

Remitting ‘filial co-habitation’: ‘actual’ and ‘virtual’ co-residence between Korean professional migrant adult children couples in Singapore and their elderly parents

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ABSTRACT

Based on in-depth interviews with middle-class Korean professional sojourner migrant married couples in Singapore and their elderly parents, this paper examines how the cultural meaning and social practice of filial co-habitation and support have been transformed in an international migration context. Transnational co-residence and visiting among these families are examined and a differentiated and patterned organisation of support by sons *versus* daughters for their own elderly parents is demonstrated. Although the immigration regulations and co-ethnic community environments for older Koreans in Singapore pose a challenge to elderly parents, the family remains the most important nexus of care and support. By adopting ‘virtual’ and ‘actual’ co-residence strategies and deploying multi-purpose long-term visits by wives and children in Singapore to their elderly parents in Korea, and by remitting regular financial contributions, these families are able to maintain the cultural ideal of filial co-residence and support. However, the gendered traditional co-habitation ideal differentiates between actual and virtual co-residence. The actual co-residence pattern was mainly adopted by first sons/daughters-in-law couples and the elderly parents of the first sons, whereas the virtual co-residence pattern was mainly adopted by sons-in-law/daughters couples and the elderly parents of daughters. These results show that patterned two-way transnational mobility for providing care and support is shaped by cultural norms and the practical negotiation of family obligations.

KEY WORDS – Korea, migration, co-habitation, intergenerational.

Introduction

‘In Singapore, I am not bored. Other elderly Korean people told me that they were bored [with staying here], but I am not.’ Elderly Mrs A told me about her latest six-month stay with her daughter’s family in Singapore at the

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time of her interview in Korea.¹ Like many older informants who have migrant daughters in Singapore, elderly Mrs A makes regular long visits once or twice a year, typically for about two or more months, staying with her migrant daughter's family while her Korean son-in-law works as a migrant professional. In contrast, several older people actually co-reside with their migrant adult sons' families who are similarly working as professionals in Singapore. A typical comment of the older people from these families was that they resided in a convenient and comfortable living environment in Singapore, but they were counting the days until they would return permanently to Korea. Except for those who actually co-reside with their children in Singapore, older people who have migrant sons make relatively shorter visits to Singapore than those who have migrant daughters.

Increasing attention is currently being paid to issues relating to older migrants and the older people left behind in Korea by their migrant children. In particular, the recent development of a literature on transnational migration and later life experiences illustrates the increased mobility of older people. Firstly, the older first-generation immigrants, growing old in their new home country, show increased international mobility in their later life for lifestyle and/or family reasons, making frequent trips to their home countries (Lunt 2009; Mason 2004; Min 1998).

Secondly, a body of work which has been carried out in an American context has shown that concerns for family obligations or the needs of the families of first-generation migrant adult children often lead older people to make a subsequent move, or undertake frequent and extended visits, to their adult children's country of residence (Kauh 1997; Treas 2008; Treas and Mazumdar 2002, 2004). Recent studies in Australia and New Zealand have also shown a similar type of older migrant (Baldassar 2007; Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding 2007; Lunt 2009). However, little is known about how these migrant families manage to maintain their filial and family obligations when their adult children initiate 'temporary' (that is, non-permanent) migration. Furthermore, little is known about how filial co-habitation or family visits differ between those of sons *versus* those of daughters in an international migration context. Many studies of Korean or other Asian older immigrants have shown that intergenerational living arrangements between migrant adult children and their parents are influenced by traditional familialism and the practical negotiation of their family obligations.

The purpose of this paper is to explore by means of a case study of Koreans in Singapore how the cultural meaning and social practice of filial co-habitation and support within three-generational Korean families have been adapted in an international migration context. Filial co-habitation is one of the key components of filial piety or *hyo* in Korea, where, in the traditional

ideal, the first son has the primary responsibility (Kim, Kim and Hurh 1991). The rapid modernisation and urbanisation of Korean society over the last several decades has transformed the typical residential arrangements from multi-generational living with elders to conjugal nuclear family arrangements (Choi 1996). However, many studies of Korean or Asian immigrant families have suggested that filial co-residence and filial support still have an impact on the organisation of intergenerational support and residential arrangements, as well as on the families' migration patterns. For example, studies of intergenerational care and support for older people in Korea (e.g. Chee and Levkoff 2001) and for older Korean immigrants (e.g. Kauh 1997) have pointed out that Confucian cultural values in Korea are still important in motivating support for older people. In terms of legal immigration status and residential arrangements in an international migration context, Treas (2008) found that the 'official' categorisation based on legal status does not match the real arrangements. The 'official' and 'real' arrangements were constituted not only by considering practical needs and negotiations, but also by utilising the family migration scheme policies of the destination countries.

Unlike immigrant countries, such as the United States of America (USA), Canada and Australia, where family reunification migration schemes are available, Singapore, like many other states in the world, does not offer such a scheme. What then are the ways in which migrant and non-migrant family members negotiate the social ideal of filial co-habitation and practical arrangements? Focusing on transnational co-residence and visiting among these families, this paper proposes that there exists a differentiated and patterned organisation of support by sons *versus* daughters for their own elderly parents.

The paper examines the way in which the patrilocal principle of filial obligation has a normative impact on the intergenerational support arrangements among Korean families and how this gendered traditional norm affects patterns and forms of transnational intergenerational family support in different ways. This study sensitises us to the gendered and primogeniture-based distinctions among the observed transnational residential patterns for first sons *versus* non-first sons and daughters.

