

두려: Increasing Community Housing & Social Integration to Decrease Elderly Deaths

Thesis

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“Homelessness is not a measure of one’s character. It is an experience caused by an intersection of unique and individual circumstances”

— Janet Pope

“Home is a notion that only nations of the homeless fully appreciate and only the uprooted comprehend.”

— Wallace Stegner, Angle of Repose

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## Introduction

The poor and the elderly will always be part of the marginalized population. Often, they are invisible to the locals, and an eyesore to visitors. Daejeon, South Korea's 5th largest city, is no exception. Low-income elderly people mostly struggle with two things, loneliness, and poverty. And truly, it is so hard not to care about this community when you see them. The problem is *getting* people to see this community that is seemingly invisible to the rest of society. This paper is an attempt to make that community more visible to those who struggle with what Jean-Paul Sartre describes as "bad faith": as a way to identify ways in which people subconsciously avoid acknowledging the things that disturb or discomfort them (Holmes 86-87). We engage in bad faith when we knowingly forget about communities in need, when we turn a blind eye to the hurting, or when we push marginalized groups to the outskirts of society.

In August, Korea is a sauna, especially Daejeon where the heat lingers long into the night as the city sits at the bottom of a geographical bowl. In August of 2019, I was in Daejeon conducting interviews with the elderly who live in low-income areas. One night, I entered a cool air-conditioned coffee shop, and noticed an older woman handing out flyers, letting people know that there was a discount on something nearby. The older woman was short, 5'2" maybe. And the thought fleetingly crossed my mind that she should not be out so late handing out flyers.

The whole city was out with their friends and families walking in the warm night under the perfectly strung summertime lights, all unconsciously avoiding the elderly woman, someone's grandma, but never really seeing her. Discouraged and disheartened she continued to pass out flyers throughout the night as people took them, threw them away, or barely looked at her.

Several hours of passing out flyers to people who didn't want them later, I noticed a group of five towering high school boys walking around. As they passed the grandma and one of

the boys decided it would be comical to take the flyer while making a scene and crumple the flyer in her face. While walking away, the boys laughed in unison and the elderly woman was left standing alone in the sea of people.

Rashid states that in Korea today, almost half of the poor elderly community lives below the poverty line and in isolation (Rashid). The poorly-funded economic social plans in combination with the strong family orientation of Korea can result in older family members committing suicide to avoid being seen as an economic burden on their children and family members (Park, Yeonsoo).

As a result, many seniors find themselves faced with overwhelming poverty, strained family relations, and extreme loneliness in the midst of the demographic shift that is taking place in Korea. To decrease depression and poverty rates among the growing population of seniors in South Korea it is necessary to increase affordable housing opportunities. Additionally, the seniors need public support resources to be more easily accessible to their community as the access they currently have are far and few between. Lastly, the seniors need cultivated community involvement to decrease social isolation. In this thesis, I provide the information to complete the knowledge gap relating to why the elderly in Korea struggle, what they struggle with, and how best to approach the proposed methods to increase subjective well-being among the elderly. I also assess how each of the above-noted stressors affects the senior community's overall subjective well-being. Finally, based on my collection of qualitative research and interviews with the poor elderly community in South Korea, I will provide possible solutions that are impacting the community emotionally, financially, and mentally (Merriam & Tisdell, Bamberg & Rugh). These methods take a holistic approach to healing, with focus on mental,

emotional and financial well-being and all efforts to make a positive impact on cross-cultural social change through humility, mutual learning, and respect for cultural values (Conquergood).

After I saw the exchange with the senior woman and the high school students, the elderly woman leaned against a post in the middle of the road taking a break to gather herself. She removed her gloves to show no ring, but a tan line where her gloves had been. When community housing is in place, that grandma will be able to go home after a long and tiresome day of work to a house full of people who care for her well-being and remind her that she is loved. For now, she will continue to go home to an empty house and fall asleep with the reminder that she will have to get up and do it all again tomorrow. When we acknowledge the social context of suffering, we can meet people where they are and gather solutions to move towards positive, sustainable, pragmatic and healing solutions. The proposed methods are designed to reincorporate community living for seniors through a communal home. This home will decrease the number of seniors who suffer from poverty, isolation and loneliness by instilling a sense of community and increasing an overall sense of subjective well-being and social support among seniors. Lastly, this thesis will increase awareness of the issue and propose methods to increase the subjective well-being in the poor elderly community, to improve the lives of the elderly beyond the elimination of misery.

### **Reflexivity**

The motivation for this research started in a dark, dim, cold coffee shop in Bellingham, Washington. There, I sat hunched over my laptop grazing online news sources about social justice issues in South Korea. I came across an article about elderly communities living in homes a little more than shacks, alone and committing suicide. I consumed the entire article on the verge of tears by the end.

As a Korean-Scottish American, I had a difficult time identifying with and owning my Korean heritage growing up. My mom is Korean, adopted from an orphanage by a white American family who scrubbed her of her culture by the time she was 7. As a result, my mother and her kids never knew the culture of her homeland. I grew up in the US as a citizen by birth in the melting pot of America, where naturally you were asked the question of, "what are you?" No one tells you when you are growing up, but that question begins to rub you the wrong way over time. Eventually, I gave up on the question and learned to say, "I don't know."

However, over time, I began to wonder more about what Korean culture was like. I would wonder how different we would be if my mother grew up with her culture if she had any siblings and what her parents were like. When I was sitting in that dark coffee shop, I began to wonder about my mother's parents again, about my grandparents. Were they like these poor elderly people that I was reading about? Were they in homes heated by charcoal briquettes, living with no running water, collecting cardboard off the streets to earn money for instant ramen every day? Were they so depressed and lonely and that they chose death over not wanting to be a burden on their other kids? And could any of that be changed if they knew that they had a granddaughter who cared about them, without even knowing them?

Though the demographics and the culture of Korea is shifting, there are still young people, like me, who have a desire to care for their seniors in any way they can. We can do this through collective leadership, which Kuenkel describes as "the capacity of a group of actors to deliver their contribution to a joint purpose collaboratively, while putting high priority on the common good and balance among the needs of people, profit, and planet" (Kuenkel, 34).

We continually see how the government has failed seniors and are outraged by the injustice of the situation. Therefore, we have taken it upon ourselves to care for them not just in

the traditional Confucian way. Nonprofits like the Korean Legacy Committee are a group of young professionals and social entrepreneurs dedicated to raising awareness and providing funds to support and love the elderly community of Korea. As a community, we can move our society towards one with equal access to affordable housing, care, and resources for our elders by raising awareness and changing policy in copowerment with the elderly.

## **Background**

This background section explains the accumulated disadvantages that the senior Korean community face regularly, as well as the obstacles that they are required to navigate to survive in today's world. This includes the demographic shift that is occurring in Korea causing a seismic disruption in the population distribution, raising the number of the nation's elderly. Additionally, this background section defines elderly poverty and how the lives of the elderly are consumed by poverty in all aspects, actions being taken to aid the elderly in economic poverty, and the housing crisis in Korea for the elderly.

## **What Is Poverty & Who Are the Poor?**

In this thesis, I refer to the elderly Korean population as those who suffer from poverty rather than referring to them as “the poor.” This is in an attempt to decrease the objectification and othering nature of labeling them “the poor”. When scholars and those in positions of social and economic power identify a community as “the poor,” it distances them from first being human, and hinges their value to their economic bracket as opposed to the emotions and stories that they carry. This distinction, I argue is necessary and important to community developers because, as Bryant Meyers describes in *Walking with the Poor*, those in helping professions have a tendency to look upon the poor as though they are not the agents of their lives, as if they are helpless, and are to be pitied (105).



Therefore, poverty is defined as a system of entanglement not simply as the lack of income (Meyers 14). In *Let Your Life Speak*, Palmer emphasizes the need to view a situation for the truth it holds “we must withdraw the negative projections we make on people and situations- projections that serve mainly to mask our own fears about ourselves- and acknowledge and embrace our own liabilities and limits ”(29). Additionally, Meyers describes poverty as, not the lack of income, but rather as a system of entanglement (14). As such, in in this thesis, poverty is referred to as the absence of access to power, resources, and choices in an individual’s life along with economic poverty (Meyers 14).

Finally, poverty is also seen as an entanglement an individual is unable to leave, as they are enduringly marked by it. Miroslav Volf agrees with Janet Pope in that a person is inescapably marked by the particularities of the social setting in which they are born and develops (19). Volf recognizes that the identity we form of ourselves is partially shaped by the feedback we receive from our society. He states that “nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false distorted, and reduced mode of being” (19). The nonrecognition of a person’s humanity or misrecognition of their identity being wrapped in their socioeconomic status, is the oppression and imprisonment both Volf and Ms. Pope state we create for people when we singularly identify them as such. Instead of their identity being wrapped in their stories, their humanity, or their personality, we call them “the poor”, “the homeless”, “the mentally ill”.

