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How and When Filial Piety Became a Feminine Virtue

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How and When Filial Piety Became a Feminine Virtue The Japanese are acutely aware that theirs is the fastest aging society in the world. Emperor Akihito mentioned the problem in his first New Year's greeting of the millennium and Prime Minister Koizumi included it in his first policy speech to the Diet (Japan Times, 1/1/01, 5/8/01). The government bureaucracy produces a steady stream of statistics to keep the issue in the public eye.

In 1990 the percentage of the Japanese population over sixty-five years of age was only 12 percent, slightly lower than in a number of European countries (the figure was 15 percent in West Germany in 1985). By 1999, the percentage had grown to 16.7 percent, still lower than in Sweden (17.6 percent in 1995). The Institute of Population Problems has projected that by 2020 those sixty-five or older will constitute nearly 24 percent of Japan's population.

Japan's demographic configuration results from a combination of the highest life expectancies in the world (83.99 for women and 77.1 for men) and a low birth rate (Campbell 1992:6; Jones 1988:958-961; Japan Times 5/31/00).

At first glance, the problem of the aging society does not seem to be a gendered one. The problems that will result from a large number of elderly with a much smaller number of young workers to support them will affect everyone in society. In a country where a majority (60 percent) of the elderly are cared for in homes, however, the burden of caring for the elderly falls primarily on women. As Diet-member Kusakabe Kiyoko of the Upper House has written, "When there is home care, no matter who the caretaker is, whether it is a wife or a daughter-in-law or a daughter, it is a woman" (1986:112). In fact, most elderly men are cared for by their wives and most elderly women by their daughters-in-law. One estimate is that only 10 percent of the total number of caretakers are men (Kiefer 1987:99). A 1987 survey found that 82 percent of caretakers of the bedridden and the senile in the home were women (Serizawa 1989:42).

The burden that care giving for the elderly places upon women has been well-documented. Mental stress, lumbago, and sleep deprivation are a few of the common complaints. Caregivers are rarely able, however, to get away from their responsibilities long enough to see a doctor about their own ailments. These burdens are compounded if the income of the household is reduced because the caregiver has had to give up outside employment (Harris and Long 1993:114; Serizawa 1989:44; Sodei 1995:219, 223). It has become a commonplace of analysis of Japanese women's work patterns to mention care giving for the elderly as one of the household responsibilities that interferes with continuous employment (Buckley 1993:369; Taira 1993:177).

Scholars often invoke Japan's Confucian heritage to explain the contemporary pattern of care giving for the elderly. That is, Confucian-inspired filial piety is credited for the respect for the aged in Japan and the high percentage of Japanese elderly who live with their children (Palmore 1985:18; Kamo 1988:300-301). It is, however, rarely noted that the current pattern of care giving has necessitated a major gender transformation of the practice of filial piety.

Confucius preached respect for parents, but he preached it to men. His observation that men who behave well towards their parents never start revolutions (Waley 1938:84) concerns the governing of the realm, certainly not in his day the business of women. His various injunctions on how to treat parents were all actions that men should take: do the hard work, see that parents

get enough to eat, serve them first with food and wine, obey them, defer to them, cause them no anxiety, know their age, refrain from wandering far afield when they are alive, serve them according to ritual, bury them according to ritual, sacrifice to them according to ritual, mourn three years, and carry our the father's intentions after his death (Waley 1938: 86, 88-89, 106). To be sure, the "five relationships" of Confucianism imply a gendered division of labor that thus justifies women's performance of certain tasks within the home. There is, however, no question but that filial piety has been a male virtue through most of history.

