



## The Epoch of Many Elders: A Literature Review on South Korea

Haeri Hwang

### Abstract

The elderly population in South Korea is plagued by a variety of issues: they suffer from a lack of income and a high poverty rate and a lack of a robust governmental support system. Most telling, they also face the highest suicide rate among OECD nations. These facts, coupled with their high percentage rate vis-à-vis the youth, make the elderly demographic ripe for research. In particular, this paper examines the state's treatment towards its elderly. This paper reflects a literature review that examines a layout of studies on this underexplored field, including the influence of cultural and religious beliefs such as Confucianism, and the melancholy that resulted from the physically demanding labor produced by this demographic. It concludes with the idea that sociology in Korea should take this phenomenon seriously and that a lot more work remains to be done.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Sociology as an academic discipline is relatively young in Korea, with its genesis tracing back to roughly 50 years (Lewis, 1964). Sociologists around the globe, scholars working at the intersection of qualitative and quantitative research methods who study individuals, groups, and social institutions, have on the whole produced an abundance of literature focused on the medical and healthcare systems.<sup>2</sup> In Korea, the analytical work on the Korean medical care system published by Hyuk Ga, a researcher and medical director at the institute of Geriatric Medicine in Incheon Eun-Hye hospital, supports this trend. In particular, his 2020 study centers on the hospital and health care programs offered by LTCI (Long Term Care System). While this study is emblematic of the type of scholarship that exists, it also points to the lack of focus on what is known in Korean language as *고령화시대*, or the “epoch of many elders.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, Harvard's Department of Sociology has a number of graduate student scholars working on Korea yet only one of them focuses on aging. For more see:

<https://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/country/south-korea>

<sup>2</sup> For example, medical sociology, or the sociology of medicine in its narrower definition, is a field with deep roots. For more see:

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20111201122050768>

<sup>3</sup> This vernacular term is used in everyday life to describe what is a well-known sociological phenomenon. For example, I grew up hearing this term expressed by my parents. Emily Apter is known for her controversial and forceful stance in the much heated debates around world literature that translation always results in something being lost. She writes “reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability, and toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded “differences” that have been niche-marketed as commercialized ‘identities.’” This is a generative and interesting argument but for the sake of smoothness in this literature review, which I see as the first step of a potential study rooted in sociological field-research, I have opted to translate this term as “the epoch of many elders.” In the Korean word, there is the sense of era, or epoch. See: Apter, 2014.

Since South Korea has one of the largest elderly populations, this demographic demands profound research and analysis. In addition, much analysis lacks taking into consideration the urban-versus-rural divide of Korea. The “epoch of many elders,” those born in the 1930s or 1940s, is a thorny and complicated issue but one that deserves more attention, thus serving as the catalyst for this study. This paper argues that the Japanese Occupation (1910-1945), the Korean War (1950-1953), and South Korea’s massive industrialization contributed to the phenomenon of “the many elderly in Korea.” As is typical of a literature review, it presents a layout of studies on this underexplored field, including the influence of cultural and religious beliefs such as Confucianism, and the melancholy that resulted from the physically demanding labor produced by this demographic. It concludes with the idea that sociology in Korea should take this phenomenon seriously and that a lot more work remains to be done.<sup>4</sup>

### **Roots of the Phenomenon: A Ruined Post-War Economy and Migration from the War (1910-1945):**

In 1992, Howard A. Palley, a professor at University of Maryland School of Social Work, laid out South Korea’s history to account for the epoch of many elders in the country which is still present today. He attributes the main reason for the many elderly in today’s society to “the Korean economy [which] was generally impoverished during the Japanese colonial period and devastated in the Korean War period” (Palley, 1992). Studies suggest that because of the war, Koreans preferred to have fewer children because the economy was in ruins and they could not afford to sustain their offspring. This attitude appears to have left long term effects on the country to the extent that in 1990 “an average wage earner’s monthly family income was about \$1,235. In 1990 the South Korean fertility rate was about 1.7 children per family and was expected to remain less than two children per family during the 1990s” (Palley, 1992). In addition to Palley, Kwon Tai-Hwan mentions the Korean war as a principal factor for the many elderly population and the bifurcation of the population into two groups, writing that “the country had been divided into two political entities after its liberation in 1945 from the 35-year colonial rule of Japan, and a civil war during 1950-53 (the Korean War) reconfirmed the division” (Kwon, 1981). Moreover, as a result of the lack of newborns, it became a common phenomenon for elementary school populations to remain static and to abstain from admission ceremonies. Indeed, “In Hyodong Elementary school located in Daegu, the number of children changed from 1000 to 91” (Son, 2023).

