

Review

Fieldwork Analysis of Family Structures and Intergenerational Relations in East Asia

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Abstract: This article provides a critical review of recent fieldwork-based research on family structures and intergenerational relations in East Asia, with a focus on China, Japan, and South Korea. Drawing on ethnographic studies, life histories, and comparative sociological surveys, it explores how traditional patriarchal norms rooted in Confucian ethics—such as filial piety, patrilineality, and co-residence—have been transformed under the pressures of demographic aging, urbanization, and shifting gender roles. The review highlights key areas of transformation, including the decline of extended families, the redefinition of caregiving responsibilities, and the rise of negotiated or "contractual" filiality. Methodological reflections reveal both the richness and the limitations of current research, particularly in terms of urban bias, the underrepresentation of women's voices, and the need for more comparative, digitally informed, and mixed-method approaches. The article argues that while traditional values remain symbolically influential, East Asian families are undergoing a profound restructuring, characterized by both cultural continuity and strategic adaptation.

Keywords: East Asia; family structure; intergenerational relations; filial piety; ethnographic fieldwork; caregiving

1. Introduction

Family has long been regarded as the bedrock of East Asian societies, deeply embedded in Confucian values that emphasize filial piety, hierarchical relationships, and the continuity of family lineage. In countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea, the family has traditionally functioned not only as a private unit of emotional and economic support but also as a moral institution, mediating the individual's relationship with society and the state. The enduring importance of intergenerational ties—both in material caregiving and symbolic responsibilities—has shaped a wide range of social expectations and institutional arrangements across the region.

In recent decades, however, East Asia has undergone rapid social, demographic, and economic transformations. Urbanization, industrialization, population aging, declining birth rates, and increased educational and occupational mobility have dramatically reshaped family structures and intergenerational relations. The traditional multi-generational household is increasingly being replaced by nuclear or even solitary living arrangements [1]. These changes pose pressing questions: How do contemporary East Asian families negotiate caregiving obligations? How are intergenerational expectations redefined in the face of economic pressures and cultural shifts? What new patterns of family solidarity or tension are emerging?

This review aims to synthesize existing fieldwork-based research on family structures and intergenerational relations in East Asia. Rather than relying solely on demographic or statistical data, the emphasis here is on ethnographic and qualitative studies that provide rich, grounded insights into the lived realities of families. Drawing on comparative findings from China, Japan, and South Korea, this paper examines both

Received: 23 April 2026

Revised: 01 June 2026

Accepted: 14 June 2026

Published: 17 June 2026



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the continuity and transformation of intergenerational norms, the negotiation of caregiving and authority, and the implications of these shifts for broader social cohesion.

The paper is organized into three main sections. First, it explores the foundations of traditional family structures and intergenerational norms in East Asia, emphasizing cultural ideals and long-standing practices. Second, it analyzes how contemporary social and economic forces have restructured these relations, creating new challenges and contradictions. Third, it reflects on methodological trends in fieldwork research and considers cross-national differences and future directions. Through this review, the paper seeks to highlight not only how families are changing, but also how those changes are interpreted, experienced, and contested within everyday life [2].

2. Traditional Family Structures and Intergenerational Norms in East Asia

2.1. Patriarchal Foundations and Intergenerational Hierarchies

Traditional family systems in East Asia were deeply shaped by Confucian ethical frameworks that emphasized social harmony through clearly delineated hierarchical relationships. At the heart of this moral order was the patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal family---a structure that prioritized male authority, generational succession, and rigid intergenerational roles. The normative ideal was the three-generation household, where grandparents, parents, and children cohabited in a single domestic unit governed by seniority and gender.

In this configuration, the eldest male---typically the grandfather or father---served as the symbolic and practical head of the family. His authority extended not only over property and finances but also over the conduct and obligations of other family members. Sons were groomed to continue the family line, inherit household leadership, and perform ancestral rites (such as *jesa* in Korea or *ji si* in China), reinforcing the idea of familial continuity across generations. Daughters, by contrast, were seen as temporary members who would eventually marry out, making male descendants central to lineage preservation [3].

The principle of *xiao* (filial piety), codified in canonical Confucian texts such as *The Classic of Filial Piety (Xiaojing)*, provided the ideological justification for these hierarchies. Filial piety was not merely an emotional virtue but a system of moral obligations that structured nearly every aspect of intergenerational life. Children---especially sons---were expected to obey their parents unconditionally, care for them in old age, and uphold the family's honor through personal conduct. These obligations were lifelong, non-negotiable, and deeply embedded in both religious and secular institutions [4,5].

