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Respect for the Elderly in Asia:
Stability and Change

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Organizations collaborating in this research include: Population Studies and Training Center, Brown University; Population Institute, University of the Philippines; Department of Social Work and Psychology, National University of Singapore; Taiwan Provincial Institute of Family Planning; and Institute of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University. For additional information about the comparative project, please contact the Principal Investigator: Albert I. Hermalin, Population Studies Center, University of Michigan, 1225 South University Avenue, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104-2590.
Respect for the Elderly in Asia: Stability and Change

Abstract: This study analyzes data from 79 focus groups conducted in the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand. The research examined ways in which respect for the elderly is experienced in these four countries, the extent to which respect has changed over time, and the reasons for changes in respect for the elderly. Using qualitative analysis, five distinct dimensions of respect were identified: gestures and manners, tokens, customs and rituals, asking for advice, and obedience. Focus group discussions indicated that changes have occurred on most of these dimensions of respect. The changes were attributed to variations in family structure and function, education, income, and modernization. These findings are discussed in relation to changing definitions of respect and variations in the way in which respect for the elderly is expressed in Asia.

Dataset used: Comparative Studies of the Elderly in Asia: Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Philippines, 1991

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Respect for the elderly is built into the social fabric of most Asian countries. The emphasis on social relationships among Asians (Ho, 1982) and their awareness of hierarchy within these relationships (Limanonda, 1995) has traditionally resulted in a special deference paid to the aged. The value of filial piety, which is understood as “respect and care for parents and the aged” (Sung, 1995, p. 240) has deep roots in Asian culture. This value serves as a standard by which attitudes and behaviors toward the elderly are judged (Sung, 1990).

The importance of respect for the elderly is reflected in the languages of many Asian countries. For example, the Filipino term “utang na loob” refers to a debt of gratitude that children have for their parents. This is a debt that can never be completely repaid and the failure to attempt to fulfill this obligation results in considerable shame among children (Domingo et al., 1993; Domingo, 1994; Ho, 1982). In Thailand, “bunkhun” refers to a sense of obligation, moral indebtedness and gratitude towards parents and others who have been helpful (Knodel, Saengtienchai & Sittitrai, 1992; Pramualratana, 1992). Similarly, the Chinese word “xiao” means that children support and respect their parents and that the elderly have an important role in their families and society (Chow, 1997). These concepts reflect a traditional view of respect for the elderly based on what they have sacrificed for and provided to the younger generation. This ethic may, however, be changing over time and may differ by country. The purpose of this paper is to examine the different ways in which respect for the elderly is demonstrated by Asians, to determine the extent to which respect for the elderly has changed over time, and to identify some of the reasons for such changes.

There is a small body of cross-cultural research that has addressed the concept of respect for the elderly. To illustrate, a classic study conducted by Silverman and Maxwell (1978) examined respect for the aged within 34 societies drawn from Murdock and White’s Standard Cross-Cultural Sample. Silverman and Maxwell (1978, p. 91) identified seven different kinds of respect classified as:

- spatial (e.g., special seats for old people),
- victual (e.g., given choice foods),
- linguistic (e.g., addressed in honorifics),
- presentational (e.g., special posture assumed in their presence),
- service (e.g., housekeeping performed for them),
- prestative (e.g., given gifts), and
- celebrative (e.g., ceremonies held in their honor).

While Silverman and Maxwell made a significant contribution to the literature by distinguishing among different kinds of respect, they did not examine whether respect changed over time in these societies.

A more recent study by Chipperfield and Havens (1992) explicitly focused on changes in perceived respect among elders in different ethnic groups. They analyzed data from a longitudinal study of older Manitobans who were interviewed in the mid 1970s
and again in the early 1980s. In this study, Chipperfield and Havens focused on the differential changes in respect among six groups (i.e., North American, British, French, German, Native Indian and Others, including Europeans and Asians). Their results indicated that some of these groups (i.e., British, French and German) experienced increased respect over time while the others experienced stability in respect. These findings are important in that they point to ethnic differences in respect over time, but they are limited by their use of a single unidimensional scale by which respect was assessed.