The Singapore context: the challenge of international migration for older people and adult children

Adaptation to living in a new land is always a challenge to migrants. However, it is less so for younger people than for their older counterparts who migrate in later life, sometimes with the loss of their social network (Ip, Lui and Chui 2007). Lack of skill in the language spoken by the local people limits their

daily life in that older migrants often find learning a new language more difficult than younger ones (Stevens 1999). The smaller size of their co-ethnic cohort in their new home country poses an additional challenge, as they may not be able to establish new social relations without the language skills of their destination countries. Koreans in Singapore live in more challenging societal contexts than their Asian immigrant counterparts in North America, where a family migration scheme, as well as at least limited social insurance and social welfare entitlements, provide legal status and material resources for older immigrants (Kauh 1999; Lan 2002). The *de facto* absence of a family migration scheme in Singapore and the still under-developed social welfare services for older people in both Korea and Singapore may pose a challenge for those Korean families who have normative and practical obligations for their frail or lonely elderly parents.

About 15,000 Koreans were living in Korea in 2006, a number which had rapidly increased from about 3,000 to 6,000 in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The number of Korean permanent resident holders was estimated to be over 1,000 in 2005 (Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade data). In the meantime, over 1.5 million Koreans were estimated to live abroad within the category of 'sojourners', meaning that they live aboard for more than one year but do not acquire the citizenship of their destination countries (Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade data). Although not all Korean sojourners are professional migrants, a substantial portion of them seem to be professional migrants and their families. Most of the Koreans in Singapore are considered to be in this category (Kim 2011: 218).

At the individual or family level, especially in the absence of social welfare services, arranging a caregiver for elders is also a task that requires the mobilisation of family resources. The commodification of care work is not yet fully developed in Korea, and this is different from other newly developed Asian countries such as Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Lan 2002). Like North American and European developed countries, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong have introduced a migrant careworker scheme, allowing immigrants, who can look after frail elders, to fill the gaps in family care, given the increasing labour market participation of women over the last few decades (Iyer, Devasahayam and Yeoh 2004).² In the meantime, the institutionalisation of welfare provision for older people is still in its infancy in Korea. In this context, the role of and negotiations within the family are still practically needed between migrant and non-migrant family members.

Method and data

The research methodology consisted of interviews with multiple family members (at least three and up to six adult members in each of 26 families).

This group satisfied the basic requirement, set in the research design, of being migrant couples, having at least one child and one surviving elderly parent. Both the wives' and the husbands' elderly parents were interviewed. This methodological approach is so far unique among studies of Korean migrant families, and is designed to explore their ideas and practices as well as the dynamics of negotiation of the key involved actors in each family. It may also establish whether or not there is any difference in the way that adult children (couples) negotiate and organise their support for their own elderly parents and their parents-in-law.

The fieldwork was carried out in four stages (Singapore → Korea → Singapore → Korea) over 17 months between mid-April 2006 and early September 2007. Investigating the lived experiences of both migrant adult children and their elderly parents necessitated multiple stages of recruitment of the interviewee families, following the movement of people (Marcus 1995) in two different locations. The study involved migrant adult children in Singapore and their elderly parents, who may stay with the primary migrants in Singapore, or who may stay alone or with other adult children in Korea. This necessitated the adoption of a two-stage approach: interviewing the primary migrants first in Singapore and then interviewing their non-accompanying family members in Korea. The first stage centred on recruiting and interviewing migrant adult children couples in Singapore between April and September 2006. Subsequently, their parents in Korea were interviewed between November 2006 and early March 2007. This two-stage approach was repeated to recruit additional migrant adult children, focusing on recruiting those families who would fill the gaps identified from the interim analyses. The subsequent interviews with the elderly parents in Korea were carried out between July and early September 2007.

For the main research method, this study used in-depth interviews. The interviews were pursued until *saturation point* was reached (Creswell 2007). The triangulation of the data (Arksey and Knight 1999, Chapter 2) was pursued by cross-referencing the multiple interviews for each family. The family was used as the unit of analysis as there were multiple interviews conducted within each family. The interviews were carried out separately even for a couple in a place where others were not present.

As the final result of the fieldwork, 110 interviews with 26 migrant adult children (PM) couples' families were conducted. Both PM couples and at least one of the surviving elderly parents were interviewed. As a result, 52 PMs, 26 males and 26 females, and their 58 elderly parents (both the wives' and the husbands'), 26 males and 32 females, respectively, were interviewed.

Each interview lasted between one and four hours. A typical interview with a PM would last for about one hour if the interview was conducted at their office, and one and a half or two hours if they were at home or at a café near

their house or office. All but two of the interviews with the elderly parents were conducted in their homes. A typical interview started with the introduction of the interviewer, obtaining the consent of the interviewees, and completing basic demographic questionnaires and consent forms. All of this took between 15 and 20 minutes, and then the interview proceeded.

All the formal interviews were digitally recorded with the consent of the interviewees, and informal conversations and observations were written as field notes. Published documents were also collected, such as personal essays in newsletters or quarterly magazines of the Singapore Korean Association, as well as other newspapers and magazines in the Korean media.

