"Love travels downwards"

...or the role of compassion in the exchange of support between elderly Sakhalin Koreans and their children.

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IN THE YEAR 2000 a 978 strong group of Sakhalin Koreans moved into a newly built apartment complex in Ansan, a 40 minute drive from Seoul. They were welcomed with banners, speeches and celebrations. This was a moment of great joy, yet tears poured down the lined faces. They were returning to Korea after about 60 long years of absence. In the crowd of Sakhalin Repatriates, there were no young faces and no children. Only the first generation was permitted to return. Their apartment complex, called the 'Home Village', was to be a retirement community.

The returnees are former forced labourers, their wives and elderly children. The men were initially 'encouraged', but eventually forced, by the Japanese government to move to Sakhalin Island in the 1930s and 1940s (Naitou 2006, 93-4). Following the Second World War, these Korean labourers were trapped on the island, by then under the control of the USSR. Japan was not interested in recovering its former citizens of Korean descent, and the Soviet Union needed workers on Sakhalin. Despite earlier attempts and campaigns, it was not until the 1990s that Japan and South Korea initiated and co-funded a limited repatriation program, which included only those Sakhalin Koreans born before the end of the war in 1945; as a result, only the first generation was permitted to resettle in South Korea, effectively leaving children and grandchildren behind on Sakhalin (for further details of the repatriation, see Choi Ki-Young 2004). But why did the repatriates choose to accept this rather drastic condition and leave their families behind in Russia? And what does this tell us about the intergenerational relations amongst Sakhalin Koreans and perhaps also in South Korea itself?

The residents of the Home Village received a living allowance that at the time of my fieldwork (2005-6) was equivalent to US$700 per month per couple, or US$400 for a single person. Despite being forbidden to take up formal employment, many of the younger elderly continued to work. Often a large proportion of the earnings was sent back to Russia to support adult children and grandchildren. Even where the elderly were not working, they saved and economised in order to have something for the grandchildren. Their help took many different forms depending on individual circumstances, but was at times very substantial. The repatriates sent money that contributed to the purchase of a house or a flat or that enabled grandchildren to attend university; they helped to pay bank credits and provided money that made the survival of unemployed or underemployed children possible. Even when children had well-established careers, money was given in order to make their lives easier.

Within the English language material on elderly parents and intergenerational support in Korea, the focus is usually on the norm of filial piety. The main focus is its impact and its various forms in Korean society past and present, how it is maintained, how it changes, and how individuals occasionally fail to live up to the ideal. While recently the rhetoric of exchange of support might have changed from that of Confucian values and duties to negotiation (e.g. Cho Mi-Kyeong 2003), the flow of support is seen as mainly flowing from the younger generations towards the elderly (though for a notable exception, see Lee *et al* 2008). The impact of the elderly as providers of child care and other support is of course recognized, but in terms of moral norms governing support exchange between the elderly and the young, the duty of the young to support the old still takes precedence in the discussion. It is not my aim here to question the importance of filial piety. Rather, having observed the extensive efforts of the Sakhalin Korean elderly to support the younger generations, I want to explore another dimension of intergenerational exchange of support.

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Above: Photo by Dorota Szawarska.

Given that the children and many of the grandchildren were adults with families, households and earnings of their own, I enquired about the rationale of this generosity. The explanation that I expected to hear was one stressing family solidarity, where the elderly found themselves obliged to provide support in the common interest of the family. But in fact the repatriates saw themselves as having few obligations towards their adult children. Rather, they found themselves compelled to give out of compassion and love. Unsurprisingly, compassion was usually felt most for those in greatest need. Consequently most support was given where future material reciprocity was least likely. Consider the story of Grandfather Yuri (73):

> *— I have three children, two sons and a daughter, but I guess I help the daughter and her daughter the most. I mean, take the granddaughter. She is studying in Moscow, in one of the best universities in the country. I know that she is studying very hard, and that life in Moscow is very expensive. And you know, now in Russia some people are very rich, but not my granddaughter. So when I imagine that other female students are dressed in new, fashionable clothes and my girl can't afford to buy a new scarf or whatever, my heart bleeds. It hurts to imagine such a thing. So I have to help her!*

In the year preceding my fieldwork the daughter received US$5000 from her parents, whereas her brothers received US$1000 each. Grandfather Yuri was not too keen to give money to his sons. The youngest was deemed irresponsible (and besides, he had already received the family house), and the eldest was a very successful businessman who had little need for the money. But the daughter was a widowed nurse, who worked hard and struggled to support herself and her daughter, so of the three children she was in the greatest need of help.