A third study by Mehta (1997), which is most relevant to our own research, used qualitative methods to examine respect for the elderly in Singapore. Her research was based on data from focus group interviews with the elderly and adult children, in which participants compared current and past respect for the elderly. Mehta found that the meaning of respect had changed over time. Respect connoted obedience in the past, but its meaning had now shifted to courtesy and politeness. While this shift in meaning was generally consistent across focus groups in Singapore, it is not possible to generalize this finding to other Asian countries.

The present study builds upon the contributions of each of these studies. Similar to the work of Silverman and Maxwell (1978), we distinguish among several different kinds of respect. We augment their work by examining changes in respect over time, as do Chipperfield and Havens (1992) and Mehta (1997). We further build on previous research on this topic by using Mehta’s qualitative methodology, data from the same Singapore sample, and adding data from focus groups in three other Asian countries. In so doing, we can begin to address cross-cultural patterns of respect for the elderly in Asia.

**Methodology**

This study is based on information generated from focus groups conducted in the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand. The data were gathered as part of the Comparative Studies of the Elderly in Asia, a comprehensive project coordinated by the University of Michigan that utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data and analytic techniques. The focus group component followed a coordinated research design that was developed collaboratively among researchers from all four countries. The 79 focus groups analyzed here (21 in Singapore, 14 in Taiwan, 18 in the Philippines and 26 in Thailand) were conducted during 1990-1991. Each group consisted of six to nine people. The focus groups from Singapore provided the data on which Mehta (1997) conducted her research.

Group membership was based on a number of criteria (see Table 1) including generation, place of residence, and socioeconomic status. The two generations involved were elderly (aged 60 and over) and adult children (aged 30-55, who had at least one living parent aged 60 and over). For place of residence, the Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand selected sites that were either rural or urban while in Singapore, groups were
exclusively urban. Socioeconomic status was considered when selecting participants in Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore, but not for Taiwan.

In addition to these three criteria, ethnicity was considered in forming focus group discussions in Taiwan and Singapore. Similarly, gender was a criteria for participating in focus groups in the Philippines and Taiwan. Based on their pretest experiences where male participants tended to dominate the discussion, men and women were separated in the Philippines. In Taiwan, men and women were separated in most of the elderly groups but not in the adult children groups. In Thailand and Singapore, men and women were included in all the groups. Finally, in Taiwan, education was used as a selection criteria such that some groups were highly educated while others had less education.

Guidelines for focus group discussions included questions concerning living arrangements and support, economic status, psychological problems, and social relationships, and respect for the elderly. While many of the questions differed by country, questions pertaining to respect for the elderly were similar across the four countries. However, there was some variation in the extent to which respect was addressed within each country. That is, respect was one of the main topics for discussion in all countries, except in the Philippines where it was a sub-topic embedded within another set of questions. Therefore the discussion about respect for the elderly had significantly less depth and richness among focus groups in the Philippines as compared to the other countries.

Analysis

All of the focus groups were conducted in the native languages which, in some cases, such as in Singapore, involved English mixed with the native language. Data were transcribed, translated into English, and transferred to Ethnograph (a computer software program for qualitative data analysis). The authors began by reading two randomly-selected transcripts from each country to identify prevalent themes and a preliminary coding scheme. The authors subsequently coded all the transcripts and had frequent discussions about their coding decisions to insure reliability and minimize subjectivity.