The Japanese have been familiar with the concept of filial piety for a long time. From the sixth century when Buddhism arrived from the continent, the Japanese could not help but acquire Confucian teachings along with the Buddhist theology and Chinese political technology in which they were more interested. The thirteenth century war tale Heike monogatari contains Chinese rhetoric, including explicit references to the sage kings Yao and Shun, about filial piety and proper government (Sadler 1972:44). In much early Japanese literature, however, filial piety remains a virtue honored more often in the breach. In the fifteenth century N? drama "Tanik?," the young male protagonist for whom the play is named, his mother, and his teacher all express Tanik?'s obligation to his widowed mother who has been ill. Nevertheless, the play ends with Tanik?'s being hurled to his death in obedience to an ancient (and certainly not Confucian) law (Waley 1957:230-235). In another N? play, Fujiwara Fusazaki, the son of a humble fisherwoman, goes in search of his long-lost mother. He encounters her ghost and, as the ghost requests, prays for her soul (Waley 1957:279). Both stories involve a mother-son relationship, and in neither case is the male protagonist required to care for his aging parent.

Two men from a somewhat later era are famed for having followed Confucius' injunction against wandering far afield when one's parents are alive. The gerontologist Erdman B. Palmore, for example, offers the sixteenth century unifier of Japan, Hideyoshi, as a classic example of filial piety who gave up his hopes of leading an expedition to Korea because of his mother's worry on his behalf (Palmore 1985: 21). The Confucian scholar Nakae T?ju (1608-1648) is another exemplar of the same virtue. He resigned his position in the service of a feudal lord in Shikoku to return to his native village near Lake Biwa to care for his aging mother (Tsunoda, de Bary, and Keene 1958:1:370).

The patriarchal family system implicit in Confucian teachings almost demands that filial piety be a male virtue. Confucian women must be obedient to their fathers until they marry, to their husbands while married, and to their sons when widowed. There is little room in such a system for a married woman to honor her own parents. For filial piety to be practiced in its usual Confucian manner, however, there has to be patrilocal residence, and that is an institution that developed fairly late in Japanese history.

Japanese literature thus provides numerous examples of filial daughters. In Heike monogatari, the only individuals who express filial sentiments about their own parents happen to be women. The professional dancer Gi? returns to Taira Kiyomori out of filial duty to her mother. When Kiyomori slights her yet again, she is dissuaded from suicide only by the thought that her death would force her mother to die as well. Instead, Gi?, her sister, and her mother all become nuns (Sadler 1972:36-37). In the same war tale, an older woman asks her foster daughter, a pregnant widow, how she can contemplate leaving her mother alone in her old age,

but the younger woman jumps from the ship and drowns anyway (163). As with the male fictional characters, the stories contain rhetoric about filial piety, but no one actually stays home and cares for an aging parent.

The fifteenth century N? play "Kagekiyo" (Waley 1957:123-133) provides an even more vivid example of a woman who displays the virtues of filial piety required of men without ever becoming enmeshed in the burdens of day-to-day care for the elderly. Kagekiyo was a Taira warrior who was sent into exile after the Minamoto defeated the Taira. His daughter Hitomaru sets out to find him in exile. She goes in search of him despite the fact that her father, thinking that because his child was a girl, he "would get no good of her," handed her over to a village headman to raise. When Hitomaru finally finds her father, he at first denies his identity, but then tells her of his final battles many years earlier. He asks her prayers and then sends her away, remaining in his thatched hut to await his imminent death. Presumably the villagers, who have "see[n] to it that he does not starve" (127), will minister to him until his death. The present Japanese government would not be eager to encourage the daughter to obey her father; they would prefer that she support him.

To be sure, the dutiful daughter-in-law is not entirely the invention of the modern state. During the Tokugawa era (1600-1868), the patriarchal family became the ideal for all classes. The eighteenth century puppet play "Sugawara" contains a scene in which we see the labor of daughters-in-law enlisted in the service of men's filial piety. The triplets featured in this play have planned a banquet to honor their father's seventieth birthday. The three daughters-in-law gather greens, chop vegetables, make soup, and set the table (Jones 1985). Here we have a dramatic display of the women's labor necessary for men even to provide food for their parents.

The national state established by the Meiji Restoration of 1868 drew up new legal codes that privileged the multi-generational patrilineal family with one son inheritance. The duties of "good wives and wise mothers," the prescribed roles for women, included "tending the old people" (Uno 1993:298). Conservative women educators such as Hatoyama Haruko and Tanahashi Ayako, who helped define the ideals for modern Japanese womanhood, admonished women to be good daughters-in-law (Nolte and Hastings 1991:174).

