

Elderly Parents Attitudes toward the Relationship with their Children; An International Comparative Study

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Purpose

Many social commentators have speculated that Confucian traditions continue to strongly influence living arrangements in both Japan and Korea. In Confucian thinking the 3-generation family unit is viewed as both the ideal type and the natural arrangement¹⁾.

Contract Euro-American “Individualism,” with it’s roots in Christian theology, has also deeply influenced living arrangements in western nations. This hypothesis has seldom been put to an empirical test.

Table 1. Hypothesis: Ideology Influencing Living Arrangements In Europe & Asia ?

	Ideology	Effect on Contemporary Living Arrangements
Japan & Korea	The Ie System [Family System]—roots in Confucianism	Elderly Attitudes toward Cohabitation with Children and Grandchildren are Strong ?
Euro—America	Individualism—roots in Christian Theology	Elderly Attitudes toward Living Arrangements with Children: Ideal Type =Independent Living with Occassional Social Contact

Methods

In 1981 the cabinet office of the Japanese government conducted a five nation survey of the elderly's attitudes toward their relationships with children and grandchildren. The five countries included in this longitudinal survey are: Japan, ROK, USA, Germany and Sweden. This survey has been repeated every 5 since 1981^{2)~6)}.

Our sample consisted of about 5000 individuals (1000 in each country), sixty years old and over. Our questionnaire asked about the relationships between elderly people and their children or grandchildren respondents were asked to choose from among 4 ideal types. Which statements best describes your view?

- (a) It would be the best for the elderly to live with their children and/or grandchildren.
- (b) It would be the best for the elderly to have meals and conversations with their children and / or grandchildren from time to time.
- (c) It would be the best for the elderly to have conversations with their children and / or grandchildren occasionally.
- (d) It would be the best for the elderly to have no contact with their children and / or grandchildren.

Results

First I would like to discuss the results of the fifth follow-up survey, which was completed in 2001.

(1) Elderly Parents Attitudes toward their Children & Grandchildren by Countries

The results of the 2001 survey reveal strong similarities between elderly attitudes in Japan and Korea, which contrast sharply with attitudes in America, Germany and Sweden. Japanese elderly respondents showed the strongest desire to live together with their children (43.5%), followed closely by the Koreans at 38.4%. Only 5% of the Sweden elderly respondents, 8.7% of the U.S. elderly, and 14.9% of the German respondents expressed a similar desire to co-habitate with their children and/or grandchildren. Elderly respondents in the three Euro-American nations overwhelmingly chose “occasionally having meals and conversations together” as the ideal pattern, 66.2% of the Americans, 66.5% of the Germans, and 64.6% of the Sweden chose this pattern.

(2) Changes in Elderly Attitudes Strongest in Asia: Japan

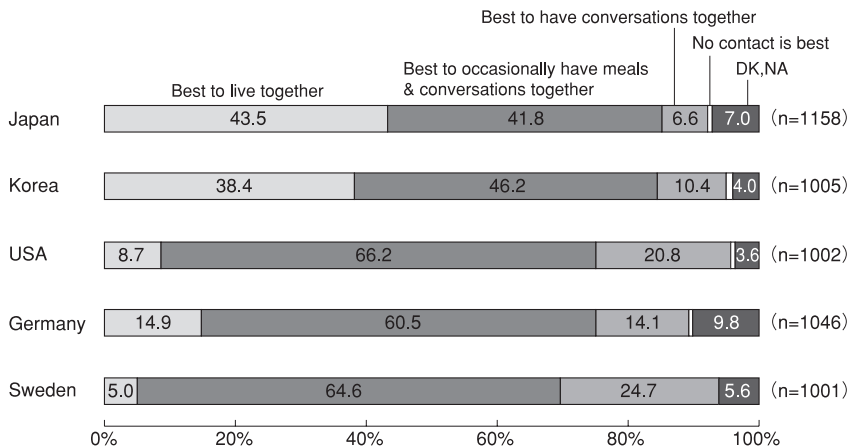


Figure 1. Elderly Parents Attitudes toward their Children & Grandchildren by Countries (2001)

Elderly Parents Attitudes toward the Relationship with their Children;

In the 2001 survey, over 40% of the Japanese elderly respondents and nearly 40% of the Korean respondents expressed a desire to live together with their children or grandchildren.

