

Living Alone: The Trend of One-Person Households in Asia
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Due to the trend of continuously declining fertility and marriage rates, increase in divorce and migration, one-person households in Asia will continue to increase in next few decades.

The one-person household is the fastest-growing household type in the world, particularly in Asia. The prevalence of one-person households is growing not only because of the rising widowhood and divorced population but also due to an increase in the never-married population and labor migration.

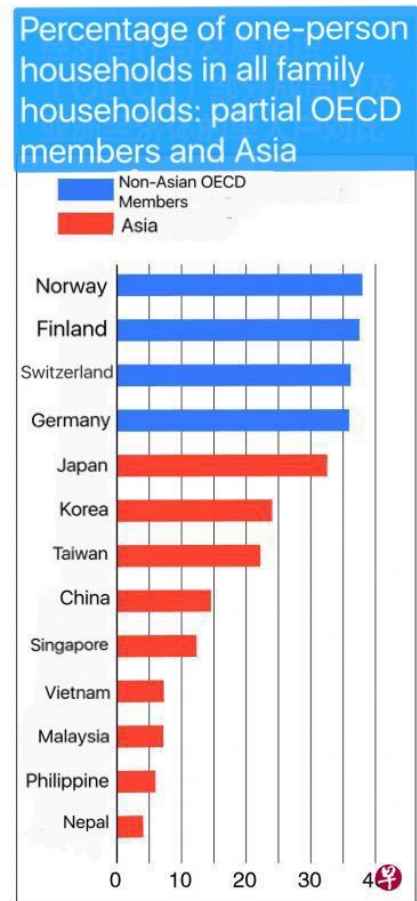
I recently edited a special issue with Dr. Adam Ka-Lok Cheung in *Demographic Research* that included a series of articles on one-person households in Asia. This research is the first systematic work on the phenomenon of one-person households that is conducted outside of Europe and North America. The in-depth analysis in fifteen countries across Asia use census data, population survey, and longitudinal data. The results help reveal that those who live alone are more likely to experience financial distress and social isolation. They also show how living alone could affect one's psychological well-being. These results have implications for policies that aim to mitigate the impact of a growing population who live alone. .

In many developed countries such as Norway, Finland, Denmark, Switzerland, and Germany more than one-third of households contain only one person (see Figure). Even though one-person households in Asia is generally lower than in Europe and North America, research predicts that by 2020, 4 out of the top 10 countries with the highest number of one-person households will be in Asia, with China and India leading the trend.

Even though living with multi-generation in one household is a traditionally valued norm in Asia, the proportion of one-person households varies among Asian countries. Among the most developed countries in East Asia such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, Japan has the highest proportion of one-person households in Asia, measuring 32.4%. The proportion of one-person households in South Korea and Taiwan is 23.9% and 22% respectively. The proportion of one-person households in countries such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, Nepal and India is well below 10%.

Who choose to live alone?

Similar to Western countries, age and gender are the main stratifying factors in the patterns of one-person households in Asia. The one-person households in Asia consist primarily two groups: elderly and young adults. The Asian elderly people are living alone due to widowhood, and the young adults are living alone because of delayed marriage, divorce, and increased geographic mobility. Since women have higher life expectancy compared to men, women are



the majority population who live alone among elderly. Among young adults who live alone, young men are the majority who choose to live alone, and it also includes a smaller proportion of women who migrate because of employment.

Nevertheless, Asian studies have shown that the distribution of one-person households does not differ significantly between urban and rural region: one-person households does not only exist in urban areas, but this phenomenon also exists in rural areas. The rural areas in Vietnam and Myanmar, family splits into multiple one-person households due to migration of a spouse or children moving to cities for employment.

The reasons why Asians choose to live alone are closer to Europe in the 18th century than those in contemporary Western societies. In contemporary Western society, living alone is labeled as a middle-class lifestyle. Young adults who are economically independent with wide social networks are more likely to living alone.

In contrast, in Asia, young adults in one-person households are more likely to be migrant workers and working-class, and the reason why they choose to live alone is more likely because of financial distress rather than to pursue a middle-class lifestyle. Moreover, the lifestyle of Asian one-person households is different from Western society. Furthermore, in Asia, due to the relatively high living expenses, urban young adults usually live in group quarters with no core family members. In Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Thailand, nearly 60% to 80% who are aged 15 to 25 live alone in urban areas and live in group quarters.

Trends in Singapore

In Singapore, the proportion of elderly (aged 65 and above) one-person households has increased by 50%, from 8% (in the year of 2000) to 12% (in the year of 2010). The longitudinal data (the Panel on Health and Ageing of Singaporean Elderly) in 2009 and 2011 show that the feeling of loneliness – that is the absence of companionship, being left-out, and isolated – has increased among elderly who lived alone.

Living in a highly urbanized city-state like Singapore, even though children might live apart with their parents, the geographic distance is relatively close. Meanwhile healthcare system is advanced and accessible, so living alone does not necessarily lead to loneliness.

Social isolation is a living condition, whereas loneliness is a psychological experience. Past research found that social isolation and loneliness tend to increase mortality, therefore, it is important to reduce these risk factors. Whereas not all older adults who live alone feel lonely or isolated, sometimes they may feel lonely. Thus, it is important to encourage living alone elderlies to attend social activities, boost their physical and mental health, and help them not feel isolated.

Due to the declining marriage and fertility rates, and a continuous increase in divorce and migration, one-person households in Asia will keep increasing in the next few decades. In China, for instance, the sharp growing population will lead to a substantial increase in the widowed one-person households. Moreover, the one-child policy has led to a substantial gender imbalance; more than 30 to 40 million of men will face the “bachelor crisis” when they are approaching the family formation age. Based on this situation, we expect to see an increase in a new group of one-person households consisting of disadvantaged men in the next few decades. As of now, nearly 80 million people are living alone in China and this number is estimated to increase to 130 million people by 2050.

We will further explore the relationship between living arrangements, social network, and social welfares to understand one-person households under different social context. Meanwhile, we need to better

understand the the impact of living alone and on physical health and psychological well-being. We also need to examine how public policies can influence both the motivations and impact of living alone.