

**Living with or Apart from Parents?  
A Comparative Study of Young Adults' Living Arrangements in China and South Korea**

**ABSTRACT**

This study examines recent trends in living arrangements of never-married urban young adults in China and South Korea from 2003 to 2018. Using data from the Chinese (CGSS) and Korean General Social Surveys (KGSS), we investigate the relationship between socioeconomic status and young adult's living arrangements. Our findings show that the percentages of living with parents continued to decrease in both China and South Korea since the early-2000s but showed a resurgence of living with parents during the 2010s with different timing. Gender and education showed no significant association with young adults' living arrangements in both countries. Findings from binary logit models show that employed young adults were more likely to live apart from parents than those unemployed, suggesting the importance of economic security on independent living in both countries. Father's educational attainment is important for Korean young adults' living arrangements, but not so for Chinese young adults. Chinese rural to urban migrants were more likely to live apart from their parents. This suggests an urban-rural divide influencing Chinese young adults' living arrangements.

Keywords: intergenerational relations; family demography; life course analysis; cross-country comparative analyses.

## INTRODUCTION

About one-third of American young adults lived with their parents, which is higher than living with their romantic partner or spouse (Fry 2016). Nearly half of young adults in Europe and several other countries, including Canada, Japan, and Australia live with their parents in 2014 (Desilver 2016). Together with a longer time for education, young adults are more likely to depend upon their families than those in the previous generations. Achieving traditional markers of adulthood has been delaying and become more flexible in that pathways to adulthood have diversified (Furstenberg 2010). Moreover, young adults these days perceive certain markers of adulthood, such as marriage not as important as their parent's generation did. However, young adults still perceive independent living as an important adulthood milestone (Furstenberg & Kennedy, 2016).

Scholars have identified that delayed transition to adulthood is rooted in cultural and structural changes. These structural and cultural changes include educational expansion, the increased insecurity in the globalized economy, and the high costs of housing (Furstenberg, 2010; Swartz & Busse, 2017). State support and access to public assistance such as subsidized housing, healthcare, and higher education opportunities also affect young adults' reliance on their own families (Arpino et al., 2015).

Despite a growing proportion of young adults returning to parental homes across the globe, studies focusing on the living arrangements of young adults in Asia have been limited. Studies examining the overall delaying patterns of the transition to adulthood in East Asia highlight the unique institutional and cultural settings, such as social norms around educational achievements and the tight connectedness between marriage and childbearing (Raymo et al., 2015; Yeung & Alipio, 2013). Young adults in East Asia are more educated than those in most other countries (e.g., Park 2013). These highly educated young adults spend longer times on the job market compared to the previous generations. Moreover, soaring housing prices makes extremely challenging for young adults to purchase housing or even rent by themselves. These structural changes related to the labor and housing markets could influence young adults' transition to adulthood, including their living arrangements.

In this study, we examine the living arrangements of unmarried urban young adults of two East Asian countries, China and South Korea from the early 2000s to the late 2010s. These two countries provide an interesting comparative case because they share cultural norms, such as the importance of higher education, and high percentages of co-residence with parents. They also have similar demographic trends, such as postponement of marriage, low fertility rate, and low out-of-wedlock births. However, China and South Korea are at different levels of economic development and urbanization, which also possess crucial impacts on people's living arrangement decisions. South Korea is a developed country and its GDP per capita is 31,846 USD (World Bank, n.d.). China, despite its unprecedented economic growth since the market reform, is still a developing country with its GDP per capita of 10,261 USD. Over 80 percent of South Koreans live in urban areas, while China is still urbanizing with 64 percent of its population living in cities (World Bank, n.d.). These similarities in demographic and cultural backgrounds and differences in economic development in China and South Korea might result in similar yet different patterns of living arrangements of young adults. To this end, we ask the following research questions: 1) How have young adults' living arrangements in each country changed from the early 2000s to the late 2010s?; 2) What is the relationship between demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, and young adults living arrangements?; and

3) What structural and social forces could explain cross-national and cross-temporal differences in living arrangements of young adults in China and South Korea?

## **DATA AND METHODS**

We use data from the Korean General Social Surveys (KGSS) from 2003 to 2018 and the Chinese General Social Surveys (CGSS) from 2003 to 2017 to provide empirical evidence to understand the influence of socio-economic status, educational background, and gender on living arrangements among young adults. We limited our analytic sample to never-married singles aged 18-35 who live in urban areas. KGSS does not include information on respondents' migration status. Considering the importance of internal migration and rapid urbanization on Chinese urban life, we add a hukou variable measuring respondent's household registration status when modeling the Chinese sample.