While shared identity with one's children and grandchildren and notions of family solidarity were elements of this rationale for exchange of support, it was the language of compassion rather than duty that was chosen to explain it. There was more going on here than simple provision of support. Compassion was the idiom of interconnectedness with the distant children. One could not simply stand by and watch one's children suffer. One had to do something. This was not just because the children were seen as suffering, but because parents suffered with them; support, growing out of compassion and co-suffering, alleviated suffering on both sides. The condition of one generation was reflected in the other (see Tapias 2006), and compassion compelled the repatriates to act. In their explanations, compassion served both as a mechanism and a justification for their actions. It was a medium through which being a parent was practised.

While compassion contained within itself a strong element of compulsion, actions stemming from it were spoken of as being evidence of the inner goodness of a person. To simply fulfil duties and obligations would not make one a good person. While compassion was spoken of in terms of compulsion to act, it was recognised that the elderly parents chose through kindness to follow that compulsion. Being compassionate meant being compelled to do good while not formally obliged to do so.

Support given out of compassion transcended notions of formal, material reciprocity. Help was given where it was seen as most needed, and apart from acknowledgement, no future reciprocity was expected. Help was given by those able to give, to those in need. Thus in the above example, future assistance was most expected from the eldest son – the child who received the least from his parents – and not from the daughter who was receiving the most current support. Where compassion was concerned, there was no give or take, and no reckoning of deeds past or future. Compassion was very much a personal inclination that surpassed social obligations. If any notion of gratitude was at work, it was the notion of gratitude of caring: "where the gratitude involves a personal relationship associated with love and bonding, and it is different in that giving benefits and receiving benefits are mutually supportive: Literally, the more you give, the more you get" (Buck 2004:101).

Compassion for one's children was also part of the motivation for returning to Korea. The repatriates did not want to burden their children with looking after the elderly. They were afraid that their growing needs, both financial and practical, would be a strain and a source of worry to the children. And so one of my informants, Anna Nikolayevna (65), having just helped her adult son to purchase property in Moscow, balked at the idea that her son should look after her in the future.

> *— No way. He has a family of his own - a baby daughter and a wife. They already demand a lot of effort and attention. To expect help from him, to demand it, it would be like hanging a heavy rock around his neck that would weigh him to the ground. That would be wrong. In any case, I would probably need his wife's assistance at some point and that would just be too uncomfortable for both of us. We never lived together, I hardly know her. So now that the flat is almost paid for, I will still carry on working. So that we have money to visit Russia, but also to save for the future, just in case one of us becomes sick, and there are medical bills or a carer to be paid for. But it would be wonderful if they gave me their daughter to look after, if only for a couple of years!*

Here compassion played a role in the exchange of support in two ways. Firstly, it contributed to the wealth and harmony of the children's household. Once the elderly moved to Korea, there was little need for the children to worry about their parents, in either financial and practical matters, as the living allowance in Korea was adequate and the living conditions more appropriate to their age. Secondly, and more importantly, through their decision to move to Korea, the elderly created a situation where in most cases the adult children could not and did not have to support the elderly much. Because the decision to migrate was that of the elderly, the children could not be seen as defaulting on their obligations towards their parents. Their parents' decision to migrate enabled the children to remain good people in the eyes of the community and to get on with their everyday lives – though the repatriation did not of course release the children from the obligation to attend their parents' funerals or visit their parents when the situation absolutely demanded it.

Sakhalin Koreans were influenced by Russian culture in their practices. As often in Russia, the focus of the family effort was on the youngest members of the family, and the elderly sidelined their own needs for the sake of the children and grandchildren (Caldwell 2004, Barsukova 2006). However, this also fits with Korean notions of the parent-child relationship. To speak of sacrifice for the sake of the children and strong identification with their interest in the context of Korean culture is not new. However, usually it is spoken of in the context of much younger children and much younger parents, for example in terms of sacrifices needed for children's education (Park So-Jin 2007) or the purchase of property. But being a parent does not cease when the children reach adulthood, and the parental care-giving role is not necessarily easily transformed into one of care-receiving (Lee Dong-Ok et al 2008). Where in the context of supporting one's children, Sakhalin Korean spoke of compassion, perhaps South Koreans would speak of love travelling downwards. But one thing appears to be clear. The discussion and understanding of morality and the practice of intergeneration exchange of support between elderly parents and their children should be extended beyond the discussion of the norm of filial piety and the assumption that the elderly are always the net recipients of support.

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