

The practice of filial piety and its impact on long-term care policies for elderly people in Asian Chinese communities

N Chow¹, MA, PhD

ABSTRACT Filial piety, though diminishing in influence, remains the most important value regulating the behaviour of children towards their elderly parents and relatives in Asian Chinese communities and communities influenced by Chinese culture. Long-term care policies in Asian Chinese communities must recognise the changes that have taken place in the practice of filial piety, though neither a complete rejection nor a total acceptance of traditional filial piety is appropriate. The adoption of a community-care approach combining the contributions of both formal and informal sources of help and support is the most effective means of enhancing the welfare of the needy elderly.

¹ Associate Director, Sau Po Centre on Ageing, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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Correspondence to: Prof Nelson Chow, Associate Director, Sau Po Centre on Ageing, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong. E-mail: hrnwctws@hkuc.hku.hk

INTRODUCTION

Kane and Kane¹ define long-term care as “a range of services that addresses the health, personal care, and social needs of individuals who lack some capacity for self-care”. Estes and Lee² similarly define long-term care as a “service provided to those suffering from chronic physical or mental illnesses, mental retardation, or other severe disabling conditions”. More recently, Cha³ has defined long-term health care for the elderly as that “providing personal care services, health care services and social support services for an indefinite period of time to the elderly who have lost some capacity for self-care because of aging, chronic illness, or impairments of mental/physical functions” (quoted in Kim and Maeda⁴). Clearly, long-term care represents a range of formal services required to meet the needs of those suffering from impairment and the need for that care may last for an indefinite period.

Long-term care often includes the provision of formal services. While it does not necessarily exclude informal sources of support, a patient’s need for long-term care is an implicit acknowledgement that

informal care alone can no longer accommodate the patient’s needs and that some form of professional input is required. Furthermore, patients requiring long-term care and support suffer from impairments that can seldom be cured quickly. In most cases, the impairment(s) will last for the rest of the patient’s life. Hence, the decision to provide services, especially institutionalised care, must be thought out carefully, as a reversal of the decision is typically difficult, if not impossible. The prolonged need for services also implies a high cost of care; any attempt to contain or reduce the costs of long-term care is worthy of the effort.

IS FILIAL PIETY STILL RELEVANT IN ASIAN CHINESE COMMUNITIES?

The Chinese Constitution states: “Parents have the duty to rear and educate their minor children, and children who have come of age have the duty to support and assist their parents” (Article 49 of the *1982 Constitution of the People’s Republic of China*). Values that have been held dear for thousands of years do not dissipate easily. Filial piety remains a basic and fundamental value regulating the

relationships between parents and children, even in modern Chinese societies. Although filial piety is not particular to the Chinese—it is part of the Judaic and Buddhist traditions, among others—it is a cornerstone of the Chinese family. As long as the family remains an important institution in Chinese communities, performing the functions of providing care and support for its members, the value of filial piety will be relevant to any discussion of long-term care for the elderly.

In a 1999 study of family support for rural elderly in China, Li and Tracy⁵ noted that “taking care of elderly family members is one of the major themes of Confucian philosophy and traditional norms in Chinese culture”. Other researchers who have studied the support of the elderly in Asian communities traditionally influenced by Chinese culture have come to similar conclusions. For example, Chow⁶ found that “filial piety is not totally forgotten in present-day Hong Kong. It is still upheld by most Hong Kong people as a value that they should treasure and practice in ways that they find suitable and appropriate”. In Taiwan, filial piety also continues to instil in children a feeling of obligation to support their elderly parents and relatives. Cho⁷ found that when children in Taiwan decided to send their frail elderly parents into institutional care, they were looked upon as being impious. Wu et al⁸ arrived at a similar conclusion when they studied the influence of intergenerational exchanges on nursing home admissions in Taiwan. They added, however, that “although filial piety has been considered an important traditional value in Taiwanese society, the solution of long-term care for the elderly is significantly affected by the nature of reciprocal exchanges within a given family”. Similarly, in Japan and South Korea, two Asian societies historically influenced by Chinese culture and the Confucian tradition of family support for the elderly, Kim and Maeda⁴ observed that most “long-term health care has been provided by the family, with institutionalised care reserved as the last resort”.

In another study on ageing in rural China, Joseph and Phillips⁹ found that “China’s Confucian tradition of filial piety and the concept of proper duties of support for parents are well known although filial piety may be on the decline”. Although traditional values are still relevant in Asian Chinese communities and people in these communities

continue to feel a responsibility to support their elderly parents and relatives, the influence of filial piety does appear to be evolving. Rather than as an absolute value in and of itself, the observance of filial piety is now increasingly dependent on other factors, such as reciprocal exchanges between elderly parents and their children. While asserting, on the one hand, the importance of the value of filial piety and recognising on the other, its declining influence, exploring how this traditional value is actually being practised in Asian Chinese communities is required to determine to what extent it may serve as a basis for the provision of care for the frail elderly.