To answer our first question, we calculate the weighted percentage distribution of living with parents, living alone, and living with others in every survey year and compare the results. We classify our samples into two time periods: 2003-2006 as period 1 and 2015-2018 as period 2. Period 1 contains KGSS 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006 and CGSS 2003 and 2006. Period 2 includes KGSS 2016 and 2018 and CGSS 2015 and 2017.

To answer our second question, we apply binary logit regression to investigate the relationship between employment status, gender, and the likelihood of living in or outside the parental home at the respective period 1 and 2 for each country.

### ***Measures***

The dependent variable is *living arrangement* and has two categories. Living with parents is used as the reference category. We combine living with others and living alone as the category living apart from parents.

## **PRELIMINARY RESULTS**

### ***Descriptive Results***

Figures 1. A. and 1. B. show the weighted percentage distribution of young adults living with parents, living with others, and living alone from 2003 to 2018. Both countries exhibit a similarly high percentage of co-residence with parents in the early 2000s – around 84 percent of urban single young adults lived in parental homes in both China and South Korea. Such high percentages of living with parents have declined since 2003 when increasing proportions of young adults live either independently or with other people in both countries. In 2013, the percentage of Korean young adults living with parents reached its peak of 83 percent and then remained at similar levels although with slight decreases hereafter. The percentage of Chinese young adults living with parents continued to decrease until 2017 when the number increased again fifteen years later.

It is also worth noted that the composition of living arrangements of young adults living apart from parents has changed from the early 2000s to the late 2010s for both countries. In the 2000s, more Chinese and South Korean young adults lived with other people when not living with parents, but in the 2010s more young adults live alone.

[Figures 1.A and 1.B here]

### ***Multivariate Results***

We estimate binary logit regression models to examine the relationship between social-economic status and young adults' living arrangements.

[Table 1 here]

### Results for Period 2003 to 2006

Table 1 presents the binary logit regression estimates of living arrangements of young adults in China and South Korea. Model 1 displays the results for Korean young adults in 2003-2006. There was no significant gender difference in the likelihood of living apart from parents. Age was significantly associated with young adults' living arrangements. Compared to those aged 18-23, older young adults showed a higher likelihood of living apart from their parents. Educational attainment and employment status were not significantly associated with young adults' living arrangements controlling for other demographic and socioeconomic statuses. Young adults who were students were not different from non-student young adults in terms of the likelihood of living apart from parents. Compared to young adults with highly educated fathers (i.e., some college or above), those with less-educated fathers (i.e., less than high school diploma) showed a significantly higher likelihood of living apart from parents. This might relate to a lack of housing resources among the less-educated parent's generation.

Model 2 presents results for CGSS 2003-06. Chinese young women's likelihood of living with parents was also not significantly different from that of Chinese young men. Like their Korean counterparts, older Chinese young adults were more likely to live apart from parents compared with those aged 18 to 23. Compared with non-employed young adults, those with jobs – either regular, irregular, or self-employed—were more likely to live apart from parents, indicating the importance of economic security on people's living arrangement decisions. Educational attainment was not significantly associated with Chinese young adults' living arrangements. Young adults living in urban areas but with a rural hukou were significantly more likely to live apart from their parents. The effect of migration on the living arrangements was much stronger than the effect of holding regular jobs, suggesting internal migration as the most important mechanism influencing urban lives of Chinese young adults in 2003-06.

### Results for Period 2015 to 2018

Model 3 presents KGSS results for the second period: 2016-2018. As found for the earlier period, while female young adults showed a lower likelihood of living apart from their parents than their male counterparts, the gender difference was not significant. Age was significantly associated with young adults' living arrangements, although the likelihood of living apart from parents for young adults aged 24-29 was only marginally different from the reference group ( $p < .10$ ). As found in the earlier period, educational attainment was not significantly associated with young adults' living arrangements. However, student young adults showed a higher likelihood of living apart from their parents compared to non-student young adults, unlike the earlier period. Employment was significantly associated with the living arrangements of young adults in the second period, showing the increasing importance of economic security for people's living arrangement decisions. Holding a regular or irregular job, or self-employment was positively associated with the likelihood of living apart from parents. Self-employed young adults were 8 times more likely not to live with parents than those not working. Compared to young adults with highly educated parents, those with less-educated parents were more likely to live apart from parents than to live with parents.