### **Demographic Shift in Korea**

With the combination of low birth rates and the overall increased life expectancy, Korea has officially entered into an “Aged Society” after only 17 years after becoming an “Aging Society” (Seoul). Nations where the elderly population, 65 or older, rises above 7% of the overall

population is considered an “Aging Society,” and transitions to “Aged” when the nation’s elderly population consists of over 14% of the total population (Bang). Moreover, if the aging rate surpasses 21% it is considered a “Superaged Society” (Bang). Practically, when a population enters into a Superaged Society, 1 in 5 people are elderly within the population. According to the 2017 United Nations report of Population aging, Korea has entered into an “Aged Society” as of 2018, with this number is projected to surpass 41% by 2050 (World Population Aging 2017).

This demographic transition is seen in the shift of the median age of the nation. In 1960 the median age in Korean society was 20 years old, indicating a young population. However, the median age has since changed to 38 as of 2010 and is projected to continue to rise to 50-years-old in 2030 (Yoon). This massive demographic shift is indicative of the fundamental socioeconomic changes of the nation, and is normal for nations to experience as they emerge from economically difficult times (Yoon). Commonly, nations experience this shift from high mortality and birth rates to low mortality and birth rates as technology, education, and economic development within the nation increases. However, Korea has found its aging population to be rising at an exponential rate with little plan for how to care for seniors after retirement. As the population has hit the highest life expectancy of 82.7 years in history, the birth rate inversed, dropping to 0.92 as of 2019 (Statistics Korea). This is problematic because, to maintain a healthy population replacement rate the fertility rate needs to stay above 2.1. These factors cause a shift in the population where instead of the majority of the population being between the ages of 15 – 64, thus increasing the median age, those over the age of 65 have taken over the larger percentage of the population.

Both the birth and death rates of a population directly affect and are affected by the economy, impacting a family’s income, cost of living and the cost of raising children. Right now,

the youth of Korea are overwhelmed with getting into good colleges, finding sustainable employment, and accumulating an enormous amount of student debt in the process. The mountain of debt forces students to seek higher paying jobs to pay off their student debts. While they are working hard to pay off their debt, the most logical option is to also put off dating and courting, thus pushing starting a family until later in life. As a result, according to Kim Juyeong, the national marriage rate has declined from 9.4% as of 1996 to 6% in 2014. This rate continues to fall as the most recent report on statistics indicates that the marriage rate in 2018 was 5%. In 2018 the number of marriages that took place in Korea was 257.6 thousand, a 2.6% decrease from 2017, a drop of 6.8 thousand people (Marriage and Divorce Statistics 2018). This demographic shift is a result of why more and more seniors find themselves with fewer resources each year, because there are less resources available due to the rising numbers of seniors in society.

This huge demographic shift is especially difficult for the nation with the additional compounding factors of Korean society. Korea has a specific cultural term for those who feel these compounding stressors. They are called the 삼포세대, *sampo sedae*, or the three giving up generation. This culturally specific word refers to the generation who have given up dating, marriage, and childbirth in light of the sheer cost of living, student debt, and the cost of housings. These generations of giving up things continue as the conditions of society worsen. The 오포세, *opo sedae*, the five giving up generation, has given up the previous three along with employment and homeownership. These generations continue until finally the 갑포세대, *sippo* or *wanpo sedae* or the ten or total giving up-generation, of which they give up the previous five and interpersonal relationships, hope, health, physical appearance-and life.

The *sampo sedae* is statistically relevant when the working class make up a greater portion of the population of countries where the fertility rate declines, which is evident in Korea today. According to Pison, Korea has a birth rate of 7 births per 1,000 people, while the world birth rate is 18 births per 1,000 people. The fertility rate of a nation indicates the number of children will be born to each woman; as the fertility rate declines, more people join the elderly demographic, increasing the overall elderly percentage of the population. Those who make up the elderly population today are the last generation to hold traditional values toward caring for the previous generation and placing more value on collectivist ideals over individualistic ideals (Hong et al.). The Baby Boomer generation is the “transitional generation” from a traditional society to a more modern Korea (Hong et al.).

The fact that the elderly today are caught between the shifting generations is pivotal because it has left them in emotional and financial poverty. Policies aren’t changing fast enough and those in the transitional generation as hurting as a result.

### **Elderly Poverty**

As a result of the economic boom following the Korean War in 1953, the baby boomers of the era (those born between 1945 -1954) grew up in a time of a natural economic rise, developing no retirement plans or social safety nets. With nothing to fall back onto in retirement, the 1997 International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis left most of the generation on the streets today. During the time of the IMF fall, suicides relating to the economic crisis began to rise, creating a crisis that the country has never fully recovered from. Today, almost half of the elderly population in South Korea live below the poverty line and reside in the poorest districts of Korea, directly next to thriving districts. Korean community is collectivist by nature, relying strongly on community involvement and in-group and out-group orientations as a function of

daily life. This group-orientation is traditionally seen with an emphasis on family orientation, parents living under the same roof as their children to help raise grandkids and with day-to-day life. In modern days, however, the traditional family structure of parents living with their children has almost gone extinct, leaving parents to alone pay for houses and amenities in high priced areas (Koo). Though some seniors receive financial help from their children, it is still difficult for most seniors to cover the high prices of rent in major cities or nursing homes, forcing seniors to move into areas with low rent and to work jobs that pay very little. However, those who do not receive financial help from their children must rely on the basic monthly pension the Government provides to stay out of relative poverty.

The relative poverty rate is defined as the percentage of elderly whose income is below 50% of the national median income. This is startling because the poverty rate among elderly Koreans sits at 45.7%, over three times the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's average of 12.9% (Korea 2018 OECD Economic Survey Overview). These statistics are even more frustrating when the World Inequality Database reports that the top 1% own 25% of the national wealth while the bottom 50% only own 1.8% (Income and Wealth Inequality, Korea, 1994-2016). The real issue of elderly poverty lies within the economic structure of the Korean government, especially given that the basic pension system is underdeveloped for the elderly in need and does not fully utilize social spending. Korea's current basic pension system began in 2014 providing KRW 200,000, USD 185, a month to an uninsured individual. Recently, however, the pension has increased to KRW 250,000, USD 251.41, for that same uninsured individual (Social Security Programs Throughout the World: Asia and the Pacific, 2010).

## **Korea's Social Security System**

Though elderly Koreans do not have that much money to work with, they have three pension systems to rely on for financial income: The National Basic Livelihood Security System (NBLSS), Social Welfare, or Private pension plans. The one I will focus on is the NBLSS. The NBLSS was put in place to guarantee a basic income for the nation's citizens, and came about as the Korean government recognized that welfare is a social right (Jung). The NBLSS pension system was implemented in 2014 to guarantee income for the elderly by providing a pension to those 65 years and older who qualify by being in the lower 70% income bracket (Park, Hyun-Jung). Since the implementation of the pension program in 2014 the poverty gap has effectively begun to decrease. In fact, in 2014, the relative poverty rate was 47.2% and then saw a reduction in 2015 to 44.7% (Park, Hyun-Jung).

The NBLSS system focuses on the social, physical, cognitive, and emotional needs of those for whom they care for, and their role is crucial to relieve poverty because as it increases access to Health Services and mitigates the burden of health expenditures among the low-income elderly. However, those who suffer from severe disabilities and low income without access to NBLSS suffer from accumulated disadvantages such as poor health status, deficient income support by public transfer and overwhelming health expenses compared to their ability to pay (Jeon 16).

However, there are still limiting factors with the NBLSS that unintentionally exclude seniors from being able to participate in the system. For example, without a government subsidy, the expenditure of the out-of-pocket payments can become paralyzing, resulting in the underutilization of medical and welfare services by low-income and disabled elderly. Additionally, the NBLSS has a strict obligation of familial support, including the fact that adult children's incomes are accounted for, even if that child is not financially able to support their

parent (Jeon 15). This obligation of familial support limits the amount of pension income that seniors receive monthly. Moreover, the fact that a child's income is factored into the senior's income shows that traditional Confucian values of filial piety permeate the legalities of the health care system. The combination of these two factors: a healthcare system that still utilizes traditional Confucian values of filial piety while modern society continues to embrace globalization and individualization from the West-results in under qualifying the needs of older adults who are ineligible for NBLSS benefits although they suffer from relative poverty. Finally, some adults may benefit from the NBLSS, even though they retained enough wealth from the informal sector that went undetected by the government system.

There are, however, other ways for seniors to gain financial assistance when they do not qualify for the NBLSS. A study conducted by Erin Hye-won Kim and Philip Cook examines the adult child's role in reducing the poverty rate of the older generation through co-residence and financial transfers of South Korea's rapidly aging society. This study shows that almost 70% of South Korea's elderly population is dependent upon child-to-parent financial transfers to stay out of homelessness and poverty. Due to the decrease in multigenerational habitation in South Korea, child financial support in the form of money transfers has increased in recent years to support elders. The results of this study show that the Confucian tradition of elder support is not necessarily fading as globalization enters; rather, it is adapting: elder support now comes through financial support instead of co-habitation. However, this study raises concern because, in a recent poll, the role of filial piety or family obligation in connection with caring for elderly parents is predicted to enter into a steady decline, leaving more and more seniors exposed to financial difficulty. Hye-Won and Cook found similar results indicating that, in addition to other factors, rapid industrialization and urbanization have negatively impacted the parent-child bond in South

Korea. So, rather than support their parents materially, the younger generation is more willing to express filial piety expressively (deep concern, sympathy, and communication) (Anh & Yoo). However, little of that deep concern or sympathy results in financial stability for aging parents.