Women, particularly daughters-in-law, were situated at the lowest tier of this hierarchy. After marriage, a woman would leave her natal home and enter her husband's household, where she was expected to serve his parents, bear sons, and manage domestic affairs. In Korea, this was institutionalized through the *hojuje* (family headship) system, which legally recognized the male head of household and his descendants. In Japan, the *ie* (household) system similarly reinforced patrilineal succession and family continuity, often formalized through legal registration and inheritance rights [6]. China's clan-based lineage systems (*zongzu*) were even more elaborate, particularly in southern provinces, where genealogical records (*jiapu*) and ancestral halls underscored the centrality of male descent and ritual obligation.

This patriarchal and intergenerational order was not only a cultural construct but also an economic arrangement. Agricultural production, property transmission, and labor allocation were all organized through the family unit, making filial obedience and intergenerational cooperation critical to both survival and social reproduction. The household was the primary site of governance, moral education, and economic activity, with state institutions often reinforcing familial hierarchies through tax systems, legal codes, and bureaucratic classifications.

While this model promoted social stability and continuity, it also marginalized individual autonomy---especially for women and younger sons---and suppressed

alternative family forms. Emotional intimacy was often secondary to duty and obligation, and tensions within families were expected to be managed internally rather than addressed publicly. The result was a highly ordered but rigid familial system that persisted well into the modern era, only beginning to unravel with the advent of industrialization, migration, and social reform in the 20th century [7].

2.2. National Variants: China, Japan, and Korea

While Confucianism served as a shared foundation, each country developed distinct family systems. In China, the *zongzu* (clan) system organized extended kin through patrilineal descent. Lineages managed communal land, maintained ancestral halls, and used genealogical records to reinforce collective identity. Authority figures within the lineage acted as informal arbitrators and custodians of moral order. Sons were expected not only to inherit property but also to uphold the family name and perform elaborate ancestral rituals.

In Japan, the *ie* system institutionalized a more legally rigid form of family continuity, particularly during the Meiji era. The *ie* was a legal entity with a designated head (*koshu*) and a clear succession path, typically favoring the eldest son. Even adoption was common if a male heir was absent, underscoring the emphasis on household continuity over biological ties. Though the *ie* system was legally abolished after World War II, its cultural legacy still influences modern Japanese family expectations, particularly around household responsibility and inheritance.

Korea developed its own Confucianized family model during the Joseon Dynasty, centered on the *gamon* (lineage house). The eldest son was responsible for *jesa* (ancestor rituals), and inheritance laws heavily favored men. Female roles were rigidly defined, and daughters were often excluded from ancestral records. Though urbanization has challenged these practices, cultural memory and ritual obligations continue to reinforce the traditional gendered division of intergenerational duties.

2.3. Ethnographic Perspectives and Cultural Persistence

Fieldwork across East Asia reveals the lived expressions of these family norms. In rural Chinese villages, researchers such as Fei Xiaotong documented how family authority was embedded in daily life through kinship rituals, land-sharing practices, and collective decision-making. Jennifer Robertson's work in Japan illustrates how families continue to value symbolic household succession, even in cases where the legal structure has dissolved. In Korea, ethnographies of *jesa* ceremonies show how filial responsibility remains deeply embedded in national culture, with sons returning from cities to perform ancestral duties in rural hometowns [8].

Despite dramatic socioeconomic changes---urbanization, shrinking household sizes, delayed marriage---the moral architecture of traditional intergenerational norms persists in subtle forms. Co-residence may have declined, but expectations around parental support, inheritance, and ritual participation continue to shape how East Asians imagine and perform family obligations. Rather than disappearing, traditional values have often adapted to new contexts, creating hybrid arrangements that mix old ethics with new lifestyles.

3. Transformation and Tensions in Contemporary Intergenerational Relations

3.1. Shrinking Households and Shifting Gender Roles

Over the past four decades, East Asian societies have undergone profound demographic, economic, and cultural transformations that have fundamentally reshaped patterns of intergenerational relations. Among the most striking developments is the steady decline of extended family households and the concomitant rise of nuclear or even solitary living arrangements. This structural change is driven by a combination of factors: declining fertility rates, longer life expectancy, urbanization, and the rising cost of housing [9]. As a result, co-residence---once a hallmark of filial piety and familial solidarity---is no longer the default model of support. In Japan, for example, the proportion of three-

generation households has plummeted from over 50% in the 1950s to less than 10% in the 2020s. Comparable patterns have emerged in South Korea and China, where rapid urban expansion and internal migration have physically separated generations, especially in metropolitan regions like Seoul, Shanghai, and Beijing.

The shift in living arrangements has been accompanied by a broader reconfiguration of gender roles within the family. In traditional Confucian-influenced family systems, eldercare, domestic labor, and child-rearing were primarily assigned to women, particularly daughters-in-law, who were expected to integrate into their husband's household and submit to the authority of older generations. These roles were deeply embedded in kinship hierarchies and reinforced through both custom and social expectation.

