

THE KOREAN IMAGES OF OLD AGE: A GLIMPSE OF VERBAL CULTURE

KYONG-DONG KIM

Department of Sociology Seoul National University

THE APPROACH

In this brief presentation, I am not going to deal with facts about the phenomenon of aging or about the old people in Korean society. Since the demographics, social conditions, cultural life, and other problems of the aged in Korea and policies to cover them are all well described and analyzed in the works of other expert participants, I would rather touch upon a narrow subject of cultural perceptions of being old in Korea, as reflected in terminologies and common sayings dealing with this subject. This, in a way, would provide a broad backdrop against which other more factual analyses would make better sense for deeper understanding of the phenomenon of aging and the aged in the Korean social-cultural context.

Two basic types of source materials are used for the analysis. One is the Korean version of Chinese-Korean dictionary and Korean dictionary, and the other is a collection of Korean sayings and proverbs. Mainly, three kinds of words were selected for analysis from the dictionaries. First is the Chinese vocabulary expressed in Chinese characters, which may have originated in China and adopted in Korea from important Chinese classic and other usages. It should be noted here that many of these Chinese terms are not currently in use in everyday life in Korea. They are, however, significant in that they still are considered as the root and background of our cultural heritage. Second is terms written in Chinese but not necessarily Chinese in their origin. For both of these Chinese expressions, I have singled out only those terms that contain Chinese character denoting being old (老). And third is purely Korean terminology expressed in Korean alphabets. Thus, they may reflect both traditional and modern images or meanings related to being old.

FINDINGS

All together, 154 words and terms relevant to our subject were found in the four different dictionaries, two Chinese-Korean and two Korean. The results are presented in detail in Table 1 below. Of these 154, eight were

terms used to denote different age brackets for old age, say 40-50 (early old age) or 60-70s, 70-80s, etc. There were 42 relatively neutral words that merely referred to categories of people, things, status and role, and the like, all related to being old. Some of these seemingly neutral terms, however, may readily be inferred to imply rather negative images or denegrating connotations.

Of the the words mainly used to refer to a person's status or as a title, there were much more positive titles (23) than negative and humbling expressions (6). But negative expressions (48) were almost double that of positive images (27) when it came to words and terms denoting the state of being old and its consequences in life.

The first observation of the findings would be that the words appear to be almost evenly distributed in three categories, those neutral (32.4%), positive (32.4%), and negative (35.1%). If we count some of the neutral names as maybe slightly negative connotation, then the negative category wins over the positive. Still, the difference is not too outstanding.

Second, however, if we look closely into the concrete examples of the words falling in these categories, comparing those positive and negative, then we find that the positive images are pretty much concentrated in the few limited classes of status and title, and to the experience of the aged, that sort of naturally come with the process of aging itself. No doubt, there is an element of respect accorded to the achievement of the senior citizens during their life course in this kind of image of old age. One should be duly reminded, however, that such respect was of the bygone days and the authority of the aged has been constantly eroding over the years.

Compared to the diminishing weight given to the status of being old in this culture and society, the data show that, as for the negative images, the variety of conditions and state of being old increases, suggesting that to be old indeed was always painful and sad and is much more so today than ever before. In the olden days, physical, psychological, and social stigma was already embedded in culture. And interestingly enough, whereas the authority of old age enjoyed by many previous generations before us has been steadily attenuated, the difficulties facing old age have been constantly variegated and accentuated over the years.

As far as the quantity of words is concerned, there was a nice balance between positive and negative expressions, even though one hardly can help feeling that somehow the darker side has attracted greater attention in the culture in terms of their substance. This negative tone appears to win over more clearly in the case of common sayings and proverbs. As shown in Table 2 below, I have simply listed them by major categories of meaning.