### **Actions Being Taken to Reduce Elderly Poverty**

As of 2016, to aid the elderly who choose or are forced to remain in the working class, the government has expanded training programs targeted towards older workers (Korea 2018 OECD Economic Survey Overview). The government plans to raise their pension income from KRW 250,000 to KRW 300,000 (USD 278) (Korea 2018 OECD Economic Survey Overview). This will provide more financial freedom to elders and allow them to spend what little money they do have on other necessities like food, medication, and money for transportation.

All in all, the NBLSS system needs continual improvement and adjustment on its policies and pension distribution. These adjustments should focus on decreasing the dependency on traditional Confucian Values and child-parent financial transfers, and improving social sector spending on social activities and community involvement promotion for the elderly. In fact, one of the protective factors that helps to prohibit for elderly suicide has been a well-developed social welfare system for those in need (Yang, Chi Ting). Therefore, increased attention to this may aid in decreasing elderly depression and suicides (Yang, Chi Ting).

Finally, the Korean government needs to continue to make public policy changes to continue to aid the elderly community. For example, the Korean elderly need improved access to home care assistance delivered meals, due to physical ailments, and policy changes that need to take effect include but are not limited to tax reductions for the elderly and subsidized housing (Lee).



## **The Elderly & The Housing Crisis**

This section aims to clarify why residential poverty runs rampant among the low-income elderly community historically, what actions are in place currently, and what actions can be taken to provide affordable housing. Moreover, this section aims to make clear why so many of the poor elderly community are unable to afford apartments and homes in major cities with their children, ultimately, forced to live alone with no social or emotional support. With no support system to rely on and no financial income, this section looks at how the elderly are able to financially support themselves and the physical and mental toll that takes.

## **History of The Housing Market & Economy in Korea**

Residential poverty among low-income and disadvantaged households is a pressing issue in Korea. Historically, Korea has attempted three solutions to solve this issue, the first being enacted between 1988-1992. This policy set out to build 250,000 public rental units as a part of the Two-Million Housing Drive (TMHD). The second approach was more systematic, as it aimed to provide the public with 1 million public rental units over the span of 10 years. However, due to the sheer capacity of the program, too much of a financial burden was placed on the Land and Housing Corporation, the state-owned enterprise in charge of providing and managing the public rentals (Kim & Park). The third policy solution that was the housing benefit program via the housing welfare policy.

The benefits of these policies and programs would have pulled thousands of residents out of poverty, and placed them into safe and affordable housing. However, everything changed in 1997 due to the devastating impact of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Crisis. The IMF Crisis was so devastating to Korea because most of the economy was monopolized by *chaebols*: family-owned conglomerates that occupied most of the economy. These *chaebols* were pushed into bankruptcy due to overborrowing and were unable to repay their debts. The government was

unable to help bail out these conglomerates, leaving no other option than to seek help from overseas. In 1997, Korea officially accepted a \$58 billion bailout package (Borowiec), as a result, the Korean government was required to make drastic policy changes such as increasing flexibility of exchange rates and restructuring elements of the economy that would limit growth (Lim). The policies that were implemented impacted most of the Korean population, including 80% of households suffering from lower incomes. Additionally, unemployment rates skyrocketed from 2.05% to 6.96% in two years (South Korea: Unemployment Rate). All in all, the impacts of the IMF Crisis impacted everything in Korea: imports and exports of the country, employment rates, and especially housing prices.

### **Housing Prices & Affordability**

One of the major contributors of residential poverty for the elderly is the cost of housing in Korea. The South Korean housing market is one of the most expensive markets in the world, both in the major and rural cities. The unaffordability of the housing market makes it difficult for everyone from single individuals, young and old, to families to find a home to rent, let alone purchase.

In Korean society, the most widely spread housing lease is the Jeonse deposit. Jeonse 전세 is an asset-based lease, also known as a Key Money Deposit, which is a Korean culture-specific real estate term that describes how apartments are leased (Jeonse). In this method, the tenant pays the entire sum of the apartment, typically two years or between 50% and 80% of the market value of the property, upfront. The money provided to the landlord upon signing the lease is known as “key money”, which gives the residents access to the space that can only be fully obtained at the end of the lease. After the Jeonse deposit is provided, the tenant is not required to make any more payments until the end of the lease, except for monthly utilities.

The Jeonse system was born during a time of high-interest rates, skyrocketing housing prices and little to no mortgage financing for homes. The system stuck around for two reasons: first, it is financially beneficial and safer for landlord because it eliminates the risk of renters not paying monthly rent due to the lumpsum deposit. Second, it is essentially the only renting option, given that so few mortgages exist in Korea. In 2014, the average Jeonse in the Seoul area was almost 347,000,000 KRW or USD 300,000.

As a result of the necessity of a lump sum for a Jeonse deposit, it is almost impossible for low-income individuals to find housing in major cities in Korea because they are unable to save up enough money at one time for the Jeonse deposit. The Jeonse system is also highly correlated with household debt because renters have to take out a huge loan to cover the deposit, leading to banks charging high-interest rates in order to make a profit. Such deposits are difficult for those who struggle with poverty because it requires the ability to save money, a bank account, and enough financial freedom in the present moment to think about the future. However, those in poverty often do not have that option or ability because their monthly income is so low that what little they do manage goes straight to paying month-to-month rent in lower income housing units. As a result, many seniors in poverty participate in odd jobs to pay for electricity and to make enough money for food. Additionally, they do not make enough money for other necessities such as medical bills, so they live with both chronic and preventable illnesses.

Many single elderly households emerge as a result of divorce, forced early retirement, unemployment, or separation from family members. Entering into a single household while living below the poverty line means people have to supply their own source of income. Seniors depend on collecting scrap, financial transfers from their children and the NBLSS to survive financially, but they also have to play a balancing game. A person's basic pension is classified as

a form of income under the National Basic Living Security System, so if their income, though barely survivable, pushes them out of the poverty bracket their pensions will be revoked (Hwang & Park). Seniors are then stuck between relying on their government to provide aid and praying they are healthy enough to work long enough on their own.

One of the most visible ways that seniors have found to pay for such things as electricity and food is by gathering scrap or cardboard to be recycled. Korea collects garbage every day, so people place their garbage and recycling on the curb every night so that it can be collected the next morning. Often, seniors will then come through neighborhoods and sort through people's garbage to get to their recycling, placing it in a large kart they have been using to gather all night. The seniors then take all of the recycling that they have collected over the course of the night to a recycling plant the next morning for a few hundred won. Seniors will either do this throughout the night or over the course of the day to collect enough money to pay for the items they need, a profession people have termed "Cardboard Grannies." According to the Citizen's Alliance for the Welfare of Elderly Scrap Paper Collectors, an estimated 1.75 million seniors rely on collecting scrap as an annual income ("Elderly People in Poverty March to the Blue House to Demand Payment of Pension Benefits"). Even when I was in Daejeon, there were seniors collecting cardboard every night (Image 1). They were out and about in the heat of the night pulling a cart, often times taller than them and half their weight.



Image 1: Daejeon, South Chungcheong, South Korea

### **Housing for the Low-Income Elderly**

Elderly residential poverty is one of the most tragic circumstances a culture can face because, residential poverty is not a measure of one's character; rather, it is an experience caused by an intersection of unique and individual circumstances (Pope). Many of the elderly who end up on the streets resort to finding shelter in parks, under bridges, and in subway stations when emergency shelters and transitional homes are not an option.

As a result of not having enough money for a Jeonse deposit and little left to pay month to month rent, some seniors in extreme poverty live in communities called 쪽방촌, *jjokbangchans* or “cubicle villages” (Rashid). These homes are often no bigger than two square meters, with communal washrooms and cooking areas (Choi). The homes often have metal roofs, are three to four meters squared, and are home to a dozen residences. Although these cubicle villages lack almost all of the most basic amenities such as gas, running water, indoor plumbing,

and heat, most of the elderly population choose to stay because the villages are the only place where they feel a sense of belonging and community (Rashid). Many of these small homes use coal briquettes called 연탄, or *yeontans*, as their only source of heat which is problematic due to the carbon monoxide that the *yeontans* produce. Moreover, *yeontans* have also been known to start fires that consume entire villages (Rashid). Many of these cubicle villages are located in thriving metropolitans such as Seoul. Seoul is Korea's most populated city with its population reaching 10,049,607 by the end of 2018 (Seoul Became The "Aged Society" At the End of 2018). The villages are hidden away, off the main drag littered with storefronts selling designer bags for tourists or knock-offs of the same ones just down the street. Yet, right next to Korea's most populated and wealthy city is its poorest district.