THE PRACTICE OF FILIAL PIETY IN ASIAN CHINESE COMMUNITIES

The traditional value of filial piety places an expectation upon the young to respect the old. A disciple once asked Confucius about the meaning of filial piety. Confucius said that he was disappointed that people of his day interpreted filial piety as no more than providing one’s elderly parents with food and other basic necessities. He said that such behaviour was no different from that of the animals, as no respect was shown. In other places, Confucius said that children must treat their parents with reverence and obedience. Three levels of the practice of filial piety can thus be differentiated: providing parents with the necessary materials for the satisfaction of their physical needs and comforts; paying attention to parents’ wishes and obeying their preferences; and behaving in a way that makes parents happy and brings them honour and the respect of the community.

Filial piety, therefore, involves more than the idea that children should be submissive to the wishes of their parents but the actual observance is quite diverse. In some communities, for example, financial support of the parents may be considered enough to fulfil the requirements of filial piety. Knowledge of the roles that children are willing to play in supporting their elderly parents and relatives in different communities will be integral to formulating long-term care policies for the elderly.

In a study on care-giving in South Korea, Chee and Levkoff¹⁰ reported: “While American caregivers cited love and affection more frequently, Korean caregivers emphasised that their motivations were

primarily based on filial responsibility, strongly influenced by the Confucian sentiment". However, they also warned: "As Korean society has become increasingly industrialized, the paradigm is in transition... our findings suggest that currently Koreans look for change with respect to the traditional family values and independence in later life as well". In other words, though Koreans are motivated by the sentiment of filial piety to provide support for their elderly parents, they are also looking for ways to reduce the strictures of their burdens. Summarising the results of a national survey on children's support of elderly parents in urban and rural China, Lee and Xiao¹¹ remarked: "Another factor that may promote need-based transfers is filial piety, which is common to all East Asian family systems based on Confucian values". They found, however, that while the obligation to support one's parents was generally felt by the children, action was only taken when the parents were in need. They also found that "elderly parents who had invested in their children received more financial support from their children than parents who had not".

In 1998, we investigated how people in Hong Kong actually practised filial piety, incorporating the three levels of traditional Confucian teaching. The majority of respondents continued to regard filial piety an important value that they should observe. So far as the first level of the practice of filial piety is concerned, 82% said that they regularly gave money to their parents, regardless of whether the latter needed financial support. Over two thirds (69.7%), said that they were prepared to financially help their parents to recover from their illnesses. However, less than a third of the respondents thought that they would follow the advice of their parents in decisions like looking for a job or getting married; some did not even think seeking their parents' advice necessary. Though nearly half of the respondents said that they would try to make their parents happy and not to bring them disgrace, filial piety could not be regarded as a primary motivating factor or guide to decision-making. The practice of filial piety in Asian Chinese communities is now mainly confined to the first level: the mere satisfaction of parents' physical needs and comforts. This does not imply that filial piety is no longer important. However, people are now adopting a more practical approach to fulfilling their duties.

LONG-TERM CARE SERVICES IN ASIAN CHINESE COMMUNITIES

There is no simple solution to problems faced by those requiring long-term care and such patients must often avail themselves of whatever help and assistance they can obtain. Long-term care services in Asian Chinese communities are in severely short supply, if they are available at all. The under-development of long-term care services is attributed to the expectation that people in need should be cared for by their families, as well as the generally low priority that public authorities give to the provision of such services. Because families are expected to support their frail elderly members, institutional care often forms the only type of long-term care service and is provided as a last resort to families unable to fulfil their duties. This has resulted in the absence of home-based services, which are perceived to have the negative effect of further eroding family support.

So far as the provision of long-term care services for elderly people is concerned, the situation as it now exists in Asian Chinese communities is intolerable. With the decline of the value of filial piety, family support has often been reduced to merely satisfying the most basic and essential needs of elderly members. Public formal services, on the other hand, are so short in supply that they are unable to serve as alternatives. After reviewing the situation of ageing in rural China, Joseph and Phillips⁹ remarked: "There is little sign that the state will, in the short run anyway, be able to make up for the declining ability or willingness of families to care for their elderly relatives". Elderly people in Asian Chinese communities who are in need of long-term care will thus continue to suffer, as neither the family nor the state is prepared to take up the responsibility of providing them with the necessary care. The situation will worsen as the median age of populations in Asian Chinese communities continues to increase. Solutions are required that are not only socially and culturally acceptable, but are also effective and efficient at meeting the needs of the elderly requiring long-term care.