The actual coding of the transcripts involved several steps. First, each author served as either a primary or secondary reader. The primary reader identified the portions of the transcript that were devoted to a discussion of respect for the elderly. Second, the primary reader then coded the relevant portions of the text. Third, the secondary reader re-read all the designated portions and re-coded them to confirm the coding decision of the primary reader and to add any additional codes that were missing. Fourth, these coded segments were then entered into Ethnograph which facilitated our ability to locate and retrieve relevant coded segments for analysis (Seidel, Friese, & Leonard, 1995). Fifth, the results were organized and analyzed in relation to three major codes: forms of respect, changes in respect, and reasons for changes in respect. In the analysis below, a number of direct quotations from focus group members will illustrate our findings but names of participants are omitted to protect confidentiality.
Findings

Forms of Respect

The focus group participants described different ways in which they demonstrated respect to the elderly. Data from the group discussions provided considerable detail about each of these forms of respect which we have organized into five categories: gestures and manners, tokens, customs and rituals, advice, and obedience (see Table 2).

Gestures and manners. In each of the countries, participants mentioned a variety of stylized gestures and manners connoting respect. While this topic was discussed by participants in all four countries, the relative importance of specific gestures and manners differed by country.

Many of the polite gestures described by the groups were related to ways in which younger people greet older people. Discussants addressed the importance of speaking politely when greeting older people. Many described ritualized ways of using the body during such greetings. In Thailand, for example, one of these greetings involved placing the hands together and slightly bending the head. Indeed, placing one’s body lower than the elder to insure that the younger person’s head was below that of the elder was a traditional form of respect mentioned by several Thai discussants. In Singapore, focus groups referred to several different ways of greeting older people: kissing their hands, bowing, and with hands joined in front of the face. These stylized greetings were described more by some ethnic groups (e.g., the Malay and Indian discussants) in Singapore than others (e.g., the Chinese). One of the Malay participants demonstrated how younger people bend their body as they passed elders. Similarly, participants in the Philippines observed that the traditional way for a young person to show respect in their country was to kiss the hand of the elder whom they were greeting.

Another form of respectful manners was displayed by the terms used in referring to older people and other family members. As one Thai respondent said, “If they are at the age of our grandma, we call them grandma. If they are at the age of our aunts, we call them so.” Using appropriate names as a form of respect was discussed quite frequently by the Chinese discussants who lived in Singapore. For example, one focus group member described how important it was to her older mother that children know and accurately address older people in terms of their hierarchy within the family (e.g., “Third Aunty or Fourth Aunty” rather than simply “Aunty”). In the Philippines, focus group members described specific terms which connote respectful manners such as the way in which one said, “yes.” They explained that the respectful term was “opo” while the disrespectful term was “oo.” In the words of one elderly respondent, “When I hear ‘oo’ from small children, my ears hurt, I get really irritated.”

A third form of good manners associated with respect was helpful behaviors. Several focus groups mentioned the importance of helping older people to cross the street or helping them to carry heavy objects. When discussing respectful behavior, a common
concern addressed by groups in all four countries, particularly in Taiwan, was how older people were treated on buses. Some of this discussion was directed toward the behavior of the bus drivers in relation to how and when they stopped the bus for an elder. However, more of the discussion focused on the behavior of younger passengers in relation to whether or not they gave up a seat for an older person.

**Tokens.** Discussions in all the countries, with the exception of the Philippines, referred to material tokens of respect. These tokens were typically in the form of food or money. The provision of food to the elderly connoted respect and caring. Thai respondents described the ways in which they tried to prepare food that elderly people particularly liked and how they saved the best part of the meal for older people. In Singapore, a respondent told how he had learned from his parents to give the elders the first of any sweets that were brought home.

Similarly, the provision of money was another form of respect. Taiwanese respondents talked about giving money to their elders to provide for their living expenses. Thais described how they gave money to the elderly so they would have the ability to make merit through offerings to the temple priests. They also used money to buy material things that the older person would like.

**Customs and rituals.** Discussions about customs and rituals associated with respect for the elderly occurred primarily within the Thai and Singapore focus groups. The Singapore groups focused on customs involving ways in which younger and older people socialized. Several members noted that, traditionally, children were taught to stay apart from the older guests until they were invited to join them. This custom involved children and elders socializing in separate rooms unless the children were invited to join the elders.