However, over the past two decades, we can see that the prevalence of these attitudes has fallen significantly both nations. In 1981 59.4% of Japanese respondents chose “co-habitation with children” as ideal.

But by 2001 this attitude had decreased by 15.9% to 43.5% in Japan. The declining desire for co-habitation was even more dramatic in

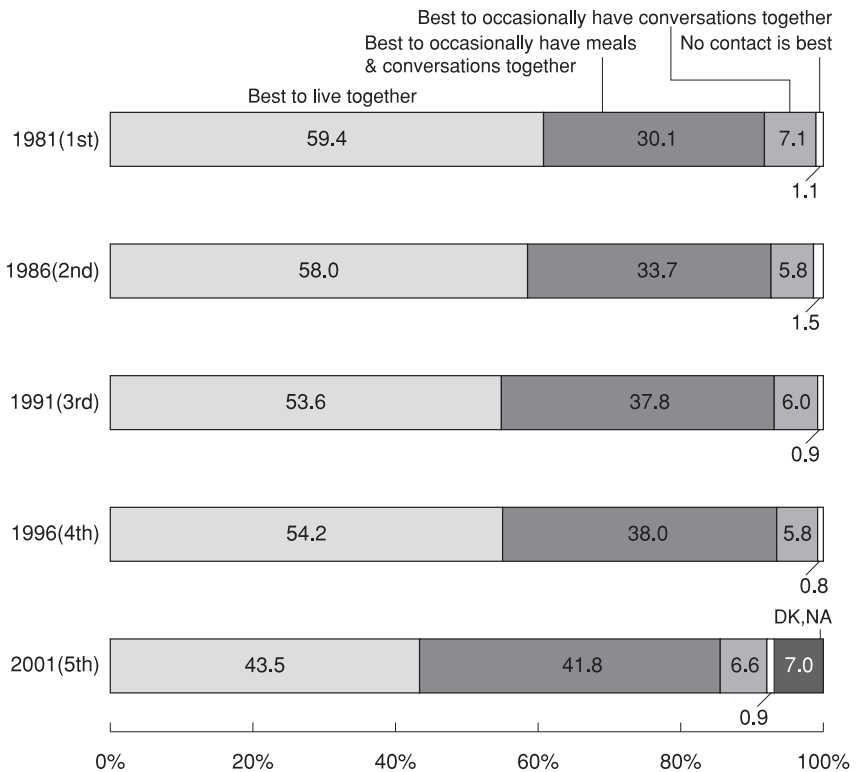


Figure 2-1. Changes in Elderly Attitudes in Japan by year

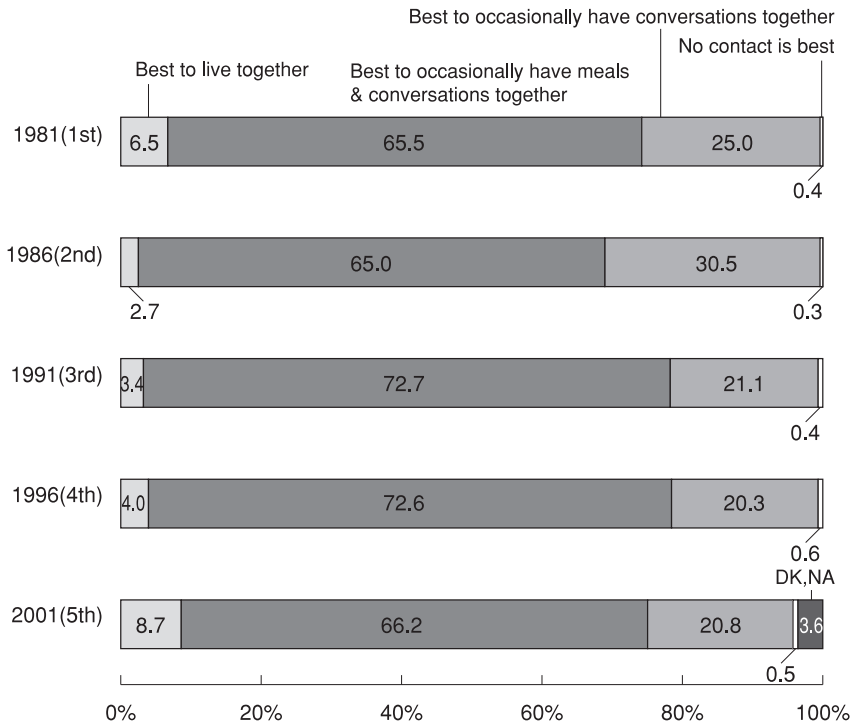


Figure 2-2. Changes in the Elderly Attitudes in USA by year

Korean, falling from a high of 83.3% in 1981 to only 38.4% in the 2001 survey.