The analysis and interpretation of the collected data were informed by the grounded theory approach. As the grounded theory approach advises (Charmaz 2006; Creswell 2007), continuous interim analyses of the interviews at each stage meant that some questions were either dropped or some new questions added for further investigation. Cross-checking and interim analysis was conducted at two levels. Firstly, as the research dealt with several family-level issues, involving diverse views and a negotiation process among the different members in each family (with the accompanying and non-accompanying family members), a family-level analysis was conducted. Secondly, themes emerging during the interviews with the members of different families were carefully recorded.

The age of the elderly interviewees ranged between 59 and 89 years (median age: 71 years) (*see Table 1*). Even though the migrant adult children were white-collar middle-class people, their elderly parents included people from both middle-class and working-class backgrounds. This may reflect the dramatic economic development of Korea and the dynamic mobility which has been achieved within the timeframe of one generation.

Among the 26 male elderly parents, 12 had working-class life-time jobs (factory workers or farmers), and 11 had held professional or managerial life-long occupations. Among the 32 female elderly respondents, 14 had held working-class jobs. There were 15 elderly participants, who were working either full-time or part-time at the time of interview; eight of these were currently working as farmers, labourers or professional workers in a more flexible schedule than they had previously worked. Twenty-five elderly parents had no schooling or only some primary education, 22 had some middle or high school education and 12 had university or postgraduate education, including one PhD holder. The income of the elderly parents was also diverse, including both those who were economically active and wealthy and those who were not. Even though almost all of the elderly interviewees were over 60 years old, those with pensions were in a minority. This is due to the only relatively recent introduction and step-by-step inclusion of a

TABLE 1. *Characteristics of the quoted families*

Case	Quoted migrant adult children					Quoted elderly parents		
	Husband's age (years)	Wife's age (years)	Number of children (age in years)	Years abroad	Monthly income (SGD)	Father's age (years)	Mother's age (years)	Number of adult children including migrant child
A	37	37	2 (9 and 4)	7	15,000	65	60	1
B	42	39	2 (10 and 8)	8	10,000 ¹	78	74	1
C	50	46	3 (21, 17 and 7)	14	4,000 ²	Deceased	76	2
D	52	50	2 (22 and 21)	17	20,000	Deceased	89	7
E	52	50	2 (19 and 17)	14.5	7,000	77	75	5
F	39	37	2 (10 and 8)	1.4	14,000	66	59	3
G	42	38	2 (13 and 6)	1.5	7,000 ¹	75	74	5
H	50	47	2 (19 and 8)	13	10,000	71	70	3

Notes: 1. This does not include their company's housing and educational subsidies. 2. The migrant couple received financial support from the wife's parents for the children's school fees.

national pension system in Korea, which means that only a small portion of the older population currently receive pensions (Choi 2006; Kwon 2005).

The majority of the migrant adult children were in their thirties and forties, ranging between 29 and 53 years of age (median ages: males 43 years, females 41 years). This reflected the age patterns of professional expatriates from Korean companies when they are sent abroad. It also reflected the attempt to recruit a diverse group by including couples whose children were of school age and who had at least one surviving elderly parent (or in-law). Almost all the PMs had received degrees from a university or a college of higher education. The PM couples' average monthly household income was 11,240 Singapore dollars (SGD), which is significantly higher than the average monthly household income in both Korea and Singapore.

The sampled migrant families had stayed in Singapore for differing lengths of time. The average length of time they had spent living in Singapore was seven years, and the average length of time they had spent living outside Korea was 8.6 years. Some families were permanent resident holders (hereafter PR, the equivalent of a 'green card' in the USA). Thirteen families had PR status in Singapore. One person held Singaporean citizenship, which was gained via a previous marriage to a Singaporean spouse. All the others held Korean citizenship either with or without PR, although one family was in the process of applying. Other families did not have PR status; they had an employment pass, a long-term visa for expatriate professional workers in Singapore.

Regardless of their PR or citizenship status, the Singaporean government requires its foreign residents who hold an employment pass to prove their financial ability to sponsor their parents (-in-law) in the country.³ If they are approved, a renewable six-month long-term visit pass is granted for the elderly parent.

Different patterns of 'remitting filial co-habitation' and intergenerational family support

This section presents the four patterns of transnational residential arrangements and support among Korean migrant families identified from the data. It also introduces the terms 'actual' and 'virtual' co-habitation. Actual co-habitation is self-explanatory and refers to a residential arrangement involving migrant adult children (typically a first son) living with their elderly parents. 'Virtual' co-habitation is a form of co-residence with migrant adult children living with elderly parents who are not officially migrants in terms of their immigration status, but who make regular and long visits, spending a significant portion of the year in co-residence with their adult children. The idea of 'remitting temporary co-habitation' is also introduced

(see below). These three arrangements involve co-residence or long visits between migrant and non-migrant generations. In addition, another term, 'imaginary daughter (-in-law)' is introduced, a figure who is often longed for by the Korean elders who have migrant adult children. This section briefly discusses these patterns, which will be discussed in detail in the subsequent subsections regarding the case families.

Firstly, some first-sons/daughters-in-law couples often employed 'actual' transnational co-habitation. In the sample, there were four families who maintained this living arrangement currently or in the recent past. It was particularly likely to occur when living with stem family members in Korea was not feasible. For example, migrant adult child Mr B is the only son of an elderly couple. This family co-resided after the marriage of the son, while he was living in Korea, but they have also continued to co-reside in Malaysia and Singapore for more than seven years.