The Thai groups described a variety of rituals in which the elderly were an integral, respected part. For some of these rituals, older people were the focus of attention. Several of our participants described how during Thai New Years, adult children paid respect to their elders by bringing them food, presents, and pouring water over their hands. Another such occasion, described by groups in Northern Thailand, involved a surprise gift-giving party to an older, revered member of the community which was sponsored by his/her younger family members. One of the focus group participants described this celebration:

> Money is gathered from many people to buy food, things to be used and dessert. Then we will silently go to visit to surprise an invalid old person. We’ll leave those things together with some money next to that old person who is asleep. When the old person wakes up and sees those things, he will bless those who give them to him.

For other rituals described by the Thai discussants, the elderly were not the focus but were central players. Such was the case for weddings when, for example, it was generally an older person who was designated to ask for the bride’s hand in marriage.
Group participants explained that younger people were neither sufficiently reliable nor respectable to play this role. Part of the wedding ceremony incorporated an older couple who made the marriage bed to bless the newly married couple with a long life together.

Advice. Consulting older people for their advice was a frequently-mentioned form of respect. Several adult Thai children described how they routinely asked their parents before they made big purchases (e.g., a house, a television, a car), particularly if they were still living with parents and planning to use their money towards the purchase. Some explained that they asked their parents for advice about major life decisions, such as the suitability of marriage partners for their children. Others said they sought older people’s advice primarily in relation to traditions. For example, a Thai participant explained the circumstances under which advice was sought, “If they are modern problems, we do not. If they are family problems, we do. Old people know nothing about modern problems.” Similarly, a Singaporean respondent said, “I don’t consult my mother but I would consult her on things which I’m not sure about, like customs.”

In addition to asking advice on customs and major purchases, Thais consulted older people for advice in a number of ways. The Thai focus groups told about relying on elders to determine auspicious dates. They asked older people to determine auspicious dates for weddings, house constructions, festival dates, and when to plant the rice. The elderly were also consulted about quarrels within the family and village. This advice-seeking depended upon the magnitude of the problem. If the problem was relatively small, older people were consulted. For larger problems, the village headman was approached. For very serious matters, villagers would turn to the police.

Obedience. Focus groups in all four countries spoke about obedience to the directives of the elder as a crucial form of respect. In the words of one Thai respondent, respect for the elderly was when “we listen to and obey their suggestions.” A Singaporean discussant described respect in terms of patiently accepting a scolding from an elder. This process involved not talking back or in any way humiliating the elder.

Focus groups in each country addressed different ways in which obedience to the elderly could be manifested. In Taiwan, there was mention of younger people following older peoples’ directives as to when they could or could not leave home. In Thailand, discussants explained how grandchildren followed their grandparents’ advice about whom to marry. In Singapore, a respondent described respect in relation to obediently following the advice of the elderly concerning large purchases.

Changes in Respect

There was ample indication that these expressions of respect were changing over time. An examination of the five forms of respect described above led to the discovery that in all categories but one, themes of change were pervasive. It was only in relation to
tokens of respect that the discussants did not refer to marked changes over time. Here, we will focus on the forms of respect that were associated with change.

**Gestures and manners.** Focus groups described numerous ways in which traditional greetings and ritualized physical gestures had altered. In Thailand, several participants explained how younger people frequently walked by and ignored older people rather than greeting them with the traditional gesture of hands joined in front of the head. Others pointed out how few young people bowed in front of elders. Referring to the younger generation’s tendency not to bend low in the presence of their elders, one Thai participant observed, “The young nowadays mostly have a still waist.” Similarly, a Singaporean discussant noted, “The children in the past, if they wanted to walk past an elder, they would bend their bodies. Children nowadays sweep by us as if we are grass.”

