

Social Indicators Research Series 47

Kalyani K. Mehta
Leng Leng Thang *Editors*

Experiencing Grandparenthood

An Asian Perspective

 Springer

Experiencing Grandparenthood

Social Indicators Research Series

Volume 47

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Editors

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The Editors

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Preface

Asia in the twenty-first century has experienced rapid socio-cultural, economic and family transformations as a result of modernisation, urbanisation and demographic ageing. Hailed as the next major challenge for Asia, the ageing of Asia is characterised by a record speed of ageing in many countries in Asia, much faster than what the Western nations have historically experienced. Asia will have an unprecedented number and proportion of grandparents amongst its population. For children in Asia who are shrinking in number with lower birth rate, it is becoming a norm to have living grandparents, great-grandparents and even great-great-grandparents in the family. With the feminisation of ageing, their living grandparents are also likely to be grandmothers.

What are the experiences of these grandparents living in such *exciting times*? It is with this enquiry that we offer this volume based on grandparents in five Asian countries to enhance the current state of literature on the growing segment of our world population – grandparents from an Asian perspective. Based primarily on an original qualitative research project of grandparenting in five Asian countries carried out by a multidisciplinary team of researchers from Japan, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Hong Kong, the local grounded knowledge of the researchers offer unique observations in individual societies which contribute to a better understanding of the dynamic interplay between changing socioeconomic conditions and cultural saliency in affecting the intergenerational relations between the grandparents and the grandchildren. In addition to the above five countries, a chapter on China has been included to expand the comprehensiveness of the book.

Social changes bring to surface paradoxes that serve at once to define and redefine the nature of grandparenting and meanings of grandparenthood to the three generations within a family. In filling a gap in the current stock of knowledge on the study of grandparents in Asia, the volume seeks to answer the following questions: What is the state of grandparenting in the Asian context today? How do the roles and functions of grandparents differ depending on living arrangement, gender, age, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relations and changing health of the grandparents? What stresses are there with grandparenting and strategies adopted to manage intergenerational conflicts? What are the cultural, religious and social principles

that buttress the value of multigenerational ties? From the social linguistic perspective, how does an analysis of ageing discourse in different cultural contexts promote our understanding of intergenerational relationships?

The grandparents in the study, by and large, represent the range of families in these Asian societies. They are the witnesses to the economic and social developments that have swept across Asia affecting the cultural and social norms they used to hold. Whilst they grow up with respect for grandparents who usually have legitimate roles in the family, expecting to be cared for at home in old age and symbolising family authority and standing at the centre of family relations, the changing expectations of care and intergenerational living arrangements have left some of them at the margin of a nuclear family focus. Whilst some grandparents may still regard themselves as playing significant roles in the upbringing of their grandchildren, others have only little contacts with their teenage grandchildren. The grandparents in the study revealed their joys and dilemmas as grandparents, and implicated the coping strategies they deployed to negotiate and balance their desires with that of their adult children's and grandchildren's. As link parents, the middle generation showed appreciation to their older parents, but exposed the paradox of wishing for an appropriate distance in grandparent–grandchildren engagements. The grandchildren observed the mix of affection and tension between their parents and grandparents, and are mostly glad to have the grandparents around as providers of various sources of support. The volume's strength lies precisely in its rich body of qualitative three-generational data spanning five Asian countries. Such an intergenerational perspective on the study of grandparenthood, which includes in its analysis the views of three generations (grandparents, link parents and grandchildren), contributes to a new dimension of advancing our understanding of grandparenthood in the familial context.

The book is targeted for social researchers, academics, gerontologists, social workers, family therapists, community workers, policy makers, anthropologists, scholars of regional studies and grandparents themselves.

As you read this book, we hope that you will grasp the authentic voices of the Asian grandparents, who are different because of their different cultures and nationalities, yet similar due to their value and belief systems.

As co-editors, we would like to thank the contributors who have been patient and dedicated in their efforts to complete the project. We have gained much both personally and as scholars of gerontology through the process of completing this volume. As we walk life's journey as grandparents, link parents and grandchildren, and as we experience the stresses, frustrations, joy and satisfaction that comes with the different life stages, may we always remember to cherish those around us who have made our existence meaningful.