Secondly, some first-sons/daughters-in-law couples, whose parents were too frail to travel long distances or unable to continue to care for themselves in Korea, deployed 'remitting temporary co-habitation'. For example, as first sons cannot take long vacations from their own work, they 'send' their wives and children to their frail non-migrant elderly parents once or twice a year for a month or more, typically over their children's school vacations. While the trip back to Korea often fulfils the needs of the elderly members of the family, it can also meet the needs of migrant family members, such as the educational needs of children, who attend classes to keep up with the Korean curriculum.

Thirdly, upper-middle-class daughters/sons-in-law couples and their elderly parents employed 'virtual' transnational co-habitation, a term introduced here to refer to an arrangement involving regular long visits. It is not just because of their relatively long stays with their families that this arrangement resembles co-habitation, but also because many of these families justify this living arrangement as a compromise. Co-habitation with a daughter and son-in-law couple is not favourably viewed in the patrilineal Confucian tradition, but still many families adopt this living arrangement for reasons of their own practical and emotional needs.

Fourthly, some first-son/daughter-in-law couples who were not currently co-habiting with their elderly parents, partly because their parents were not yet frail or needing daily care, were seriously considering or actually planning to maintain 'temporary' separate households. (They are typically called *kirogi* families – meaning 'wild geese' families – in Korea; see Kim 2010.) They would maintain a separate household in Singapore so the husband could continue to support the family in Singapore, while the wife and children returned to Korea. Alternatively, the wife and children might stay abroad so that the children could finish school while the

husband returned to working in Korea after the educational migration of his children. This was partly because of the normative pressure felt by first-sons/daughters-in-law and the parallel expectations of the elderly parents. Because of this, some families planned to make a middle-ground compromise of sharing their living arrangements for several years.

The concept of an ‘imaginary daughter (-in-law)’ completes the above four patterns. For many parents, an unfilled gap in the emotional and support/care realm was articulated in their longing for an imaginary daughter (-in-law), often expressed by elders who have actual or virtual co-habitation or receive financial assistance from their migrant children. Intergenerational family support arrangements in an international migration context require both migrant and non-migrant family members to adapt, but they do not resolve all the elders’ issues. Imagining a perfect daughter is not necessarily confined to those who do not currently live with their adult children; it was also observed among those who currently live with their adult children’s family abroad, but who wish to make a permanent return to Korea.

When trying to understand these current living arrangements, it is useful to consider both the immigration schemes for elders as well as the history of living arrangements for each family. Attention has therefore been paid to how negotiations occurred in their current and previous living arrangements. In the following case studies, the different patterns and issues regarding living arrangements that emerged are discussed.

Actual co-residence: choosing the uneasiness of living abroad

Elderly couple B (male aged 78 and female aged 74) has lived with their only son’s family since his marriage in 1995. Their son works as an executive at the Singapore branch of one of the largest Korean companies. They live in a luxurious and spacious condominium in Singapore, and are one of the four elderly cases currently in co-residence with their adult children in Singapore. At the time of the interview they had lived abroad for the past seven years. They initially came to Singapore in 1999, spending three years there before moving to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, for two years. They then returned to Singapore in 2004, following their son’s re-assignment. When they were in Korea, elderly Mrs B was a housewife and, together with a baby-sitter, helped to care for their then infant grandchildren as her daughter-in-law was a professional worker in Korea.

Just before they came to Singapore for the first time, their daughter-in-law asked her parents-in-law ‘which one would you like to choose, loneliness [*i.e.* living without their son’s family] or uneasiness [*i.e.* of living abroad with potential difficulties]?’ The elderly couple chose the latter. When asked

about the residential arrangement, elderly Mrs B said 'I have never thought of living apart from my son'. However, her husband had a different opinion, as his health had become an issue for concern. He said he had lost his 'will to live' because of his severe back and heart pains, which had been treated in every possible way in Singapore's best hospitals. Doctors here have said that there is 'not anything wrong' except for the known complications, about which they can do nothing further.

When interviewed, elderly Mr B was finding it difficult to walk and had been bedridden for seven months. After becoming frail and ill a few years ago, he now 'just wants to go back to Korea'. He further said:

It is a tragedy that I have only one child and that I have followed my son and daughter-in-law to live abroad. . . . [Elderly parents] should have at least one daughter . . . so that [we can rely on her] in an emergency [or a situation like this].

In the Singaporean context, the lack of a co-ethnic elderly community played a part in the uneasiness of living abroad. Elderly Mrs B also said:

During the first stay in Singapore and in Malaysia, there were a number of Korean elderly of a similar age, so that we could chat with one another, but now there isn't anyone to chat and play with.

Nevertheless, being with their adult children and grandchildren was a source of happiness for them. The elderly couple said that they liked the afternoons when their grandchildren come back home from school, kissed their grandparents and chatted with them for a while. Both the elderly couple B are looking forward to the day when they will soon be able to return to Korea, but elderly Mrs B knows that her son may be reassigned overseas again in a few years' time. She said: 'I will follow my son. . . . How can two of us live alone [in Korea]? . . . I don't think we can live alone . . . I will follow them abroad'.

Although family B is one of those families which have not changed their intergenerational living arrangements, many others have. For example, the migrant adult son Mr C had worked in China and Singapore for the last ten years. When the family lived in China, his widowed mother (now aged 76) was not granted a long-term residential visa, and she could only live with them up to the maximum stay of her temporary visa. She alternated between staying with her daughter's family in Korea and going to Singapore to live with her son's family. Now, in Singapore, they can sponsor their mother with a long-term visit pass (for up to six months, renewable), and their mother can stay with them.