In the Philippines, focus group participants decried the glib way in which younger people now greeted older people without even kissing their hand. Said one elderly Filipino, “Nowadays, kids don’t know anything about respect. You’ll have to offer your hand for them to kiss. Sometimes, they don’t even want to kiss the elderly’s hands.” Another Filipino distinguished greetings between the young and the old in the city as compared to the country, “In the city, older people are ignored by the young whereas in the country, young people will at least greet older people with a few words, such as ‘Good morning’ or ‘Good afternoon.’”

Another change concerned the way in which the young addressed the old. Several discussants pointed to marked changes in the traditional attention to naming patterns. A Chinese group member in Singapore noted that the English education system had resulted in an indifference to distinctions between elders and juniors, “When the kid grows up, you ask him who is this person? He’ll say ‘uncle’ but will not know how you are related--whether you’re father’s older or younger brother, mother’s older or younger sister.” In addition, younger people were portrayed as much ruder than in the past. A Taiwanese shopkeeper told how a younger person had recently asked directions by shouting, “Hey! Got a minute!”

A third change had occurred in relation to help-giving. Focus groups noted changes in the kindness previously directed toward older people using public transportation. Some noticed that bus drivers rarely waited for the elderly to be seated before moving. Others observed that young people frequently did not give up their seats to older passengers. In the words of a Filipino discussant, “Nowadays, you will often see an old man helplessly standing beside a seated teenager just looking on.”

**Customs and rituals.** Certain customs related to proscribed respectful behaviors toward older people appear to be in flux. Group members described changing expectations concerning how children should behave in the presence of elderly people. For example, in Singapore, young people were traditionally expected to stay apart from older visitors until they were called. They also ate separately from the older people. In the words of an older Indian participant from Singapore, “Elders don’t expect young to
behave in that way. The pattern is changing.” Another Singaporean respondent talked about how, when in the past children did eat with their parents, it was unacceptable for children to ask for food. In contrast, children now feel quite comfortable asking to have a dish passed to them.

Among the Thai, the degree of change appeared to be related to geographical location such that those in urban areas noted more change in respect than did those in rural areas. In Bangkok, discussants were particularly vocal about changes that they observed. The Bangkok participants noted that now people were asked to help in festivities based on their ability and status, rather than simply their age. One participant described the criteria for becoming president of a ceremony, “He must be an able old man or an important one to be invited. A local old man will never be invited.” They also noted that, unlike the country, people in Bangkok did not wait for the elderly before beginning important ceremonies. As one woman observed, “They may not even come. How can they spend time waiting for them?”

**Advice.** While some of our participants felt that younger people were genuinely interested in the advice of their elders, others described a form of advice-asking that was more stylized. For example, in Thailand, members of a Bangkok focus group identified a strategic form of advice-asking that was intended to enhance the elder’s sense of control. These adult children described how they consulted with older people to give them the feeling that they were an important part of the decision. In so doing, the decision of the elderly was generally consistent with what the adult children wanted. Similarly, in Singapore, a participant described how whenever she bought anything, she immediately showed it to her mother or mother-in-law to help them feel that they had been consulted in the decision.

**Obedience.** While focus groups described obedience as a form of respect, there was considerable evidence that younger people no longer followed the dictates of the elderly. A consistent theme was that today’s younger people may listen to the advice of older people but often do not follow this advice. An older Singaporean participant told about how hurt and disrespected his wife felt when their children and grandchildren questioned her advice. He explained, “So this change of time, change of world, change of the way of accepting advice... they don’t blindly agree.”