National policy was not, however, uniform in its support for the multi-generational household. National educational institutions drew young men to the capital, and many never returned to the rural districts where their parents lived. Military officers moved from assignment to assignment within the empire, sometimes leaving elderly parents behind. In Natsume Soseki's novel Kokoro, the narrator and his brother return home from distant cities to pay their respects to their dying father, but neither of them wants to return permanently to their natal home. Sensei, the older male protagonist in the novel, has broken all contact with his family of birth. His wife's mother was living in Tokyo as an independent military widow when he first met the family, and he and his wife thus cared for her mother rather than for anyone from his family (Natsume 1957).

The Pacific War compounded the disruptions in orderly family life inherent in modernity. Narratives of women's lives provide us with many instances of daughters and daughters-in-law who stepped in and took on all the male responsibilities of filial piety, including earning the financial support for parents and parents-in-law. In the life histories collected by an American

social worker (Freed 1993: 61, 105), a never-married woman cared for her father after all her siblings moved out; a woman widowed by war returned to her father's house and then cared for him in his old age. One war widow supported her husband's mother-doing what the son would have done had he lived-for twenty-three years after her husband died.

The postwar reforms that bestowed upon women new political rights did little to relieve their responsibility for the care of the aged. To be sure, women were given the right to vote and run for office. The 1947 constitution stressed the dignity of the individual and guaranteed the equality of men and women. The Revised Civil Code of 1947 recognized legal equality between husband and wife in marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The responsibility for the elderly, and indeed for all needy, remained, however, a private one, one that whenever possible should be borne by the relatives of the needy.

In the public sphere, women in elected office claimed the problems of the aged as an issue on which they had special expertise. When Nakayama Masa was appointed vice-minister of welfare in 1953, she took as her special concern the elderly who, because they had no living relatives, "lived in terrible anxiety for the future" (Nakayama 1977:196-197). In 1962, another female legislator in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), K?ro Mitsu of the Upper House, drew up and submitted her own version of a welfare law. Although this particular bill did not even reach the committee stage, it paved the way for the eventual passage of the Welfare Law for the Aged in 1963 (Campbell 1992:111).

In the private sphere, the food and housing shortages of the immediate postwar era made elderly care giving a particularly heavy burden for households. Men as well as women were inconvenienced. Niwa Fumio's short story, "The Hateful Age," is a biting account of three granddaughters, two of them married, and the burden they and their husbands bore. The male author expressed the resentment of the male characters with particular eloquence.

First of all, these men are inconvenienced not by their mother or their grandmother but by their wives' grandmother. One brother-in-law, Itami, exhausted after sheltering the grandmother for only three months, refuses to do so any longer. "All I know is that in that little body of hers the spite and hypocrisy and dishonesty of her past eighty-six years have coagulated into a solid core of wickedness" (55). His wife Senko reminds him that there is no simple way to expel Granny from their household, and thus reminds us of the role of the state in constructing the current system of care for the elderly. "But if you throw her out, she'll simply go to the police and give our name and they'll bring her right back. There's no point trying to put her into an institution either; nowadays they only take people who have no families to look after them" (56).

At Itami's insistence, Granny is sent to stay with Senko's sister Sachiko and her husband Minobe. Granny's nocturnal wanderings, her constant pilfering, and her annoying habit of extinguishing the charcoal fire drive Minobe to question the wisdom of Confucius on filial piety and respect for the aged. Staring at Granny, he asks himself, "Was it possible that the Master had had sly, wicked old women like this in mind when he expounded his noble precepts? To respect an insensitive old woman like Ume [Granny], conscious as she was of only the physical aspects of life, was like worshipping a stone idol! (68)." Note, however, that Minobe assumes that as a male he ought to at least contemplate the practice of filial piety.

Inoue Yasushi's memoir, Chronicle of My Mother, first published serially in 1964, 1969, and 1974, recounts how two of his sisters cared for his mother, one inviting the mother to live with her in Tokyo, the second moving into the mother's home. The burden of care giving was thus shared among several adult children and grandchildren. In addition, the family employed a maid (Inoue 1982).

