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# An Overview of the Aging Population in Korea

Ehn Hyun Choe\*

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## I. Introduction

During the last three decades, efforts to deal with population problems in Korea have been focused largely on the reduction of population growth. The national population control program has been a major means of achieving this goal. Between the early 1960s and 1985, survey evidence indicates that the percent of current use of contraception rose from about 12 percent to 77 percent, and in 1988 the total fertility rate fell to 1.6, representing one of the most rapid fertility transitions in the developing world. In conjunction with this rapid reduction in fertility, mortality also improved significantly during this period. Thus, Korea has virtually completed the demographic transition from high birth and death rates to low birth and death rates during the same period.

The aging process in Korean has been accelerated by the rapid reduction in fertility. In this context, there has been growing concern over potential problems and needs that may arise from

the increase in the number and proportion of the elderly population as related to the rapid socioeconomic changes experienced during the past three decades. The successful execution of the 5-year Socioeconomic Development Plans has promoted industrialization and urbanization and, also, expanded the nuclear family system. As a result, the traditional values and norms concerning the aged also have changed significantly. In this paper, an attempt is made to describe the general features of the present situation of the Korean elderly by reviewing several aspects of the aging phenomenon in Korea, namely, the demographic, family, psychological, and social welfare aspects.

## II. Demographic Aspects of Aging

There has been a significant increase in the number and proportion of the elderly population during the last three decades. Those aged 65 and over increased from 0.7 million (2.9 percent of the total population) in 1960 to approximately

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\* Vice President, Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs.

2.1 million (5.0 percent of the total population) in 1990, which means an increase of about 1.4 million elderly people during the last three decades. Moreover, it is projected that an additional 4.2 million will be added by the year of 2020 so that the number of the elderly will reach approximately 6.3 million and the proportion will be 12.5 percent of the total population by that year (Table 1).

As can be seen from the table, the growth rate for the elderly population is much greater than for the young age population (aged 14 and less), whose growth rate will be negative, reflecting the influence of the rapid reduction in ferti-

lity. The growth rate for the working age population (aged 15 to 64) will also continue to decline, but unlike the other age groups, the annual growth rate for the elderly is relatively constant at about 4 percent, indicating that the elderly population is expected to increase rapidly in the near future.

Even though the total dependency ratio is expected to decrease, due mainly to the rapid decline in the young dependency ratio, the old dependency ratio is expected to increase steadily. As a result, the index of the aging, which is the percentage of those 65 and over in relation to those under 15, will increase significantly. As can

**Table 1. Trends of Major Population Indicators in Korea**

Year	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
Total Population ('000)	25012	32240	38124	42869	46789	49683	50578
Proportion	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
0~14	42.3	42.5	34.0	25.8	21.2	19.1	16.0
15~64	54.8	54.4	62.2	69.2	72.0	71.5	71.5
65~	2.9	3.1	3.8	5.0	6.8	9.4	12.5
Annual Growth Rate(%)							
Total	2.6	1.7	1.2	0.9	0.6	0.2	
0~14	2.6	-0.6	-1.6	-1.1	-0.4	-1.6	
15~64	2.5	3.1	2.3	1.3	0.5	0.2	
65~	3.2	3.9	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.1	
Dependency Ratio							
Total	82.6	83.8	60.7	44.5	38.8	39.9	39.9
Young	77.3	78.2	54.6	37.3	29.4	26.8	22.4
Old	5.3	5.7	6.1	7.2	9.4	13.1	17.5
Index of Aging	6.9	7.2	11.2	19.4	31.9	49.1	78.2