A second clear reason that scholars have discussed for the massive elderly population is also directly related to the 1950-53 Korean war. In the wake of this war, there was an exodus of Korean emigrants from Japan and Manchuria who were repatriated on a massive scale, and about 80% of them settled in South Korea.” (Kwon, 1981). The ages of migrants into South Korea in the middle of the 20th century averaged roughly 20-30. Today, it is this demographic that makes up the majority of the elderly.

In addition, effects of the war contributed to society’s attitude at large towards the elderly population. Many Koreans spent heavily on the education of their children. Yet, as Palley writes,

---

<sup>4</sup> For example, Harvard’s Department of Sociology has a number of graduate student scholars working on Korea yet only one of them focuses on aging.

<https://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/country/south-korea>  
<https://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/people/jeong-hwang>

“despite parental sacrifice for the well-being of their offspring, many children view the care of parents and parents-in-law as necessary but burdensome“ (Palley, 1992). The aforementioned historical causes, the poor economy and the new migration of Koreans into the country after the Korean war, contributed largely to the discrepancy of a large percentage of elders in contemporary society vis-à-vis the youth.

### **Influence of Confucianism on Attitudes Towards Elderly Care and the Modern Nursing Home:**

Confucianism, like any ancient religion, has a long and complicated discursive history in South Korea. By the end of the twentieth century, Confucianism was paradoxically deplored as both the problem that prohibited South Korea’s growth and as the spring for Korea’s success; the rhetoric depended on the speaker’s background, ideology and agenda (Pettid, 2023). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that some scholars such as Ki-soo Eun, Gene Yoon and Howard A. Palley cite Confucianism as instrumental for understanding Korean society. Furthermore, Confucianism has been evoked in studies on the elderly in South Korea. For example, Hyun Ga recalls that reverence for elderly has been one of the primary principles of Confucian philosophy (Ga, 2020). As Palley explains, within traditional Confucianism beliefs, the eldest son is responsible for the care of his elderly parents (Palley, 1992). According to Ki-soo Eun and Gene Yoon, “[they] more specifically [claim that] familism as a derivative of confucianism is the fundamental principle to organize and control Korean society and Korean people” (Eun & Yoon, 1995). Confucianism appears essential for understanding the organization of Korean society on a micro and macro level. It appears that scholars should focus on how these traditional beliefs might clash with the modern introduction of nursing homes, which was not indigenous to Korean culture.

With this background of the studies linking Confucianism and society together, Hyun Ga, profoundly elaborates on the health care systems for the elderly in South Korea. He provides some historical evidence of medical support before digging deep into the issues and solutions. In particular, Ga traces the establishment of an elderly care home in 1885. A French Catholic missionary priest, Jean Marie Gustave Blanc, established a space that took after 40 people in Seoul; this was the first documented establishment for older people in Korea (Ga, 2020). Ga then goes on to mainly discuss a specific care system which is the “Japanese long-term care insurance (LTCI) system” (Ga, 2020). On top of LTCI, the long-term care hospital (LTCH) “provides another distinct form of LTC in Korea” (Ga, 2020). Their ultimate goal is to afford medical care and functional rehabilitation so that elderly patients may successfully return home. Their care systems include assistance in physical, housekeeping activities, nursing care, environmental evaluation, visual/hearing ability, and diseases or symptoms. Ga reports that “based on a recent survey, 90.9% of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the LTCI system” (Ga, 2020). This favorable result shows that elders are mostly satisfied with LTC health care systems.

If the elderly in South Korea appear pleased with the nursing home system, then what is the issue? Scholars such as Ga have pointed to the problem of senior centers that began in rural areas. With the demand for these centers in cities, they have received an insufficient amount of government funds to operate many programs (Ga, 2020). The lack of government’s financial support indicates that the Korean government is unaware, or even worse, negligent when it comes to providing support for elders. It appears that there is an inherent tension between native Confucianism attitudes towards elderly and the imported institution of a nursing

home which is now well-spread in society and should be further addressed through empirical research by scholars.