Model 4 presents the results for Chinese young adults in 2015-17. Unlike the earlier period, the likelihood of Chinese young adults aged 24 to 35 living with parents was not significantly different from their younger peers, possibly showing a convergence of styles of living arrangements across age groups. Like the earlier period, employment status was strongly associated with the likelihood of living apart from parents. Neither educational attainment nor father's education showed any significant association with young adults' living arrangements. Similar to findings in period 1, rural to urban migrants are more likely to live alone or with others. But the migration effect is weaker than that of holding a regular job in Model 4, suggesting a declining influence of internal migration in the period 2015-17 compared to the period 2003-06 and possibly a converging living arrangement style between locals and migrants.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our findings show some similar characteristics of single urban young adults' living arrangements in China and South Korea. Both countries experienced a period of young adults leaving the parental home in the early 2000s and a resurgence in living with parents in the 2010s. Gender is not an important mechanism in young adults' living arrangement decisions. The likelihood of living with parents for Chinese and South Korean women was not significantly different from that of their male counterparts. These findings suggest similarities in their living arrangements of men and women at least among never-married singles living in the urban areas. Surprisingly, educational attainment does not play a significant role in young adults' living arrangements in both countries. Findings from binary logit models suggest that employed young adults are more likely to live apart from parents than those unemployed in both China and South Korea, confirming the importance of economic security on young adults' living arrangements.

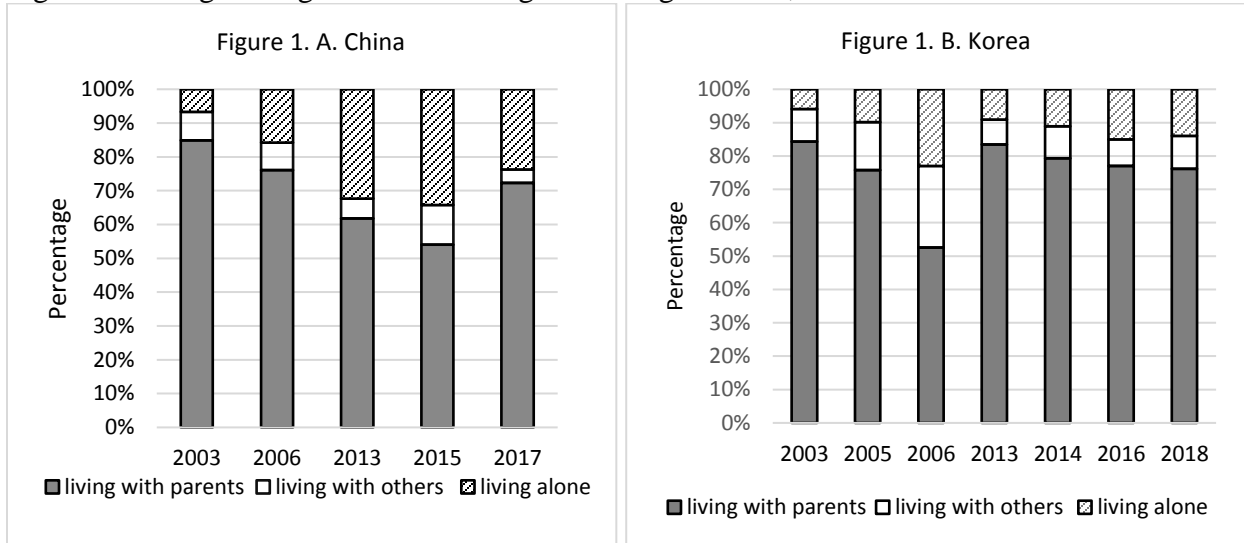
Father's educational attainment is important for Korean young adults' living arrangements, but not so for Chinese young adults. Chinese urban young adults holding rural hukous—those who migrated from rural to urban China—are more likely to live apart from their parents, maybe because their parents are still in the countryside, or because of their parents' lack of financial resources to provide urban housing even if they had moved to the cities long ago. This suggests an urban-rural divide influencing Chinese young adults' living arrangements.