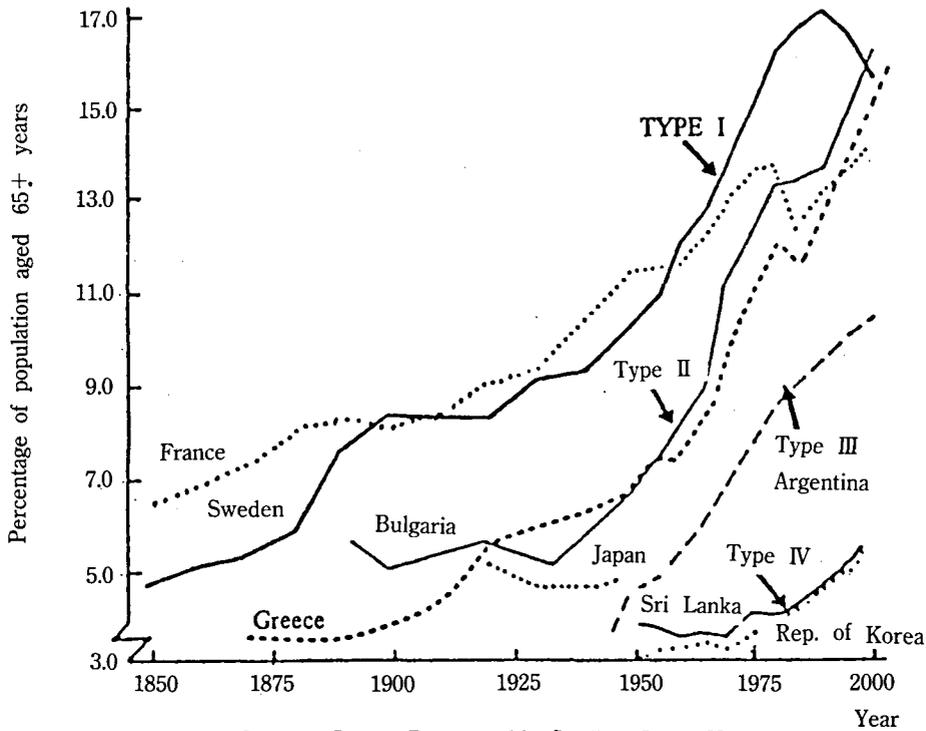
Source : J. J. Yoon (1991)

be seen in the table, while the elderly population was only about one-fifth of the young population in 1990, the elderly population will increase to about four-fifths of the number of the young population by the year 2020. This suggests that taking care of elderly dependents will become a heavy burden for the working age population in the near future.

The aging of the Korean population, which did not begin with the initial decline of fertility in the early 1960s when the birth rate declined slowly, seems to differ from that experienced in Western countries. The effect of the decline in the birth rate during that period was offset by the decline in mortality so that the age structure

remained more or less stable. It was only after the late 1970s that aging process of the Korean population was initiated by the drastic decline in fertility which occurred after the baby boom cohort passed its active childbearing period.

Unlike the Western experience, the aging process, once begun, proceeded more rapidly. It took about a century for Western countries to increase their proportion of older people from around 5 to 12 percent, but Korea will increase its proportion of older people to the same level in less than half that time, that is only in the 30 years from 1990 to 2020. In this sense, Korea can be identified as one of the 'nascent' aging countries as can be seen in Fig. 1.



Source : Centre Demographic Studies. Duke University.  
**Fig. 1. Trends in percentage of population aged 65 years and over, selected countries, 1850~2000**

