

DUTIES OF CHILDREN TOWARDS THE ELDERLY: EAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVES ON INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY

WILFRIDO VILLACORTA

Introduction

In the context of East Asian cultures, duties of children to their parents are as important as the duties of parents to their children. Issues on intergenerational solidarity in East Asia are not identical with those that most Western societies confront.

First of all, an aging population is not faced by the majority of countries in the region. It is only Japan and Hong Kong which have significant “graying” populations. Almost 17% of the Japanese population are 65 years old and above; in Hong Kong, they comprise 11% (see Appendix A).

Secondly, East Asian beliefs and practices on generational relationships do not approximate the egalitarian, individualist model of Western families.

Philippe Aries, in his classic work, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1962), wrote that Western societies themselves underwent transformation in their attitudes towards childhood and family life, as a result of economic and technological changes. In the Middle Ages, the child was well integrated into the adult community. Upon reaching the age of seven, they were regarded as having the mental and emotional capacities of adults. With the advent of capitalism in the seventeenth century, the child was segregated as a person that required education to prepare him for integration in society. Because the child’s nature was considered different from that of an adult, his family saw the need to coddle him (Hutter, 1997:312). Children and the nuclear family assumed greater importance.

Aries found that the industrial era of the 19th century resulted in the increased division of labor among family members and the confinement in the home of the “non-productive” women and children (*Ibid.*).

Margaret Mead (1970) also wrote about generational roles and relationships that vary by culture. In postfigurative cultures, children are socialised by their forebears so that the former behave in accordance with the mores and values of the latter. Mead contrasts this pattern found in traditional societies, with that which is found in cofigurative cultures, where social changes render the experience of the young as significantly different from those of the older generation. This situation, which exists in most industrial societies, results in a break from the individual's link with the past (Hutter, 1988:393-395). The reduction in the elders' authority generates tension and conflict within the family.

In different societies, there are varying modes of transition from childhood to adolescent adulthood. Ruth Benedict (1973) found that there is less continuity in the development of age roles in industrial societies like the United States. More traditional societies employ the small-adult conception of the adolescent, where there is less dichotomization of values desired for a child, on the one hand, and those desired for an adult, on the other. These societies provide more support to individuals as they progress from one life stage to the next. This framework applies more to the East Asian approach to intergenerational continuity and equity.

Foundations of East Asian Generational Relationships

A brief review of the cultural, political and economic profile of East Asian may be necessary to provide the context of intergenerational solidarity in the region.

East Asia consists of the five countries of Northeast Asia: China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea and Taiwan, as well as the ten countries of Southeast Asia: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Except for the Philippines, Christians compose the minority in all these countries. Islam is the religion of the majority in Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, and of the minority in Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand. China has also a significant Muslim minority. The Confucian and Northern Buddhist (Mahayana) traditions are strong in China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore and Vietnam. Southern Buddhism (Theravada/Hinayana) is dominant in Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia (see Appendix B).

The socialist ideology holds sway among middle-aged generations in China, which has been governed by the Communist Party for 53 years. Communist governments ruled Cambodia from 1975-1991, as well as

Vietnam and Laos from 1975 to the present. A military junta reigns in Myanmar, while a unique form of socialist government with theocratic and millennialist elements controls North Korea. Brunei is a monarchy headed by a sultan.

The new democracies in the region are Indonesia, Taiwan, South Korea and Thailand, while the older democracies established after World War II are the Philippines (interrupted by the Marcos dictatorship from 1972-1986) and Japan. Singapore and Malaysia have elective parliaments with ruling parties that have dominated the political system for the past 37 years. The entrenchment of these ruling parties have made strongman rule possible in these two countries, which have an encompassing Internal Security Act often used to stifle dissent.

The market economies in East Asia are Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and Thailand. The “markets in transition” are China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. Socialist countries prefer to call themselves “social market economies”. North Korea remains an autarkic economy.

Regardless of religious and ideological traditions, as well as political and economic systems, filial piety dominates generational relationships in all East Asian countries. Responsible for sustaining and reinforcing respect for parental authority are indigenous customs which are rooted in their pre-industrial past. Despite the fact that Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore have attained a high level of capitalist development, they have maintained their Confucian beliefs and practices.

In Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, respect for authority is likewise deep rooted in their cultures. Their folklore, temple teachings and popular literature are filled with moral lessons derived from obedience to parents and respect for elders and the king. In the Malay countries – Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and the Philippines, the sultans and village chieftains epitomize the paternalism that pervades Malay culture. Islam – and in the case of the majority in the Philippines, Christianity – has institutionalized filial piety in these countries.