The 104-district is one of Korea's remaining slums. The 104 district is the last stop on the metro 1 line where there is a community of *jjokbangchons* among rundown homes. I went out to visit the 104-district when I was in Korea, and found it to be somehow more rundown than I imagined. Instead of part of the town being rundown and in poverty, it seemed like the entire town was under construction. Where sidewalks were supposed to be were the railroad tracks of concrete-filled in with loose gravel and floor insulation in an attempt to create an easier walking surface that went on for blocks. Like most of Korea, the 104-district was built on rolling hills, with the most areas of the city being populated by shops and stores for everyone to get to. Going out, from either direction, into the hills, were the residential areas where roofs were falling apart or being held together by tarps and tires or bricks. There were tarps on top of the buildings to prevent the rain from entering due to all of the holes in the roofs. Many of the homes also had large water barrels on their roofs to collect rainwater.

In many ways, the 104 district is reflective of a Korea that is slowly fading away. In the neighborhoods, traditional kimchi pots were sitting by front doors. It was much quieter than the major cities, and there were seniors gathered in parks and on front porches talking with each other. In the residential areas, many of the homes had potted plants in front of their doors and on their roofs. There were no skyscrapers in the district, so the sun was able to touch down and reach even the smallest plants looking for light.

However, with the option of living alone in a nice apartment out of the question due to the cost, some seniors have turned to long-term care facilities as an alternative option. In fact, a study conducted by Hong, et al., they shows that 35.1% of the Korean Pre-Elderly demographic and 28.9% of Boomers intend to use long term care facilities. In their research, Hong et al. concluded that the only differing factor that led to the intention to use long term care facilities was income. This points to the conclusion that if long-term care facilities were more financially available, a then greater proportion of the population would use these facilities. However, most of the seniors in the low-income community either refuse to, or are financially unable to, use such long-term care facilities due to their high cost. Most understand that entering into a long-term care facility would either drive them or their families into debt, making them a financial burden those they love. Moreover, as of 2010, the full capacity of long-term care facilities in the nation could care for 148,322 seniors, equating to less than 3% of the elderly population in Korea (Hong et al). Overall, there is a greater need for more financially accessible long-term care facilities in Korea.

### **Soup Kitchens & Homeless Shelters**

Lacking affordable housing often means that seniors don't have a dependable way to cook food on a daily basis. As a result, thousands of seniors gather every week in front of soup

kitchens across the nation to receive free or reduced meals, religious organizations, or NGOs. Without these organizations, seniors would have no reliable food source and go hungry most days or survive on one meal a day. Soup kitchens are crucial to the lives of the elderly in poverty because provides them with a reliable meal they get receive daily and a source of community in the midst of suffering from the effects of poverty.

To better understand the elderly community and how they deal with food instability, I joined James Kim and his volunteer group that has been serving the Thomas Homeless Shelter located in Western Seoul. Run by a 95-year old Catholic Korean woman, this specific kitchen has been serving meals to 350-500 low-income seniors every Saturday for the past 30 years. During my time there, I observed the following routines. Once the volunteers prepared all the food, it was time to begin serving the line of seniors who had been wrapped around the block since 9 am to get a meal for KRW200 or USD 0.17. Jennifer was a volunteer who served at this shelter for the past several years in order to give back to the community. She knew several of the seniors who came in by name and showed kindness and compassion to the ones she met for the first time. When many of the seniors turned away parts of the meal, I turned to Jennifer to ask why. She said that some people turn away items such as sausages because their teeth are so bad, they cannot chew the food. That is why the kitchen serves lots of soups and soft foods. When I asked why there were so many seniors in need of free food, she explained that many of the seniors who came through here suffered from mental illnesses. Jennifer informed me that Seoul Station and Yeongdeungpo station, our location, have the highest number of homeless people in Korea and that there were an unusually high number of soup kitchens in this area of Seoul (Park, Jennifer).



Jennifer also told me of growing up during a time of economic hardship in Korea. She remembered how, even at age 5, people would come to their house with a huge pot asking for food to help feed their families. This was a time shortly after the Korean war, where the country had no time to recover before going off to Vietnam. The country was economically hurting, and no one could get a job. As a result, people went around and stood on their neighbor's porches holding out pots asking for food. Jennifer said that she recalls her mom's heart hurting, so she filled their pots up with rice, kimchi and side dishes. Jennifer explained that many of the people who once stood on her family's doorsteps, asking for food to feed their families, were the same ones we were served at the Thomas Shelter. They had never quite been able to quite recover.

Since Park Won-Soon was appointed as mayor of Seoul, the city's welfare fund has increased the annual spending budget of 4 trillion won in 2011 to 11 trillion in 2019 to aid the elderly (Lee). Additionally, the city plans to continue to increase public spending to provide 28,000 meals to seniors who are in the low-income working demographic (Seoul City Announces "2019 Changing Seoul Welfare). This new city action is following a comprehensive plan that the city is going to initiate to assist 30% of the homeless community to find work and become independent by 2023 (Lee). Additionally, government-funded organizations are in place to help seniors who abuse alcohol get into rehab programs and *gosiwons* (low-income micro-housing).

### **Seniors & Suicide**

Hofstede ranks Korea with an Individualistic index of 18, deeming the culture as extremely collectivist (Hofstede Insights). He goes on and explains that collectivist societies rely strongly on community involvement and in-group and out-group orientations as a function of daily life, with their core principles being "connectedness" and "group unity" (Hofstede Insights,

Beck). Within collectivist societies, the perception of the self is then constructed by how well an individual can operate within the group, and in relationship to others (Park, Yeonsoo, et al.). As those on the in-group experience life-giving community, loyalty, and belonging, those who reside in the out-group experience the inverse: loneliness, depression, and exclusion. Korea's group-oriented nature is traditionally seen in its strong emphasis on family orientation: parents living under the same roof as their children to help raise grandkids. However, as noted above, in modern days, the traditional family structure of parents living with their children has almost gone extinct. The personal independence away from their families the younger generation develops with individualism on the rise, paired with the extremely strong family orientation disrupts the core principle value of "connectedness" and "unity" felt by the traditional collectivist community.

The currently elderly generation in Korea is the last generation to hold traditional values toward caring for their elders and placing more value on collectivist ideals over individualistic ideals of Korean society (Hong et al.). As a result, the Baby Boomer generation is the "transitional generation", moving from the traditional to the more modern Korean context (Hong et al.). As the transitional generation, the boomers of Korea struggle with the ingrained cultural values of collectivism and unity while living in a culture that is shifting towards individualism.

This shift can leave the elderly feeling forgotten by many as they move into a culture that places them outside of society. These kinds of generational shifts can also lead to feelings of loneliness, depression, and thoughts of suicide. Park Et al. describe that those who struggle with thoughts of suicide are struggling with two different thought processes: "thwarted belonging" and "perceived burdensomeness". "Thwarted belongingness" is what Park and colleagues describe as a condition in which a person's need to belong is impeded, characterized by feelings

of loneliness and the lack of reciprocal relationships in their lives (713). “Perceived burdensomeness” is a cognitive state where the person believes they are a liability towards those they love; this is a notion comprised of idea that they are a burden and are then filled with self-hatred (713).

Unfortunately, the elderly context in Korea today is the perfect ground for both of these conditions. More often than not, seniors live alone in low-income housing with limited contact with their children and loved ones. They work 50-60-hour weeks collecting recycling to pay for their own needs leaving no time to socialize with the friends they once had and leaving them prone to the overwhelming feeling of thwarted belongingness. Additionally, those who still operate under the Confucian value of filial piety view their existence as a burden to their children, especially when financial transfers are sent. All of this leaves seniors with an added sense of perceived burdensomeness. These perceptions of thwarted belonging and perceived burdensomeness can easily manifest in conditions of the culturally bound condition of *Hwa-Byung* (화병).

### **화병 Hwa-Byung**

The seniors who experienced the IMF crisis and live with the horrible and life-altering results are understandably angry about the situation they find themselves in today. Sixty percent of those who built Korea up from the ground level after the IMF Crisis are now homeless or in extreme poverty. And most of these people are also depressed, living in isolation as a result of their economic status, and growing increasingly frustrated at the position they are in life now. The combination of these symptoms leads to the identification of *Hwa-byung*. *Hwa-Byung*, 화병 is a Korean culturally bound syndrome that has been identified as the biological manifestation of *han*, 한.

Within Korean culture, *han* is a socio-cultural concept that has been popularized in cinema, music, and writings in recent years. It encapsulates the feeling that is only known by Koreans as the "collective feeling of unresolved resentment, pain, grief, and anger. *Han* is often described as running in the blood of all Koreans, and the quality of Korean sorrow as being different from anything Westerners have experienced or can understand. . . . a characteristic of Koreans and at the root of Korean culture" (Kim, 254). *Han* is further described as the deep-rooted grief that goes back through past generations and is carried forward in future generations, the only cultural parallel being the experience of the African American community throughout history. *Han* encompasses the "bitterness and longing that Koreans experience as the result of a long history of oppression and injustice, but also as the pain that Koreans experience from their individual life circumstances" (Kim, 255). This definition of *han* encapsulates the elderly population in Korea today. The elders today hold onto extreme bitterness, believing themselves to have been abandoned by their government, their families, and their country. They served their country well with the idea that they would have a family and country to rely on when they became older, yet they remain unable to support themselves.