In contrast, the American elderly’s attitudes have remained quite steady over the 20 year period of the survey. The German elderly’s attitudes have changed little over the past 10 years.

(3) Desire for Cohabitation by Age

In Japan the desire to live with one’s children or grandchildren increases with the age of the elderly respondents. Only 37.7% of Japanese age 60–64 expressed a desire for co-habitation, while 53.8% of those over 80 viewed joint living as ideal. This trend is similar in

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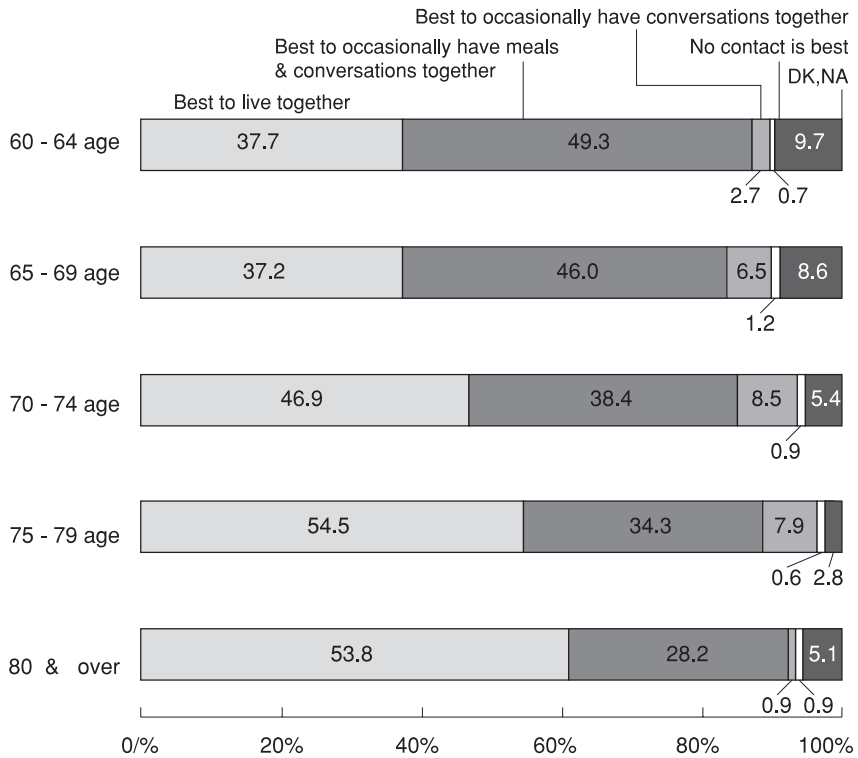


Figure 3-1. Desire for Cohabitation by Age: Japan

Korea with 31.3% of the 60–64 age bracket and 59.6% of those in the 80 and over age bracket choosing co-habitation as ideal.

In American and Sweden the respondent’s age had no impact on the desire for co-habitation, which remained below 10% for all age brackets in both nations. In Germany the elderly’s desire for co-habitation varied from 12 to 20%, increasing slightly with the age of the respondent.