If we turn to today's daughter-in-law, we find that her problem is that she is inhibited from outside employment by the role expectations of others that she be the caregiver for her parents-in-law. If her burden is not the result of Confucian filial piety and unchanging Japanese tradition, how do we explain it? Certainly medical technology has enabled society to prolong life longer than was possible just a few decades ago (Kiefer 1987:89).

Moreover, some of the pressures on the daughter-in-law come from what we might term demographic factors: more people are living longer, and because of the proliferation of the nuclear family and the smaller number of children per family, the pressure on individual women is greater. As Sodei Takako has noted, "Care for frail elders used to be a problem for a small number of people, but now it has become everybody's problem" (1993:218). Despite the increase in the number of those caring for the frail elderly, caregivers work in relative isolation. Often by the time a woman is undertaking care for her parents or parents-in-law, her children have already left home. In extreme cases, her husband may assume that he has no responsibility for the care of his parents. Whereas in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, men gave literary expression to the burdens of filial piety in the extended family, Ariyoshi Sawako set her 1972 novel in the home of a married couple with one school-age son. Her novel depicts the exhaustion and unavoidable absences from work that result when a working wife takes on the care of a senile father-in-law with no assistance from relatives outside her immediate nuclear family.

Two other important factors in the daughter-in-law's burden are extreme gender differentiation of function within the home and the rise in the cost of labor in Japan that has made manual labor in the home almost the exclusive responsibility of the wife. The systemic pressures that make it almost impossible for a woman to keep outside employment and pay someone else to do the care taking suggest that the old division between work outside the home for men and inside the home for women has become a division of work with the mind for men and work with the hands for women. The current stereotype of a husband is of a workaholic who rarely spends time in his own home. Married couples who live apart have become so common that there are television programs on the topic. Because companies require men to work such long hours, even when husbands and wives live in the same household, they have no time to relate to each other. Some couples are such strangers to each other that when the husband calls his home, the wife inquires politely, "May I ask who is calling, please?" (Kusakabe 1986:110). This workaholic is a postwar construction, one that did not emerge until at least the 1960s and 1970s.

The separation of function by gender that has resulted from employment patterns has generated attitudes that have taken on an independent existence of their own. Wives explain their husbands' failure to share the burden of housework by saying their husbands regard housework as a nuisance (49 percent), they simply do not like to do it (33 percent), and they think it is

women's work (31 percent) (Lummis and Nakajima 1995:243). Such attitudes set the stage for the complete transformation of filial piety into a feminine virtue. One informant told Long and Harris (1993:114) about her burden as a caregiver, "Even when I request his help, my husband does nothing, saying it's the job of the daughter-in-law."

This extreme gender differentiation of function within homes has not simply bubbled up from some reservoir of Japanese tradition; rather, this pattern has been fostered and reinforced by government policy. In official statements, bureaucrats praise the tightly knit Japanese families of prewar Japan that cared for their own. They mourn the loss of the traditional patriarchal extended family that disappeared, they say, when the American Occupation gave legal recognition to nuclear families (EJ 1971). Government praise for "traditional," multi-generational households (EJ 1981) reinforces the thinking of the significant number of Japanese who still believe that "only men should work while women should stay at home." A survey done in late 1987 showed that 36.6 percent of the women polled agreed with the statement (EJ 1989). Although the number of Japanese who support the philosophy of "men at the workplace, women in the home" has declined from 80 percent in 1972 to only 24 percent in 1990, approximately one quarter of the society still adheres to the older position (Toshitani 1994:78)

The interest of the government in the unpaid labor within the home has been particularly acute since the state turned its attention to the problems of the aging society. John Campbell, an American political scientist who has written extensively about Japanese policy formation, maintains that the attention of policy makers shifted from the problems of the elderly to the problems of the aging society in 1975. In the wake of the "oil shock" in the fall of 1973, planners concluded that Japan was shifting from a period of high economic growth to one of only moderate yearly increases; this perception prompted a shift in the national welfare agenda (1992:210-212).

