

Intergenerational Solidarity in Asia and the Pacific: An Overview¹

Bussarawan Puk Teerawichitchainan, PhD
Department of Sociology and Anthropology/
Centre for Family and Population Research,
National University of Singapore
puk@nus.edu.sg

Asia's rapid demographic transformations and sweeping social changes over the last few decades have raised alarming views regarding intergenerational social contract. Is intergenerational solidarity on a decline? Is such decline inevitable? How might the decline impact the well-being of older persons and their families? This essay provides an overview of recent trends in intergenerational solidarity in Asia and the Pacific. Specifically, I revisit the conceptual frameworks of intergenerational solidarity, describe key demographic and structural changes that may impact intergenerational ties, review evidence of change, persistence, and adaptation in intergenerational solidarity in Asian settings, and discuss future prospects for intergenerational solidarity in Asia.

Conceptual frameworks: Solidarity research emerged as a response to widespread claims about the erosion of family ties across generations. A theory of intergenerational solidarity, developed by Vern Bengtson and colleagues, provides a useful lens to conceptualize the links between family members across generations regarding six dimensions of family solidarity: (i) affectional (emotional closeness); (ii) associational (frequency of contact); (iii) normative (norms of obligations); (iv) consensus (agreement about values); (v) structural (geographical proximity); (vi) functional (support exchange) (Marshall & Bengtson, 2011; Silverstein et al., 2012). The theory originally emphasized positive and supportive ties across different generations but has subsequently incorporated conflict and ambivalence to address criticisms regarding the theory's positive bias (Bengtson et al., 2002; Luscher & Pillemer, 1998). The theory has inspired a large volume of research that examines different dimensions of solidarity (e.g., affectional, structural, or functional support), the reciprocal relationships between the six dimensions, and their health and well-being outcomes for parents and children (see Suito et al., 2016 for review). Subsequently, solidarity scholars have integrated societal-level and family-level solidarity (Timonen et al., 2013) and investigated intergenerational solidarity from a cross-national comparative perspective, including many Asian settings (Silverstein et al., 2010).

Demographic and structural changes: Asia is aging faster than the rest of the world (He et al., 2022). Adults aged 65+ presently account for 9% of Asia's total population and are projected to increase to 23% by 2060. In the foreseeable future, the region will be home to many of the world's super-aged societies. Importantly, Asia's compressed aging is taking place alongside other societal changes, including rapid economic development, urbanization,

¹ Prepared for a presentation at the Expert Group Meeting on "Older Persons and Intergenerational Solidarity" organized by UNDESA and UNESCAP during 10-11 October 2023.

growing inequality, transformations in filial piety, and changing gender expectations (Silverstein, 2021; World Bank, 2016). These changes may undermine current old-age support systems. For instance, declining fertility rates, smaller family size, and widespread rural-urban and international migration may lead to a change in norms and values that in turn hinders the efficacy of traditional social contracts between parents and adult children. Furthermore, given that old-age welfare and long-term care systems in many Asian countries are largely underdeveloped or non-existent, there are grave concerns that older persons may be particularly vulnerable in the context of eroding family support ties (Croll, 2006; Hermalin, 2002).

Old-age living arrangements: One aspect of intergenerational relationships that has consistently undergone significant changes in recent decades is changing patterns of living arrangements among older Asians. Living arrangements are generally a function of older persons' marital status, availability of kin, health, wealth, individual and family preferences, kinship system, and cultural norms. Several Asian countries have witnessed a substantial decline in intergenerational coresidence—a living arrangement conventionally thought to play an essential role in ensuring old-age security. For example, the percentage of older Chinese coresiding with their children has declined from 70% to 50% between 1990 and 2010, with similar reduction rates observed in both urban and rural regions (Zeng & Wang, 2018). Correspondingly, coresident rates in Thailand declined from 77% in 1986 to 52% in 2017 (Teerawichitchainan et al., 2019). Furthermore, evidence indicates that proportions of older persons living alone continue to rise in Asia due to rapid population aging, decreasing marriage and fertility rates, and increase in marital disruption and migration (Yeung & Cheung, 2015). For instance, although modest, there has been an upward trend in solo-living among older persons in Southeast Asia (Teerawichitchainan et al., 2015). In Thailand, proportions of older persons living alone rose from 4% in 1986 to 11% in 2011. These changing patterns of living arrangements signify a fundamental shift in filial behaviors that causes concerns about the erosion of filial piety.