Filial Piety as the Core of East Asian Family Values

Kyu Taik Sung (1998) wrote that the peoples of East Asia regard families as “systems of responsibilities”. Foremost is the tradition of filial piety, which involves the obligation of adult children “to respect and care for the elderly with affection, responsibility and gratitude”.

Sung provides six major categories: respect for the parent, filial responsibility, harmonization of the family, repayment of debts to the parent, affection to the parent, and sacrifice for the parent. Respecting parents requires bringing no dishonor to parents and family, and “taking care of parents with good food, soft clothes, a warm room, comfort and peace”. Disrespectful behavior is reprehensible and severely criticized, and “the mere material support of one’s parents without the expression of reverence, respect and spiritual consolation can not even be called filial piety”. He quotes Confucius who admonished, “Filial piety today is taken to mean providing nourishment for parents, but even dogs and horses are provided with nourishment. If it is not done with reverence for parents, what’s the difference between people and animals?”.

In turn, filial responsibility requires that one pay attention to one’s own health and relieve parents of this anxiety, in the same manner that parents were most concerned about the health of their children. Sung refers to the reminder of Confucius: “While his parents are alive, the son may not go abroad to a distance. If he goes abroad, he must have a fixed place to which he goes”.

Actual Practice of Filial Piety

According to Piaget (1932), an authoritarian relationship between parent and child impedes the latter’s moral development because such relationship instills a morality of constraint and sanctions. However, the experience of families in East Asia indicates that the seemingly authoritarian and hierarchical tradition in the region does not necessarily pose a constraint to the moral development of children in their relationships with their parents.

Janet Salaff (2000) conducted a survey of literature on the practice of filial piety in Northeast Asian countries. She observes that co-residence is a guide to children’s willingness to support the elderly. Most older folk live with their children. Even in the advanced economies of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea, the percentage of elderly people living with their children is around 75 to 85 percent. Despite Singapore’s small size, the overwhelming majority of the aged live in a family setting (92% women; 8% men). Only 5.7% live alone with their spouses; 73.1% live with senior children, and the “three-tier” family accounts for 21.2%.

In Hong Kong, despite small living spaces, Salaff found that the majority of elderly also live with, or near, their children. In 1991, 58.2% of the elderly people in Japan were living with their children (42% with married, 16% with unmarried children). She observed that there is a gradual decline in

co-residence among the Japanese. Patrilocal coresidency has likewise decreased in China, as more parents prefer to live independently.

Asian parents still expect their children to be filial. Most Hong Kong respondents of the Salaff study support filial piety, including caring for the elderly. Over half the respondents to a Shanghai study thought that elderly people were respected in their homes. Three-fifths of Singaporeans polled confirm that they listen to the advice of their elders. Even university and postgraduates claim that they listen to their elders.

Salaff described another study that examined exchanges between adult couples and their parents in Singapore Chinese middle-class families over different life cycles. Newlyweds mostly rely on parents for financial support, while adults with preschoolers especially need child care services. Eventually, adults become caregivers to aged parents.

The elderly who expect filial obligations are generally those with low income, poor health, widowed or divorced. They have low levels of educational attainment and do not receive pensions. They count on their daughters' as well as their sons' financial support.

Salaff concluded that need is relative and is socially constructed: "There are intergenerational comparisons: children that earn more than the parents are more likely to support their parents and give more. Studies on Malaysia, Taiwan and China point out that daughters with more education are both able to and willing to contribute more to their parents. This motivates parents to invest more in their daughter's education. Parents base the amount of investment in their children's education on the probability of their child's success rather than, as had been the case in the traditional family of the past, the child's gender".

The study indicated that the supporting relationship between parents and children is reciprocal: the more the parents give to their children, the more children repay as the parents advance in age and become needy. It also found that what assures the continuity of intergenerational support is the parents' paying for their children's education.

Among the countries in East Asia, the Philippines is regarded as a country most influenced by the West. But despite its having been colonized by Spain from 1565-1898 and by the United States from 1901-1946, the primary values of the Filipino are very much East Asian in character. Filial piety is a legacy not only of indigenous cultures but also of China that has had an extensive influence on Filipino customs.

