The Social and Economic Consequences of Ageing in Asia: An Introduction

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As Asian countries grapple with the rapid ageing of their populations, one of the prominent issues continues to be the economic support of this growing segment of the population. Asian societies with their long traditions of filial piety have continually propagated the notion that familial care of the elderly is paramount. State or formal care only becomes a necessity if familial care is insufficient or unavailable. The on-going debate regarding state versus familial responsibilities for the elderly continues in most Asian countries. The role of research is to inform this debate. The papers in this volume attempt to do this. They provide an overview of the types of social support, both formal and informal, that are available to the elderly in select Asian countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam. Research on intergenerational transfers has been an important topic in the study of ageing because knowledge of the types of familial support available and assessment of their sufficiency for old-age support is necessary for the development of policies that promote elderly well-being. Research on intergenerational transfers or social support of the elderly tries to understand how formal and informal sources of support for the elderly interact with each other. In the United States and Peru, formal sources of support were found to “crowd out” familial support, thus the provision of government support can be seen to inhibit intergenerational transfers within the family (Cox & Jimenez, 1992; Schoeni, 1992). Asian governments are keen to avoid this crowding out effect as they evaluate social security policies to support their burgeoning aged populations. A recent publication by the World Bank (1994) warns against the pitfalls of total reliance on formal support for the elderly. Rather, a gradual implementation of formal systems should be adopted. The informal/formal mix that will be arrived at is a political issue.

The theme of this special issue, “The Social and Economic Consequences of Ageing in Asia” is particularly topical given that 1999 is the United Nations designated International Year of Older Persons. The flavour is comparative. As Hermalin posits in his paper in this volume, there are many challenges to cross-cultural work, particularly when such research is only in its infancy. In this collection of articles from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam, the complexity of doing research on ageing in Asia emerges. As Knodel and Debaivalya (1992; 1997) have repeatedly advocated, policy-making needs to be based on solid empirical evidence rather than casual impressions and preconceptions. Recently, data allowing us to do empirical research have become available; this volume contains cutting-edge empirical work in this regard.

In most Asian countries, the call to address the ageing of Asia emerged in the mid- to late 1980s. Given the falling fertility rates in countries such as Singapore
and Taiwan, the ageing of their populations was inevitable. Pro-natalist policies in Singapore and Malaysia have received meagre support and most predictions point to Asia housing the largest proportion of the world's elderly in 30 years' time. Overall, the proportion of elderly in Asia is expected to increase from 7 percent currently to 21 percent by the year 2030 (Knodel & Debalayla, 1992). The two oldest Asian countries will be Singapore and Japan. Singapore will have at least one-third of her population above the age of 60 by the year 2030 (Teo, 1994).

In initial conceptualizations of social support for the elderly, living arrangements were thought of as a determinant of elderly well-being. Elderly who lived with at least one adult child were thought to be better off, or better provided for, compared to elderly who lived alone or with non-relatives (DaVanzo & Chan, 1994; Martin, 1989; Martin & Kinsella, 1994). More recent conceptualization, however, is more subtle as described by Hermalin (1997). In this revised model, living arrangements are taken as a “determinant of the dimensions of well-being rather than primary measures.” As such, social support from non-coresident kin has begun to receive more attention (see special issue of the Asia-Pacific Population Journal on living arrangements and social support of elderly in Southeast Asia, 1997). Hermalin notes the need to take into account the fact that changes in living arrangements need not necessarily mean a decline in well-being of the elderly. He argues that a distinction between “form versus function” has to be made. In future, the elderly may be more likely to live alone (perhaps due to an increased value of privacy) and, at the same time, receive adequate support from children living elsewhere. This underscores the importance of studying the nature of intergenerational support from children living elsewhere.

In part, the initial focus on living arrangements resulted from the lack of data of intergenerational support with non-coresident kin in Asia. More recently, the availability of detailed data on social support exchanges has facilitated research on the exchanges between elderly and non-coresident children (Knodel & Chayovan, 1997; Nativad & Cruz, 1997; Truong et al., 1997; Chan, 1997). The papers in this special issue make use of some of these data collected by the University of Michigan for the Philippines, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Two of the papers in this volume utilize longitudinal data collected by RAND in Malaysia and in Indonesia.

It is assumed that children and elderly who live together are supporting each other. However, as Nativad and Cruz (1997) state in their paper on social support exchanges among Filipino elderly, support from non-coresident children indicates the extent to which these non-coresident children maintain their “obligation” to care for elderly parents. For the Philippines, there appears to be an active exchange of monetary and non-monetary support between elderly parents and non-coresident children. Indeed, in Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand, the elderly appear to be active participants in exchange networks with non-coresident kin, often providing childcare and housework help and receiving monetary and non-monetary transfers.

Table 1 shows types of support including living with at least one child that the elderly, 60+, receive in four Asian countries. Coresidence is highest in Singapore where 85 percent of the elderly live with at least one child. A large majority, over 80 percent of Singapore and Thai elderly, receive material support from a non-coresident child. In the Philippines, over 90 percent of the elderly receive monetary support