Persistent intergenerational support: Despite significant changes in older persons' living arrangements, evidence from several Asian settings consistently suggests that intergenerational support between older parents and their adult children remain strong along several dimensions of intergenerational solidarity (Hermalin, 2002; Knodel, 2014). For instance, adult children's migration does not appear to undermine intergenerational transfers. Migrant children usually provide financial support and keep in touch with their parents through visits, phone calls, or both (Knodel et al., 2010; Silverstein et al., 2006). Reciprocity in intergenerational transfers is also common (Croll, 2006). For example, a substantial proportion of older persons care for grandchildren left under their care by migrant children, thereby enabling these migrant children to pursue employments in settings where providing childcare on their own would be challenging (Chen et al., 2011; Teerawichitchainan & Low, 2021). Moreover, regarding personal care support, family members, especially children, continue to be the primary individuals offering long-term care support to frail older persons (Knodel et al., 2018; Teerawichitchainan & Knodel, 2018). Evidence further suggests that migrant children occasionally return when their aging parents have acute healthcare needs,

and in certain instances, they help their parents access better healthcare services in urban areas (Knodel et al., 2010).

In recent years, governments in several developing Asian countries have expanded their old-age welfare programs such as health insurance and social pensions for older populations. Evidence from Asian contexts generally do not find that state welfare provision crowds out intergenerational support from adult children to older parents (e.g., Chen et al., 2017; Kim, 2015; Lee et al., 2019). In other words, family support for older persons does not decline in response to welfare expansion. For example, Thailand's the Old Age Allowance (OAA) scheme (a near-universal social pension program) has increasingly become the main income source for many older Thais. Nevertheless, relying on OAA as the main income source is not necessarily associated with a reduction in intergenerational coresidence and social support for older Thais (Teerawichitchainan & Pothisiri, 2021). Intergenerational coresidence is significantly more common among older Thais whose main income comes from OAA compared to those relying on other income sources. Moreover, older Thais who rely on OAA are as likely as others to receive frequent visits from non-coresident children. This suggests that nonmonetary intergenerational support has remained largely intact, despite the expanding role of the state in welfare provision.

Family adaptation: Many aspects of intergenerational solidarity persist although the forms taken may be altered as both older age parents and adult children adapt to changing circumstances. For example, one adaptation common among urban middle-class families in several parts of Asia is to hire paid caregivers to supplement family caregiving for older persons (Knodel et al., 2018; Zhang, 2009). This creates a substitute for direct children support or intergenerational coresidence. It serves as a way to avoid the stigma associated with institutionalization while not entirely committing, except financially, the children of older adults. Additionally, during the last decade, some middle-income countries like China have witnessed the emergence of private community-based nursing homes. Evidence suggests that the increased competition among nursing homes in China has led to improvements in the quality of institutional care, thus lowering stigma against nursing homes and leading to reinterpretation of what intergenerational support means (L. Chen, 2016). According to Zhan and colleagues (2008), for example, some older Chinese parents in Nanjing considered adult children to have fulfilled their filial duty when they afford high-quality institutional care for their parents.

