Ageing in East Asia: Mental Health &
Determinants of Social Activities

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.
Pei-Chun Ko is a postdoctoral fellow of Changing Family in Asia Cluster at Asia Research Institute and the Centre for Family and Population Research, National University of Singapore. She received her PhD degree from University of Cologne, Germany in 2015. She is a sociologist and her research interest explores how and why older people in East Asia engage in social activities.

Within the discipline of social gerontology, one of the most commonly discussed concepts is Successful Aging which comprises three elements: low probability of having a debilitating disease or disability; high mental and physical capacity; and active engagement in life. Ko’s doctoral research “Aging in East Asia: Multilevel Perspectives on Determinants of Social Relationships and Mental Health” uses this framework to understand social relationships and mental well-being of older people in three East Asian countries—China, Japan, and South Korea. Hence, her dissertation is a collection of three research articles examining aging-population datasets from the three countries. The following two sections summarise some of the findings from her thesis.

**Linking Education and Mental Health among Older People in China, Japan, and South Korea**

Ko looks at whether older adults with higher education would have better mental health. To do so, she uses data gathered from Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale, which measures symptoms associated with depression. Additionally, she examines whether their socio-economic conditions (e.g. employment status) and social support networks (e.g. family ties and friendships) mediate the relationship between education and depression. Ko found that older Chinese and Koreans with higher education are less likely to have depression than those with lower education, but she did not find such a relationship for older Japanese. These findings support the explanations in previous literature that people with higher education are more likely to have better resources (such as access to health care) and less exposure to factors that trigger distress than those with lower education. As for the difference in the Japanese sample, Ko suggests that the social welfare system in Japan may have compensated the disadvantaged positions of older adults with lower early-life education. Furthermore, she found that family support measured specifically by number of children, education level of children, and proximity between parents’ and children’s residence is a mediator for older Chinese and Koreans. According to Ko’s findings, older Chinese and Koreans with higher education are more likely to have better family support that lowers their risk of depression than those with lower education. Participation in social activities, such as volunteering also reduces their chances of being depressed. Ko found that in China, however, employment conditions of older people plays a more significant role. Older Chinese with lower education level are more likely to work in an unsafe working environment with greater exposure to health hazards. Their mental health as a result suffers as well. In Korea, Ko gathered that having a partner lowers the risk of depression. In fact older Koreans with a higher education level are more likely to find a life partner and hence, the risk of depression is reduced.
Determinants of Social Activities among Older People in China: Analysis of Community Factors

In her study, Ko also examines the factors that affect older Chinese people’s engagement in community activities (e.g. volunteering) and leisure activities (e.g. playing Ma-jong). Ko looks at three specific determinants: socio-demographic profile of older Chinese (e.g. education level and gender), physical environment (e.g. accessibility and variety of community facilities) and structural conditions (e.g. social and welfare policies concerning seniors). Additionally, she explores regional differences between urban and rural communities as well as costal/municipality and inland communities to see if older adults in these regions engage in activities differently. Ko shows that firstly, a greater number of older Chinese participate in leisure activities (20 percent) than in community activities (5 percent). Secondly, they are more likely to participate in both community and leisure activities when there is a greater variety of community facilities. Ko found that older people living in urban or coastal/municipality communities participate in more leisure activities than those living in rural or inland communities. The availability and accessibility of community facilities in urban or coastal areas is key to promoting participation in social activities. A possible explanation for older people’s lack of participation in community and leisure activities in rural or inland communities is that grandparents in these areas are occupied with taking care of their grandchildren after their adult children migrate to more economically developed areas for better job opportunities.

Policy Implications

To conclude, Ko’s research has policy implications and suggests recommendations for governments to design a sustainable and conducive environment for their aging populations. Firstly, a closer look at the implementation of social policies concerning health care and old-age in Japan is needed in order to gain better insights into the mental well-being of Japanese older people. A longitudinal study on the relationship between education and risk of depression in all three countries will be helpful so that governments can provide comprehensive institutional support for their socio-economically disadvantaged older adults to enhance their mental health. Secondly, Ko’s research suggests that improving economic conditions and physical infrastructures in rural communities is necessary to encourage older people’s participation in recreational and social activities.
UPCOMING EVENTS


Call for Papers – Deadline 10 December 2015

This conference, explores patterns and consequences of intergenerational transfer of money, time, wealth, or psychological resources to human capital development of the population. Some studies have suggested that family background may have contributed to the widening social inequalities in society. Public policies pay a crucial role to redistribute resources in the society. Hence, the conference will bring in scholars and policy makers to seek a better understanding of the patterns and implications of these transfers for social stratification and mobility around the world. Papers related to this core theme are particularly welcome.

For more information on the conference and submission guidelines, visit: http://www.singaporerc28.com/call-for-proposal.html

RESEARCH CLUSTER ACTIVITIES

Paper Presentations

International Life Course Conference, Brisbane, Australia, 28 –30 October 2015

- Wei-jun Jean Yeung, plenary presentations titled “Divergent Destinies: China’s Hukou System, Education Reforms, and Intergenerational Mobility” and “Institutional Changes and Children’s Well-being in Post Reform China”.


- Korinek Kim, “Migration, Modernisation and the Predictors of Adolescent Fertility in Vietnam from 1989 to 2009”.

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