TABLE 1. CATEGORIES OF WORDS REFERRING TO BEING OLD OR OLD AGE

Classification & Examples	Number of Words (%)
1. Words referring to Age Brackets 40-50s, 60-70s, 70-80s, etc	8 (5.2)
2. Words referring to Neutral Names for Categories of People, Status & Roles, Things, etc That are Old Old man, woman, parents, brothers, friends, guest, farmer, monk, cliques, servants, things, trees, mere state of being old, etc	42 (27.3)
3. Words referring to Positive Titles, Status, etc Old lord, master, teacher, gentleman, (cabinet) minister man of distinction, man of achievement, elder, hero; etc	23 (14.9)
4. Words referring to Negative Positions, Status, etc Old hostess (geisha), wife, maid (spinster), bachelor boy, commoner, house	6 (3.9)
5. Words Expressing Positive Images and Sentiments —Experienced: veteran bureaucrat, veteran army general; seasoned scholar (Confucianist); disciplined monk, old farm hand: —Accomplished; successful; —Well-versed; expert; skillful stroke (calligraphy); —Wholesome; mature; aged wine; ripe; —Astute; wise (cunning); —Respectable; virtuous; —Spirited; healthy; —Longevity, etc	27 (17.5)
6. Words Expressing Negative Images and Sentiments —Physical conditions; old body, legs, eyes, teeth, bones; figure, appearance, face; deformed body; filthy; —Activity; slow; timid; feeble, weak; debilitated; lazy; —Sickness; ill; ailing; disease; pain; prolonged old age; —Psychological conditions: muddle-headed; senile; dote; insane; old passion & desires; cunning; —Metaphoric state of being old: useless (mundane scholar); obsolete; subdued summer or Indian summer; wasted thing; tired army; weakened stroke (calligraphy); waning nation; retired; —State of mind: lonely; submissive; dependent; excessive kindness (grandmother's solicitude); —Other: impoverished; foolish; drunk; old country bum, etc	48 (31.2)
Total	154 (100.0)

In total, there were only 33 sayings I could identify directly relevant to our purpose out of thousands of entries in the two volumes of Korean proverbs and common sayings, one compiled in South Korea and the other in North Korea. Of these thirty-three, only nine of them were meant to convey some positive image of being old, and all nine of them even used

metaphors like old horse, bird or dragon, mouse, or donkey. The main merits of being old are wisdom, experience and skill, and accomplished. These were parts of the characteristics depicted in the dictionary terminology as well, but much more limited in scope in the case of these sayings.

TABLE 2. COMMON SAYINGS AND PROVERBS LISTED AND CLASSIFIED

Category	Sayings
1. Positive Descriptions	
1) Wise, even cunning:	The old bird cannot be caught with grains. The wise old bird cannot be tempted with prey. The old mouse can drill a hole even on a jar. The old mouse can drill a hole even on a bull's horn. All the old donkey keeps intact is tricks.
2) Experienced, skilled:	The old horse knows the way. The old horse never loses the way. The old horse guesses the way rather well.
3) Accomplishment	The old dragon finally reached the cloud.
2. Negative Descriptions	
1) Lonely, alienated:	Even blind birds do not come near an old and sick person. Even the friendly birds stop visiting an old tree. When you are old, you easily shed tears. Even the state is not supposed to treat the aged coldly. Do not take an an old person by the scruff of the neck.
2) Value depreciated:	Once aged, even the fleet steed is worth less than a hired horse. Once aged, even a giraffe cannot run as fast as a regular horse. There is no point in bargaining for an old cow.
3) Lazy, easy going:	The old cat covets the warmer part of the floor. He is too easy on his job like an old monk rubbing down the ink stick (for calligraphy). All the old fleet steed does is to doze off.
4) Greedy:	The old horse covets more beans. The old cow rushes to the bean field. The old cow never refuses more beans.
5) Stubborn:	The old tree does not bend. Stubborn like an old man with stiff knees.
6) Senile, childish:	When you are old, you act like a child. When you are old, you wear a child's mask.
7) Miscellaneous:	
Tricky, cunning:	Like under the old pine tree.
Complaining:	As you grow old, you become full of little complaints.
Hard life:	It is distressing for an old dog to keep the gate.
Bad luck:	Even in old age, one faces death in a disaster.
Old age shunned:	Even an old person would not like to be called old.
Responsibility:	If an old person behaves badly, that is really bad.

By contrast, negative descriptions were not only more numerous, but also much more variegated than positive references in the case of proverbs, too. The aged are lonely, alienated, and ill-treated; their value in life depreciated; they become lazy and try to go easy on life and work; they become greedy, stubborn, and senile and childish, and more. The general impression, therefore, is that old age and old people are not too positively described or referred to in old sayings and proverbs in Korea.

REFLECTIONS

As has been mentioned at the outset of this presentation, my objective in this small piece of work has been rather clear and limited. Needless to say, one should be careful not to read too much out of this sort of data. Nonetheless, I thought it should be interesting enough to track down part of the broad cultural images of being old and the aged in Korea by examining those dictionary terms and statements related or referring to the subject of old age.