Lee et al. reviewed *Hwa-byung* is a syndrome as it is unique to Korean culture. They showed that *Hwa-byung* is statistically significantly comorbid with disorders recognized by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) such as anger disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and major depressive disorder (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Dsm-5). This definition correlates with Bagalkot et al.'s definition that correlates *Hwa-byung* with suicidal ideation and difficulties with depression, self-esteem, anxiety, and anger. *Hwa-byung* has the literal definition of "anger disorder" or "fire disease" and has been described as the physical manifestation of extensive exposure to frustrating and tragic

life events, resulting in an excessive amount of pent up anger (Bagalkot et al.). The comorbidity rate of *Hwa-Byung* and major depressive disorder was found to be 60.7%.

Cultural factors that influence the onset of *Hwa-byung* are traditional Confucian values, such as the open expression of distress is discouraged, gender roles, as females experience more social restrictions, familial assigned roles, and the stigma of mental illness, as the expression of psychological distress is considered socially unacceptable. Additional, factors that influence the onset of *Hwa-byung* are family dynamics, socioeconomic factors, religious affiliation, psychosocial stress, and intolerable life problems that have been internalized as emotional distress, an intersection that over 45% of the elderly population today find themselves in (Korea 2018 OECD Economic Survey Overview). The study found some factors significantly correlated with *Hwa-byung* are psychological stress, family conflicts, financial loss, and poverty. Western medicine describes *Hwa-byung* as "chronic psychosomatic illness caused by the incomplete suppression of negative emotions such as anger or the projection of anger into the body" (Lee et al, 4). Traditional Korean models of medicine describe the syndrome as "a state of disharmony" (Lee et al, 4).

Lee et al. also identified several levels that impact the prevalence of *Hwa-byung* starting on the broadest level, culture, and working down to more individual factors. Confucian values in particular tend to restrict, specifically women, in regard to their emotional expression, family roles, and struggles with surrounding mental health (Lee et al.). The next level is identified as a "religious community." Stress may manifest on this level as a result of not being able to fulfill all the cultural responsibilities placed on an individual. These responsibilities include being able to properly worship one's ancestors. When these duties are not able to be fulfilled, emotional stress may manifest as guilt, anger, and fear. The second to last level is the interpersonal, embedded in

the religious community and the general traditional culture. Family conflicts may arise between spouses and children due to the desire to trade Western values for traditional values, or vice versa, creating tension and emotional stress within the family dynamics. Lastly, individual variables that are important to note are age, socioeconomic status, level of education, level of commitment to traditional values, and acculturation stress (Lee et al., 7). These individual variables translate to show a lack of family harmony and insufficient support are related both to suicidal ideation and actual suicide attempts (Bagalkot et al, 369).

When I was in Korea in August to conduct my interviews, I had the opportunity to ask seniors from the community what they thought of *Hwa-byung*. Park Su Ok is a senior from the Yuseong-gu Senior Citizens' Welfare in Daejeon. Sue Ok was 79-years-old when I met her, and had been attending the welfare center for the past 17 years. When I asked if she could describe what *han* was, with the help of my translator Anna, I received an unexpected answer,

So she is actually have Hwa-byung, han, they were the ones who were yelling (earlier in the game room there were two older men yelling over a disagreement in the score of ping pong). She is explaining. She is also saying the same thing as I said to you. Not the younger generation, but their generation experienced the poverty and lots of difficulty in their life right. So what they do is pour out everything onto their children. But then its got to be unconditional. You have to forget about it what you have given to children, but then you know naturally, internally you expect something in return. When that doesn't happen, when the expectation doesn't meet, then things come out. (Park Su Ok)

For clarification, I asked if people became angry when they have Hwa-byung and another senior at the table, Kim Soja stated that,

There are people who are people who actually kill themselves. They tend to explode, but then coming here, they just forget about it, just doing what they like. It is kind of a healing process, for them. For example, nanta, when you are upset and angry, you just (play the drums with more passion), and ping pong too. Where they can actually kind of resolve it, doing something that they are happy about . . . when it is really accumulated, sometimes you can just explode. [*Hwa-bung*]. (Kim, Soja)

In sum, those who live with *Hwa-byung* live in a constant state of suppressed anger and repression of emotions. With *Hwa-Byung's* high correlation to depression and high comorbidity with major depressive disorders within the senior community, it is important to take into account how the physical and mental attributes of *Hwa-byung* lead to personal self-neglect.

### **Elder Self-Neglect**

Self-neglect is defined by the Korean National Center on Elder Abuse as “the behavior of an elderly person that threatens his/her own health or safety.” In their study, Lee and Kim evaluate the risk factors for self-neglect in seniors who live alone in South Korea. According to their study, along with several other studies, the most at-risk demographic for self-neglect are seniors living alone or with a lack of family social support. Park Joon et al. have similar findings, the lack of others in the home has a high correlation with late-life depression in elderly Koreans (39). Additionally, self-neglect was reported highest in seniors with higher education and cognitive abilities.

Elder self-neglect has been associated with medical comorbidities, physical abilities, cognitive abilities, depressive symptoms, and a lack of a social network or support. The study found that self-neglect was highest in those who lived alone, had depressive symptoms and lacked family social support. In fact, those who lived alone were characterized by being the most

at risk to commit self-neglect, more so than those who were divorced, separated, or never married.

Lee and Kim also found that the quality of family networks is extremely important because they positively protect against self-neglect. As such, these researchers had several suggestions for policymakers, the first one being that policymakers acknowledge that elderly self-neglect is a serious and rising issue among Korean elders, and that they therefore allocate more resources to help the seniors. Additionally, Lee and Kim argue that neglect needs to be legally redefined and categorized. Currently, neglect by those with family members is classified as “neglect by family” due to Confucian values. However, Lee and Kim assert that neglect needs to be reframed into two categories: self-neglect and neglect by others.

This study adds additional evidence that depressive symptoms are the strongest variables that lead to self-neglect. They also state that the government should increase awareness of the issue through the use of social media. The last suggestion that Lee and Kim provide is an encouragement towards cross-generational activities with seniors who live alone, involving them in community activities. This study is extremely important to my research as it shows the prevalence of elderly neglect in Korea and provides steps to combat it.

The current issue that Korea is facing is that the rate of economic growth is decreasing; income distribution is becoming more concentrated, increasing the wealth gap; the national fertility rate is decreasing, and the population is rapidly aging. As seen in figure 1, the suicide rate for individuals increases astronomically after they pass 50 years old.



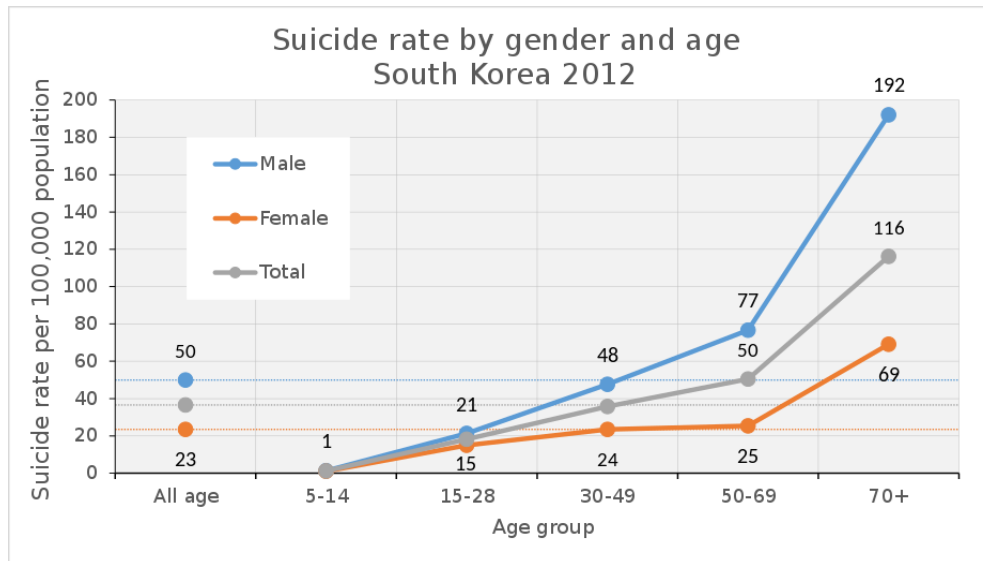


Fig. 1: Suicide Rate by Gender and Age in South Korea, 2012. World Health Organization. "Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative". *World Health Organization*. 2014. Accessed 9 Nov. 2018.

Given these statistics, even if economic and cultural conditions were solved immediately and adequate pensions were provided, it would not aid the current elderly generation from the suffering they endure every day. Among developed countries, the Korean elderly community suicide rate is as high as 81.8 per 100,000 people between the ages of 65-74 (Kim, et al). This number almost doubles for those 75 years and older, where the suicide rates are 160.4 per 100,000 people. In comparison to other OECD countries, the suicide averages are 16.3 and 19.3 respectively (Kim, et al). In 2012, South Korea had the second-highest suicide rate in the world, 2.5 times the average (Yoon). In real-time, this translates to 40 Koreans dying by suicide every day.