In sum, findings from various contexts challenge the common assumptions that associate demographic shifts and structural changes with the decline of intergenerational solidarity. Instead, it appears that parents and adult children are actively making choices to adjust to the evolving social and economic landscape brought about by these social changes, allowing them to sustain relationships and support exchanges (Knodel, 2014). This is consistent with the modified extended family perspective (Litwak, 1960), which suggests that, even though economic development results in a greater dispersion of family members across different locations, those affected would usually find ways to adapt. These adaptations may alter the traditional family structure, but they still enable extended family relationships

and many of their functions to persist. For example, migration does not prevent the provision of financial support to family members in distant places or the maintenance of emotional bonds and social interactions. Advancements in transportation and communication technologies allow family members to maintain connections and continue fulfilling some of the filial obligations that once required physical proximity.

Future kin availability and kinship ties: Looking ahead, it is important to pay attention to how structural transformations continue to affect kin availability and kinship ties which may in turn have implications for intergenerational solidarity. A few emerging noteworthy trends include generational overlaps, step-kin ties, and kinlessness. For example, greater longevity suggests increasing generational overlap between older, middle, and younger generations. Evidence indicates that generational overlap is estimated to affect care time demands on parents and grandparents in the Global South, including Asia (Alburez-Gutierrez et al., 2021). The experience of simultaneously having frail older parents and young children (“sandwichness”) or young grandchildren (“grandsandwichness”) will become more prevalent. The duration of the grandsandwich state is projected to rise by about one year in Asia during 1970-2040. The growing overlap between generations suggests an increase in the amount of time dedicated to caregiving throughout the entire span of adulthood but it may also present an opportunity for strengthening intergenerational solidarity.

Furthermore, changing patterns of marriage and childbearing across Asia (e.g., delayed marriage, increasing divorce and remarriage rates) are expected to increase the complexity of family ties, particularly the rising prevalence of step-kin ties. Evidence from western settings suggests that transfers of all kinds are less commonly exchanged with step-kin than with biological kin (Wiemers & Park, 2021). The extent to which the prevalence of step-kin ties may weaken intergenerational solidarity as well as how this might be applicable to Asia remain largely an open question. More recently, scholars have paid increasing attention to a decline in kin availability as a result of smaller family size, declining sibship size, and rising rates of non-marriage, and childlessness. The kinless (i.e., “unpartnered, childless”) are more likely to live alone than those with kin (Verdery et al., 2019). In some East and Southeast Asian countries, the childless tend to demonstrate worse psychological health and lower levels of social participation than those with children (Teerawichitchainan & Ha, forthcoming). Moreover, Chinese adults without close kin face disadvantages in terms of their health, wealth, and economic support (Zhou et al., 2019).

Concluding remarks: While intergenerational solidarity remains largely intact at the present time in several Asian contexts, geographical dispersion of family members due to increasing migration and changing patterns of kin availability as noted above may present significant future challenges, particularly regarding long-term care provision. Will it be possible to uphold the widespread practice of family members, particularly adult children, serving as the primary caregivers for frail older persons? Will the fewer but more educated adult children with higher incomes make up for the smaller numbers by providing increased financial support and outsourcing caregiving for their older parents? Will expanding

retirement and welfare benefits for future older persons complement or crowd out intergenerational transfers from children? Will having fewer or no children enable future older persons to accumulate greater wealth for their own old-age support? How is the state adapting to provide assistance to older persons in relation to the family, particularly when a need for long-term support arises and there are no children in close proximity? What might be the roles of non-governmental organizations, community groups, and faith-based organizations in closing the gaps in old-age support left by the unavailability of the state and family?

To address these questions, one should be mindful that numerous considerations will likely moderate the challenges posed by population aging. For example, the composition of future older persons will be different compared to today's older populations. They are likely to be more educated and healthier and can perhaps live independently for a longer period of time. Furthermore, ongoing economic, social, political, and technological transformations, such as the rise of AI and robotics, the rise and persistence of between- and within-country inequalities, and the climate crisis, will reshape the circumstances in which future older individuals and their families live. Additionally, older persons and their children will likely exercise their agency to adapt to these changing conditions to fulfill intergenerational contracts. In brief, it will be beneficial for stakeholders and policymakers to maintain continuous monitoring of the evolving situations of older persons and their families, particularly in light of the increasing availability of population-based survey data that specifically target older persons (Teerawichitchainan & Knodel, 2015).