### **Shortage of Youth Workers and Boom of Technology:**

By no means confined to just South Korea, one of the largest issues plaguing Korean elderly is the gap that has resulted from the boom of technology and the shift from an agrarian to a hyper industrialized society (Palley, 1992). The massive development shift can be traced to the 1960s with rapid socioeconomic development and implementation of family planning (Ga, 2020). The primary drive for Korean economic development began in 1960 under the policies of Premier Chung Hee Park. Governmental support for economic development and an "export strategy" led to massive improvements in South Korea's standard of living. While in 1960 its GNP per person was about "\$675, in today's money, its average income by 1990 of \$5,000 per household paralleled that of Portugal." Korean children, because of a more nutritious diet, became on average five inches taller than their parents." (Palley, 1992) Palley's detailed description of comparison between people's lives in past and present sheds light on Korea's colossal enhancement in a short period of time. Despite this positive economic growth, elderly were in a disadvantaged position to adapt to technology for physical reasons; according to the Pew Research Center, "9 percent of seniors at the age of 75 or over have severe visual impairments, and 18 percent have severe hearing limitations in the EU." Additionally, U.S statistics show that "23% of older adults indicate that they have a physical or health condition that makes reading difficult or challenging." Seniors' circumscribed abilities function as huge obstacles for their daily lives. Furthermore, many elders in the United States are frustrated that they "are missing out on communication technology", while they struggle from emotional stress such as "feeling disconnected and lonely" (Smith, 2014). To make matters worse, many older Koreans have been forced to stay in the job market for a long time because they receive little support from their children (Yun, 2010).

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, much work still remains to be done by scholars in the field of sociology on the elderly population in South Korea. The Pew Research statistics on the elderly are only focused on the United States but reverberate widely in Korean society; going forward, scholars in Korean institutions could conduct parallel data by asking similar questions. This is not to suggest that the United States is commensurable with South Korea. One of the most important factors in Korean society is the apparent clash of Confucianism as a traditional belief system that emphasizes elderly respect with the contemporary reality that forces many elderly Koreans to stay in the job market and go to nursing homes. The epoch of the many elderly is still in full swing; it is about time that we not only understand it, but also care more for our aged citizens.

## References

1. 이, 연. (2023, May 10). 2023년을 맞이한 대한민국의 인구문제(3). *치의신보*. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://www.dailydental.co.kr/mobile/article.html?no=124990>
2. Eun, K., & Yoon, G. (1995). Understanding aging in Korea. *Korea Journal of Population and Development*, 24(2), 301-317. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43783468?seq=1>
3. Ga, H. (2020). Long-term care system in Korea. *Annals of Geriatric Medicine and Research*, 24(3), 181–186.. <https://doi.org/10.4235/agmr.20.0036>
4. Brænden, K., Nordlie, R., Ommundsen, S. & Robstad, J. (2017). *How, and why, we made KOMP*. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://d1h06bsnqv2xsg.cloudfront.net/Pdf/How-and-why-we-made-KOMP.pdf>
5. Palley, H. A. (1992). Social Policy and the Elderly in South Korea: Confucianism, Modernization, and Development. *Asian Survey*, 32(9), 787–801. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645071>
6. Kye, B., Arenas, E., Teruel, G., & Rubalcava, L. (2014). Education, elderly health, and differential population aging in South Korea: A demographic approach. *Demographic Research*, 30, 753–794. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26348217>
7. Pettid, M. J. (2023). In Jennifer Oldstone-Moore (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Confucianism* <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/45499/chapter-abstract/392458495?redirectedFrom=fulltext>
8. *Kwon Tai-Hwan*. Population Change and Development in Korea. (n.d.). Asia Society. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://asiasociety.org/education/population-change-and-development-korea>.
9. Repetto, R., Kwon, T. H., Kim, S.-U., Kim, D. Y., Sloboda, J. E., & Donaldson, P. J. (1981). *Economic Development, Population Policy, and Demographic Transition in the Republic of Korea* (1st ed., Vol. 93). Harvard University Asia Center. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1tfjb2s>
10. Smith, A. (2014). *Older Adults and Technology Use*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/04/03/older-adults-and-technology-use/>
11. Yun, J.-W. (2010). The Myth of Confucian Capitalism in South Korea: Overworked Elderly and Underworked Youth. *Pacific Affairs*, 83(2), 237–259. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25698453>