These are concerning statistics, especially considering that a staggering 95% of Koreans report being stressed and 28% of elderly Koreans report being depressed (Watkins). These numbers don't account for the number of people who do not report being stressed or depressed

due to the social stigma attached to syndromes like depression. In a study conducted by Kim et al., depressive symptoms were found in 39.5% of their sample size of community-dwelling seniors, especially among the socioeconomically disadvantaged (Kim, Hongsoo). However, they also found that there was a positive relationship between depression and the use of healthcare facilities in older people across the board. Moreover, they discovered that the relationship between depression and healthcare facilities was positively correlated, indicating that as the use of healthcare facilities rose so did the cases of depression in the facilities. This correlation is presumably due to both the social stigma surrounding long term care facilities across the world and the unique factors of Korean culture.

These staggering depression results are because those in Korean society are less willing to seek out help because of the undesirable labels associated with doing so (Watkins). This is reflected in the fact that according to Watkins, 78% of elderly Koreans think that depression means that a person is weak. This same belief is held by only 6% of elderly Americans. The social stigma around depression is profound, deeply rooted, and will be very difficult to overcome. My translator Anna Jeong, a native Korean, explained that she had never heard of depression until she moved to Australia for college:

The thing that I was so shocked about was that when I was in Australia, when I went to campus, you know in different cities, on different campuses, I was so shocked to see the poster, depression clinic, depression, depression, depression. Everywhere! I have never heard of depression in my life before. We don't talk about depression because we are so busy. Our mind is so busy with what to do; our lives are so busy with what to do. So, we are too busy to be depressed. (Jeong, 8:26)

I asked her if she thought a busy life would be able to cure depression and she responded with, “Busy life is better” (Jeong 8:45).

As a result of the social isolation that most elderly experience they sink further into a depressive, feeding into the perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belonging they feel, giving the way to suicide. However, suicide is not the only way seniors pass away in their homes; they can also pass away under *godoksa conditions*.

### **Elderly Godoksa Deaths**

*Godoksa* is a culturally specific term in Korean meaning “the solitary death of someone who lives alone” (Jang). Those who die under *godoksa* circumstances usually have no ties with family members, friends, co-workers, or neighbors, and so they pass away alone, cut off from society (Steger). Typically, those who pass away under *godoksa* conditions are not found until several days later, when the smell becomes too much for the neighbors who are forced to call someone. Most of the *godoksa* deaths that occur are those of the elderly. Some of this is attributed to the fact that is not uncommon for depression within elderly communities to become so overwhelming that it becomes difficult to find the motivation to perform even routine daily tasks. This level of stress is especially true in the face of the compounding societal disadvantages while also wrestling with depression, loneliness, and anxiety about the future.

These elders are alone until the moment they passed away, and continue to be alone even when their bodies finally begin to decompose. This increasingly common phenomenon of *godoksa* has increased over the past several years, especially in the middle-aged and elderly community. In 2014 1,008 seniors died alone in their homes. This number then increased in 2016 to 1,833 cases, an 80% increase from the previous record (Yonhap). In a study conducted by the Seoul Welfare Foundation, 52% of these deaths occurred in low-rise or rental apartments, with

an additional 8% occurring in *goshiwons* (Chae). Ultimately, many seniors find themselves in this position of residential poverty as explained in the previous sections.

The word *godoksa* is a makeshift word used by scholars, academics and the media to portray someone who lived and died alone and whose corpse is found much later on (Shin & Jang). Most officials, however, prefer to use “unconnected deaths” to refer to “those who die without next of kin, or without family members willing to accept the body, leaving the local government to handle the funeral arrangements and the disposal of the deceased individual’s effects” (Shin & Jang). Scholars believe that the reason for the increase in *godoksa* deaths is highly correlated with the increasing number of single-person households that have emerged (Yonhap). As a result of the recent spike in *godoksa* deaths, the community has formed several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to help the community. As previously stated, many elders find themselves in positions of living alone as a result of family separation, divorce, or unemployment, and find great difficulty becoming financially stable. These conditions also combine with the ever-declining multigenerational households that the elderly community is accustomed to. All of these factors, in combination with one another, lead to the elderly becoming socially isolated. As such, these lonely deaths are becoming a major social issue, particularly in combination with the increasing acceptance of Western individualistic values and the rise of elder poverty within a historically collectivist culture.

There are several reasons for *godoksa* deaths. One reason is that older people, especially those with chronic medical conditions, face a higher likelihood of passing away in their sleep. With no one around to look after or check up on them, their bodies remain untouched until an organization is called. Another reason for the high occurrences of *godoksa* deaths is as a result of

the fact that there are more older people living alone in general. Additionally, those who live alone have higher rates of depression and experience loneliness to a higher degree.

Along with suffering from loneliness and depression, many of the seniors who live in isolation also live with anxiety in regard to what will happen to them when they pass away, specifically who will handle their funeral. A rising number of elderly Koreans who die alone have no one to claim their bodies and give them a proper funeral when they pass. Many senior bodies go unclaimed for several reasons, strained family relationships, no family, and the sheer cost of funerals in Korea. When the elderly pass, families typically collect their bodies and hold a funeral for them as a sign of respect. However, due to the poor relationships that many seniors now hold additional anxiety over what will happen to their bodies when they pass. In Korea families rent out a funeral home to mourn the death of a loved one for two nights and three days, starting immediately after the individual passes away (Chu). However, due to the complicated nature of the Korean healthcare system, hospitals do not make enough revenue merely providing medical services, and so funeral home operations serve as one of the biggest money-makers for them. In 2017, the average cost of a funeral room in a hospital with additional services was 9.38 million won or \$8,220. This number does not include the cost of burial or cremation services, which is typically an additional 2-5 million won (Chu). In addition to the steep cost of the funeral, the family's social status is on display, ranked by the number of guests who arrive and based on how long they stay. For those who are poor, however, it is not worth the cost to have a public funeral.

As a result of the high expense of funerals and the potential shame that follows the arrival of few guests, many elderly bodies go unclaimed by their families. As a result, NGOs have formed to help with the funerals as well. Civil groups such as Good Nanum or Good Sharing

exist to hold a passing on ceremony for those who have no one. Once the body is claimed, organizations like Good Nanum normally wait about a month to see if anyone will claim the body before they hold a funeral of their own (Ng & Shushan). Good Naumn, which is a Soul-based organization, on average conducts four free funerals a week for the community with no connections, with the average increasing as of recent. As of 2018, Seoul's government has updated its ordinance on the provision of public funerals services that the city provides. The new ordinance provides those who die alone with public funerals, as well as those who suffer from financial difficulty. Members of the community are invited and encouraged to partake in the ceremonies that are held (Steger).

In an attempt to decrease the number of elderly suicides within homeless communities, this research draws from both Western liberation theology and Minjung theology. Western liberation theology acknowledges that poverty is not simply a passing phase, but is rather a product of economic, social, and political structures that oppress weaker people groups (Groody 189). Minjung theology, 민중 “*minjung*” (oppressed) is the theology of the oppressed, born from Christians in Korea who were in places of social and political oppression in the 1970s, understanding “the pain of dehumanization” (Park, A. Sung). In today’s world, the elderly homeless community is part of the *minjung*. Listening to the voices of those who have experienced the injustice of poverty is a pursuit of reconciliation between the hurting system and the healing elderly population who has been harmed by the system (McCarthy). James McCarthy explains that, “reconciliation means to bring together those parts that were torn apart to make them whole again, to repair the brokenness in our community. . . when harm is done, we all work together to recognize and undo the damage. That is reconciliation. It also is real justice” (111). The elderly are socio-politically oppressed and discriminated against as they suffer from systems

of poverty. Those who have suffered as a result of the IMF crisis are reasonably angry about the situation that they find themselves in today.

### **Community Living's Impact on Depression, Dying Alone, & Suicide**

Welfare Centers are government-sponsored facilities run, partially sponsored, by the government through fundraising. They are numerous in Korea, providing an incredible service to elders during the day (Deok) and are extremely community-oriented, participatory, and inclusive. They have programs and classes that range from physical and mental to traditional and modern. Seniors have these opportunities 1-2 times a week to improve language skills, to maintain their physical fitness with traditional drum and trampoline classes, to learn how to use a smartphone, and to participate in well-living activities. Other class options range from calligraphy, language learning, gym and dance classes, all free to the public. Additionally, Welfare Centers provide job opportunities for both the able-bodied and the disabled.

Welfare Centers cater to the retired demographic, however, when operating hours are over, everyone must vacate the premises, and those who live alone are typically isolated from social interaction until the following day. Social isolation is one of the major predictive factors for depression, especially in the elderly. Social isolation can lead to a sense of loneliness in an individual, a factor that is especially difficult for Korean seniors because of the collectivist nature of their community. Relying strongly on community involvement and in-group and out-group orientations as a function of daily life, many of the seniors who I had the privilege of talking to, stated that they would much prefer the idea of living in a community with other seniors to increase the feeling of the community over the option of continuing to live alone.

