

**Subcontracting Filial Piety:
Elder Care in Ethnic Chinese Immigrant Families in California**

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Abstract

Based on in-depth interviews with middle-class Taiwanese and Hong Kong immigrant families in California, I examine how the cultural meaning and social practice of filial care for aging parents have been transformed in the U.S. context. I analyze the commodification of elder care from three dimensions—where care takes place, who gives care, and who pays for care—and examine its impacts on Chinese family relations. Although three-generational cohabitation may have declined on foreign soil, the family remains the nexus of care networks and economic ties among Chinese immigrants. Through recruiting home care workers as fictive kin, immigrant adult children are able to maintain the cultural ideal of filial care. The receipt of public care among immigrant elders does not necessarily indicate the diminishment of family bonds, but reinforces kin connections as channels for circulating economic resources.

Keywords

Elder care, care work, Chinese family, immigrant family

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“I told her that I hire you to help me achieve my filial duty,” Paul Wang, a 60-year-old Taiwanese immigrant owning a software company in Silicon Valley, described to me his conversation with the in-home care worker he employed for his mother suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. The cultural norm of filial piety has traditionally governed intergenerational relationships in ethnic Chinese families. Yet, many middle-class immigrant households from Taiwan and Hong Kong, like their American class peers of other ethnic origins, now seek services provided by non-family workers to care for their aging parents.¹ The commercial transfer of elder care offers a lens for us to explore the transformation of family relations and cultural practices among Chinese immigrants in the United States.

This article underscores cultural variation and institutional embeddedness in the arrangement of elder care. The issue of ethnic diversity is especially crucial in California, where 25 percent of current residents are foreign-born (Lollock 2001). I argue that ethnic culture is not a static heritage but is constantly transformed by human agency and institutional environments. The changes in elder care arrangements demonstrate how immigrant families negotiate their cultural norms and kin relations in response to different institutional prerequisites in the new country. I use the term “subcontracting filial piety” to describe that Chinese immigrant adult children transfer the filial duty of caring for their aging parents to non-family employees, and in the mean time, maintain the ideal of filial piety by incorporating the care workers to be their filial agents and fictive kin.

A Transfer Chain of Filial Care

Why are children motivated to fulfill the filial responsibility for their aging parents in ethnic Chinese societies? Scholars have offered two complementary theories to explain the normative nature and institutional prerequisites of filial piety. First, children may perceive filial norms to be morally and socially acceptable; they internalize the norms during the

process of socialization or abide by them under social pressure (Blieszner and Hamon 1992). Second, social exchange theory explains filial duty as an act of reciprocation resulting from the fact that intergenerational relationships serve as channels for the exchanges of resources and power (Pyke 1999). The parents-children bonds are governed by an implicit moral contract in ethnic Chinese societies: childrearing is viewed as a process of social investment with an expectation of delayed repayment, in the Chinese term, “*bau-da*” (payback). Parents undergo economic and emotional costs in bearing and rearing children, associated particularly with educational investments, purchasing houses, and preparing bride prices for sons. Children, especially sons, are thus obligated to return the debts through filial care for their aging parents.

To further elaborate the social mechanisms of arranging elder care in ethnic Chinese families, I develop the concept of “a transfer chain of filial care” to describe how the filial duty of elder care is achieved through the mediation of gender dynamics and market forces. The transfer chain consists of two components: *gender transfer* from the son to the daughter-in-law and *market transfer* from (mostly female) kin caregivers to non-family home care workers. The gender transfer of filial care is embedded in social traditions such as parental authority and patriarchy in Chinese societies, and the subcontracting of elder care reveals the transformation of cultural practices in contemporary institutional contexts, especially associated with the emergence of dual-income nuclear households.

The traditional Han-Chinese household pattern is three-generational cohabitation based on a patrilocal principle. Family membership, inheritance of property, and distribution of authority are defined through the main axis of father and son. A daughter is considered “spilled water,” given away after marriage to another family headed by her husband’s father (Thornton and Lin 1994; Wolf 1972). In contrast, giving birth to sons assures more security for the future welfare of parents. As a Chinese proverb says: “To raise a son, to protect

yourself at old ages.” Although the sons, especially the eldest one, are obligated to reside with and care for their aging parents, the actual duty of elder care is mostly performed by their wives, the daughters-in-law. They have to abide a traditional model of caregivers which is associated with the hierarchical concept of “serving” rather than the more egalitarian conception of “caring” (Liu 1998).

Nevertheless, intergenerational power dynamics are being transformed in the process of modernization (Collier 1997). As a society shifts from an agricultural to industrial economy, adult children gain most of their income in the market economy, thus depending less on economic resources provided by the family. Younger generations choose their marriage partners on the basis of romantic love rather than compatibility to family needs or parents’ expectations (Dizard and Gadlin 1990:11). Their resistance to three-generational cohabitation may still induce social blame for failure to achieve filial piety, but it involves less monetary loss of family assets and properties than in the past.

Market transfer has become a means for contemporary Taiwanese daughters-in-law to unburden their filial duty. Since the 1980s, an increasing number of dual-earner households in advanced ethnic Chinese economies like Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore have hired low-cost migrant women from Southeast and South Asia to handle the tasks of serving their parents-in-law. They turn to the employment of waged caregivers not only because of their shortage of time and to lessen the burdens of labor, but also to retrieve some autonomy from the authority of their mothers-in-law (Lan 2000).