Instead of concentrating on older people themselves and how society had caused problems for them, attention would focus on the problems caused by the growing numbers of older people-problems for specific programs like health care or pensions, for the overall size of government, for companies and other private-sector institutions, for economic growth, and for the vitality of Japanese society (Campbell 1992:212).

The 1974 White Paper on Welfare, which ostensibly focused on the problems of the elderly, employed language about "the increasingly heavy burden in order to maintain social security for the aged" (EJ 1974). By couching arguments about the aging society in terms of the financial cost to the state and the added tax burden on the household, the government has concentrated on those aspects of society for which men usually have responsibility. It has ignored the fact that low government expenditures for old age homes and home-helpers impose a heavy burden on the women who care for the elderly within their own homes.

Bureaucrats propose as the solution for the aging society a "Japanese-style welfare" system, the essential content of which is that the family should care for the growing numbers of elderly (Campbell 1992:220-221). One does not have to be a sociologist to know that the burden of such a system would fall on women. Specific measures to encourage families to care for their elderly relatives include an improved tax exemption for households with an elderly parent,

loosening of restrictions on the inheritance law so as to allow families to reward a caretaker, and loans for families building an addition to accommodate an elderly parent (Campbell 1992:221N, 237).

These state policies fail to conform to sincere filial piety in several respects. True filial piety requires that children respect the wishes of their elders, and there is a growing body of evidence that many Japanese parents wish that they did not have to be dependent upon their children. As one elderly woman told an American interviewer, "It is not good for parents to be too dependent on their children" (Freed 1993:97). Another woman told the same interviewer, "I have two daughters and don't want to be dependent on either of them. I have told my older daughter that if I cannot manage, she should send me to a nursing home." Moreover, she makes it very clear that she would like to have access to public services for the elderly and thus have no need to ask her children for help (Freed 1993:83). A housewife in Tokushima, who was currently nursing her own mother and who expected to care for her parents-in-law, expressed a similar wish for independence for herself. "When I get older I hope they put me in a nursing home so I won't be a bother to anyone" (Condon 1991:97).

The sense of individual independence expressed by these elderly women stands in sharp contrast to the rhetoric of the LDP and business. The women who favor nursing homes over dependence on their children argue in essence that having lived their lives as productive members of society, they expect society to meet their needs in old age, regardless of their relationships with their children. By contrast, LDP politicians worry that an enhanced social security system would shift expenses from private households to the public sector. In the policy platform that he issued in his campaign for the LDP presidency in the summer of 1976, Fukuda Takeo expressed concern that the social security system "might lead to the citizenry losing its sense of independence" (Campbell 1992:215).

In 1986, Takemura Yasuko, a woman member of the Diet, accused the LDP of sacrificing the family to the pursuit of high economic growth (Takemura 1986:23). Kusakabe Kiyoko, an articulate writer on women's problems who has since been elected to the Upper House, makes much the same argument. Kusakabe criticizes the state for forcing individuals to sacrifice their families for the sake of the company. She uses her friend T-san to illustrate her argument. A young man in his twenties, T-san was until recently the picture of health. Now he has circles under his eyes, hollow cheeks, and a cough. The reason for the dramatic decline of his health is exhaustion from the strain of caring for his elderly parents. His mother tore the ligaments in her knee in a skiing accident. After several months of caring for his bedridden wife, T-san's father collapsed. Just as T-san was most desperately needed by his parents, his company announced that it planned to transfer him away from his parents' home in Tokyo. Although T-san explained his situation and begged the company to rescind the transfer order, management refused his request. T-san talked to a lawyer about suing the company, but he was advised to drop the suit. The lawyer said because T-san did not actually live with his parents and because his older sister also lived in Tokyo, the court would probably side with the company (Kusakabe 1986:108-109).

Kusakabe illustrates the wisdom of the lawyer's advice by citing a court case. In July 1986, the Osaka high court overturned a lower court decision in favor of an Osaka salaryman. The salaryman sued for wrongful dismissal after he was fired for refusing a transfer. By

overturning the decision, the high court sided with the company and thus gave official recognition to the wide powers of companies to transfer employees. The ruling specifically stated that family problems must simply be endured; to consider them valid obstacles to company transfers would simply be an abuse of civil rights (Kusakabe 1986:109).