Some discussants alluded to a new definition of respect in relation to obedience. For example, focus group participants in Singapore explained that, in the past, respect was equated with obedience and submission. Currently, however, respect is associated with seeking the opinion of elders and/or informing them after a decision has been made. Another group in the Philippines offered a variant on this theme. They observed that, in the past, respect was associated with never answering back to an elder. Now, however, it was acceptable to disagree if it was done in a nice manner and by speaking moderately. Others totally disassociated respect and obedience. These individuals felt that lack of submission to the advice and directives of older people should not be interpreted as disrespect. In the words of one older participant in Singapore, “Though they may not
listen to you, they may respect you because you are the elder. But as for your advice on certain matters is concerned, they don’t agree.”

Reasons for Changes in Respect

Discussions from focus groups in our study provided a number of reasons for why respect for the elderly had diminished over time. The major themes that emerged from this discussion pertained to changes in family structure and function, education, income, and modernization.

Changes in family structure and function. Several participants alluded to the impact of changes in family organization and employment. They observed that an increased emphasis on the nuclear family had decreased respect for the elderly. In Singapore, a participant explained how older people now felt excluded from their children’s families, “...presently a lot of families are pretty self-centered. I mean I form a family-nucleus, I normally center my life around my family. So the parents are actually considered as outsiders.” A Taiwanese discussant described a shifting pattern of loyalty within the family from the elderly to children. This participant said, “These days, familial feelings are all devoted to the children and not to parents.” Another Taiwanese discussant explained that while adult children had a “respectful mentality,” it was difficult to express their respect because they no longer lived as an extended family due to the pressures of needing to leave home to make a living. Such altered living arrangements then impacted on the relationships between the elderly and their grandchildren. Several Thai respondents talked about how, in the past, parents appreciated and respected older people’s discipline of their children. However, most parents now considered older people’s discipline as an unwelcome interference in their child rearing responsibilities.

Participants were also vocal about the extent to which women’s employment outside of the home had influenced respect for the elderly. Many associated women’s employment with neglect in the teaching of values. A Filipino eloquently made this point, “In the past, all the niceties, even in eating, were taught by the mother because she was at home. Nowadays, the mother is always in a hurry. She goes to the office. In the afternoon, she hurriedly cooks and markets. She can no longer teach the children because she has plenty of chores.” A discussant in Taiwan made an even clearer connection between women’s employment and respect, “Respecting the elders was one of the four virtues. But, today there is not the same family structure. Mothers are working women. Everyone comes and goes without learning respect.” Some discussants pointed out that the pressures of work and the guilt associated with not being available to their children made mothers particularly susceptible to spoiling their children, providing them with material things, and not insisting on good manners and behavior. In the words of a focus group member from Singapore, “So from here, I see that children today do not know how to respect the elders. I am also afraid that my child may treat me like that.”
Education. Many focus groups held the educational system responsible for lack of respect paid to the elderly. The educational system was critiqued for its lack of emphasis on teaching morals and family values. Focus groups explained that in the past, education had focused on teaching duties and morals but that these topics had little attention in current curriculums. In the words of a Thai participant, “They are taught too many subjects at school such as dancing and others but not about gratitude. In the former times, we were taught to be grateful to parents.” Similarly, a discussant in Taiwan critiqued the process of learning, “...schools have put an emphasis on studying science and give morality and family relationships short shrifts... Education comes up short in instilling moral thinking to the point where it makes the younger generation feel less respectful toward their elders.”

Discussants also noted that education had the effect of increasing the knowledge gap between younger and older people and thereby decreasing respect. As an older Thai respondent observed, “When they finish learning, they say that the older people don’t know anything because they don’t even have a fourth grade education. They rarely obey us.” In Singapore, an older participant spoke about how with the present emphasis on prolonged education, children frequently go to school for many years. Due to this focus on education, they often postpone entering the family business and thus have much less contact with older family members. Others described how the focus on English language training resulted in poorer communication between the young and the old, who did not speak English. One Singaporean group member spoke poignantly about this communication gap, “When the children come, they learn only English. How are the old to talk to the children? You can only say, “I don’t know.” You can’t communicate. We want to talk and the children don’t understand. He wants to talk and we don’t know what he’s saying.”