The study of Lilia Domingo *et al.*, *The Filipino Elderly* (1994:20-45) concludes that "the family has taken on the care and provisions for the

needs of the elderly in the Philippines". There is a very low proportion of the aged living alone or living without relatives. These findings confirm the results of the earlier survey conducted by the Social Research Center of the University of Santo Tomas (1989).

In the Philippines, people are classified according to age, and each age category has corresponding social responsibilities and expectations (Domingo *et al.*, 1994). Society is, therefore, divided into generations, which operate under a subordination-superordination relationship (*Ibid.*). The older the generation, the higher the position in the hierarchy; the younger generations are expected to obey and respect them (Jocano, 1969).

The Philippine Constitution has provisions that directly relate to the family. The Declaration of Principles and State Policies (Article II) stipulates that "The State recognizes the sanctity of family life and shall protect and strengthen the family as a basic autonomous social institution. It shall equally protect the life of the mother and the life of the unborn from conception. The natural and primary right and duty of parents in the rearing of the youth for civic efficiency and the development of moral character shall receive the support of the Government (Sec. 12)".

Moreover, the fundamental law is perhaps the only constitution in the world that has a whole, separate article on "The Family" (Article XV):

Section 1: *The State recognizes the Filipino family as the foundation of the nation. Accordingly, it shall strengthen its solidarity and actively promote its total development.*

Section 2: *Marriage, as an inviolable social institution, is the foundation of the family and shall be protected by the State.*

Section 3: *The State shall defend: 1) The right of spouses to found a family in accordance with their religious convictions and the demands of responsible parenthood; 2) The right of children to assistance, including proper care and nutrition, and special protection from all forms of neglect, abuse, cruelty, exploitation, and other conditions prejudicial to their development; 3) The right of the family to a family living wage and income; and 4) The right of families or family associations to participate in the planning and implementation of policies and programs that affect them.*

Section 4: *The family has the duty to care for its elderly members but the State may also do so through just programs of social security.*

Altruism or Exchange – Demands of Social Change

While filial piety remains a dominant feature of family life in East Asia, new tensions are visible in countries that are afflicted by mass poverty. Three-generation homes create inevitable problems in cramped dwellings. In countries like the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand which have large numbers of overseas workers, traditional generational roles are undermined by the long absence of one or both of the parents. Likewise, families that have settled in countries like the United States, Canada and Australia are experiencing severe cultural dislocation, particularly in family values and relationships (see Chan, 1997; Shanas, 1997).

Furthermore, rapid technological and social changes in the modern world have proven to cause tensions in the relationship between parents and children. In middle-class families, there emerges a reversal of roles when as a result of increased use of electronic gadgets, the young sometimes play the role of teachers of their parents. While this is a development that is initially welcomed by parents and children alike, the widespread use of the Internet and mobile phones escalates the individualization of adolescents and is seen by elders as another barrier to intergenerational communication.

Greater access to educational opportunities for women has generated more consciousness of gender rights. Their emancipated consciousness usually poses problems in their relations with their husbands and in-laws, who expect the traditional submissive behavior. In newly established democracies, peoples who are not used to free expression are suddenly exposed to egalitarian ideals.

There are fears that a new approach to filial piety could arise, in which the youth may now have the right to reason out with their elders as to the wisdom of required behavior – whether it contributes to the mutual benefit of child and parent. With increased independence of children, will elders be still effective in handing down desired moral and social values? Will respect from them no longer be assumed, but will, from now on, have to be earned and justified?

Even the practice of giving will now have to be subject to intergenerational negotiation where conditions are laid before agreeing to help the other party. Does this pragmatic exchange erode intergenerational solidarity or is it time that rationality be provided the age-old concept of filial piety?

Philippe Plitaud (1999) asserts that the idea of solidarity does include the idea of exchange, which is essential for the preservation of the family and the maintenance of harmony within it. He writes that “although soli-

ilarity is a new concept in social policy, it is nevertheless, a very old one whose effects have long been felt at various levels and in various forms. Some authors link dependency and solidarity because to them, true dependency is at the same level as reciprocity”.

Ideally, intergenerational solidarity is based on altruistic motives reinforced by tradition and moral duty, rather than by the imperative of reciprocal benefits (Rajulton, n.d.). But the exchange theory asserts that solidarity is rooted in pragmatic motivation. Parents provide childcare in return for financial support and coresidence in the future. In turn, children extend help to their elderly parents with the hope of receiving an inheritance (*Ibid.*) In other words, service to the young and old within the family is actually an investment or even a bribe.