To being with, it should be reminded that these words and statements may not be as commonly and widely used in everyday life of the ordinary Koreans today. Much of the terminology analyzed originally came from China but adopted to the Korean social and cultural context in the classical days of the past generations and the proverbs and common sayings introduced here may have been around for decades or even centuries in some cases. Granted that, however, they do represent genuine part of Korean verbal culture, no doubt, and many of them are still familiar to the Korean people on the street nowadays. In this limited sense, they could show us a portion of the culture of aging and the aged in Korea.

Moreover, we have found that words and proverbs specifically touching upon old age were quite limited in number compared to the total number of entries in the dictionaries and books of proverbs examined. This in itself could reflect the relative status and the image of old age in Korean culture. Despite the unusual emphasis on old age, mainly owing to Korea's staunch Confucian legacy, such emphasis may have been applied to the small fraction of the entire population, mainly the gentry class, and hence pretty much exaggerated than real. Real life must have dictated the fate of old age as a burden to society rather than as an asset to be cherished.

As a senior philosopher in Korea has characterized recently, aging or old age is a life problem for humans and has been so conceived from olden days, but has taken on a more serious overtone these days. He thinks that there are three main types of problems of old age for the aged themselves,

namely, health, income, and work (Kim, 1995). These certainly are practical problems. But according to our analysis of the data, there are much more complex physical, psychological, social, and cultural troubles and problems entailing old age, as has been perceived and conceived in verbal culture over a long span of time.

With the very restricted data, I should not venture any further interpretations. Limited as they may be, however, they surely enlighten us to reflect upon the problems plaguing the aged, not merely the practical issues of health, income, work, and welfare, but their social worth, cultural images, and their psychological agonies consequent to them. Besides the general tendency of today's young generations to look upon the aged (parents and other alike) as an economic burden and social nuisance, the economy-centered, materialistic, capitalist "culture of development" that has dominated the consciousness of the entire world in the past generation or so must have devastated the minds of the people in such a way that everything is seen as an economic problem in a practical sense (Kim, 1994).

People are people, with all kinds of sufferings and agonies, especially the aged who have to face the desolate life of waiting to pass away any minute. And the societies that fail to pay due attention to and do something useful about the human side of the issues of old age deserve to be called inhuman. Come the 21st century, when Korea is going to have close to one out of ten of the total population aged 65 and over, Korea is also going to have to rewrite many of the maxims and reedit the dictionaries in the direction that the cultural image of old age drastically improves, reflecting the real life situations of the aged in Korea.

SOURCE MATERIAL

- Kim To-Hwan. 1993. *HAN'GUK SOKDAM HWARYONG SAJON* [DICTIONARY OF KOREAN PROVERBS AND SAYINGS]. Seoul: Hanul Publishers.
- Min Pyong-Su. 1991. *SAE KUGO SAJON* [NEW AGE KOREAN DICTIONARY]. Seoul: Kyohaksa Publishers.
- Om Pyong-Sob. 1992. *CHOSON SOKDAMJIB* [COLLECTION OF KOREAN PROVERBS AND SAYINGS]. Pyongyang: Social Science Publication Co.
- Yi Ka-Won and Chang Sam-Shik. 1976. *HANJA TAEJON* [GRAND CHINESE DICTIONARY]. Seoul: Hanyong Publishers.
- Yi Sang-Un. 1983. *HANHAN TAESAJON* [GRAND CHINESE-KOREAN DICTIONARY]. Seoul: Minjung Publishers.
- Yi Sung-Nyong. 1990. *SAE KUGO TAESAJON* [NEW GRAND KOREAN DICTIONARY]. Seoul: Sungmunsa Publishers.
- KIM KYONG-DONG

REFERENCES

- Kim Kyong-Dong. 1994. "The Culture of Development and the Idea of 'Cultured' Developmen." Pp.3-17 in Manwoo Lee et al. (ed.) CULTURE & DEVELOPMENT IN A NEW ERA AND IN A TRANSFORMING WORLD. Seoul and Paris: The Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University and UNESCO.
- Kim Tae-Gil. 1995. "Nulgum kurigo Chugum [Growing Old and Dying]." *Kegan CHORHAK KWA HYONSHIL [PHILOSOPHY AND REAL LIFE QUARTERLY]* (Fall): 98-114.

KYONG-DONG KIM is Professor of Sociology at Seoul National University. His research interests are in social change, social development, and methodology.