REFERENCES

Alburez-Gutierrez, D., Mason, C., & Zagheni, E. (2021). The “sandwich generation” revisited: global demographic drivers of care time demands. *Population and Development Review*, 47(4), 997-1023.

Bengtson, V., Giarrusso, R., Mabry, J. B., & Silverstein, M. (2002). Solidarity, conflict, and ambivalence: Complementary or competing perspectives on intergenerational relationships? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64(3), 568-576.

Chen, F., Liu, G., & Mair, C. (2011). Intergenerational ties in context: Grandparents caring for grandchildren in China. *Social Forces*, 90(2), 571-594.

Chen, T., Leeson, G. W., Han, J., & You, S. (2017). Do state pensions crowd out private transfers? A semiparametric analysis in urban China. *Chinese Sociological Review*, 49(4), 293–315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21620555.2017.1298968>

Chen, L. (2016). *Evolving Eldercare in Contemporary China*. Palgrave Macmillan US.

Croll, E.J. (2006). The intergenerational contract in the changing Asian family. *Oxford Development Studies* 34(4): 473–491. doi:10.1080/13600810601045833

Hermalin, A. (Editor). (2022). *The Well-Being of The Elderly in Asia: A Four-Country Comparative Study*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

He, W., Goodkind, D., Kowal, P., Almasarweh, I., Giang, T.L., Islam, M.M., Lee, S., Teerawichitchainan, B., & Tey, N.P. (2022). *Asia Aging: Demographic, Economic, and Health Transition*. US Census Bureau, International Population Reports, P95/22-1. Washington, DC. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2022/demo/p95-22.html>

Kim, E.H. (2015). Public transfers and living alone among the elderly: A case study of Korea's new income support program. *Demographic Research*, 32, 1383–1408.

Knodel, J. (2014). Is intergenerational solidarity really on the decline? Cautionary evidence from Thailand. *Asian Population Studies*, 10(2), 176-194.

Knodel, J., Kespichyawattana, J., Saengtienchai, C., & Wiwatwanich, S. (2010). How left behind are rural parents of migrant children? Evidence from Thailand. *Ageing & Society*, 30(5), 811-841.

Knodel, J., Teerawichitchainan, B., & Pothisiri, W. (2018). Caring for Thai older persons with long-term care needs. *Journal of Aging and Health*, 30(10), 1516-1535. DOI: [10.1177/0898264318798205](https://doi.org/10.1177/0898264318798205)

Lee, S., Ku, I., & Shon, B. (2019). The effects of old-age public transfer on the well-being of older adults: The case of social pension in South Korea. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 74(3), 506–515.

Litwak, E. (1960). Geographic mobility and extended family cohesion. *American Sociological Review*, 25(3), 385-394.

Luscher, K., & Pillemer, K. (1998). Intergenerational ambivalence: A new approach to the study of parent-child relations in later life. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 60(2), 413-425.

Marshall, V. & Bengtson, V. (2011). Theoretical perspectives on the sociology of aging. In R.A. Settersten & J.L. Angel (Eds.), *Handbook of Sociology of Aging* (pp.17-34). Springer.

Silverstein, M., Cong, Z., & Li, S. (2006). Intergenerational transfers and living arrangements of older people in rural China: Consequences for psychological well-being. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 61B(5), S256-S266

Silverstein, M., Conroy, S. J., & Gans, D. (2012). Beyond solidarity, reciprocity and altruism: Moral capital as a unifying concept in intergenerational support for older people. *Ageing & Society*, 32(7), 1246–1262

Silverstein, M., Gans, D., Lowenstein, A., Giarrusso, R., & Bengtson, V. L. (2010). Older parent-child relationships in six developed nations: Comparisons at the intersection of affection and conflict. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 1006–1021.