Changes in income. According to some of the focus group participants, changes in the earning power of young people made them less reliant on and therefore less respectful toward their elders. In the words of an old Taiwanese man, “Before, they were respectful. No matter what sort of older person one was, he was always revered. Now young people all think the elderly can’t work any more and only eat. I think it’s because the standard of living is higher. With industry and commerce in full boom, everybody can earn more money and they don’t need to rely on parents.” A participant in Singapore identified a connection between income and respect by saying, “...if you have to ask your parents for money, then probably you have to be more obedient to get the money from them.” An older Thai discussant elaborated on this connection when he remarked, “If they are students or going to find jobs, they will listen to us a little, but if they are employed and earn their incomes, they won’t listen to us anymore.”

Modernization. Many of the focus groups described how changes in the broader world, including moving from an agrarian way of life and adopting Western ways, had negatively influenced respect for the elderly. In the words of a participant in Taiwan, “People who live in cities, and who are involved in the industrial society, tend to be fully occupied with their work. They don’t have as much time to spend with others. People in
rural areas are rich in genuine human warmth and have more time to show their respect to the elderly.” A participant in a Thai focus group observed that the trend among adult children in villages was to move to the city to earn money. In so doing they “surpassed the footprints of their fathers.” By moving beyond the experiences of the village elders, they became more immune to their advice and criticism.

Several groups spoke about how this pressure to succeed among adult children had resulted in an overly permissive environment for the succeeding generation. A Singaporean discussant noted a direct correlation between such parental permissiveness and a decrease in respect for the older generation, “Another reason why children are losing respect is that they are given much freedom by their parents. These parents resort to just giving them money in order not to be distracted from their other activities.”

This emphasis on materialism and individuality was frequently attributed to the West. Numerous respondents referred to the effect of Western values which had been transmitted by television, films, and advertisements. A Singaporean discussant described this impact, “I think it’s the Western influence. You’ll see from American films, children who rebel against their parents... The Western system invariably affects us.”

Discussion

By examining focus group data from four Asian countries, this study addresses various forms of respect for the elderly. Group participants identified a number of different ways in which respect could be expressed: gestures and manners, tokens, customs and rituals, advice, and obedience. While specific expressions of respect and their relative importance differed by country, the general categories of respect were described by focus groups in all four Asian countries. With a few significant exceptions, the categories of respect that emerged from our study overlap with those identified by Silverman and Maxwell (1978) based upon their analysis of 34 societies. However, Silverman and Maxwell did not categorize either asking for advice or obedience as forms of respect. Our work and that of Mehta’s (1997) suggests that obedience to the dictates of the elderly may be a form of respect that is changing most pervasively.

Unlike Chipperfield and Havens (1992), who found that respect for the elderly increased or remained stable, participants in our study perceived that respect for the elderly was generally decreasing. The present study identified four causes for this change: family structure and function, education, income, and modernization. These attributions are supported by researchers who have examined changes in the status of the elderly in other Asian countries. For example, Baginda (1987) noted that in Malaysia the loss of stature among the elderly is related to several phenomenon including: a shift towards a nuclear family form, the differences in educational levels between young and old, and the migration of young families to the city such that older people are left behind. Similarly, Goldstein, Schuler and Ross (1983) discussed the complex changes in authority relationships in Nepal as sons work for the government or business and are no longer
dependent upon their fathers’ land. These studies, in combination with our own, identify ways in which authority and status changes have influenced respect for the elderly.