However, as East Asian women have gained greater access to higher education, professional employment, and urban lifestyles, many now challenge the gendered assumptions embedded in traditional caregiving expectations. Particularly within urban middle-class families, women are asserting more autonomy over how they contribute to intergenerational care---or whether they participate in it at all. Rather than uncritically assuming long-term caregiving roles, many negotiate conditional or time-bound forms of support, such as helping with grandchildren on weekends or during school holidays but refusing full-time responsibility. In dual-income households, some couples also engage in more egalitarian caregiving arrangements, though this often remains aspirational rather than fully realized.

These shifts are not without friction. Older generations may continue to expect unconditional support from daughters-in-law or assume co-residence as a natural extension of familial duty. At the same time, younger women often face the "triple burden" of wage labor, child-rearing, and caring for aging parents or in-laws---while navigating social narratives that stigmatize women who "fail" to meet caregiving expectations. In many households, this has led to silent tensions, overt conflict, or the outsourcing of care to paid domestic workers, eldercare facilities, or community-based programs.

Moreover, while the renegotiation of gender roles has been most pronounced in urban contexts, rural areas often lag behind, continuing to adhere more rigidly to traditional expectations. This rural--urban divide creates asymmetries in family obligations and contributes to differing experiences of care across regions, classes, and generations.

3.2. Urbanization, Migration, and the Redefinition of Kin Ties

The large-scale rural-to-urban migration across East Asia has profoundly reshaped intergenerational dynamics by introducing physical distance between family members. Traditional caregiving models---once grounded in co-residence and daily proximity---are increasingly untenable as young adults relocate to urban centers for education and employment. While this spatial separation challenges established norms of filial duty, it does not necessarily signal a breakdown of intergenerational support. In many cases, new forms of "long-distance filial piety" have emerged, including regular video calls, financial remittances, and the outsourcing of eldercare to local community services. These adaptations reflect both practical constraints and evolving interpretations of familial responsibility.

Nevertheless, generational expectations are not always renegotiated smoothly. Many younger individuals voice skepticism or outright resistance toward conventional narratives of sacrifice and obedience. Recent ethnographic research has documented the rise of what some scholars refer to as "contractual filiality"---a more conditional, negotiated form of intergenerational exchange. Rather than fulfilling obligations based on moral imperative, support is often framed as contingent upon past emotional closeness or perceived fairness. This shift reflects broader socioeconomic pressures as well. In some cases, adult children remain financially dependent on their parents due to housing costs or job precarity, complicating traditional roles and blurring lines between caregiver and dependent.

Concurrently, anthropologists have noted the emergence of "invisible kinship" practices, characterized by discreet, often nonverbal forms of care and connection. These may include infrequent but emotionally meaningful messaging, quiet financial assistance, or a maintained sense of solidarity that does not rely on cohabitation or formalized rituals. Such understated expressions of kinship are especially prevalent among urban middle-class families, where individual autonomy and emotional distance coexist with enduring--if muted---familial bonds. In these cases, kinship is less about public performance and more about quiet continuity.

3.3. Care Dilemmas in an Aging Society: Field Insights

The challenges of elder care in aging East Asian societies have become a central site of intergenerational negotiation and conflict [10]. With populations rapidly aging---Japan and South Korea being among the world's oldest societies, and China not far behind---families are under increasing pressure to develop new caregiving arrangements. The ideal of "family first" persists culturally, but institutional support is becoming increasingly necessary.

In some families, especially in rural or peri-urban areas, grandparents continue to play vital roles as caregivers for young grandchildren while the middle generation works in cities. This form of reverse intergenerational support challenges the assumption that care always flows from young to old. However, it also creates intergenerational dependencies that can be emotionally and physically taxing, especially when grandparents lack adequate health or resources.

Urban ethnographies highlight increasing tensions in multigenerational households. In Shanghai, for example, research has shown that co-residence often leads to disputes over parenting styles, spending habits, and household labor distribution. Adult children may resent the authority of their parents, while elders feel displaced or disrespected. These tensions are further exacerbated when aging parents require care but reject institutional solutions such as nursing homes, fearing social stigma or loss of dignity [11].

In response, new hybrid models of care have emerged: part-time caregivers, elder cooperatives, and state-subsidized day-care centers. In South Korea, the long-term care insurance system has helped families afford institutional support, yet cultural resistance to non-family care remains strong [12]. Across East Asia, families continue to carry the emotional burden of elder care, but they are increasingly doing so in negotiation with markets, states, and changing cultural values [13].

4. Methodological Reflections and Regional Comparisons

Anthropological and sociological research on intergenerational relations in East Asia has employed a range of qualitative methods, particularly ethnographic fieldwork. Participant observation remains a cornerstone, allowing researchers to witness daily family interactions, caregiving routines, and ritual performances over extended periods. This is often complemented by in-depth semi-structured interviews with family members across generations, which reveal how narratives of obligation, resentment, or affection are socially constructed. Life history narratives are also valuable, especially in capturing how individuals' familial roles shift across time---often shaped by national policy, migration, or broader ideological change from collectivism to neoliberal individualism.