In another example, elderly Mrs D (aged 89) currently co-resides with her migrant first son and his wife in Singapore. However, when her first son worked in India and China in the past, she either co-resided abroad or with her other son in Korea. Their previous separate living arrangements and subsequent co-habitation was the outcome of an implicit negotiation

between her, her son, her daughter-in-law, and her other children in Korea. During the period when she stayed without her first son, her second son lived nearby. Although elderly Mrs D has four daughters, she had experienced an uncomfortable relationship with them. She told me that she favoured her sons heavily over her daughters when she raised her children, following what she told me was the 'traditional way'. She invested everything in her sons' education by selling all the small pieces of land which she worked on as rice-farmer. Her favouritism towards her sons and the second son's management of the financial remittance which the first-son couple sent, caused tensions in the relationship, not only between the elderly mother and her daughters, but also between her and her migrant daughter-in-law. According to her migrant son, he resolved the issue by relying on the passage of time, so that both his wife and his mother might eventually come to realise that they needed each other for their current co-habitation arrangements.

Current arrangements of transnational co-residence are not ironclad or completely final, but rather remain flexible; many of the families have made alternative arrangements and have expressed their future plans to adopt a different arrangement from the current one. Normative family obligations and practical considerations, as well as immigration regulations, have influenced their ongoing decisions.

Remitting family members: 'Letting my parents have their grandchildren around (for a while) is the greatest gift to my parents'

Mr E's family first came to Singapore in June 1990 when the migrant husband (currently he is 52 years old, and his wife is 50 years old) was dispatched to work for a European semiconductor company's Singapore branch from its office in Seoul. This family had stayed abroad for a total of about 15 years at the time of the first interview. Before that, Mr E worked for one of Korea's largest electronic companies, now a globally influential player. In 1992, he volunteered to go to the company's research centre in Italy for one year and then returned to Singapore, still working for the same company. From 1995 onwards, he switched to working for another globally well-known European electronic company until 1999, when he stopped designing and developing semiconductors as an engineer and started his own business, marketing semiconductors. He now has offices both in Singapore and in Shenzhen, an industrial area of China, just outside Hong Kong, and alternates between spending one week plus an additional weekend in Singapore with his family and five weekdays of the following week in Shenzhen, China.

Mr E has a 77-year-old father and a 75-year-old mother. His mother has suffered from Parkinson's disease for the last few years, and she is cared for

by her husband and her second son's family in Mr E's second apartment in Korea. His wife and children have usually made trips to Korea twice a year during their children's school vacations. This arrangement stems from Mr E's sense of an unfulfilled duty of filial co-habitation. He 'remits/sends' his children; he believes they are 'gifts' of greater value than anything else he could give to his elderly parents, who want to have their grandchildren around them for a while. According to Mr E:

Towards my parents, I regret that I could not have co-resided with them even though I am the first-born son. . . . For Korean elders, seeing their grandchildren is a source of their joy. I feel guilty that I took that [opportunity] away from them. One of the reasons why I send my children to Korea once or twice a year . . . is to give back their grandchildren [for them for a while], and to let my children learn what the affection of their grandparents is and . . . to learn about their kin. . . . [I am] returning their grandchildren [for a while to my parents].

Although his mother's illness is currently manageable, he is slowly preparing for his eventual return to Korea when his second son completes secondary school and will go to a university there. In the meantime, his wife and children make frequent and long visits as a compromise.

Other families revealed that the wives' and children's long visits to Korea had multiple purposes, including 'remitting family members to their elders'. From the viewpoint of these migrant adult children, these arrangements were related to filial piety and in order to 'keep up with their kin' (Treas and Mazumdar 2004). The visits were to provide a chance for the elderly parents, as migrant son Mr E suggests, 'to have their grandchildren' around them so as to have 'intensive' time for the two generations to get closer. This was mostly the case for those migrant families who have stayed abroad for long periods, typically for more than five years. In the Singaporean context, most PMs in Singapore do not have close relatives, unlike in immigrant settings, where the chain migration of close family or kin members is available and common, so that immigrant families may have some kin members around them.

In addition, these visits had an educational purpose for the migrant PMs' children. Firstly, they were meant to provide a way for their children to catch up with the school subjects taught in the Korean curriculum or in the Korean language. Secondly, the visits provided an opportunity for the children, especially those in the lower grades at primary school, to have those kinds of Korean cultural experiences which are not available abroad and could not be taught or learned from textbooks.

Virtual co-residence: 'We end up going there'

Elderly Mrs A (aged 60 years) was interviewed in her newly built house in one of the industrial cities in a south-eastern province of Korea, after she had

spent almost six months with her only daughter's family in Singapore. This visit had been somewhat longer than usual, although the couple had typically spent at least two months a year there since their daughter moved to Singapore in 2000. They went there just after *Chusok* (a Korean holiday) and came back just before the Korean New Year's Day. Whilst in Korea, she receives a call from her daughter in Singapore almost daily. They talk about everyday things such as how to cook a certain dish, and the calls often last for over an hour. Whilst elderly Mrs A was in Singapore, she took care of her grandchildren. She said, 'That's what I volunteer to do, it's not something that I am asked to do. I love doing it and it is really fun'. When I asked her what led her to go to Singapore so often and for such long periods, she said:

When we talk over the phone, saying we miss you, then we end up going there. While we are there, something happens to make me stay there longer. In Singapore, I am not bored. Other elderly Korean mothers told me they were bored, but I am not. I am busy over there. I wake up early, as the kids in Singapore go to school early. After helping them to go to school, I walk to the wet market as an exercise. Later on, when the kids are back, I prepare things for them, and then I go for a walk outside. I am busy doing things every day.