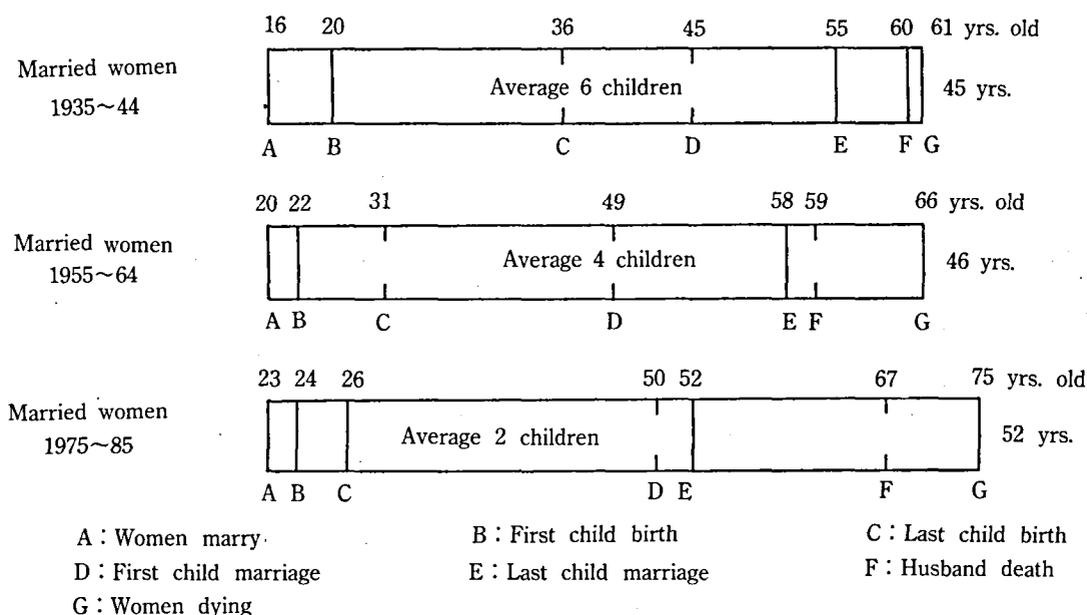
### III. Family Aspects of Aging

Traditionally, the aged in Korea are supplied with economic and emotional needs by their families as a result of the high value placed on filial duty in the past and they exerted absolute authority over the younger generation according to confucian philosophy. As Korean society becomes industrialized and urbanized, the family as a social unit is undergoing structural changes. Also the traditional family value system, i. e., filial duty and family care for the elderly, is gradually disappearing. Related with these social changes, the elderly in Korea are losing power over their children and becoming less able to adjust to the rapidly changing socioeconomic environment. In this section, several dimensions of

the family aspects of aging in Korea are briefly reviewed.

#### A. Family Life Cycle

Due to the reduction in fertility, improvement in the mortality rate, and socioeconomic development, the Korean family life cycle experienced dramatic changes as can be seen in Fig. 2 (Park, 1987), i. e., the time interval between the marriage of the last child and the death of the husband has been increasing over the last 40 years. For example, the cohort of women married during the 1935~45 period experienced the death of their husbands 5.8 years before the marriage of their last child, and women were expected to die almost at the same time as the last child married, but due to the decline in fertility and



Source : Park, I. H., Estimated Life Cycle, Changes in Korean Family Structure, Chapt. 5, KIPH, Seoul, Republic of Korea, 1987.

Fig. 2. Estimated life cycle of average Korean women

the development of medicine and, hence, improved mortality, the time intervals have lengthened. It is expected, therefore, that the recent cohort of women will experience a longer empty nest stage than those in the earlier cohorts. In this sense, special attention should be paid to the elderly who are in the empty nest stage.

### B. Living Arrangement

Weakened traditional family functions in caring for the elderly parallel with changes in the family structure have been observed recently in Korea. Owing to the fertility decline and the prevailing nuclear family system, the average number of household members has decreased, and due to urbanization and industrialization, more women are participating in the labor market outside of their homes, reflecting further problems in caring for the elderly, because women played a significant role as the primary providers of care for the elderly at home. The prevalence of the nuclear family system has increased the number of elderly-only households, accounting for 5.2 percent of the total households in 1990.

As Table 2 shows, about two-fifths of the elde-

rly aged 60 and over in 1984 maintained a traditional stem family system by living together with their eldest son's family, but about one-third of the elderly population co-reside with sons other than the eldest or maintain independent living arrangements. This means a digression from the traditional concept that one's eldest son is obliged to reside with his parents. The proportion of the elderly living with their eldest sons was found to be the lowest in metropolitan areas and the highest in rural areas. This indicates that modernization and urbanization may have a significant impact on the elderly's living arrangements.

Even though an increasing number of the elderly may maintain non-traditional type of living arrangements, about 76 percent resided with their offspring in 1984. The elderly expressed the opinion that the most desired type of living arrangement is the extended family system, indicating that strong familism among the elderly still prevails in Korea. Actually, about 83 percent of the elderly desired that "the whole family to live together" in 1981 (Gallup Polls, 1984), but this wish for co-residence with family members changed a lot during the 1980s and the proportion

Table 2. Elderly Living Arrangement in Korea, 1984

Type	Total	Metropolitan	Other City	Rural Area
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Independent State	22.6	17.0	20.6	25.3
Eldest Son	38.4	34.7	39.0	39.8
Other Son	12.4	11.0	9.9	13.6
Unmarried Children	23.0	31.0	25.8	19.0
Daughter	2.4	5.0	3.5	1.1
Other	1.2	1.3	1.2	1.2

Source : Lim et al. (1985)

had declined to 61.4 percent in 1990(JARC, 1991), reflecting the fact that attitudinal changes were occurring in the pattern of co-residence with children. More and more elderly want to maintain independent living arrangements as long as they can afford them.

