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## **Questioning the Adaptability of the Concept of Ageism in Korean Culture**

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Minho: “안녕하세요. 만나서 반가워요. 저는 이민호라고 합니다.”

“Hi, nice to meet you. I am Minho Lee.”

Nara: “민호씨, 만나서 반가워요. 저는 김나라입니다. 혹시 나이가 어떻게 되세요?”

“Nice to meet you, Minho. I am Nara Kim. How old are you?”

Minho: “저는 28살이에요.”

“I am 28.”

Nara: “오! 나도. 우리 친구네!”

“Oh, me too. We are friends!”

What do you think about this conversation? If you think it is a bit strange in your culture, why is that?

### **South Korea, the age-sensitive country**

Ageing is a universal phenomenon that everyone experiences, but how much it matters can vary from culture to culture. Age is especially important in South Korea. Like what Nara did in the conversation, it is quite normal to ask a person's age whom you just met in South Korea. If the person is the same age as you, you can speak to the person as a “friend,” even though you barely know the person. An equal friendship

is usually established only among those of the same age. If the age is not the same, people have “brother/sister relationships,” which establish a hierarchy, rather than friend relationship.

Not only the concept of friendship, but also every aspect of life is strongly influenced by chronological age in South Korea. People adapt the form of Korean language based on the person’s age they are speaking to, which also entirely changes how people treat the person. The Korean language has six different honorific forms of verbs that can be used based on the formality of the situation and the relative social status of the participants of the conversation. People use a different form in a different situation, for example: to respect older people, to talk down to younger people, or to speak in public. Even in the conversation above, right after Nara realized that Minho is the same age as her, she immediately adjusted her language form from the honorific (존댓말; Jondaemal) to the informal form (반말; Banmal) in Korean.

Now, you may be curious how you might deal with the situation when your friend (who is the same age) has just passed her birthday in May, and is older than you for six months, because your birthday is in October. In that case, do you need to use a different form and title to respect your “friend” for a few months?

### **South Korean age system**

Let’s go back to the previous conversation. Minho and Nara are 28 years old, but they are actually 26 years old “internationally” (or 27 if their birthdays have passed). Wait, what?

South Korea has a very special age-calculating system. Under the South Korean age system, a baby is one year old at birth, and gains an additional year on New Year’s Day. It is not one’s birthday but the New Year’s Day that makes a person one year older in South Korea. In other words, every Korean gets one year older “together” on each New Year’s Day. So, let’s say a baby is born on 31 December 2019. On 1 January 2020, the baby is now two years old—like magic! It may seem irrational and complex, but it surely has an advantage—you don’t need to worry about changing your and others’ age in the middle of the year, and therefore, changing the way you treat

people—not only how you speak to people, but also how you behave accordingly e.g. bowing.

This age system originally came from China and spread to other Asian countries centuries ago. There are different theories why they invented this age system. Some people say that it was developed to respect the fetus's life, but there is no clear answer. South Korea is now the only remaining country that uses this special age structure. China, Japan, and even North Korea do not use it. There have been attempts to remove this age system in South Korea, but none of them were successful. I think this commitment demonstrates the importance of age in South Korean society.

### **How should we view this culture? And what are the challenges facing us regarding ageism?**

It is almost impossible to separate age from the South Korean culture. Age-based thinking permeates daily lives of Korean people in every way, affecting the way people perceive others and the world. Then how should we see this age-based culture? Let's say we develop criteria for ranking countries by level of ageism. South Korea would probably be considered number one. We don't want to foster the society to be ageist, but we also don't want to wipe out the uniqueness of this culture. There are certain aspects that must be considered in ageing and ageism research in order to preserve cultural diversity. Is the South Korean culture ageist that we should fight against it, or should we respect it? To what extent is it permissible as a culture? This might be challenging for researchers who study ageing and ageism, but it is a very important step towards cross-cultural adaptability.

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