

**Being a Good Grandparent:
Comparative Intergenerational Relationships in Japan and Singapore
By Associate Professor Thang Leng Leng,
Department of Japanese Studies and CFPR Deputy Director, NUS
*As featured on Lianhe Zaobao, 3 September 2016***

When speaking about the caregiver role in Asian families, the image of grandparents as providers of grandchild-care, especially grandmothers, are frequently brought to mind. This is particularly so in Singapore where increased longevity, coupled with changes in family structure, the trend toward nuclear families, and dual-earner families, have heightened the awareness of grandparents' roles and intergenerational bonding. A 2005 survey from Singapore children's society has shown that 40% of children in Singapore from birth to three years old are cared for by their grandparents. The government recognizes and supports the role of grandparents as caregivers for grandchildren because they are important in helping promote birth rates. The grandparent caregiver tax relief introduced as part of a new procreation package in 2004 is a scheme which enables working mothers (Singaporean citizens with children age 12 and below) whose children are being cared for by unemployed grandparents to receive income tax relief of S\$3,000.

Although most dual-earner families consider the grandparents as a potential help for raising grandchildren, grandparents clearly differentiate between parenting and grandparenting, and feel the need for their children to employ full time domestic workers to help them cope with the strenuous role in caring for children. Nonetheless, even if grandparents do not see it as their responsibility to care for their grandchildren, they recognize the lack of options available to their children and many will step forward to help. Research has shown that the willingness of older women to help their daughter or daughter-in-law in childcare reveals the social expectation for women - especially tertiary-educated mothers - to remain in the workforce, and to willingly quit their jobs is seen as a waste.

When comparing grandparents in Singapore and Japan, there appear to have lower expectations for grandparents in Japan to raise their grandchildren. The distance between grandparents' and their children's households influence how often the grandparents interact with their grandchildren and whether grandparents will help in providing care. Unlike Singapore where the small size of the country allows for relatively easy travel and other arrangements in caring for grandchildren by their grandparents even if they do not live under one roof, in Japan the fall in three-generational households reduces the availability and intergenerational contact.

However, this does not mean that Japanese grandparents are totally hand-offs in grandparenting. A study revealed that grandmothers continue to be heavily involved in childrearing, often serving as an invisible pillar of support behind the working mothers in Japan. On the other hand, the same study discovered that grandmothers in Japan have become much more active nowadays - many are active outside the family such as by working as instructors of traditional arts and culture.

In both Japan and Singapore, which both have the highest rate of aging and are among the richest in Asian countries, a new generation of elderly has emerged, having distinctly different expectations and aspirations from their earlier cohorts. In a study in Japan during the 1990s, a new senior culture made up of middle-class, rich urban elderly - mostly retired salarymen - wanted to be self-reliant and did not

want to live with their children. More recently, the older Japanese, especially the baby-boomers from the 1960s, increasingly wish to lead an active "second life" after their retirement. More grandmothers are actively seeking ways to enhance their purpose of life outside the family, such as work, hobbies, traveling and volunteering. Similarly in Singapore, active, outgoing grandparents face challenges with having to balance between their grandchildren-caregiving responsibilities and social/leisure activities.

In a qualitative study that I conducted with Professors Kalyani Mehta, Tsuneo Usui and Mari Tsuruwaka (2011) in Singapore and Japan, grandparents from both countries were unanimous in their non-interfering roles as grandparents; they refrained from interfering for the harmony of family relationships. However, non-interference does not mean that they do not care, but instead it is perceived as a way to show respect to the younger generation.

Grandparents are '(cushy) cushions'

The principle of non-interference seems more strictly adhered to among the Japanese grandparents than the Singaporean grandparents. One Japanese grandparent said that interfering too much would result in being told off by the daughter-in-law, and another said that the daughter-in-law views the things she says as a bad influence.

For both Singaporean and Japanese grandparents, the non-interference rule places them in a passive role where they will not make the first move until their children approach them for help. The Japanese parents, in particular, seem to agree that grandparents should not interfere in the way they raise their children, with one mother insisting that she will bring up her own children the way she wants, and refuses to listen to her mother-in-law. This has seen a decline in traditional practices such as naming the grandchildren, which one grandfather laments as a loss of traditional authority. On the contrary, a Chinese daughter-in-law in Singapore accepts her mother-in-law's assertion that she should name her own grandchildren, although it was no longer a practice, and she in fact saw it as an honor and was proud of it. However, except for the naming of grandchildren, the mother-in-law did not interfere with the raising of her daughter-in-law's child, and she saw it as a mutual respect that maintained a harmonious relationship between the generations in the family.

While grandparents mostly do not interfere when raising grandchildren by drawing a boundary of responsibility, they often assure the parents that they will be there to help if asked.

Grandparents want to be a good grandparent and a friend to the grandchildren. Grandparents do not want to be involved in disciplining the grandchildren as this is seen as the parents' responsibility. Instead, their responsibilities are to love them, comfort them and be their friends. The grandchildren also recognize the role differentiation between parents and grandparents, with one grandchild talking about how his grandfather mediate whenever his father scolded him, and how his grandparents will soothe the parents whenever they scold him for doing something wrong. The parents are also aware of the differences between the relationship and how they complement each other with one Japanese parent describing grandparents as a cushion who are always being kind and never scold the grandchildren, giving them comfort as opposed to the parents who scold them.

Although grandparents tend not to interfere, they still provide instrumental help such as cooking for the grandchildren and picking them up from school. Most Singaporean grandmothers interviewed above have provided childcare for their grandchildren when they were younger, especially if they live in the same household.

Despite the seeming lack of interference in raising grandchildren, all the interviewees agree that grandparents play significant and intangible roles in teaching traditional values and morals to the younger generation. One Japanese grandparent taught national culture, tradition, history and customs in non-disciplinary ways, such as making mention of characters in historical dramas. A Singaporean parent comments how his children benefits from his father's knowledge of botany and Hindu scriptures, with the grandfather often telling the grandchildren stories and legends.

Yet there still exist tensions within the family, with parents being unhappy when the grandparents attempt to correct them on the correct way of raising a child. The grandparents also may have problems with the maids, something more specific to Singapore, which cause the latter to be upset when the former tell them what to do. The grandparents also have to be careful treading around the in-laws, with one Singaporean grandparent explaining how he could not tell his in-laws what to do in the same manner as he would his own biological children.

Grandparenting, like any other relationships, is about relationship building. In Singapore, grandparents today face more challenges with generational differences and expectations, their efforts at co-nurturing the younger generations should be more recognized and appreciated by the middle generations. Whether they choose to commit to caring for their grandchildren or not, grandparents will always love their grandchildren and want to be perceived as good grandparents.

Reference: Thang, L.L., Mehta, K., Usui, T. and Tsuruwaka, M. Being a Good Grandparent: Roles and Expectations in Intergenerational Relationships in Japan and Singapore. *Marriage and Family Review* 47(8): 548-570. 2011.