As young people moved massively into urban areas, the elderly left behind in rural areas have suffered from a shortage of farm hands and a feeling of alienation. The elderly in urban areas have also suffered from a loss of social roles in their homes and communities, and hence, feel alienated. The alienation among the elderly usually comes from a loss of social roles and familial care. They usually spend their time in public houses for the elderly, which do not provide sufficient social services to eliminate the feelings of alienation.

### C. Marital Relations

Given the sex difference in mortality levels and age at marriage, elderly women experience a very high risk of being widowed. In Table 3, about 86 percent of the male elderly aged 60

and over reside with their spouses, whereas only about 30 percent of the female elderly reside with their spouses. As the age of the elderly increases, the female elderly are increasingly less likely to have spouses compared with their male counterparts. More than 40 percent of the male elderly aged 80 and over still had their spouses, only 3 percent of the same aged females had spouses. This inequality in the marital status by sex may, therefore, affect the quality of elderly life, particularly that of the females by affecting their adaptability to their environments. This phenomenon may explain why the female elderly show a greater tendency to depend on their children than their male counterparts.

### D. Intergenerational Relations

As Korean society becomes industrialized and urbanized, the elderly may not have the same power they enjoyed previously, but they are still very important members of their families and play a significant role in their families. They may help with the household work, look after grandchildren, talk to and consult with or lead the

Table 3. Marital Status of the Elderly in Korea by Age Group, 1984

(Unit : Percent)

Age Group	Male		Female	
	W/Sp.	W/O Sp.	W/Sp.	W/O Sp.
Total	86.3	13.7	29.5	70.5
60~64	93.9	6.1	46.4	53.6
65~69	92.5	7.5	31.9	68.1
70~74	82.5	17.5	22.2	77.8
75~79	66.0	34.0	15.3	84.7
80~	42.6	57.4	3.0	97.0

Source : Lim et al. (1985)

family as a financial supporter and head of the household.

Given that more than 78 percent of the Korean elderly reside with their offspring, many elderly encountered problems in intergenerational relations within their families. According to Lim et al. (1985), about 40 percent of the aged had experienced conflicts with their sons and another 40 percent had experienced conflicts with their daughters-in-law. A major reason for the conflict among the male elderly is economic, while that of the females is due to personality differences. This intergenerational conflict reflects the fact that the traditional authority and decision making power of the elderly in the household affairs is threatened by their sons or daughters-in-law.

### **E. Family Support**

Most aged Koreans, except those who can support themselves, are expected to be supported by their families, particularly their children, and the family can provide emotional as well as economic support. Traditionally, this relationship has been considered the norm according to Confucian philosophy.

According to the survey results conducted by JARC in 1990, unlike other countries, the aged in Korea are in favor of co-residing with children who are the most desirable caretakers when the elderly are bedridden due to illness, while children living separately are favored next. This result indicates that the Korean elderly consider that children are the most important sources of help when they need care.

As a consequence of industrialization and urbanization, the function of the family in caring for the elderly within the household has weakened.

Generally, the elderly in Korea are retired from the private or public sector at about the age of 60 and very few of them receive any kind of pension. The loss of the income to maintain themselves becomes the most distressing factor for the elderly, so weakened support from the family and an inadequate pension system, results in a poor quality of life for the elderly.

### **F. Relations with Friends and Neighbors**

In addition to intergenerational family relations, friends and neighbors may play an important role in the lives of elderly people. About 60 percent of the Korean elderly have close friends of the same sex to consult with or to be taken care of, but the remaining one third do not have close friends. The proportion of female elderly who do not have close friends is higher than that of the males.