(4) Desire for Cohabitation by Family Type

As we might expect, the elderly’s attitude toward co-habitation is

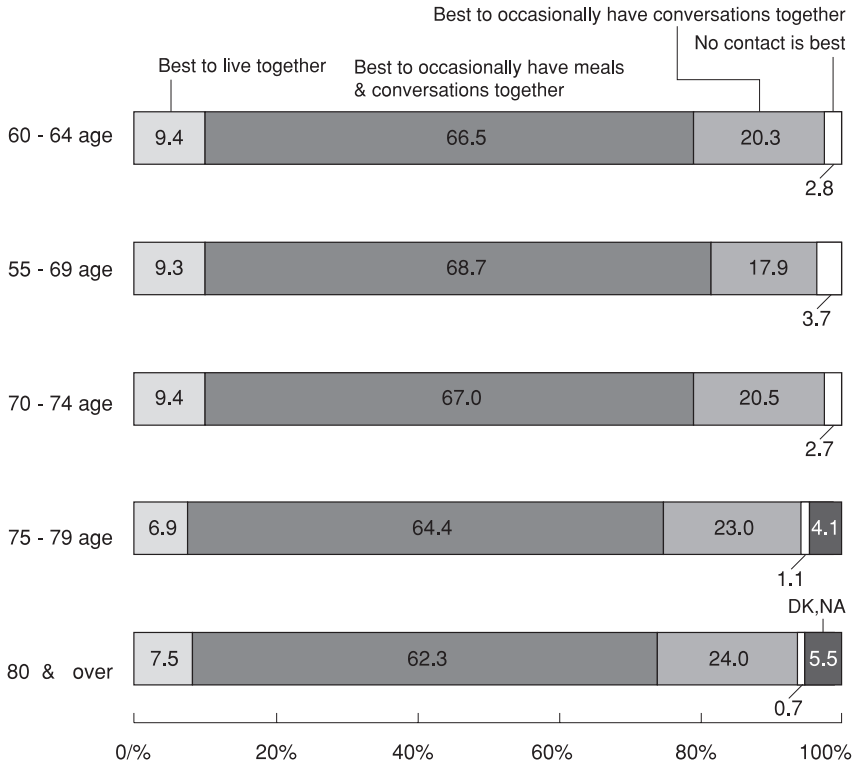


Figure 3-2. Desire for Cohabitation by Age: USA

strongly influenced by their current living arrangements.

In the 2001 survey 88.2% of elderly living in 3-generation households chose co-habitation as the ideal type; however, this figure drops to 52.3% among Japanese elderly who are currently living alone.

(5) Desire for Cohabitation by City Size

In Japan, elderly living in smaller cities and towns expressed a much stronger desire for co-habitation than those living in large urban centers. In towns with fewer than 50,000 people, just over 50%

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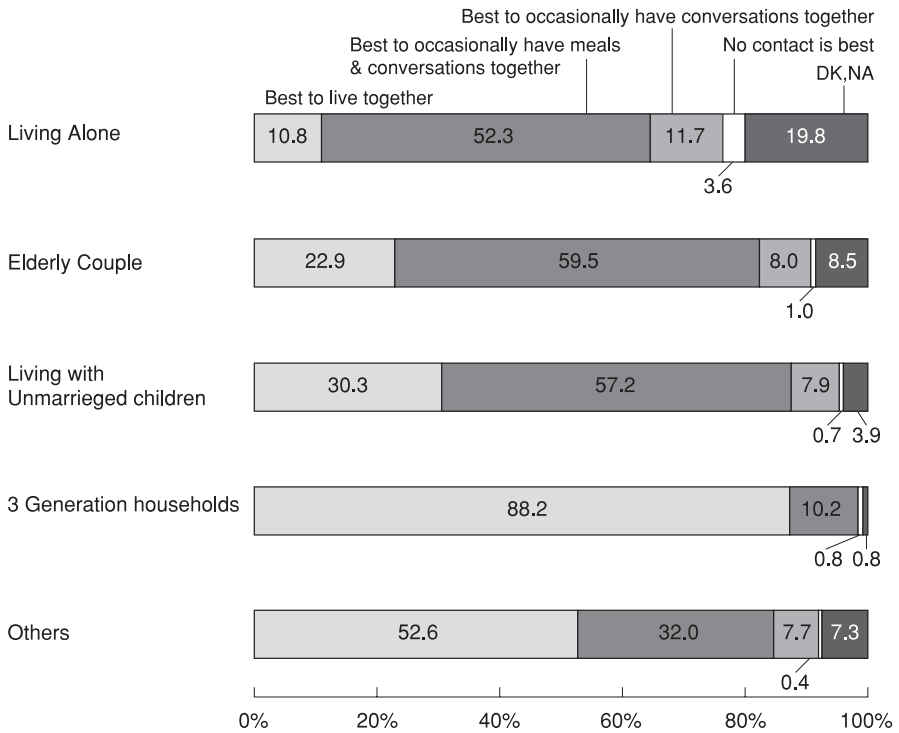


Figure 3-1. Desire for Cohabitation by Family Type: Japan

of the elderly respondents chose co-habitation as the ideal arrangement. In Japan’s 13 largest urban areas, the desire for co-habitation fell by more than 50% to only 24.7% of the elderly respondents.