Elderly Mr A used to run a big factory until about ten years ago, so the elderly couple has managed to live without any financial problems. Additionally, they have found enough activities to keep themselves active in Korea in the absence of their extended family. Elderly Mrs A has learned many different sports, including badminton and golf. Whilst she was living in Singapore, she liked to walk through the parks near her daughter's house. Her husband, meanwhile, swam almost every day in the swimming pool in her daughter's private apartment and sometimes went fishing.

Although the elderly couple has maintained virtual co-habitation with their daughter's family, actual co-habitation is an option that they also need to consider through other's eyes, as co-residing with daughter's family does not accord with Korean tradition. According to the PM daughter, her mother 'works out' and pays a lot of attention to her health since she developed diabetes three years ago. She once told her daughter 'I shouldn't collapse [read: get ill]. If I do, I will become a burden to my daughter'. When I asked the elderly mother about actual co-habitation, she told me:

I do not have any such intention. . . . We should live like this, but if we got ill, then, can we go abroad to co-reside? She asks me all the time to live with them together when things get difficult in Korea, but we do not have any such intention yet.

However, when I talked to her migrant daughter in Singapore, she told me that: 'When I try to persuade my husband to live together with my parents, as my brother-in-law can take care of my parents-in-law, he is

almost persuaded'. Her husband had favourably considered the idea of having 'actual' co-habitation with his wife's elderly parents and he appreciated the commitment from his wife's parents to the care of his children while his wife's parents 'virtually' co-resided in Singapore. However, this decision needs not only their own and his wife's parents' favourable opinion but also that of other family members, such as her husband's parents and her husband's younger brother's family, considering the needs and opinions of many involved parties.

There were several families where the migrant adult children and their elderly parents adopted virtual transnational co-habitation; these families were mostly those of migrant daughters and their elderly parents, who are typically relatively young elders and who are willing to provide help for their migrant daughters and grandchildren.

For example, the case of family F shows that a close relationship between a daughter's family and her parents continues to shape migration patterns, but this is also bounded by the challenges of living abroad for the elders. The elderly couple F (husband aged 66 and wife aged 59) took care of their first-born PM daughter's children until recently. When the PM daughter went to Singapore after volunteering to be assigned by an Australian multinational corporation (MNC) to their Singapore office from their office in Seoul, the elderly couple F decided to follow her to continue to look after their grandchildren. This was related to the fact that the PM son-in-law could only go to Singapore to start his company-sponsored MBA programme at one of Singapore's universities six months after his wife's overseas assignment began. He then declined an offer from a top US university so as not to have to live apart from his wife and children. The elderly couple were prepared to live abroad to fill the temporary absence of their son-in-law. According to elderly Mrs F, 'I didn't even have any reservations about it. I just felt I ought to go there to take care of the grandchildren'.

However, an unexpected thing happened. Elderly Mr F began to suffer from depression, and he started to worry about the tiniest things. For example, he worried about whether his grandson, who barely spoke any English, would be able to understand which school bus to take, and he worried that his grandson might get lost in a foreign land. Worrying about that, he went to the school to make sure his grandson caught the right bus home. According to his wife and the PM couple, he seemed to 'have lost his radar'. When in Korea, it was he who drove the car to take his wife and others wherever they needed to go, but suddenly he lost his 'sense of direction and started worrying about everything and couldn't sleep well for three months'. Facing this, they decided to send elderly Mr F back to Korea, but his condition did not improve until his wife came back. She had received a call from her sister, who also lived in the same apartment complex, saying 'the

condition of elderly Mr F is deteriorating'. When asked about his experience, he said:

I do not know. As I was at home all the time and worrying about the kids [grandchildren] in Singapore, depression came. . . . I couldn't eat the local food. . . . When I came back alone, I just didn't want to talk to anyone. I didn't want to meet anyone. I went to see a doctor. . . . Now I've heard that they speak English well, so I do not worry.

Before the PM couple F went to Singapore, the elderly couple lived in the same apartment complex in a suburb of Seoul. In fact, the PM daughter and son-in-law 'followed' the elderly couple F whenever they moved because they had taken care of the grandchildren, a ten-year-old boy and an eight-year-old girl at the time of the interview. Elderly Mrs F said:

I almost raised the grandchildren. It was like having 'two families under one roof'.⁴ . . . I moved back and forth between the two houses all day.

She even had her own room in her daughter's apartment, even though the PM daughter lived in the block next to her own apartment. When they lived nearby, elderly Mrs F also managed the household finances of her daughter and son-in-law. However, when asked whether she wanted to co-reside with one of her children, she said:

Although I do not live in the same place, I want to live nearby. . . . Also, for a few more years, I feel I should 'manage' my grandchildren as they require caring hands.

To the same question, elderly Mr F, even though he likes his grandchildren and his son-in-law, expressed his uneasiness about how this would appear in 'the eyes of others', fearing that they would take a negative view of co-residence with his daughter's family.