Nonetheless, it will take a long time before the traditional notion of filial piety in East Asia is replaced by purely pragmatic conceptions of intergenerational exchanges of support. The cultural and ethical foundations of its societies are much too strong to be shaken by the onslaught of globalization and growing materialism. Moreover, the “crowding out” hypothesis in which a responsive welfare state reduces the support from families to their aged parents and, therefore, erodes intergenerational solidarity (Rajulton, n.d.) does not apply to East Asia, where no welfare state that effectively cares for the elderly exists. In the absence of adequate state support, intimacy and affection between generations remain intact.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Age Integration, the Changing Life Course, and Intergenerational Solidarity.* 2001. An Information Note on the Expert Seminar in Preparation for the Ministerial Conference on Ageing, Berlin 2002. Retrieved March 17, 2002, from United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Website: http://www.unece.org/ead/pau/age/berlv_infonote.htm
- Aries, Philippe. 1962. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life.* New York: Vintage Books.
- Asia and the Pacific in Figures 2000.* 2000. Statistics Division, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). Retrieved April 3, 2002, from UNESCAP Website: <http://www.unescap.org/stat/statdata/apinfig.htm>
- Benedict, Ruth. 1973. “Continuities and Discontinuities in Cultural Conditioning”. In *The Sociology of Youth: Evolution of Revolution.* Ed. by Harry Silverstein. New York: Macmillan. 100-108.

- Bengston, Vern L. (n.d). *Regional Economic Change and Family Relations in Southern California*. Retrieved March 17, 2002, from <http://sc2.usc.edu/ccd/bengston.html>
- Chan, Florentius. 1997. "To be Old and Asian: An Unsettling Life in America". In *The Family Experience: A Reader in Cultural Diversity*. Ed. by Mark Hutter. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. 373-375.
- Commission Publishes its Strategy for a Europe for All Ages*. 1999. Retrieved March 17, 2002, from European Industrial Relations Observatory Website: <http://eiro.eurofound.ie/1999/09/inbrief/EU9909189N.html>
- Domingo, Lita *et al.* 1994. *The Filipino Elderly*. Quezon City: Center for Integrative and Development Studies, University of the Philippines.
- Donati, Pierpaolo. "Inter-generational Solidarity: A Sociological and Social Policy Issue". First outline. 2001.
- Grusec, Joan E. and Leon Kuczynski (Eds.). 1997. "A History of Research on Parenting Strategies and Children's Internalization of Values". In *Parenting and Children's Internalization of Values*. New York: John Wiley and Sons. 3-22.
- Hutter, Mark. 1988. *The Changing Family: Comparative Perspectives*. New York: Macmillan.
- Intergenerational Solidarity: Social Cohesion and Quality of Life* (n.d.). Retrieved March 17, 2002, from <http://www.social.coe.int/en/cohesion/fampol/intergen.htm>
- Jocano, F. Landa. 1969. *Growing Up in a Philippine Barrio*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Kalache, Alexandre. (n.d.). *Demographic Transformation*. Retrieved March 17, 2002, from http://www.mh-hannover.de/aktuelles/projekte/mmm/englishversion/fs_programme/speech/kalache_v.html
- Kendig, Hal L. and William T. Tiu (Eds.). 2000. *Who Should Care for the Elderly? An East-West Value Divide*. Retrieved March 17, 2002, from <http://www.wspc.com.sg/books/general/4378.html>
- Mead, Margaret. 1970. *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gaps*. New York: Natural History Press/Doubleday.
- Piaget, J. 1965. *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. (M. Gabain, Trans.). New York: Free Press. (Originally published in 1932).
- Plitaud, Philippe. 1999. *Intergenerational Solidarity as the Basis for Social Relationships*. Retrieved March 17, 2002, from <http://www.geronto.org/vitalaging/October1999/socialrelationships.htm>
- Population Dynamics*. 2001. World Bank, World Development Indicators, Table 2.1. Retrieved April 1, 2002, from World Bank Organization Website: http://www.worldbank.org/data/wdi2001/pdfs/tab2_1.pdf