Our study suggests that while expressions of respect for the elderly are changing in these four Asian countries, respect remains a central value. The degree of concern expressed about how respect for the elderly is changing is an indication of its vital importance to the value system of Asians. Respondents were actively engaged in the process of redefining the meaning of respect. Mehta (1997) noted that respect was redefined, among her Singaporean sample, from obedience to courteous behavior. Similarly, in a study of youth and elders in Hong Kong, Chow (1997) determined that young people are still willing to provide financial support and personal care but are less willing to consult older people for their opinions. We observed this same process of redefinition occurring among the Singapore, Thai, Taiwanese, and Filipino focus groups. Participants in all four countries indicated that respect for the elderly could no longer be equated with obedience. However, they redefined respect to encompass a number of other kinds of acceptable respectful behavior. They augmented their definition of respect to include being polite, asking for the advice of elders, and informing the elders of their decisions. Our study suggests that while traditional expressions of respect for the elderly are changing, the value of respect remains stable. Asians are actively engaged in the process of searching for alternative definitions of respect for the elderly.

These findings must be considered within the context of the limitations of this study. First, while the topic of respect was addressed in focus groups in all four Asian countries, the specific questions varied by country. In particular, the focus groups in the Philippines devoted less attention to the topic of respect. While the Filipino groups discussed forms of respect for the elderly and changes in respect over time, there was less richness and detail in these data than for the other countries. Future research which makes such cross-cultural comparisons should insure more similarity among the questions asked.

Second, this research is limited in its generalizability by our sampling techniques and our cross-sectional data. The sample was purposively drawn to include people who represented a variety of pre-determined characteristics (e.g., generation, gender and socioeconomic status) and change in respect was ascertained by asking each group to compare the present with the past. While our sampling techniques resulted in findings that were remarkably consistent across the four countries, it is important that future research on the topic of changes in respect use representative, longitudinal samples. It would be particularly interesting to examine changes in respect for the elderly among the younger generation of Asians who are now adolescents and young adults.

Third, our study represents a broad-brush approach to examining respect across four Asian countries. In so doing, we did not look at specific factors that differentially affect respect for the elderly within each country. For example, it may be that respect for the elderly is more influenced by their socioeconomic status in some countries than in others. Examining the effect of such variables as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status,
and urbanicity on respect would be a fruitful direction for future cross-cultural research on this topic.

Our research suggests that Asians are concerned about changes in respect for older people. Others have documented ways in which Asian countries are taking steps to address these changes. In Japan, for example, older people are included in school functions as a way of enhancing the contact and good will between children and elders. Elders are invited into the classroom to share folktales, traditional games, and skills (Nakamura, 1994; Yamazaki, 1994). In Korea, a Filial Piety Prize is awarded to individuals whose long-standing service demonstrates exemplary respect and care for the elderly (Sung, 1990). In Singapore, the government is using the media to emphasize the importance of filial duty and is using legislative initiatives to induce three generational families to live together by offering such families more desirable housing units (Mukerjee, 1982).

Respect for the elderly has deep roots in traditional Asian cultures. These roots retain their stability but also evidence change. Our study indicates that, within a sample of four Asian countries, the value of respect for the elderly continues to be important. However, the meaning of respect is changing. Asians are concerned about these changes and are developing creative strategies to renew expressions of respect for the elderly. Westerners can learn by carefully observing these attempts to retain deeply rooted values in a changing world.
Table 1. Characteristics of focus groups by country (n= 79 groups)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Taiwan</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
<th>Singapore</th>
<th>Thailand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generation</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Elderly</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>Adult</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Residence</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SES</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14*</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>9</td>
<td>--</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
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<tr>
<td>Both</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
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<td>Both</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
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<td>Malay</td>
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<td>Fukeinese</td>
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<td>--</td>
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<td>Hakanese</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainlander</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: * includes 2 mixed SES groups
Table 2. Forms of respect for the elderly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gestures and Manners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ritualized gestures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful terms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helpful behaviors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tokens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Customs and Rituals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebrations focused on older people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrations involving older people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major purchases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auspicious dates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultants in family quarrels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obedience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leaving home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage decisions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Chow, N. (1997). The policy implications of the changing role and status of the elderly in Hong Kong. The University of Hong Kong, Monograph Series Number 28.