Silverstein (Ed.). (2021). *Aging Families in Chinese Society*. Routledge. DOI: [10.4324/9781003015529-2](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003015529-2)

Suitor, J., Gilligan, M., & Pillemer, K. (2016). Stability, change, and complexity of later-life families. In L.K. George & K.F. Ferraro (Eds.). *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences*, 8th Edition (pp. 205-226). Academic Press.

Teerawichitchainan, B. & Knodel, J. (2015). *Data mapping on ageing in low- and middle-income countries in Asia and the Pacific*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: HelpAge International East Asia and Pacific Regional Office. <http://ageingasia.org/data-mapping/>

Teerawichitchainan, B., Knodel, J., & Pothisiri, W. (2015). What does living alone really mean for older persons? A comparative study of Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. *Demographic Research*, 32(48), 1329-1360. DOI: [10.4054/DemRes.2015.32.48](https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2015.32.48)

Teerawichitchainan, B. & Knodel, J. (2018). Long-term care needs in the context of poverty and population aging: The case of older persons in Myanmar. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 33(2), 143-162. DOI: [10.1007/s10823-017-9336-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10823-017-9336-2)

Teerawichitchainan, B., Pothisiri, W., Knodel, J. & Prachuabmoh, V. (2019). *Thailand's Older Persons and Their Well-being: An Update Based on the 2017 Survey of Older Persons in Thailand*. Chiangmai, Thailand: HelpAge International East Asia and Pacific Regional Office. <http://ageingasia.org/thailand-older-persons-wellbeing-2019/>

Teerawichitchainan, B. & Pothisiri, W. (2021). Expansion of Thailand's social pension policy and its implications for family support for older persons. *International Journal of Social Welfare*. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ijsw.12481>

Teerawichitchainan, B. & Low, T. (2021). The Situation and well-being of custodial grandparents in Myanmar: Impacts of cross-border and internal migration. *Social Science & Medicine*, 277(2021), 113914. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.113914>

Teerawichitchainan, B., & Ha, J.H. (Forthcoming). Social and psychological implications of actual and de-facto childlessness among older persons in East and Southeast Asia. *Journal of Chinese Sociology*.

Timonen, V., Conlon, C., Scharf, T., & Carney, G. (2013). Family, state, class and solidarity: Reconceptualising intergenerational solidarity through the grounded theory approach. *European Journal of Ageing*, 10, 171–179.

Verdery, A., Margolis, R., Zhou, Z., Chai, X., & Rittirong, J. (2019). Kinlessness around the world. *Journal of Gerontology, Series B Social Sciences*, 74(8), 1394-1405.

Wiemers, E.E., & Park, S.S. (2021). Intergenerational transfers of time and money over the life course. In K.F. Ferraro & D. Carr (Eds.). *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences, 9th Edition* (pp. 201-220). Academic Press.

World Bank. (2016). *Live long and prosper: Aging in East Asia and Pacific*. World Bank East Asia and Pacific Regional Report

Yeung, W.J.J., & Cheung, A.K.L. (2015). Living alone: One-person household in Asia. *Demographic Research*, 32, 1099-1112.

Zhan, H. J., Feng, X., & Luo, B. (2008). Placing elderly parents in institutions in urban China: A reinterpretation of filial piety. *Research on Aging*, 30(5), 543–571.

Zhang, H. (2009). The new realities of aging in contemporary China: Coping with the decline in family care. In J. Sokolovsky (Ed.), *The Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide perspectives*. Praeger.

Zhou, Z., Verdery, A., & Margolis, R. (2019). No Spouse, No Son, No Daughter, No Kin in Contemporary China: Prevalence, Correlates, and Differences in Economic Support. *Journal of Gerontology, Series B Social Sciences*, 74(8), 1453-1462.

Zeng, Y., & Wang, Z. (2018). Dynamics of family households and elderly living arrangements in China, 1990-2010. *China Population and Development Studies*, 2, 129-157.