## REFERENCES

- Desilver, D. (2016, May 24). *In the U.S. and Europe, more young adults live with parents*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/05/24/in-the-u-s-and-abroad-more-young-adults-are-living-with-their-parents/>
- Fry, Richard. (2016, May 24). *For first time in modern era, living with parents edges out other living arrangements for 18 to 34 years olds*. Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/05/24/for-first-time-in-modern-era-living-with-parents-edges-out-other-living-arrangements-for-18-to-34-year-olds/>
- Arpino, B., Muttrarak, R., & Vitali, A. (2015). Comparing Living Arrangements of Immigrant Young Adults in Spain and the United States. In C. M. Aybek, J. Huinink, & R. Muttrarak (Eds.), *Spatial Mobility, Migration, and Living Arrangements* (pp. 161–187). Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-10021-0\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-10021-0_8)
- Furstenberg, F. F. (2010). *On a New Schedule: Transitions to Adulthood and Family Change*. 20(1), 67–87.
- Furstenberg, F. F., & Kennedy, S. (2016, November 4). Growing Up is Harder to Do.2: After the Great Recession - Contexts. *Contexts*. <https://contexts.org/blog/growing-up-is-harder-to-do-2-after-the-great-recession/>
- Park, H. (2013). The Transition to Adulthood among Korean Youths: Transition Markers in Productive and Reproductive Spheres. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 646(1), 129–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716212467947>
- Raymo, J. M., Park, H., Xie, Y., & Yeung, W. J. (2015). Marriage and Family in East Asia: Continuity and Change. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41(1), 471–492. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112428>
- Swartz, T. T., & Busse, E. (2017). Family Support in the Transition to Adulthood among Diverse Young Adults in the United States. In T. T. Swartz, D. Hartmann, & R. G. Rumbaut (Eds.), *Crossings to Adulthood*. BRILL. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004345874\\_003](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004345874_003)
- World Bank. (n.d.). *GDP per capita (current US\$)*. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>
- Yeung, W.-J. J., & Alipio, C. (2013). Transitioning to Adulthood in Asia: School, Work, and Family Life. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 646(1), 6–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716212470794>

## Tables and Figures

Figure 1. Living Arrangements of Young Adults Aged 18-35, 2003-2018



Source: CGSS, KGSS

Table 1 Logistic regression estimates of living arrangements for young adults in China and South Korea

	Period 1: 2003-2006		Period 2: 2016-2018	
	Model 1: S. Korea	Model 2: China	Model 3: S. Korea	Model 4: China
<b>Women</b>	-0.21 (0.17)	-0.26 (0.18)	-0.42 (0.28)	-0.20 (0.18)
<b>Age group (Ref: 18-23)</b>				
24-29	0.74*** (0.21)	0.49* (0.19)	0.69+ (0.36)	-0.080 (0.23)
30-35	1.56*** (0.31)	1.16** (0.39)	1.58*** (0.45)	0.26 (0.30)
<b>Educational attainment (Ref: college and above)</b>				
HS or below	0.06 (0.25)	-0.53 (0.30)	0.52 (0.40)	-0.24 (0.25)
Some College	-0.34 (0.23)	-0.14 (0.31)	-0.52 (0.38)	-0.41 (0.27)
<b>Student</b>	-0.07 (0.23)	-0.34 (0.33)	1.02* (0.44)	0.02 (0.28)
<b>Employment status (Ref: unemployed)</b>				
Regular	0.37 (0.23)	1.20*** (0.29)	1.05* (0.47)	1.14*** (0.26)
Irregular	0.34 (0.25)	0.92** (0.31)	1.50** (0.50)	1.14*** (0.27)
Self-employed	0.63 (0.41)	-0.09 (0.52)	2.11* (1.06)	1.98*** (0.43)
<b>Father's education (Ref: some college and above)</b>				
Less than HS	0.60** (0.22)	0.29 (0.28)	0.98* (0.34)	-0.21 (0.27)
HS	0.08 (0.20)	0.18 (0.30)	0.54+ (0.28)	-0.12 (0.28)
<b>Hukou Registration Status (Ref: urban)</b>				
Rural	- -	2.19*** (0.24)	- -	0.97*** (0.21)
<b>Survey year controlled</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Constant</b>	-2.54 (0.36)	-2.81*** (0.42)	-3.07 (0.54)	-0.82* (0.35)
<b>N</b>	984	1348	369	851

Note: Robust standard errors.

Source: CGSS and KGSS.

+  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .