

*East Meets West: Asian Elders' Experiences of Ageing-in-Place in a Western Country*

Elsie Ho, University of Auckland , New Zealand  
Vivian Cheung, University of Auckland, New Zealand  
Ell Lee, University of Auckland, New Zealand  
Suhina Kaur, University of Auckland, New Zealand

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**Abstract**

“Ageing in place” is a fundamental principle in current ageing policy. With the growing phenomenon of transnational families, increasing numbers of older people from Asia have migrated in late-life to join their adult children living in Western countries; however their experience of ageing in a new environment is under-explored. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 44 Chinese, Indian and Korean elders aged 62 to 86 years who have migrated to New Zealand in later lives, this paper investigates the elders’ ageing experience, in particular what is needed to enable positive ageing-in-place for this population. Contrary to traditional filial practices of intergenerational co-residency, some elders in this study are living in close proximity to their children but in separate households. Intergenerational conflict is not the only reason for the elders’ pursuit of independent living. Rather, it is also a reflection of the elders’ shifting expectation of filial responsibility from their children as they navigate between Eastern and Western cultures. The study suggests that Asian elders’ ability to age-in-place is affected by the elders’ interactions with multiple environments including housing, family, community and government resources. The majority of participants stress the importance of maintaining core Eastern values of intergenerational interdependency, while they also adopt Western ideologies of autonomy and self-reliance, and use of state welfare assistance and community resources. However, barriers to service utilization and community participation impair elders’ ability to positively age in place. Findings highlight the need to ensure that ethnic elders’ needs are met in policy and service design.

Keywords: Asian elders in New Zealand; ageing in place; housing choices; family relationship; community participation

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## Introduction

With decreasing fertility and longer lives, the world population is getting older. This trend is going to accelerate in the coming decades. In 2015, about one in eight people worldwide was aged 60 years and over. By 2030, older people are projected to account for one in six people globally. This will rise further to one in five in 2050 (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, 2015).

There are many countries in the world which have a much larger share of older people in their populations than the world average, and New Zealand (NZ) is one of them. In 2015, about one in five people in New Zealand were over 60 years of age. By 2030, older people are projected to make up 27 percent of the New Zealand population (Statistics New Zealand, 2017a).

With the rapid structural population transformation, there is a growing attention to the promotion of “ageing in place” as a fundamental goal in policy and practice pertaining to older people. In New Zealand, *The New Zealand Positive Ageing Strategy* (Ministry of Social Policy, 2001) emphasizes that ageing well is not only about maintaining personal health and functional independence through healthy eating and doing regular physical activity, but is also about continuing to engage in meaningful activities, being valued, and being able to make choices about where to live in later life, and to receive the support to do so. The idea of “ageing in place” is a priority goal in the *New Zealand Positive Ageing Strategy*. The principle of ageing in place is to support older people to continue to live in their own home and participate in their community for as long as possible, rather than having to move to residential aged facility earlier than needed.

However, what ageing in place might mean for older people from different cultural backgrounds who have migrated to New Zealand in later lives remains under-researched. This paper focuses on one subset of the New Zealand older population, the overseas-born Asian elders. In 2013, about one in ten people identified with an Asian ethnicity in New Zealand were over 60 years of age, with Chinese (53%), Indians (30%) and Koreans (5%) making up the majority of the older Asian population. A large proportion of Asian elders (93%) were overseas-born. Further growth in numbers and proportions of Asian older persons within the New Zealand population can be expected in the next 20 years (Statistics New Zealand, 2017b).

In Asian cultures, the most predominant value relating to the care of older people is filial piety. It prescribes the child’s obligation to attend to parental needs, and to provide care and support to aged parents (Li, Hodgetts & Ho, 2010; Sung, 1998). One of the core elements of filial piety is co-residence with one’s parents. However, contrary to widely held beliefs and norms, data from the 2013 Census show that only around half of Chinese, Indian and Korean elders in New Zealand lived with their children (Table 1). The proportion is less for those who had lived in New Zealand for over 10 years (47.2%) than those with a shorter residence (70.9%). This suggests that overseas-born Asian elders are more likely to co-reside with their children when they arrive; but with longer residence in New Zealand, the proportion living with their children decreases. This trend seems to align with the norms of liberal Western societies such as New Zealand, where immense value is placed on the ability of older

people to be independent and autonomous, and living independently from their children (Beswick et al., 2010; Lecovich, 2014).

Table 1: Percentages of Chinese, Indians and Koreans aged 60 years or over living with children by years of residence in New Zealand in the 2013 Census

	Chinese	Indian	Korean	Total Asian
Live in NZ for under 10 years	69.6	74.1	56.0	70.9
Live in NZ for 10 or more years	45.7	52.8	46.2	47.2
Total, 60 years and over	49.2	57.6	47.4	51.5

Understanding the culture-specific needs of Asian elders as well as the factors influencing their ageing experience is crucial for supporting them to age well for longer in their communities (Office for Senior Citizens, 2015). The overall aim of this study, therefore, was to explore the ageing experiences of Chinese, Indian and Korean elders who have migrated to New Zealand in late-life and live independently from their children. The research questions were:

- What are their demographic and housing characteristics?
- What are their attitudes towards ageing and what influence their ability to age in place in a new country?
- What is needed to enable positive ageing in place for this population?

### Research methods

This study used a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews and participation observation. This method uses words to explore participants' attitudes, perspectives and lived experiences in depth (Alasuutari, 2010). By doing so, underlying contextual meanings each participant ascribed to their experiences were also captured.

Research was undertaken between February 2017 and May 2018 in various neighbourhoods of Auckland, the largest city in New Zealand where two-thirds of the Asian population live. The target population was Chinese, Indians and Koreans who migrated to New Zealand in later life and were living separately from their children. Specifically, the criteria included: 60 years and over, migrated to New Zealand after 50 years of age who were living separately from their children. To recruit participants, a combination of purposive sampling strategy and snowballing technique were employed. Five key community groups (two Chinese, one Indian and two Korean agencies) with close connections to their respective ethnic communities were approached. A snowballing technique was further applied when participants encouraged others in their own networks to participate. A total of 44 participants (41 families) were recruited.

The interviews were conducted in Mandarin, Cantonese, Hindi, Korean, and/or English. Participants shared with us their motivation for migrating to NZ, housing history, current housing experiences, familial relations, community engagement, as well as their cultural values regarding housing, care and ageing. The interview data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach (Thomas, 2006). This involved categorising data under different themes to compare and contrast across families.

## Participant characteristics

Table 2 gives the demographic and familial characteristics of the research participants.

Table 2: Demographic and familial characteristics of research participants

	Number	Percent		Number	Percent
<b>Gender</b>			<b>Age</b>		
Male	17	38.6	60-69	9	20.5
Female	27	61.4	70-79	26	59.0
Total	44	100	80 and over	9	20.5
<b>Country of origin</b>			<b>Arrival year to NZ</b>		
China	10	22.7	1995-1999	5	11.4
India	22	50.0	2000-2009	28	63.3
Korea	12	27.3	2010-2018	11	25.0
<b>Living arrangement</b>			<b>Government benefits*</b>		
Live with spouse	32	72.7	NZ pension	24	54.5
Live alone	12	27.3	Overseas pension	10	22.7
<b>Children's location</b>			Other	14	31.8
All children in NZ	21	47.7	<b>Driver's licence</b>		
One or more in NZ	17	38.6	Yes	4	9.1
All children overseas	6	13.7	No	40	90.0

\*Multiple answers

There were 27 female and 17 male participants. The age of the participants ranged from 62 to 86 years, and the length of their residence in New Zealand ranged from one to 20 years (at the time of the interview). Participants who had resided in New Zealand for over 10 years generally met the eligibility criteria for New Zealand pension. A total of 24 participants received New Zealand pension, of which 7 received additional governmental benefits such as disability allowance, accommodation supplement and overseas pension from their respective country of origin. Six participants who were not yet qualified for New Zealand pension received overseas pension.

Regarding general health of participants, most elders had long-term conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes but were controlled with medication and healthy lifestyles. Many participants also reported having cataracts, asthma, arthritis and surgeries in the past for knee replacement, pacemaker insertion and shoulder ligament.

## Reasons for living away from their children

All research participants migrated to New Zealand in their later life primarily to join their adult children and to look after their grandchildren. This is reflected in their living arrangements: when they initially migrated, they lived with their adult children. However, factors such as unsuitable housing, intergenerational tension, changing models of authority, fear of being a burden, and changes in the cultural expectation of



intergenerational co-residency influenced their decision to live separately from their children. At the time of interview, 32 participants lived with spouses and 12 lived alone (Table 2).

### ***Unsuitable housing/health concerns***

Many families with health conditions such as asthma and arthritis considered the house they lived with their children as unsuitable because it had too many stairs and some wanted more personal space.

*My wife has arthritis so she can't climb upstairs. There the kitchen was upstairs and our room was downstairs. So three to four times a day she would have to climb the stairs.* [Indian, male, aged 83]

*I lived with my daughter but her house was very small – only two small rooms. I lived in one room and my grandson had to sleep in the lounge. He was in high school. I feel this was no good, so I told my daughter I wanted to move out.* [Chinese, female, aged 67]

### ***Intergenerational tension***

While the primary motivator to migrate to New Zealand was to reunite with family, elders found themselves wanting independence and freedom as family tension grew in intergenerational households.

*We feel inconvenient living with our daughter's family. Why? Because we have different habits. If we watched television, we distracted the kid's studies. We like singing, but we could not sing in their house – they would think we are mad! So moving out can give us freedom, and they have freedom too.* [Chinese, male, aged 70]

A few participants provided examples of events surrounding changed model of authority as they navigated their role as a parent and grandparent. They spoke of confrontations and disharmony that offering advice to children and their spouses brought.

*When living with your children, it's good but the way I educate and how the younger generation teaches is different, so there were frequent troubles. I would get stressed and they would also get stressed. ... My daughter would say, 'Mum, that's not how I do it'.* [Korean, female, aged 70]

Accumulatively, the above factors led to elders feeling like a burden on the family as their sense of making meaningful contributions in the lives of their adult children and grandchildren decreased. This was exacerbated by lack of English proficiency and knowledge about New Zealand norms and infrastructure.

### ***Changes in the cultural expectations of intergenerational co-residency***

Asian elders' pursuit to live separately from their children should not be perceived as the result of intergenerational conflicts alone. Rather, it is a reflection of changing

attitudes towards aged care in the cultural and physical context of the host country. All participants acknowledged the importance of living with extended family but also shared that this norm of co-residency is changing.

*Traditionally, co-residency was the way of life. But now I don't see how that can be maintained. There are benefits to that but the downfall is that it makes each other feel uncomfortable nowadays. Society is changing and so the culture is also shifting. Personally, I think it's better to live separately rather than with extended family - it's better for both the young as well as the old [Korean, male, aged 74]*

## **Housing tenure, satisfaction and location preferences**

### ***Housing tenure***

As shown in Table 3, majority of the participants resided in rental properties including public housing (34.1%) and private rentals (36.4%), compared to elders who owned their own homes (15.9%) or lived in houses owned by their child (13.6%). Public housing is government-funded residence with specific criteria applicants must meet: have income and assets that do not exceed the set criteria, show that they have been unsuccessful in finding appropriate private rental. Once eligible, applications are prioritized on a need basis and tenancy period is guaranteed for a set period. Private rentals belong to private landlords (participants found them through agents or from landlords directly).

Table 3: Types of housing tenure

<b>Housing Tenure</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Owner occupancy	7	15.9
Children's house	6	13.6
Public housing	15	34.1
Private landlord	16	36.4
TOTAL	44	100

### ***Housing satisfaction***

Participants' satisfaction with their housing varied according to types of housing tenure they resided in. In regards to a sense of tenure security, homeowners had the most sense of security compared to renters.

*As Chinese, we feel better having our own home. It gives us a strong sense of security. [Chinese, male, aged 70, resident in NZ for 8 years]*

Elders living in house owned by their child also had a sense of ownership/security as they received similar perceived benefits as homeowners.

*We don't have any worries because it's our son's house. ... We did some modifications to the kitchen, bathroom and laundry. ... My son paid for all the modifications – it's their house. [Indian, male, aged 83, resident in NZ for 20+ years]*

Although public housing is rental property, elders residing there had a stronger sense of security compared with private dwellers because their contract is permanent. As such, they did not have to worry about “being kicked out” and generally had a sense of attachment to their housing.

*Because it is Housing NZ, they don't throw us out but if I was renting a house outside private, when those people want to sell their property then you have to move out.* [Indian, female, aged 74, resident in NZ for 13 years]

Given the nature of their contract, private dwellers were the most likely to feel insecure compared to elders of other housing tenures.

*It does not make me feel like a home because this apartment is rented and I am not really getting used to this place.* [Chinese, male, aged 72, resident in NZ for 6 years]

*There's uneasiness as it's not my own house, and I may have to leave against my will as I am not the landlord.* [Korean, female, aged 70, resident in NZ for 4 years]

However, sense of security seemed to be compensated by the fact that renting allowed them to enjoy a sense of independence and freedom living separately from their adult children.

*We have a sense of belonging because we can come when we want and we go when we want. There's a lot of freedom of that kind and I didn't realize this before... here we relax and do what we want, eat what we want when we want how we want.* [Indian, female, aged 86, resident in NZ for 9 years]

### ***Location preferences***

Regardless of housing tenure, living in close proximity to amenities such as banks, post offices and supermarkets were deemed important and convenient by participants. In particular, accessible bus routes were a core aspect in informing their choices as a majority of participants (90.9%, see Table 2) did not have a driver's license. This is aided by the availability of ‘Supergold Card Scheme’ that provides subsidized public transportation, allowing elders to get to places without having to rely on their children.

*This house is near the bus stop, shopping centre. Especially because we don't have a car, we go by bus.* [Indian, male, aged 62, renter of private dwelling]

Living close to their family and community groups were additional key factors in influencing their housing choices.

*It only takes me 15 minutes on the bus to where my son lives so I can go see my grandchildren when I want to or they come over.* [Korean, female, aged 78, renter of public housing]

Many participants also remarked the importance of location in relation to safety.

*I like this house because it's in the city and it's safe... We feel very safe. It's an apartment, it has a secure entrance so that you have a special key to enter the premises. So other people can't come so we feel secure.* [Indian, male, aged 84, renter of private dwelling]

## **Family relationship and future plans**

### ***Current interactions with children***

In this study, participants remarked that co-residency was not the only way for their children to express filial piety. Despite living separately from their children, most participants reported having regular contact with their children and grandchildren either weekly or fortnightly. Regular interaction was made through dinners, and this was facilitated by the geographic proximity to their children.

*My daughter, she comes practically every day because we are on the same bus route.* [Indian, female, aged 77, resident in NZ for 5 years]

*Our children and grandchildren come often and can be very loud when they say "bye Grandma! bye Grandpa!".* [Korean, male aged 75, resident in NZ for 12 years]

*Our two daughters come very often. They get all the heavy groceries for us. Basically we do not need to buy anything.* [Chinese, male, aged 70, resident in NZ for 8 years]

Such contact helps maintain positive relationships with their children. A key concept that captures such positive relationship is reciprocity wherein the elders received support from their children while also providing support to them.

*I help my daughter to take care of her children... I take my grandchildren to the kindergarten. My daughter helps me a lot, such as interpretation in hospital.* [Chinese, male, aged 73, resident in NZ for 6 years]

However, there were few participants who did not have regular physical contact with their children, especially those participants whose children were overseas (13.7%, see Table 2). These participants maintained contacts with their children via phone or video calls. They also spoke of seeing each other at least once a year.

### ***Expectations of filial responsibility from their children***

Participants' expectations of filial responsibility from their children varied. Most had certain expectations but were confronted by the reality of Western values (ie. rest home), fear of being a burden to their families or losing their independence.

*I do expect [it] in terms of dire need. But I would like to be independent as far as possible. I wouldn't like to trouble the children.* [Indian, male, aged 64]

*I am not expecting my children to help to take care of me. I hope I can take care of myself, as following the Western lifestyle. [Chinese, male, aged 72]*

*We are happy with this [living] arrangement. Our children still look after us in the sense of having interest and checking up on us. It's easier and comfortable for everybody. [Indian, female, aged 86]*

Some participants expressed that they would have expected their children to look after them in old age in their respective origin countries, but governmental benefits in New Zealand allowed them to rely on social welfare if family cannot/ does not wish to look after them for financial, emotional and physical support.

*In India we don't have a social welfare system like we do here in NZ. ... Here if my daughter decides she doesn't want to look after me, I know there is social welfare to help me. [Indian, male, aged 62]*

*Thankfully, in New Zealand there are government benefits so I don't need to think or expect my children to take care of me. [Korean, female, aged 78]*

### ***Future plans***

Many participants described that they did not want to go to rest home based on negative associations on quality of rest homes from experiences of their own, friends or family members.

*No, we haven't [thought about moving into rest home] and I don't want to. I want to live with my son really. [Indian, male, aged 67]*

*I want to stay at home for as long as possible. But if I can't take care of myself, I will go to a rest home. [Chinese, male, aged 74]*

*I don't want to be a burden to my son so will probably have to consider it [moving to rest home] as I'm getting older. I'm doing the best I can to be healthy, eating healthy and exercising so I can die at home. [Korean, female, aged 74]*

However, some were comfortable with the potential prospect that they may have to go to rest home - especially for those whose children are all overseas. These elders voiced that they would rather age in New Zealand where they call home (given community, friends), rather than overseas where they children are.

*My son knows that I want to go to a rest home when I can't take care of myself. [Chinese, female, aged 67]*

### **Community participation, facilitators and barriers**

#### ***Community engagement***

The level of community engagement is impacted by participants' health, choice of housing, living arrangement and level of family care. Living separately from their children encouraged them to be more involved in the community. As a result, most



participants had a dense network compared to when living with their children and were involved in various activities.

*I go out most days, I go to senior school during the week to see my friends. I volunteer out in the parks and gardens of my neighbourhood to pick up rubbish every third Saturday of the month. [Korean, female, aged 71]*

Ethnic organizations serve as a key platform in which elders gather and socialize with others. These organizations also provided a place and time for elders to listen to invited guests speakers from various health-, social- and welfare-related service providers.

*I participate in a lot of community activities, including this English class organized by the Chinese New Settler Services Trust. The activities are well structured, and the teachers are excellent. I feel happy living in New Zealand. [Chinese, female aged 65]*

Those who affiliated themselves with a religion tended to form networks around religious communities. Church also provided a place for elders to gather - even for those who did not associate themselves with the religion joined religious activities.

In particular, Indian elders engaged with more than merely their own ethnic community groups compared to Korean and Chinese participants. This is likely to be due to Indian elders being able to speak English more proficiently. Their knowledge of Indian culture, customs and people as well as their interest in contributing to the country they now consider home was seen to be an important part of defining their value and identity within broader society:

*We visit other seniors in rest homes who are lonely. So we laugh with them, talk with them, sing with them and pray with them. ... We also help at the church. [Indian, female, aged 86]*

*I work for the police, in a volunteering capacity. I am a community safety ambassador. Guiding peoples in shopping, how to be safe. [Indian, male, aged 67]*

*I'm part of OPAG, Older People Advisory Group, which meets every two months and takes care of the needs of the older people who get injured. I try to put input in the Indian point of view or Southeast Asian point of view. [Indian, male, aged 80]*

### ***Facilitators of community participation***

All of the participants referred to having a healthy lifestyle such as exercising and eating healthier as key facilitators. Many also spoke of having a positive mindset, and keeping healthy through engaging with friends and community. Additionally, governmental support and social welfare provisions allows them to have freedom and independence to participate in the community. The availability of free transport (bus) allowed them to physically attend activities and New Zealand pension enabled them to financially afford to attend the classes.

*Government is empowering. It affords us independence, freedom and security. We have to thank God for bringing us to a country like this. It is such a beautiful country where we hardly pay anything for medicals and buses are free. We don't get all these facilities in India. It is very important. Back in India we wouldn't have got this [Indian, female, aged 75].*

Majority of participants enthusiastically described positive relations with their communities, seeing their friends almost every day, if not daily. This was particularly pertinent for elders who had strained parent-child relationships and were receiving less support from their children, or those who did not have children living in New Zealand. Connection to community networks helps elders to feel connected to their culture, and provided a sense of community, emotional and practical support.