- Porio, Emma, Frank Lynch and Mary Hollnsteiner. 1978. *The Filipino Family, Community and Nation*. Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University.
- Rajulton, Fernando. (n.d.). *Social and Family Cohesion across Generations*. Retrieved March 17, 2002, from The University of Western Ontario Website: <http://www.sscl.uwo.ca/sociology/ftsc/Rajulton1.html>
- _____ and Zenaida Ravanera R. 2001. *Intergenerational Support and Family Cohesion*. Retrieved April 5, 2002, from The University of Western Ontario Website: <http://www.ssc.uwo.ca/sociology/popstudies/dp/dp01-11.pdf>
- Report of the Civil Society Society Consultation for the Second World Assembly on Ageing*. 2001. Retrieved March 17, 2002, from United Nations Website: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/ageing/waa/chiangmairep1.htm>
- Salaff, Janet. (2000). *Balanced Relations or Patriarchy? Daughters and Sons in the Modern Chinese Family*. A Paper delivered at "Conference on Families in the Global Age: New Challenges Facing Japan and Southeast Asia". Center for Advanced Studies, National University of Singapore. October 14-16, 2000. Retrieved March 26, 2002, from University of Toronto Website: http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~salaff/Chinese_families_property.pdf
- Shanas, Ethel. 1997. "The Family and the Elderly". In *The Family Experience: A Reader in Cultural Diversity*. Ed. by Mark Hutter. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. 353-360.
- Social Research Center. 1989. *The Elderly in the Philippines*. Manila: Social Research Center, University of Santo Tomas.
- Sung, Kyu-taik. 1998. *Filial Piety: The Traditional Ideal of Parent Care in East Asia*. Retrieved March 17, 2002, from American Society on Aging Website: <http://www.asaging.org/networks/forsa/a&s-101.html>

APPENDIX A

PERCENTAGE OF THE POPULATION AGED 65+*

Countries	1980	1990	1995	1997	1998	1999
<i>Northeast Asia:</i>						
China	4,7	5,4	6,7	7,0	7,4	7,6
Hong Kong, China	6,4	8,5	9,8	10,4	10,7	10,9
Japan	9,1	12,0	14,5	15,7	16,2	16,7
North Korea	3,5	4,3	4,8	5,0
South Korea	3,8	5,0	5,9	6,3	6,6	6,8
<i>Southeast Asia:</i>						
Brunei Darussalam	2,8	2,7	2,9	3,0	3,6	3,4
Cambodia	2,6	2,7	3,0	...	3,4	...
Indonesia	3,3	3,8	4,3	4,5
Laos	2,8	3,0	3,0	3,0	3,7	...
Malaysia	3,5	3,6	3,7	3,7	3,7	3,8
Myanmar	3,5	4,0	5,0	5,1	5,1	5,2
Philippines	3,4	3,5	3,6	3,7
Singapore	4,9	6,1	6,8	7,0	7,1	7,3
Thailand	3,5	3,9	5,1	5,3	5,4	5,7
Vietnam	4,8	4,8	4,9	5,0

* Source: Statistics Division, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), 2000.

APPENDIX B

POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL PROFILE OF EAST ASIA

Countries	Political System	Economic System	Religion/ Philosophy/ Ideology
<i>Northeast Asia:</i>			
China	Socialist Regime	Socialist Market Economy	Confucianism/ Buddhism/ Socialism
Japan	Parliamentary Democracy	Market Economy	Confucianism/ Buddhism/Shinto
North Korea	Socialist Regime	Autarky	Confucianism/ Buddhism/Socialism
South Korea	Presidential Democracy	Market Economy	Confucianism/ Buddhism/Christianity
Taiwan	Presidential Democracy	Market Economy	Confucianism/ Buddhism
<i>Southeast Asia:</i>			
Brunei Darussalam	Islamic Monarchy	Market Economy	Islam
Cambodia	Parliamentary Democracy	Market in Transition	Buddhism
Indonesia	Presidential/ Parliamentary Democracy	Market Economy	Islam/Christianity/ Hinduism
Laos	Socialist Regime	Socialist Market Economy	Buddhism/Socialism
Malaysia	Parliamentary Authoritarianism	Market Economy	Islam/Buddhism/ Confucianism/Hinduism/ Christianity
Myanmar	Military Regime	Command Economy	Buddhism
Philippines	Presidential Democracy	Market Economy	Christianity/Islam
Singapore	Parliamentary Authoritarianism	Market Economy	Buddhism/Confucianism/ Islam/Christianity
Thailand	Parliamentary Democracy	Market Economy	Buddhism/Islam
Vietnam	Socialist Regime	Socialist Market Economy	Buddhism/ Confucianism/Socialism