DIMINISHING FILIAL PIETY AND ITS IMPACT ON LONG-TERM CARE POLICIES

When developing and introducing policies to

provide for the long-term care needs of the elderly, authorities must recognise the following:

1. The need for long-term care will rapidly increase, since populations in Asian Chinese communities are ageing even faster than those in western industrialised countries.
2. Private institutional care is often the only form of long-term care service available in Asian Chinese communities, with minimal governmental resources since it is generally held that the family should provide necessary support.
3. Home-based services are generally unavailable or in severely short supply, despite the fact that nearly all elderly people requiring long-term care remain in the community.
4. The influence exerted by filial piety is declining in Asian Chinese communities, though the value is still treasured as one that should regulate the behaviour of the children towards their parents.
5. Notwithstanding the diminishing role of the family, filial piety remains the most important source of support for elderly people requiring long-term care, and increasing state input is unlikely to be forthcoming in the near future.

Li and Tracy⁵ came to similar conclusions in their review of the situation in rural China: "Filial piety has lost its original meaning of absolute obedience to and sacrifice for parents. However, its ideological implication that the younger generation should respect the seniors and take care of their parents remains strong in rural China where support and services from outside the family are extremely limited". Lee and Xiao¹¹ in their study on children's support for elderly parents in urban and rural China, added that "elderly parents who had invested in their children received more financial support from their children than parents who had not". In other words, the observance of the value of filial piety is no longer absolute; it now also depends on other factors, like the level of support which they have received from their parents, particularly in education, and hence their ability to repay the latter when they become old.

A NEW STRATEGY TO PROVIDE CARE FOR ELDERLY PEOPLE IN ASIAN CHINESE COMMUNITIES

What new strategies can Asian Chinese communities devise that would take into account both the

diminishing importance of traditional filial piety and the fact that formal services are, and will remain, short in supply? In what way could elderly people who are in need of long-term care in Asian Chinese communities be provided with the most appropriate form of care, considering not only the special conditions of these communities but also the form of care that the elderly would find most satisfying and be most comfortable with? The following is a list of suggestions for providing support for elderly people requiring long-term care in Asian Chinese communities:

1. Long-term care programmes must be built upon the value of filial piety, which remains the most important and dominant value regulating the behaviour of the children towards their elderly parents and relatives in Asian Chinese communities.
2. As long as children feel obliged to support their elderly parents and relatives, this sense of responsibility should be upheld and given public recognition and encouragement.
3. The value of filial piety should not be over-emphasised to the extent of placing an undue burden upon children to provide support for their elderly parents and relatives. The ability of children to support their elderly parents and relatives should be realistically assessed and individually adjusted.
4. The value of filial piety should be used as the basis of a community care approach in Asian Chinese communities to rally support for elderly people living in those communities.
5. The contributions of families or the community should be integrated with formal support services to provide care for the elderly. Formal support services should aim at enhancing the caring functions of both the family and the community.
6. Institutional care should not be regarded as a last resort; it should be available to those genuinely in need of the service. The admission of an elderly person into institutional care should in no way be taken as an act of impiety.

These guidelines are not meant to be exhaustive, but they would certainly be useful to Asian Chinese communities in their attempts to devise a long-term care policy for elderly people. In applying the guidelines, Asian Chinese communities must, of course, take into consideration their particular social and economic conditions, as well as their overall

developmental objectives. For example, children in Taiwan still feel it their duty to take care of their elderly parents, whereas most people in Hong Kong would like to have the responsibility shared between the family and the state.¹² Studies have also found that communities in Chinese cities, like Shanghai, were much more ready to support the elderly living in the community than those in Hong Kong.¹³ Individual Chinese communities in the Asian region must devise their own policies for supporting the frail elderly.

CONCLUSION

Research on the practice of filial piety in Asian Chinese communities can serve as a basis for the formulation of new policies for supporting the elderly in need of long-term care. Neither a complete rejection nor a total acceptance of the value is appropriate. Filial piety has no doubt diminished in influence, but this does not necessarily imply that the value is no longer upheld; filial piety is in fact still observed, though not in the traditional ways. Any long-term care policy for elderly people in Asian Chinese communities must recognise the changes that have occurred in the practice of filial piety. While children still feel obliged to support their frail elderly parents and relatives (though now mainly confined to satisfying the latter's physical needs), their contributions should be harnessed. The tenacity of filial piety implies that elderly people are still retaining a legitimate role, both within the family and the community. This should help facilitate the adoption of a community care approach that aims at combining the contributions of formal and informal sources of help and support. Finally, Chinese

communities in Asia are undergoing rapid changes. Policies in support of the elderly must constantly be revised and kept in line with the changes that occur in the value of filial piety and its practices.

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