*When I'm sick my friends will come see ... and they would bring food over. And my neighbour will clean the windows outside for me, I never ask her but she always does it for me. She'll even broom my front bit for me. [Indian, female, aged 72]*

### ***Barriers to community participation***

Community participation for Koreans and Chinese meant only within their own respective ethnic communities as their English proficiency limited them from engaging with wider society. These participants mentioned that their language barrier restricted deep and engaging interactions that they wish to have with their neighbours, or with wider New Zealand society.

To overcome the English barrier, some participants recalled their efforts to learn English and get to know people of other nationalities by attending community activities at the YMCA and Auckland Council. However, they soon realized the difficulties and limitation of learning a new language which discouraged them from attending regularly and consistently.

*What will elders who don't share the same language talk about? We just all sit and stand still or drink coffee for a bit and just go home. Overcoming language is the hardest. [Korean, female, aged 77]*

There were also additional barriers to community participation such as how people "talk" in the community and lack of gender-appropriate activities. Financial burden (administration fee to join community groups) and lack of access to transport were additional barriers particularly for those without New Zealand pension.

*[Us] males, all we can do is get together, drink and play cards [gamble] which can be quite burdensome financially. If we start mixing with females, people will talk in the Korean as it is culturally inappropriate. We don't have a place we can gather freely, that's why we can't do it ourselves. [Korean, male, aged 85]*

### **Conclusion**

The study results highlight a complex mix of factors that contribute to Asian elders' ability to age in place. These include housing choices, familial support, community

participation, government resources as well as cultural adaptation of elderly care expectations and practices. To facilitate ageing in place, housing choice plays a crucial role in improving Asian elders' quality of life and functioning. *The New Zealand Positive Ageing Strategy* (Ministry of Social Policy, 2001) emphasizes that the ability of elders to make choices and to exercise agency in their care and living arrangements is fundamental to positive ageing in place. Traditionally in Asian cultures, leaving ageing parents to live alone is often regarded as socially unacceptable as it implies that parents are being abandoned (Park et al., 2017; Wang 2004). Participants in this study, however, pursued independent living despite wider cultural norms of intergenerational co-residency. Despite living separately from their children, many participants in this study found comfort and meaning in their children's new acts of care including regular visits, phone calls and financial support. Not only were adult children providing support, participants also demonstrated a reciprocal relationship wherein they offered childcare assistance and traditional cooking. These findings are consistent with international research that suggests "filial piety at a distance" can enhance intergenerational relationship (Zhang, 2004; Li, Hodgetts & Ho, 2010). The practice of intergenerational interdependence despite living separately can be seen as an adjustment to practicing filial piety in a Western country. It emphasizes Asian elders' shifting expectation of filial responsibilities from their adult children, as well as the need to recognize family involvement in supporting Asian elders' choice to pursue residential independence.

Another key finding of the study is that although reunification with their children was the primary motivator for Asian elders to migrate to a Western country in their later lives, this is not the only reason for them to stay. Community members and resources surfaced as important determinants in positive ageing in place. Participants commented on their breadth and depth of meaningful relations with community members, complementing their varying levels of family support. Community connections not just provide emotional support, but are also major sources of pragmatic support including access to health and social information and filling out application forms. By actively participating in the community, Asian elders have increased their social capital, which acts as a protective factor against post-migration stressors and facilitates their positive ageing. Importantly, there are a proportion of Asian elders who have limited family support. In this case, community engagement becomes even more important. A sense of belonging and attachment to place underpins the preference for Asian elders to age in the community. The findings highlight the need to ensure that ethnic elders' needs are met in policy and service design.

Finally, participants in this study perceive the meaning of ageing in place as independence and autonomy. As mentioned earlier, making own choices is an important aspect of being independent. Participants also acknowledge that New Zealand welfare services, ranging from social housing to income support, greatly enhance their ability to attain independence, freedom and autonomy. Thus, Asian elders have embraced both Eastern (interdependence) and Western values (independence) to assist their ability to age in place.

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**Contact email:** e.ho@auckland.ac.nz