A study conducted by Yoo et al. analyzed the levels of depression among the elderly in South Korea in three different environments where they chose to spend most of their free time: in

their homes (group 1), small community halls (group 2), and senior welfare centers (group 3) (Yoo et al., 200). The data gathered by interviewing 833 seniors about their independence, social support, life satisfaction, and depression, found that those who spend most of their free time at home had the highest levels of depression. These individuals were also typically in the low-income bracket and had corresponding health care issues. As a result of having medical problems, they received in-home care from public health centers. The adults in group one reported having worse health in comparison to group two (Yoo et al., 206). Additionally, a higher proportion of those in group 1 lived alone compared to groups 2 and 3. This study found that subjective health was a predictor of depression and that factors such as social, financial, and health vulnerabilities (Yoo et al., 206).

An important contribution that this study adds to the field is backed by the findings of previous studies as well. This study found that an individual's lack of social support greatly affects his or her degree of depression in an individual. This is especially true for "empty-nest individuals" and the elderly who live alone. In fact, it may account for the number of elderly in group 1 who lived alone and had little social support (Yoo et al., 206). This study found that those who reported the highest life satisfaction were the elderly in group 3, those who spent their time in senior welfare centers. Yoo et al. hypothesize that reporting happened as a result of life satisfaction being closely related to the physical and psychological well-being of the elderly. They state that even though the inevitable physical functioning and mobile decline occurs, having a stable foundation of psychological functioning has a high correlation of reporting life satisfaction (Yoo et al., 206).



## Contextualization

Moving forward to aid the poor elderly community requires us to note that though elderly poverty is an issue across Korea, every region experiences the impacts of it differently. Therefore, contextualization within the context of aiding the poor elderly community is necessary to implement.

In the case of working with the Korean elderly, contextualization requires the reevaluation of the place and role of the family in Korean culture due to the onset of Globalization and Westernization. In recent years, Korea has become a globalized nation, both importing Western culture and exporting Korean culture. In terms of cultural exports, South Korea found a way to participate in the global flow, creating economic value with the use of digital technological infrastructures (Friedman, Thomas 137). The annual exports of cultural content in 2018 increased by 8.4% from 2017 to KRW 11.08 trillion or USD 9.55 billion (Yonhap). Korea's largest annual cultural export products are video games (\$6.39 billion, 66.9% of all cultural content), trade characters (\$733 million), knowledge information (\$644 million), and music (\$564 million) (Yonhap). Globalization continually reshapes what we know of culture, family, and society while the interconnectivity of the world makes it so that our capacity of understanding and empathy for one another grows. Contextualization is important because by understanding the nuances of a culturally relevant situation, one is better able to identify the factors working against the group.

A study conducted by Kim and Cook examined the adult child's role in reducing the poverty rate of the older generation through co-residence and financial transfers of South Korea's rapidly aging society (Kim). The study showed that almost 70% of South Korea's elderly population is dependent upon child-to-parent financial transfers in order to stay out of homelessness (Kim). Additionally, this study shows that in addition to other factors, rapid

industrialization and urbanization have negatively impacted the parent-child bond in South Korea. As a result, contextualization is necessary because it addresses the specific needs for financial stability of the local community and recognizes the aid children are able to provide their families has shifted over the years. Additionally, the lack of contextualization in aid development results in poor program execution, unmotivated and directionless staff, and the no responsibility taken for the fallout of a faulty plan (Easterly 5). Therefore, governmental and non-governmental organizations should address this shift and continue to contextualize the aid provided.

NGOs were chosen as the group that could best aid the poor elderly community because they can contextualize the aid provided. NGOs provide services that are the most appropriate to the community, due to the grassroots nature of their organization. They are also able to provide services more efficiently and effectively than an outside group because they are integrated into the community, and using local people's knowledge and local materials (Willis 108). Partnering with NGOs places the solutions in the hands of the local people, understanding what they want and need and not going off the assumptions of others that displays that “the understanding of and pursuit of wellbeing is to come from the poor themselves” (Meyers 31).

Contextualization means providing all of the background necessary to understand the issue at hand. Ott reframes contextualization for the practitioner as an understanding of the community and how they react and respond to rapid social change (Ott, 43). In a study conducted in 2016, Sun Hye-Jin, a researcher from Kyung Sung University, analyzed different preventative methods that local governments were utilizing to decrease elderly deaths by suicide. Jinan-gun, or Jinan county, enforces depression screening for those 65 years and older and can catch early symptoms of depression. Jinan County has also created five villages called “Villages Enjoying

Happiness” (Sun). These villages were created to reduce depression and suicidal events of the elderly who reside in them through laughter therapy and social interaction. These two methods alone, depression screenings and social interaction, have proven to reduce suicidal ratings, bringing Jinan-gun from the highest suicidal rating to 234th place (Sun). The method these districts have taken seems unconventional, forcing everyone 65 and older to go through a depression screening. However, the idea of distinct areas or “villages” designated as places to promote happiness seems to operate off of the same concept as Silver Wings: bringing people in the same condition into the community with each other.

The case study of Silver Wings focuses on how “Help Age Korea’s Older People Self-Help Group” promotes aging in the community by improving emotional well-being and reducing the long-term care needs of the elderly South Korean population (Yang, Yunjeong). Help Age Korea’s Older People Self-Help Group Initiative is a civil society effort that promotes aging in local communities. The overall aim of the initiative is the social integration of marginalized, low income, elderly people. The study focuses on a specific group, Silver Wings. Silver Wings means to achieve their four objectives: fighting poverty, overcoming social isolation, promoting health, and eliminating discrimination, by increasing emotional well-being through socialization and physical activity, as well as programs such as Korean Language classes, exercise classes and activity clubs (Yang, Yunjeong). This shows evidence that through participation in physical activities and social inclusion, older marginalized demographics found renewed energy and a greater sense of empowerment than before (Yang, Yunjeong).

While both of these studies evaluate the mitigation of depression symptoms through the integration of social interaction in low-income elderly communities, they do not acknowledge that those paying high rents are unable to go to such programs because they are trying to

maintain a steady source of income. However, this thesis recognizes the value of the methodology behind each study, and pulls from them to work through the housing crisis. Hopefully, over time, those who live in community homes will begin to view themselves as anything but a financial burden in the eyes of their family members. Ultimately, the goal is that they will be integrated into community with each other and able to rely on one another (Groody 186).

### **Proposed Solutions**

두리 or *durae* is the Korean word that refers to a barn raising or cooperative farming community. The word denotes an overall culture of working together, sharing labor and providing support to anyone in need (Shin). In fact, this thesis is titled 두리 to show the benefits of the community working together in order to solve a problem. The hopes for the current elderly population in Korea are that a community will once again work together to help the overwhelming number of those who suffer from elderly depression and suicide every year. This section is an accumulation of the current research and is in an attempt, not to "solve" social isolation in the elderly community, but to restore a "peace of mind, lack of anxiety, happiness" and satisfaction with life through affordable community housing (Meyers 32). The research presented makes a case for how community living increases the overall subjective well-being of those living in the homes.

### **Community Living**

One of the proposed solutions to increase life satisfaction and decrease godoksa deaths is affordable community living. An affordable community home would provide those struggling with finances to enter into that is safe, secure, and financially sustainable home. This community home would consist of anywhere from 4-6 of the same gendered individuals to live day-to-day

life in community with one another, eating, celebrating holidays together, and looking out for one another.

The Carnation Houses were a pilot study constructed in the Gyeonggi province in 2013. These homes were constructed to be a community day center for the elderly. The community center was intended for those elderly who live alone to have a place to eat, sleep, cook, and care for each other, a place where they also could make money by peeling garlic for USD \$4 a bag and making shopping bags. Since their creation in 2013, the success rate of the Carnation Houses has led to the opening of an additional 23 homes across the Gyeonggi province (Ng & Shushan). The Carnation Houses, on one hand, allow for the community to engage, cook and eat with one another, but the seniors still return home alone at night. As such, the recommendation of this thesis is to consider the communities of homes should be created, like the Carnation Houses, with the addition of the seniors being able to reside in the homes, integrating the community into their life holistically.

Anecdotally speaking, the notion of these communities comes with broad approval. While interviewing senior women in Korea at a welfare center, I asked Yu Chong Ya, Yang Che Young, Park Sonja (Yu; Yang; & Park) about a community living pilot study that had been launched called Carnation Houses. The three women had not heard about them before, and were curious about the concept, so I explained that it is a day home where a group of elderly individuals in similar situations live life together. The women were thrilled about the idea. They all agreed that homes like the carnation Houses would benefit their community greatly. That way they can all live in a community together and take care of each other when they are sick.

The Korean government is currently funding a Community-Based Home Healthcare plan to assist the growing elderly population. Their current plan is to provide the same care from

convalescent facilities, hospitals, and acute care hospitals, bringing them into the homes of the elderly who are suffering from such conditions. The program plans to build 40,000 public rental housing units catered to the elderly between 2019 and 2022. The plan places an emphasis on doctor and home care visits to the larger poor elderly community, so that they may remain in their homes rather than being forced to live in medical institutions or nursing homes ("Comprehensive Community Care System to Allow Elderly Koreans to Live in Their Homes by 2025").