Concerning the frequency of friendly talks with people in the neighborhood, more than half of the Korean elderly respond that they talk with their neighbors every day, which is highest among the surveyed countries (JARC 1991). Among the Korean elderly, giving advice and enjoying tea and meals together are reported as the most frequent associations with their neighbors.

## **IV. Psychological Aspects Reflected in National Sample Survey, 1984**

In this section, attitudes toward the life of the elderly and their surrounding environment are reviewed using findings from a survey conducted

by the Korea Institute for Population and Health in 1984 (For more details, see, Lim et al., 1985).

### **A. Attitude about co-residence with their children**

The majority of the elderly aged 60~64 (males, 53.7 percent ; females, 69.8 percent) wanted to live with their children. As they get older, the desire for co-residence with their children increases to 66.7 percent for males aged over 65 and 81.5 percent for females, which means that the majority of the elderly still prefer to co-reside with their adult children, particularly the female elderly.

### **B. Attitude about cost of living in later life**

The attitude about dependence on adult children for their living in the near future differed remarkably by sex. About 43 percent of the female elderly responded that they should depend on their children while only about 28 percent of the male elderly expressed the same wish. Only 2.4 percent of the elderly said that their living costs should come from the government. The remaining 60 percent responded that their living costs should come from savings or other sources which they had established themselves, so the majority provided for themselves or were provided for by family members ; and only a limited number expect government aid, reflecting that aid from the government is inadequate to cover the living costs of later life. So government support for the needy elderly requires special attention.

### **C. Attitude about remaining years of life**

The male elderly generally expressed their desire to live until the age of 80, whereas the female elderly generally expressed a desire to live until the age of 77. In other words, the males wanted to live an additional 12.9 years over the current average, whereas females wanted to live an additional 9.7 years. So, even though the female elderly may actually live almost 8 years longer than their male counterparts in 1985 the males wished for longer lives than females. These attitudinal differences by sex are probably due to the differing likelihood of having a spouse and, thus, may be due to the low status of the widowed female elderly within the family.

### **D. Attitude about happiness**

Happiness about their lives generally reflects the mental health condition among the elderly population. In Korea, two-fifths of the elderly feel happy, whereas two-thirds of the elderly in Japan feel happy(JARC, 1991). The male elderly living in rural areas expressed a higher level of unhappiness than the male elderly living in cities, suggesting the undesirable responsibility for farming labor among rural elderly, and reflecting massive rural-to-urban migration among young people. Generally, more of the elderly with spouses expressed happiness about their lives than the elderly without spouses. The elderly living in rural areas and the elderly without spouses generally expressed higher levels of unhappiness.

## **V. Social Welfare Aspects**

The Korean Government recognizing the need for an old age welfare policy promulgated a Social Welfare Law for the Aged on June 1981 to promote and improve better living arrangement and to maintain better health for the elderly(Social Welfare Law, No. 3453). In this segment, contents of the social welfare system are described briefly.

### **A. Social Aid System**

The social welfare system, giving preference to the elderly, started on Parents' Day in May, 1980. It provided legal advice, Social Welfare Centers and Counselling Services operated by civilians voluntarily through the private sector. The preferential system includes free passes to such public places as museums, national parks, old palaces, and temples. Sixty welfare centers for the elderly were established to offer consultation and to provide job opportunities in 1992. Also 756 classes for the elderly were established for further education in 1987.

The basic law for public aid gives benefits for those people over 65 who live alone and in cases in which the family is incapable of supporting them. Relief methods include nursing homes for the helpless, help for those who cannot support themselves and medical care. There are special measures for disabled veterans and their families.

### **B. Social and Health Insurance System**

#### **1. National Pension System**

As part of the social support system, social

insurance provides pension benefits for the elderly to cover financial difficulties after retirement. The government planned and prepared basic documents for implementing a national pension scheme in 1973, but action on the original plan was postponed until 1987. There are, however, pension schemes implemented for particular jobs such as government officials(1960), military personnel(1963), and school teachers(1974). Those who benefit from these systems represent only about six percent of the population.

From January 1988, industrial workers in any establishment with more than 10 employees must carry insurance. Farmers and fishermen including self-employers and employees of establishments with less than 10 employees may voluntarily carry insurance, but the socioeconomic situation of farmers and fishermen is not properly reflected since they are, in fact, excluded from the benefits of the public pension system.

