



Living Alone in Asia

Asian Family Matters

Changing Family in Asia Cluster

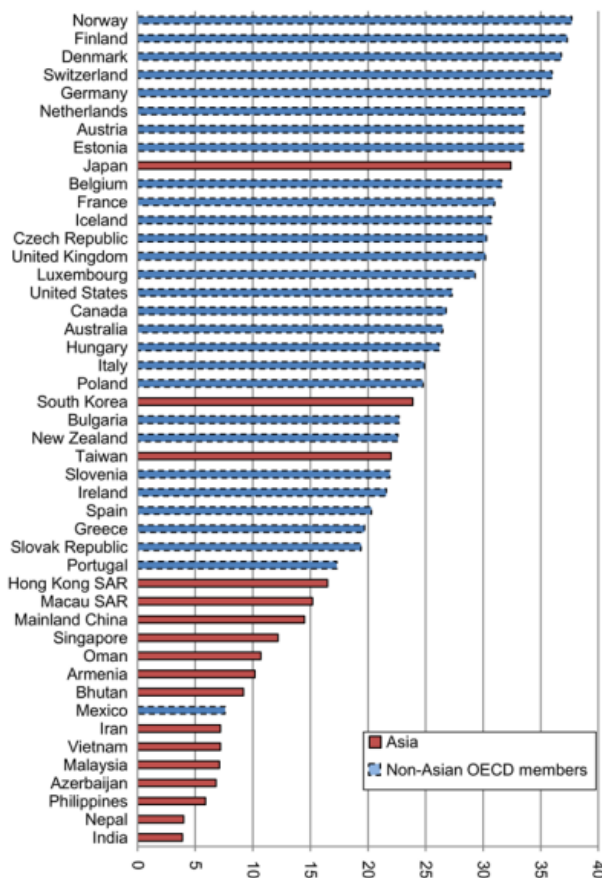
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This brief is intended to provide an overview of research produced by the Changing Family in Asia Cluster at the Asia Research Institute.

Wei-Jun Jean Yeung and Adam Ka-Lok Cheung (eds) (2015). *Living Alone: One-person Households in Asia. Demographic Research, Volume 32, Special Collection 15.*

Prof Jean Yeung is Research Leader of the Changing Family in Asia cluster at the Asia Research Institute and Professor at the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore. Dr Adam Cheung is Assistant Professor at the Department of Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Institute of Education. Dr Cheung was a postdoctoral fellow in the Changing Family in Asia cluster at ARI during 2012-2014.

Figure 1: Percentages of one-person households in all family households: OECD members and Asia



Source: OECD (2013); United Nations (2014).

Taiwan have the highest proportion of OPH in Asia, at 32.4%, 23.9%, and 22% respectively.

Despite the traditionally valued norm of intergenerational co-residence in many countries of Asia, there is of course considerable variation, and the proportion of OPH in countries such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, Nepal, and India is well below 10%.

OPH patterns in Asia

OPH in Asia consist primarily of the elderly and young adults – the elderly due to widowhood, particularly women, since women have a higher life expectancy compared to men, and among the

In June 2015, Drs Yeung and Cheung guest-edited a special collection of articles in *Demographic Research* on one-person households (OPH) in Asia, the fastest growing type of household in many regions of the world, including Asia.

Global trends in living arrangements

According to recent statistics, in many economically advanced countries such as Norway, Finland, Denmark, Switzerland, and Germany, more than one-third of households contained only one person at the end of the last decade. While the prevalence of OPH in Asia is generally lower than in Europe and North America, it is estimated that by 2020, 4 out of the top 10 countries with the highest number of OPH will be in Asia, with China and India leading the list. Figure 1 provides an international comparison of the prevalence of OPH around 2010. The more economically developed societies in East Asia such as Japan, South Korea, and

young adults, men, and to a smaller extent, women, who migrate away from their families for employment; live alone as a consequence of delayed marriage, divorce, and overall, increased geographic mobility. Similar to Western countries, the patterns of OPH in Asia indicate that age and gender are the two main stratifying factors. On the other hand, research in Asia suggests that OPH are not just an urban phenomenon but also a feature of rural societies in countries such as Vietnam and Myanmar, where a family splits into multiple OPH due to outmigration of a spouse or children to urban centres.