However, only 5,000 of these 40,000 public units will be set aside for the low-income elderly community. That means only 8% of the units being built are there to serve the largest segment of this demographic. My proposed alterations to the community care plan are as follows:

The homes should be built and operate as communal residencies in a neighborhood of other elderly community homes. Having people live near and with one another in affordable subsidized homes would decrease elderly solitariness, social isolation, and poverty because it will foster a sense of belonging and comradery within the home. Additionally, community homes would decrease the elderly condition of thwarted belongingness by introducing consistent intentional and reciprocal relationships to their daily lives. Community homes also increase the positive collectivist values held by the senior community and can protect at risk individuals from suicidal thoughts and behaviors by promoting a sense of unity and oneness in the homes. By setting the communal homes in a neighborhood of similar houses, seniors can create a large and community-oriented social network as they age. They are then able to rely and feel a sense of unity with those, not only in the home, but also in their community as well. In fact, Liu et al. found that those who live in more social environments, such as social neighborhoods, reported

higher levels of self-related health (Liu et al.) Moreover, in their study on neighborhood environments and self-reported health, Liu et al. suggest that there is a greater need for community-based support systems in an aging society, especially considering the elderly community that rely more heavily on social support from neighbors (Liu et al.)

These homes should provide opportunities for residents to earn income by providing services that help the larger city community. Organizations such as Welfare Centers and the Carnation Houses provide ways for seniors with a way to earn money. This is either through job postings, working at the welfare centers, peeling garlic, making bags, or folding fruit nets. Jobs like these would increase the seniors' source of reliable income as an extension of the homes' programming. The seniors would not need to solely depend upon their children's financial transfers or collecting cardboard off the streets, thus, decreasing their self-perception of burdensomeness, being a liability on their family and sense of self-hatred.

The Community Care Plan emphasizes food delivery for residents living alone and total care residence, residence considered in need of convalescent services and daily living support ("Comprehensive Community Care System to Allow Elderly Koreans to Live in Their Homes by 2025"). The Care Plan should empower the healthy elderly community to partner with them to deliver the food to those in their homes for a wage. By empowering the elderly community to mobilize the food delivery service within the neighborhoods, they could be compensated with a sustainable wage while meeting their neighbors, again increasing their social network. Healthy seniors would then be able to reflect the model of some NGOs and sit with those who are immobile, providing companionship and company.

Currently, many of the seniors in the 104-district anywhere between 0.5 and 1 mile away from any store, bus stop, or market on top of a hill, making movement difficult and carry

groceries almost impossible with any physical condition. As such, it is the recommendation of this thesis that neighborhoods should first be built in areas that are easily accessible to public transportation. By doing this, seniors are more likely to utilize the social resources available to them, such as welfare centers, soup kitchens, and clinics. Bus lines would also promote connectivity in the community, encouraging the elderly to engage in social activity, and reducing the impact of depression and loneliness by providing the means to stay connected.

Lastly, I propose modern *hanoks* be constructed for the elderly to reside in or refurbish ones that already exist. Hanoks are traditional Korean homes that date back to the Jeonse dynasty. These homes are ecological and environmentally friendly; they consist of an open floor plan to increase community involvement within home and fulfill a more traditional orientation. Typically lived in by those of with high status, the *hanok* is the perfect metaphor for going back to traditional Korean roots. Historically, the entire family unit would reside in a *hanok*; grandparents, children, and grandkids and spouses. Based on its historical roots, classic architecture, community orientation by design and environmental approach, the *hanok* will serve the community the best. In fact, there have already been several projects that have looked into reducing the project cost and enhancing the performance of the building while maintaining the traditional nature of the homes.

### **Additional Benefits of Community Housing**

According to Clare et al. the best ways to increase life satisfaction and aging well for the elderly is through mood state, non-isolation, and social relationships. These three factors have the greatest impact on overall life satisfaction. Community housing programs, such as Carnation Homes, integrate the elderly into living with others, breaking social isolation, fostering social



relationships in the home, and providing an opportunity for the individual's mood state to increase (Clare et. al 717).

In addition to the outcomes of the elders living in homes, community living also benefits those who aid that community, acting as the building blocks of the change process (Anderson 35). The communal nature of the homes make it easier to provide aid to those who need it because nurses and home care workers would be able to maximize their time by visiting multiple individuals in one home. Hopefully, this would decrease the burden and stress of nurses thus, decreasing burnout rates.

With the implementation of communal homes, the need for organizations such as Good Nanum, the National Assembly of Sweepers, or Hardworks as elderly *godoksa* deaths would decrease. Though elders still may not have a family to bury them, they would have a community to hold a funeral for and remember them. Additionally, there would be fewer unclaimed bodies as fewer seniors would live and die alone. Reports of elderly depression and loneliness would decrease as community involvement and social integration increased over time. Furthermore, the elderly demographic would also have a community around them to celebrate major holidays with, thus increasing life satisfaction and social relationships. Additionally, the community living arrangement would benefit home care workers as well.

## **Methodology**

For my field work I originally went with the question of, how does the intersection of globalization, elderly poverty, and *hwa-byung* affect the lives of the individuals who live in the phenomenon? While I was in Korea, I evaluated this intersection and how it effects the daily lives of the poor elderly community. An ethnographic phenomenological approach was chosen as it naturally analyzes the intersection of all the indicated factors. A phenomenological study

also places special emphasis on the “essence or essences [of a] shared experience”, such as the shared experience of economic, residential, and social poverty (Merriam & Tisdell, 26). The main effect of a phenomenological study captures the essence of a specific experience.

The research methods included interviewing and volunteering with leaders of Welfare Centers in Daejeon, volunteers from soup kitchens in Seoul, and members of the elderly community. Due to the nature of phenomenological studies, this research was conducted through directed but open ended and informal interviews to gain a better perspective on the everyday lives of individuals. The interviews covered family dynamics, conditions of living, employment status, and levels of sadness and depression. These interviews were unstructured and informal, indicating that the questions formulated open-ended, flexible, exploratory, and held within the context of a conversation (Merriam& Tesdell, 110). Relevant questions were asked concerning their lived experience and perspective on globalization, current family structures, anger and bitterness, and elderly poverty.

Interviews with volunteers were semi-structured consisting of a combination of more pointed interview questions and open-ended questions and addressing all three factors. Specific interview questions for volunteers were as follows:

1. How did most of the elders end up living in these conditions?
2. Do the elders talk about their families?
3. Have most of the elders been in poverty their entire life?
4. What is your perception of working with this community?
5. If so, how do they make an income?

Data was collected through informal phenomenological interviews. Merriam & Tisdell state that this style of interview “attempts to uncover the essence of an individual’s ‘lived’

experience” which was critical for this research (113). These interviews were then evaluated to measure thoughts on globalization, symptoms of *hwa-byung* and elderly poverty and to assess their lived experience.

Data was transcribed and coded at the end of every day. An interpreter was present at all times when interviews were conducted and they were made aware of the ethical standards of which to be held, the sensitivity of the subject, and overall nature of the study. Additional resources that were utilized included public documents, personal documents, and archived data to assess past research on the issue, currently insights, and thoughts for the future (Merriam & Tisdell, 164).

However, the questions I asked changed dramatically when I began the interviewing process. While talking to the poor elderly community I learned that what they needed was not an analysis on how globalization has affected them. But instead they said needed, someone to lookout for them, housing, someone who cared.

## **Conclusion**

In a rapidly aging society, almost half of all elderly Koreans live below the poverty line and suffer from depression and loneliness. While 78% of elderly Koreans believe that depression implies personal weakness, my intentions of presenting this information was not to turn away from the social taboo mental health and depression present, but to lean into them and understand how they impact an at-risk community.

My goal is to supply a new solution to elderly suicide and depression patterns through the use of housing and community development. Therefore, I focused on the demographic shift that is occurring in Korea today in order to understand the cultural conditions of how elderly poverty came to impact a profound number of people. Additionally, I evaluated at the history of the

Korean housing market and the economic impact that the IMF had on it, why the elderly are unable to live in affordable homes, and what they can afford now.

The solutions provided allow those in the elderly community who battle with depression, loneliness, suicidal thoughts, thwarted belonging, and perceived burdensomeness to lean on one another through the functionality of community living, shared resources, and shared experiences. The concept of community housing is utilized to combat such social issues like *godoksa* and mental health conditions such as perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belonging in order to create conditions where the elderly feel safe, with a sense of belonging that increases their sense of well-being in old age. With policy changes and community development programs in place, the seniors in the community will no longer feel isolate or burdensome. We enact this vision with compassion, understanding, and knowledge that the community cannot be healed at once, but with the hope that the elderly would feel cared for holistically so that one day they can all be cared for. The better systems we put in place for our grandparents of today, the better we can take care of our parents, ourselves, and our children. Therefore, we are not only caring for the elderly of today but the collective in its entirety.

In conclusion, for there to be an effective coalition of people working to change the living conditions of the elderly community, everyone must first be informed of the challenges they endure and the systemic structures that restrict them. We must continue to analyze the social, economic, demographic and cultural constructs as they shape the lives of the elderly, and we must be aware of the social systems and inequalities that blindly distance us from the marginalized.

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