As the above cases A and F show, the distinction between visiting and co-residence has become blurred. Also, intimate discussion happens regularly in their daily living as part of their everyday experience. The cheap availability of international calls, particularly through internet-based services, does not in itself make migrants' intergenerational relations transnational. As both these cases show, elderly mothers have been able, active and willing to provide a caring role for their grandchildren. A major reason why adult sons' parents normally stay for about one month, whereas adult daughters' parents stay for longer, lies in their different care-giving roles and expectations, depending on whether or not the wife of the PM couple is their own daughter.

Even though traditional expectations are waning, daughters-in-law still feel tensions with their parents-in-law, and vice versa. Even though mothers-in-law may help with the housework for their sons' families, as domestic work is the realm of their daughters-in-law, their exchange of help is weighed in a different way to the same exchanges between mothers and

their own married daughters. An elderly parent, whose son was staying in Singapore, once remarked: 'Look around you, all the Korean elderly people are their daughters' parents, not their sons'.⁵ This was readily observable.⁵ This *virtual co-residence* seems to be a transnational version of the newly emerging forms of residential arrangements between adult children and their elderly parents, which have been occurring in Korea (Kweon 1998).

Becoming kirogi as the middle point

In contrast, first-son/daughter-in-law couples, who currently do not live together with their elderly parents, said that they felt pressure to do so and to devise ways of integrating filial co-habitation with the pursuit of their own careers. Migrant adult son Mr G was working in Singapore as a Korean MNC and as an expatriate manager, but had deliberately delayed his overseas assignment as long as he could. In making this decision, he gave serious consideration to his 75-year-old father and 74-year-old mother, who were living in a small city about one and half hour's drive away from Seoul, and who had implicitly expressed their desire to be with their only son. Before the couple left Korea for the husband's overseas assignment, there had been a small 'family conference' and multiple discussions of the issue between the couple, their parents and the four elder sisters of the son. According to the daughter-in-law, "my parents-in-law asked me whether I would prefer a 'big apartment' or a 'small apartment' [when they were willing to supplement the cost for us to buy one]. I answered that I would like a small one". Her reply was implicitly designed to delay immediate co-habitation with her parents-in-law. When her wishes were indirectly passed on to her four sisters-in-law, they took different positions with two of them supporting their parents' daughter-in-law and two, who did not. That happened a few years ago, yet more recently when asked about her opinion on co-residence with her parents-in-law, Mrs G was adamant that she 'is prepared to do so' when she returns to Korea. Her husband's most pressing issue was how to accommodate his filial obligation of co-habitation, his career, and his children's current and future secondary education in Singapore. He is seriously considering a middle way: going back to Korea immediately after his current five-year assignment in Singapore has ended in order to live with his parents in Korea, but leaving his wife and children in Singapore for about two more years so that his children can complete secondary school. This is the new form of *kirogi*, which Kim (2010) reported in his study of Korean educational migrants in Singapore. Like Mr G, many other first-son informants expressed their obligations towards their own parents, even if

they currently do not live together; with the exception of a few families, whose parents were very rich, migrant adult children remitted monetary contributions to their parents and parents-in-law as a token of their filial obligations.

Wishing for an 'imaginary daughter (-in-law)' in the home country

Imagining kin sometimes reveals an unsatisfied emotional gap, which is hard to fill through the current care and support arrangements. Among the families in this study, some elderly parents expressed their wish to have an 'imaginary daughter (-in-law)' in Korea, who could provide emotional and practical daily care roles for them. This has a resemblance to the concept of 'fictive kin' which has been suggested by some scholars of care-giving (Karner 1998; Lan 2002). The concept originally referred to the close emotional relationship which care-givers feel with the employers under their care, or to the bond which older people develop with their care-givers and leads them to regard the care-givers as substitutes for their own children or kin.

For example, elderly couple B, who have co-habited with their only son and his wife during the whole of their son's married life, expressed their wish to go back to Korea as their overseas stay lengthened. According to their daughter-in-law, one day the elderly couple had a dispute with each other. The elderly father-in-law said to his wife, 'Why couldn't you bear a daughter so that we could go back to Korea when we want to stay with her?' The daughter-in-law had to intervene then by saying, 'Parents, you should have talked about that issue 30 years ago, not arguing now about what you did not do then'. As the health of elderly Mr B deteriorated and their homesickness grew, their co-habitation with their only son in Singapore was felt to be not enough.

Similar accounts of elders who yearned to have an imaginary daughter (-in-law) were also given by those who did not live together with their adult children. For example, elderly couple H now live in Korea, but they stayed with their daughter and her husband when the couple opened new restaurants in Singapore. Although elderly Mrs H's visit to Singapore was meant to be a brief one to take up a temporary care role for her grandchildren during the busy period of the initial establishment of the business, she ended up staying there for about three years. During this period, as the couple's business thrived, the other adult children's couples of elderly Mrs H chain-migrated to Singapore to become involved in the business. Whereas the elderly couple H's health condition was by then manageable by seeing doctors for regular check-ups in Korea, it was not good enough for them to live in Singapore as older foreigners. They therefore

decided to stay in Korea rather than in Singapore, where health-care costs were far more expensive, and Korean-speaking medical doctors are not readily available. During a visit to a hospital for their check-up in Korea, the elderly couple chatted with a friendly stranger, who seems to have been a 'daughter(-in-law)' character in a Korean soap drama, which was popular at that time. Elderly Mrs H remarked that 'I talked about her for a long time with my husband when I came back. I wish I could have such a daughter (-in-law). . . . When I see someone of this age like her, I imagine this woman might be the person that I looked for'.