Overall, contemporary patterns in Asia represent circumstances and motivations closer to Europe in the 18th century rather than contemporary Western societies. Unlike the West where living alone is often indicative of an urban middle-class lifestyle of economically independent young adults with wide non-family social networks, young adults in OPH in Asia are more likely to be migrant workers and working-class individuals rather than those in search of a new lifestyle by living alone. Constrained by the high costs of living in cities, young adults who live alone in urban areas often live in group quarters, for example 60 to 80% of 15-25 year-olds live in OPH in urban areas of Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Thailand.

In Singapore, the proportion of older (65+) single person households has increased during 2000-2010 by 50% from 8 to 12% of all households. Longitudinal data over the 2009 to 2011-12 period from the Panel on Health and Ageing of Singaporean Elderly shows that the feeling of loneliness – that is the absence of companionship, being left-out, and isolated – increases among the elderly living alone. Although living alone is not associated with increased mortality once the individual health status is accounted for, the feeling of loneliness remains a significant predictor of all-cause mortality among the elderly. This suggests that in the context of a highly urbanised city-state where children may live separately but relatively close, and where the healthcare system is advanced and accessible, it is not the living arrangement per se but isolation that affects mortality.

Future trend

As trends in population ageing, declining fertility and marriage rates, increase in divorce and migration continue, it is expected the OPH in Asia will continue to increase in the future. In China, for instance, the rapid rate of ageing will result in a substantial increase in the number of widowed persons in OPH, and we can expect to see a new group of OPH consisting of disadvantaged men, as the one-child policy has led to an excess of 30–40 million men approaching family formation age. Further research on the relationship between living arrangements, social networks, and well-being is required to understand OPH in different contexts. We also need to better understand the pathways between living alone and its effects on the health and psychological well-being of young adults, as well as the role of public policy in influencing both the motivations and the implications of living alone.

The special issue of *Demographic Research* is available at <http://demographic-research.org/special/15/default.htm>

Cluster Activities

Asia Trends 2015 — Perspectives on Marital Dissolution: Divorce Biographies in Singapore

Dr Sharon Quah, *The Pod*, National Library Building,

18 September 2015

This lecture was organised by the Changing Family in Asia cluster and was chaired by Cluster Leader, Prof Jean Yeung. Dr Sharon Quah discussed some of

the key research findings in her recently published book, *Perspectives on Marital Dissolution: Divorce Biographies in Singapore* (2015, Springer). She showed that the experience of divorce is not necessarily only debilitating, but that it can provide opportunities to individuals for greater productivity, self-responsibility and relationship formation.

At the same time, her work examined the economic, social and policy contexts of her divorced respondents that facilitate or hinder their pursuit of productivity. Dr Quah conveyed that her research highlights the diversity and complexity of Singaporean divorce biographies. The event was well attended by policy makers, social workers, educators, academics, students, media representatives, and members of the public.



Presentations by Cluster Members in September-October

“Aging in East Asia: Multilevel perspectives on determinants of social relationships and mental health (A focus on grandparents caring for grandchildren in China and Korea)”, Ko Pei-Chun, Centre for Family and Population Research (CFPR), NUS, 4 September 2015.

“Retirement age adjustment and human capital in China”, Jean Yeung, presented at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 14 September 2015.

“Interdisciplinary practice: My sociological explorations”, Ko Pei-Chun, Department of Special Education, National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan, 22 September 2015.

“Families, divorce and intimacies: Insights from the cases of Australia and Singapore”, Sharon Quah, Invited guest lecture for Sociology students at Macquarie University, 8 October 2015.

“Theorising divorce through the framework of divorce biography”, Sharon Quah, *The Australian Sociological Association Families and Relationships Symposium (The Changing Face of Families and Relationships)*, The Bouverie Centre, Melbourne, Australia, 30 and 31 October 2015.