However, these methods are not without limitations. A recurring issue in the literature is the idealization of filial relationships, frequently based on surface-level interviews or ceremonial observations. Researchers sometimes take normative claims---such as "we always take care of our parents"---at face value, without probing the tensions, contradictions, or emotional ambivalence embedded within. Moreover, much of the existing research suffers from an urban bias, as fieldwork tends to be conducted in major cities or peri-urban zones, where researchers have easier access. This focus risks marginalizing the practices and values of rural families, ethnic minorities, or lower-income groups, whose intergenerational dynamics may differ significantly from dominant models.

Another important gap is the underrepresentation of women's voices, particularly those of daughters-in-law and elderly women. While men are often described as household heads or decision-makers, it is frequently women who bear the emotional and practical labor of caregiving, navigating between traditions and emerging expectations. Feminist ethnographers have begun to foreground these perspectives, but their insights remain under-integrated into mainstream comparative frameworks, especially in cross-national reviews.

Cross-nationally, the family systems of China, Japan, and South Korea all reflect a Confucian heritage that prioritizes familial loyalty, respect for elders, and hierarchical structure. Yet key institutional and cultural distinctions exist. For instance, while all three societies value filial piety, Japan's ie system historically emphasized household continuity through legal succession; Korea's jesa rituals reinforce male-centered ancestral obligations; and China's lineage traditions continue to shape rural kinship networks, especially among older generations. Table 1 summarizes these contrasts, highlighting how cultural commonalities are mediated through differing historical, legal, and welfare contexts.

Table 1. Comparative Features of Intergenerational Relations in China, Japan, and South Korea

Dimension	China	Japan	South Korea
Historical Framework	Patrilineal lineage; collectivist rural kinship	Ie household system with legal continuity	Clan-based jesa rituals; Confucian patriarchy
Filial Norms	Emphasis on co-residence and obedience	Emphasis on emotional harmony, less institutionalized	Ritualized duties for sons; gendered expectations
State Support Systems	Family-led care; state support emerging in urban areas	Advanced eldercare infrastructure; low birth rates	Public-private eldercare mix; high aging pressure
Gender Roles in Care	Daughters-in-law as primary caregivers	Increasing state role; single women as carers	Strong female burden; limited institutional support
Urban-Rural Divide	Pronounced; rural kinship remains strong	More uniform due to urban concentration	Urban bias in services; rural areas underserved

Looking ahead, scholars increasingly call for digitally informed ethnography, exploring how family members sustain intergenerational relationships through mobile messaging apps, video calls, or social platforms. These "mediated intimacies" reshape expectations of proximity and support. Moreover, mixed-methods approaches, combining survey data, policy analysis, and grounded field narratives, offer more robust insight into how family dynamics intersect with broader demographic and institutional changes. As East Asian families continue to evolve amid aging populations and global mobility, future research must remain methodologically flexible and critically attuned to both cultural continuity and social transformation.

5. Conclusion

This review has traced the evolution of family structures and intergenerational relations in East Asia, highlighting both enduring cultural frameworks and emerging modes of negotiation. While Confucian notions of filial piety and hierarchical authority

have long shaped familial expectations, contemporary forces---such as urbanization, demographic aging, and the shifting roles of women---have significantly reconfigured these dynamics. The traditional model of multi-generational co-residence is no longer dominant, giving way to more individualized and negotiated arrangements that reflect both structural pressures and changing values.

Yet, these structural shifts do not indicate a wholesale rejection of cultural norms. Rather, they reveal a complex field of tension and adaptation, where individuals and families actively reinterpret obligations within new socioeconomic contexts. Whether through long-distance support, hybrid caregiving models, or strategic compromises between generations, East Asian families continue to perform kinship in ways that blend continuity with transformation. Intergenerational ties remain central---not as static institutions, but as living, contested relationships that must be constantly reimaged.

Importantly, the field still suffers from a disjuncture between macro-level analysis of demographic and policy trends, and the micro-level, everyday experiences of family life. Bridging this gap requires more grounded, ethnographically informed research that attends to emotional nuance, gendered labor, and regional diversity. Future studies should also explore how digital communication, migration patterns, and economic precarity reshape the moral and material expectations between generations. Ultimately, understanding the transformation of East Asian intergenerational relations demands both critical distance and empathetic attention to lived experience.

Acknowledgments: I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my parents for their constant support, encouragement, and understanding throughout this work. I am also deeply grateful to Professor Marco Di Nunzio for their valuable guidance, thoughtful advice, and continuous support in shaping this work.

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