Conclusions

This large scale, longitudinal survey clearly documents that the attitudes of Japanese elderly residing in urban centers have begun to resemble the attitudes of elderly populations in America and Europe,

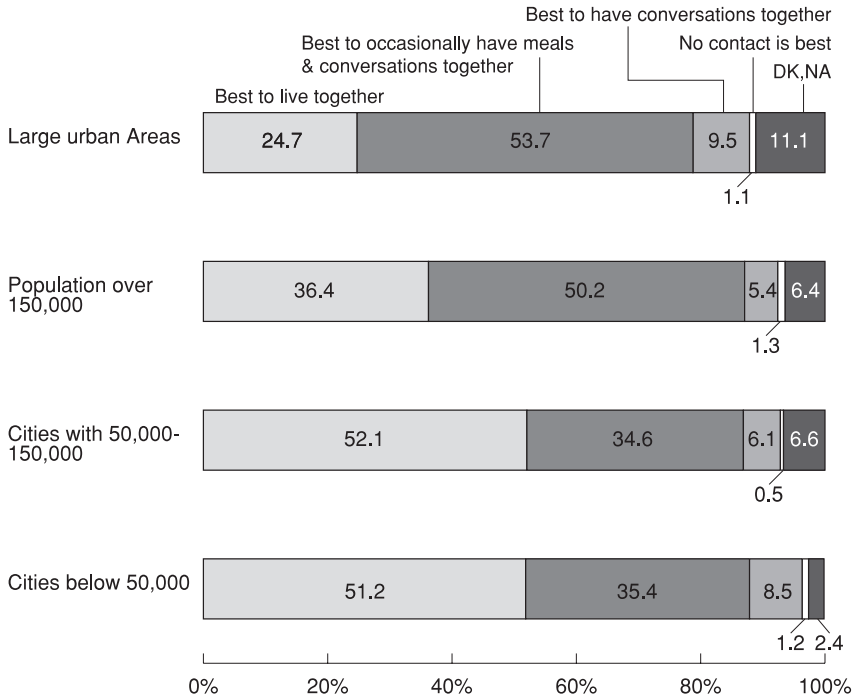


Figure 3-1. Desire for Cohabitation by City Size: Japan

at least with regard towards living arrangements. At the same time, the data indicates that in Japanese rural areas attitudinal shifts have been less dramatic. More than 50% of rural Japanese elderly continue to view co-habitation with children and grandchildren as the ideal type of living arrangement.

This shift in elderly attitudes toward independent living arrangements in urban areas has dramatically increased the demands for social services in metropolitan centers. In partial response to this demand, the Japanese government introduced “long-term care insurance” in the spring of 2000.

Appendix

I participated as researcher in these cross-cultural studies. This paper is concerned with Elderly Attitudes toward the Relationship with one's Children; An International Comparative Survey by Japanese Government in the 18th Congress of the International Association of Gerontology (Rio de Janeiro-Brazil, June 26-30, 2005).

References

- 1) Tadashi Fukutake (1974), Japanese Society Today, University of Tokyo Press
- 2) Office of Prime Minister (1981), Koureisha no Seikatsu to Ishiki (in Japanese) (Life and Attitude of the Elderly), Tokyo.
- 3) Office of Prime Minister (1987), Koureisha no Seikatsu to Ishiki (in Japanese) (Life and Attitude of the Elderly), Tokyo.
- 4) Office of Prime Minister (1991), Koureisha no Seikatsu to Ishiki (in Japanese) (Life and Attitude of the Elderly), Tokyo.
- 5) Office of Prime Minister (1997), Koureisha no Seikatsu to Ishiki (in Japanese) (Life and Attitude of the Elderly), Tokyo.
- 6) Cabinet Office (2001), Koureisha no Seikatsu to Ishiki (in Japanese) (Life and Attitude of the Elderly), Tokyo.

付記：

この論文は、総務省及び内閣府が1981年以降、5年ごとに世界の主な国々(5か国)を対象として「高齢者の生活と意識」について調査研究を行っているものに依拠している。

私は、第3回と第4回の調査研究に学識経験者(委員)として参加し、主に「高齢者の家族生活」について、分担執筆してきた。

今回、掲載した論文は、私が分担執筆している部分を縦断研究として概略的に整理し、「第18回国際老年学会議」(2005年6月26日～30日、ブラジル・リオデジャネイロ)においてに発表したものである。

なお、この研究の詳しい内容については、研究報告書（『高齢者の生活と意識』各年版、中央法規出版）を参照されたい。