sg/ari/events_categorydetails.asp?categoryid=6&eventid=1664

Paper Presentations

North American Chinese Sociologists Association Meeting, Chicago, 21 August 2015
- Hu Shu “Parental Labour Migration and Adolescents’ Transition to High School in Rural China”.
- Mu Zheng and Wei-jun Jean Yeung, “Migration and Marriage in China”.

Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Chicago, 22-25 August 2015
- Hu Shu and Wei-jun Jean Yeung, “Delaying Individual and Community Factors of Marriage Behaviour in Modern China” and “Gender and Housework Division: the Paradox of East Asia”.
- Roundtable discussion organised by Wei-jun Jean Yeung, “Family and Population Studies in Asia”.

- Abhijit Visaria, “Son Preference and Group Majority/Minority: Comparing Hindus and Muslims in India and Bangladesh”.

Eighth International Conference on Population Geographies, Brisbane, Australia, 30 June-3 July 2015
- Tharuka Prematillake, “Sri Lankan Student Migrants Settlement in a New Environment”.

Third Congress of the Asian Association of World Historians, Singapore, 29-31 May 2015
- Tharuka Prematillake, “From Students to Work-life: Sri Lankan Student Migrants in Singapore”.

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