The government has implemented some programs to provide income for the impoverished elderly ; these include administrative and financial support to operate 264 placement agencies and 152 communal work places for the elderly(Choe and Lee, 1991).

#### **2. Medical Insurance System**

The Korean Medical Insurance System derives from the Medical Insurance Law enacted and promulgated in 1963, but the medical insurance scheme on a compulsory basis was not enforced for well over a decade because of the immaturity of the contemporary socioeconomic situation.

As rapid economic development there was increased recognition of the need for a social security system, and the Medical Insurance Law was entirely amended in December 1976 to compulso-

rily cover employees in workplaces on the basis of the number of employees. Since then, the coverage has been gradually expanded : in 1981, from factories or organization employing 500 workers or more to those employing 100 workers or more. Further since 1983, workplaces employing 5 workers or more have been covered on a voluntary basis, and in 1987 workplaces employing 16 workers or more were covered on a compulsory basis.

As of January 1988, those covered by medical insurance was 68 percent of the whole population. If the poor and needy covered by public medical assistance are added, the total coverage is 78 percent. By July 1989, the whole Korean population was covered under a medical insurance system both in urban and rural areas. Under the medical aid system, the government absorbs all medical charges for those with incomes below the poverty level and thus can not bear their own medical expenses. Most of the beneficiaries from the medical aid system are the elderly. It is recommended for the further development of the health care system for the elderly that hospitals for the aged be established to care for those suffering from geriatric diseases.

## VI. Conclusion

The burden of taking care of the aged is becoming pressing due to the rapid increase in the number and proportion of the elderly in Korea's population. These increasing numbers and proportions may be classified in the empty nest stage or the living along stage. The majority of the aged in Korea prefer support to be rendered by

their families. Among the aged who need care, the family is still one of the primary concerns in Korean society. This tendency was reinforced because of the inadequacy of the social support system.

As a result of the rapid socioeconomic development and urbanization, however, increasing attitudinal gaps between the young and the aged are observed. This brings about care problems and psychological conflicts. Due to rapid industrialization and urbanization, the elderly in Korea are experiencing changes in the family structure, the loss of their economic and social status, and emotional dissatisfaction because of the deterioration of their relationships with their families. Another emotional problem could be a conflict stemming from inter-generational relations. These attitudinal changes and conflicts between generations lead to potential problems in the care of the elderly the majority of whom need help to maintain decent lives in later years.

Given that the elderly in Korea played a significant role in rapid economic development, they deserve to be supported by the Government as well as by their families, so even though the primary obligation for care of the elderly still belongs to the families of the aged ; more adequate social support is needed.

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## 우리나라 노인인구에 대한 고찰

최 인 현\*

우리나라의 노인인구는 대체로 사회구조의 급격한 변화에 대한 적응능력이 부족하고, 사회적 지위가 과거에 비해 낮아지고 있으며, 또한 가족내에서는 세대간의 갈등으로 소외감을 느끼고 있다. 특히 노후생활이 제대로 보장되지 못하는 현실에 불안을 느끼며 생활하고 있다.

이러한 노인인구의 부양에 따른 부담은 최근 노인인구의 절대적 및 상대적 비중의 급격한 증가로 크게 늘어나고 있는 추세에 있다. 더구나 산업화 및 도시화의 영향으로 우리나라의 가족구조는 핵가족화되어가고 있으며, 이에 따라 노인단독가구의 비율 역시 증가되고 있다. 따라서

노인부양은 가족내에서 해결되어지던 것이 점차 사회나 정부가 책임을 지는 사회복지 형태로 나아가는 형태이다.

이에 따라 정부에서는 1981년 노인복지법을 제정하였으며, 여러가지 소득보장정책과 사회복지서비스를 제공해 오고 있다. 그러나 효에 근본을 두는 유교적 가치관 하에서 살아온 노인들에게는 가족내에서의 부양에 보다 큰 의미를 부여하고 있는 만큼, 노인부양에 있어서 사회 및 정부 뿐 아니라 가족의 역할이 강조되어야 하겠다.

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\* 本 院 副 院 長