Kalyani K. Mehta
Leng Leng Thang

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Grandparenthood in Asia

Kalyani K. Mehta and Leng Leng Thang

Have you ever wondered why the word grandparent has the ‘parent’ component in it? Is it because grandparent is one’s parent’s parent OR is it because a grandparent has the love and compassion of a parent? As this book focuses on the Asian grandparent, let us take a quick look at the terminology to gain some insights. In Mandarin language, the paternal grandfather is *Ye Ye*, and the grandmother is *Nainai*. The maternal grandfather is *Waigong*, and the grandmother is *Waipo*. Respectively, in Thai, the paternal grandfather is *Pu*, and the grandmother is *Ya*; the maternal grandfather is *Dta*, and the grandmother is *Yai*. In the Malay language, the corollary is *Datuk* and *Nenek*. No distinction is made between maternal and paternal lineage. Similarly, in Japanese language, the grandfather is *Ojiisan*, and the grandmother is *Obaasan*. The most interesting, in our opinion, is the term in Gujarati for paternal grandmother, *Baa*, and for the grandfather, *Dada*. The term for maternal grandmother is *Nani*, and the grandfather is *Nana*. They are simple words, easy for a young toddler to remember and to vocalise. This examination of linguistic terms of address reveals that, in some cultures, lineage is extremely important as in Chinese and Gujarati; thus, different words are used for maternal and paternal lineages.

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In some languages, the word for ‘grandfather’ is similar to ‘father’, and this is echoed for grandmother and mother. Did our ancestors prescribe that one’s parent’s parent is meant to be as close as the parent? An Asian Indian saying goes: ‘More valuable than one’s investment is the interest we gain from the investment’ (here, investment refers to children, and interest refers to grandchildren). Many a time, we hear older generations saying that they did not have ample time to play with their children, unlike the unlimited time they have for their grandchildren!

1 The Attention on Grandparenthood

Scholarly interest in grandparent–grandchild relationships has grown dramatically since the mid-1980s, with global trends in demographic and family transformations. Amongst the discourses on grandparenthood is the general recognition of the diversity and complexity in understanding what entails being a grandparent (Bengtson and Robertson 1985; Giarrusso et al. 1995; Silverstein and Bengtson 1997; Silverstein et al. 2003). As Vern Bengtson mentions in one of the early influential works on grandparenthood: ‘the growing body of empirical research points to the heterogeneity among grandparents, to the dangers in stereotyping and overgeneralizing, and to the likelihood of increasing differentiation in grandparents’ roles in the future’ (Bengtson and Robertson 1985: 11). This is reinforced by Silverstein et al. (2003) in their review of the role of grandparents in the family system. Whilst commenting that ‘the contribution of grandparents is an important but often overlooked resource in promoting optimal family functioning’ (2003: 77), they note that, despite an unprecedented increase in the number of grandparents across societies with longer life expectancy, there are ‘few explicit expectations concerning the responsibilities and proscribed behaviour of grandparents, the act of grandparenting is often fraught with uncertainty over the appropriate type and level of involvement grandparents ought to have with grandchildren’ (Silverstein et al. 2003: 78).

Nonetheless, despite the heterogeneity of what determines the roles and behaviours of grandparents, we see in the development of the literature on grandparenthood a greater research interest in the significance and contributions of grandparenthood to roles in the family. From the classical family sociological model of the older generations being peripheral to family life (Goode 1964), there is now an increasing awareness on the significant roles played by grandparents in ensuring the stability of families and the well-being of younger generations (Copen and Silverstein 2007; Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2006; Uhlenberg and Cheuk 2010).

The symbolic significance of grandparents in promoting family stability has been one of the most acknowledged contributions, although Bengtson reminds us of the equally varied dimensions of such a role (Bengtson and Robertson 1985: 21). The symbolic dimensions of the grandparent’s role are identified as ranging from the sheer presence of grandparent as a symbol of family continuity, as being a family historian, mentor, role model, nurturer, ‘national guard’ (Hagestad 1985) and ‘family watchdog’ (Troll 1983), as transmitters of values, and as arbitrators for the parent