The above accounts of elders show that imagining a daughter (-in-law) is not confined to either migrant elders or elders, who are left behind by their migrant adult children. In both of these cases the elderly parents lived together with their migrant adult children's couples and were fairly well supported by them both financially and emotionally. Nevertheless, they still wished to have a fictive daughter (-in-law) in Korea, where they wanted to spend their later lives. In their imagination this fictive kin would provide practical and emotional support at their preferred location.

Discussion and conclusion

Facing the everyday concerns for their family obligations in Singapore, many Korean transnational families have developed adaptive and innovative arrangements for care and support. Actual, temporary ('remitting') and virtual co-habitation, as well as planned future co-habitation patterns, are recognisable adaptive strategies which are adopted when Korean adult children embark on their sojourning professional migration. Transnational co-residence arrangements and regular visits were often made in consideration of care and support needs and capabilities across generations in the international migration context. This observation is in line with those in other recent works (Baldassar 2007; Mason 2004), but the findings of extended visits or virtual co-habitation can also be seen as a transnational adaptation of the practice of mixing 'intimacy at a distance' (Finch and Mason 1990: 152; Townsend 1957), both geographically and temporally. It can be understood as finding different ways of 'remitting' migrant adult children's filial obligations in a similar way to that of contemporary less-skilled migrants, who remit only monetary and non-residential support to their elderly parents across borders (Asis, Huang and Yeoh 2004; Hugo 1995).

Among relatively young elders, virtual co-habitation is also based on an elder's family obligations towards their adult children and grandchildren. Furthermore, the lack of a family migration unification scheme, as well

as traditional norms favouring patrilineal linkage in co-habitation, shaped their strategies into virtual rather than actual co-habitation. Many elderly parents understandably complained of the language barrier, and they missed their friends and other relatives. This, combined with a preference for the Korean climate, meant that they were disinclined to stay for long periods in Singapore. Some of these factors have already been found to be barriers for older people in an international migration context (Ip, Lui and Chui 2007; Kauh 1997; Treas 2008; Treas and Mazumdar 2002). On the whole, this study has found that the healthier, younger and financially more capable older people, who are committed to their own grandchildren, seemed more likely to become transnational.

Wishing for an imaginary daughter (-in-law), as well as making arrangements to have separate households, so that at least one partner co-resides with the parents (one partner living with the parents and the other one living with their children until they complete their secondary schooling), reveal unfulfilled emotional and practical needs as well as filial obligations among migrant and non-migrant family members in an international migration context.

The current transnational living arrangements also reflected the gendered tradition of filial co-habitation, which places the primary responsibility on the first-son couple. However, when the living arrangements of elders, who currently co-reside with their children, were examined, many of them had shifted between co-residence with their children and an independent living arrangement. Negotiation of living arrangements and consideration of their circumstances occurred between migrant adult children and their elders, as well as their close kin. Perceived needs, obligations and reciprocal commitments facilitated the transnational mobility of both migrant and non-migrant family members, and were responsible for a diverse range of family movements, including regular extended visits as well as permanent stays.

These findings confirm those of previous research, which has identified such mobility, not only in migrant adult children towards their elderly parents (Baldassar 2007), but also in older people towards their adult children (Kauh 1997; Treas 2008; Treas and Mazumdar 2002). In this way family obligations are met by 'doing family' at a distance (Finch 2007; Mason 2004).

In general, these results show that patterned two-way transnational mobility in providing care and support is shaped by cultural norms and the practical negotiation of family obligations. Many of these current arrangements were not a fixed end result or a permanent form of living arrangement, but had the potential for change in the near future.

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NOTES

- 1 All the names are pseudonyms. Even though the interviews with elderly parents of both adult children couples (husbands/sons and wives/daughters) were conducted, the accounts of the elderly parent(s) of a migrant adult child's family quoted in this paper are from one side only (either the migrant husband/son or the wife/daughter). To distinguish different generations (*i.e.* elderly parent and adult children) of a same family (*e.g.* family A) when needed, 'elderly' or 'son/daughter' was put in front of their family marker (*e.g.* elderly Mrs A, elderly couple A, migrant adult (PM) couple A or migrant son Mr A).
- 2 Although elders who were brought to Singapore by their children had less authority than in the past, they were not the 'main family source' of domestic help for the migrant children, unlike their North American counterparts (Kauh 1997; Treas and Mazumdar 2004). This is partly to do with the relatively cheap availability of domestic helpers in Singapore and also with the affluence of professional migrant adult children.
- 3 As of November 2011, an employment pass is given to professionals whose fixed monthly salary is at least 4,000 SGD in Singapore. The holder of this pass can bring his spouse and children under 21 years old with a dependent pass and his parents (-in-law) with a long-term visit pass. A middle-level professional who earns a monthly salary of at least 2,800 SGD is given an 'S pass', and he may bring his dependent spouse and children under 21 years old (Singapore Ministry of Manpower 2011. "Employment Pass: Before you apply" and "Passes for Family Members" (<http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes-visas/employment-pass/before-you-apply/Pages/default.aspx>, accessed on 1 November 2011)).
- 4 This was similar to the title of a famous Korean soap opera, 'Three families under one roof'.
- 5 In the interviewed families, with the exception of one family in which both the husband's parents and the wife's parents make frequent and long visits, most made a similar remark. Many elderly parents stayed for about one month or so in Singapore (such a duration was the most popular, as cheap air tickets were available) if they visited their sons and longer if they visited their daughters.

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