

The Changing Korean Family

Fewer retirees want to live with their children, prefer to stay in own homes

by Shin Hae-in
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Shin Han-yong, a 59-year-old businessman, is planning to live by himself once his two sons get married. He has been lonely since his wife died last April, but thinks living together with either of his sons would cause too much trouble.

“I know that my future daughters-in-law wouldn’t like the idea of living with an old and single father-in-law,” said Shin. “And I hate the thought of my sons hassling over which one is responsible for taking care of me.”

Since he has enough money to live on until he dies, he is planning to spend the latter part of his life by himself, in peace, he said.

Until recently, it was common for Korean sons and daughters—especially sons—to support their parents by living together with them after marriage. Under the Korean tradition of filial piety, it was considered a duty.

With the so-called “silver population” of people over 65 increasing, experts point out the dangers of older people suffering from poverty and illness are abandoned by their children.

By 2019, those older than 65 will comprise 14 percent of the population, and the figure will jump to 20 percent in 2026, according to the National Statistical Office.

But recent research shows that it is not only the younger generation that wants to break away from the old rules of filial piety. Many other older people like Shin are willing to adjust to the changes and want their children to form separate family units after marriage.

The National Statistical Office announced earlier this month that more than 50 percent of a surveyed 10,000 citizens aged over 65 do not want to live with their children in the future. This is a big leap from the 27 percent who wished to live separately from their children in 2002.

In fact, the actual number of older people living by themselves has more than doubled during the last 10 years.

A new term has been created to describe these older people who wish to enjoy the latter part of their lives away from their children, spending their life savings on various leisure activities. They are described as “TONK”—Two Only, No Kids.

With such drastic changes occurring in the traditional family, there was an interesting poll in 2002 of people in their 20’s to 40’s by the local research group Insight Research.

According to this research, people who were on good terms with their parents were more positive about living with them in the future. But interestingly, those who had grown up in large families that included grandparents living at home were negative. The research group had expected people from large families to be comparatively positive about living with parents, said Kim Min-hyung, a staff member who participated in the research.

“But seeing the result, we concluded that large families were no longer suitable for current society,” Kim said. “Many said that it was especially difficult to live together with parents once their own children are born. The generation gap can end up ruining the whole family.”

A woman who participated in the poll said that “ideal traditional large families exist only in books and movies.” The woman was in her late 20’s at the time, Kim said. “After growing up watching her mother serving her grandmother, she said that she knew from experience that living with parents was much more difficult than one might think,” said Kim. Thus, it is natural for more parents and children to wish for separate lives, Kim said.

Housewife Hong Myung-soon, 62, has two daughters and a son who are all doctors, but Hong and her husband are looking into so-called “silver towns” where retirees live. They can move into one after her husband retires next year. “My elder daughter, who got married last year, is already asking me to look after her baby when she has one. I have no intention of doing so,” said Hong. “Taking care of three children wore me out with worries and effort. I want to get some rest now.”

Not all elderly people are well enough off to get a rest, however. To have enough money to join the TONK party, some people are now concentrating on saving money instead of spending it on their children, as parents traditionally used to do. “I am planning to stop spending money on my daughter and save up so that my husband and I can find a quiet house in the countryside after he retires,” said housewife Lee Hyo-yang, who has a daughter in college.

Im Seung-gwon, director of the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, says that in the past, older people had no choice but to depend on their children because they normally spent all their life savings on their children. “In a way, parents had the right to depend on their children,” he said. Today, however, “Parents are becoming less devoted to their

children, in order to stay independent after they turn old.”

Problems remain, however, as the great majority of the older population is still comprised of people who do not have enough money saved to pay for their expenses by themselves.

The current situation is due to changes in the social structure, not in people’s ethics, Im said.

“This is why the government should think of more ways to help people who are aging, rather than asking individuals to be more ‘moral’ and go back to the traditional ways,” he said.

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