Women politicians such as Takemura and Kusakabe may hold the key to long term legal and social change in Japan. Certainly women politicians have spoken out on the issue of the aging society. In April 1985, it was a socialist woman, Kubota Manae, who asked Prime Minister Nakasone in the Upper House Budget Committee what exactly the government planned to do about the challenge of the aging society. Her question elicited from him a promise that he would develop an overall plan (Campbell 1992:241).

Whereas Campbell found that male members of the Diet did not see welfare spending as an issue relevant to their election campaigns (1992:218), women of the opposition parties, especially the Social Democratic Party Japan (SDPJ), have explicitly identified aging as an issue important to them as women. Soon after her election as chair of the socialist party, Doi Takako interrogated Prime Minister Nakasone about the problems of the elderly. She asked why, when the percentage of the elderly in the population was increasing, aging had taken on the nature of a curse, and she inquired about the health care available to the elderly. Doi was quite explicit about the aging society being a woman's problem: "Women spend three different lives with old people: the lives of their parents, their husbands, and themselves. Behind the word 'old age' the sighing of women is audible" (Doi 1986; Arima 1987). D?moto Akiko, now governor of Chiba, decided to run as a socialist for the Upper House of the Diet in 1989 because she was dissatisfied with existing government policies. She included the aging society among the problems on which Japan needed to develop policies and enact effective legislation (Ling and Matsuno 1992:59). Toguchi Tomako, elected to the Lower House in 1990, considers herself a special advocate for the elderly:

> I see myself in Parliament as a mouthpiece of the people I represent. For instance, many of my constituents are the elderly, and I know that they need public services. That is why I have been speaking to this issue many times and have put forth arguments for better funding of welfare centers to provide quality services for the aged (Ling and Matsuno 1992:59).

Other women in the socialist party have expressed the view that aging is a topic on which women have special expertise (Ling and Matsuno 1992:58).

This rhetoric has made its way into election contests for both the Upper and the Lower Houses. Chiba Keiko, a lawyer running as a Socialist for re-election to the Upper house, pledged, "I shall pursue establishment of a system of regional welfare for the aging society that is based on the equality of men and women" (Gekkan shakait? 1992: October, 161).

The increased participation of women in politics at the national level has been paralleled at the local level and has drawn further attention to women's concerns for the aging society. In the April 1991 elections, an unprecedented 1335 women won office in local legislative assemblies. At a symposium on the aging society in September 1991, some of the regional assembly members discussed how they themselves had cared for bedridden mothers, fathers, and

in-laws. In response to a questionnaire, most said that they had included the issue of the aging society in their election campaigns (Higuchi 1992:2, 8-9, 19).

Let us return to the question posed in my title. When did filial piety become a feminine virtue in Japan? Japan has, of course, always had filial daughters who honored, obeyed, and served their parents and parents-in-law. Japan used to have filial sons as well. The assumption that women, and only women, will spend years of sleepless nights and constant vigilance is a product of the gendered pattern of Japanese high economic growth. The daughter-in-law's burden results not from filial piety but from the assumption in public policy that male workers have wives who will assume any domestic burdens, leaving men free to meet the temporal and geographic needs of the companies. Although the linkage among filial piety, the three-generational family, and women's care for the elderly seems to justify a Confucian explanation for the burden that falls upon Japanese women today, let me suggest that if the burden were truly the result of Confucian filial piety, men would be bearing a greater share of it.

NOTES The life expectancies are from the Japan Times, 8/19/00. In 1994 the figures announced by the Japanese government for Respect for the Aged Day were 82.5 for women and 76.25 for men (Goozner 1994).
For other passages linking filial piety with the governing of the realm, see Waley 1938:92, 93.
Taira (1993:175-177) provides an account of a medically dependent tuberculosis patient who in 1957 sued the Minister of Welfare because of the manner in which the government ordered his brother to bear part of the cost of his medical care.
Brasor (2000) provides an examples from an NHK special in which an elderly woman says that she would prefer a professional caregiver to her husband. "I don't want him carrying me into the toilet," she said.

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