To further explore the transformation of filial norms and elder care arrangements, I interviewed eight ethnic Chinese dual-earner immigrant families in California and explored the following questions: What happens to intergenerational relationships and power dynamics when ethnic Chinese families resettle on foreign soil? How do adult immigrant children arrange care for their aging parents while negotiating cultural traditions and new social

resources in the United States? What are the varying patterns of subcontracting filial care in mediation of the mechanisms of kinship and market? How does the commodification of care impact on the formation of family relations and boundaries?

Method and Data

My data were collected between November 2000 and February 2001. Through snowballing personal referral, I conducted in-depth interviews with 16 immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong in eight households residing in the San Francisco Bay Area. These households share a similar immigration pattern: Adult children settled in the United States first, and their overseas parents and other immediate relatives came later as “legalization dependents” (Portes and Rumbaut 1996: 15). Eight informants were elderly parents between 68 and 88 years old, including three widowed women, one widowed man, and two married couples. Given their varied physical conditions, the kind of care they needed was mostly personal and custodial attendance rather than medical care. I also interviewed eight adult children, including one man, three women, and two married couples. Their ages ranged between 38 and 60, and all had parents residing in the Bay Area before or at the time of the interview. In four of the households, both parents and children were interviewed; I failed to do so in the other four households due to the death of the parents or unavailability of the adult children.

I also interviewed 11 home care workers, all of them women. Ten are from mainland China and aged between 51 and 64. One is a 40-year-old Taiwanese immigrant. All these workers had legally entered the United States to join their siblings or other immediate relatives. My access to these workers was facilitated through referral from the Alameda County branch of SEIU (Service Employee International Union). Four of the home care workers were employed by the families in this research. I also spent some time observing

interactions between elderly clients and home care workers. All interviews were audiotaped and each lasted from one to two hours. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, except for one that was conducted in Cantonese with the assistance of a translator. The interviews were translated into English by me as quoted in the article. To protect the privacy of informants, all names used in this article are pseudonyms, and some details that may reveal their identities are slightly modified.

Transplanting Families on Foreign Soil

According to Emily Abel (1991), the process of caregiving demands that adult children and aging parents redefine their roles vis-à-vis the other party—frail parents ask for help but feel ambivalent about receiving it, because adult children as care providers are required to exert some authority over their parents. Power dynamics between immigrant adult children and their aging parents are subject to change, not only because of the shift of their roles in the process of caregiving, but also due to the experiences of immigration in a new country. As Jessica Chao, a 60-year-old Taiwanese, described: “The minute you arrive here [in the U.S.], you switch the roles...they [parents] don’t speak English; they don’t know how to drive; it’s as if they become children again.”

Relocated at postemployable ages, the immigrant elderly usually own little personal income and social resources in the new country. Compared to life in their home countries, it becomes more difficult for them to achieve self-reliance financially and socially after resettlement. Elderly immigrants, who mostly speak little English and lack driving skills, experience a significant degree of alienation after they move into their children’s suburban houses in the United States. They are no longer the figures of parental authority but become dependent on their children, or sometimes grandchildren, to assist in all sorts of daily affairs.

The material base of parental authority—the distribution of family properties among

children—has diminished in the context of immigration. The major economic resources in most middle-class immigrant families come from the income of adult children. In addition, social punishment entailed in the breaching of the family moral contract, such as receiving bad reputations among kin networks and local communities, has weakened after resettlement in a new country. Separate residence has gradually become the dominant intergenerational residential pattern among middle-class Chinese immigrant families in the United States.²

In only two (out of eight) households in this research did aging parents and adult children share the same residence. One of them is John Chen, a 55-year-old business owner from Taiwan residing with his father, suffering from cancer, and mother. When I asked him if he ever thought of alternative residential arrangements, he lowered his voice even though his parents lived in the other annexed building. He said: “We dare not think about it.... People might say you’re not filial, right? Why taint yourself with that stigma? But, on the other hand, the filial norm is rooted in Taiwan. When people are in the U.S., who cares? Your neighbors here don’t know you. Who minds what you did?”

Although following the traditional custom, John keenly recognized the decline of social control conveyed by the norm of filial piety in the United States. The patrilocal principle of residential arrangement is undermined by immigration and resettlement. Many immigrant seniors live with their daughters instead of their sons. When I asked John Chen and his wife, Erin Chang, to comment on this transformation, they offered the following explanation:

EC: Many parents live with their daughters. It’s easier to get along with daughters.

JC: Is that right? I think it’s the impact of American culture. If you live with your son, you have to make appointments with your daughter-in-law—Can I go to your house? Which day is okay with you? But when you go to your daughter’s, even if they’re not home, they would just leave you a key to open the door.

EC: That's right. The daughter would say, mom, just come. No appointment necessary.

PCL: Is this situation different in Taiwan?

JC: In Taiwan? When you say you want to see your grandchildren? Who dares say you can't?

EC: In Taiwan, most children's houses were bought by their parents. Parents have more power. But after they come to the U.S., it's different. Everything is children's. So parents would feel more afraid [of asking].

This conversation manifests a transformation of Chinese immigrant families toward the European American model of the modern nuclear family. Dizard and Gadline (1990: 11) compare traditional and modern types of families: "Traditional households, even when they were commonly home only to nuclear family, were expected to be permeable: kin were accommodated. By contrast, the modern nuclear family is distinctly more autonomous, set apart from kin and the network they formed." A modern sense of family boundary, circumscribed around nuclear households, guards the privacy of adult children from intervention by the extended kin and, meanwhile, empowers a daughter-in-law vis-à-vis her parents-in-law in "her" domestic terrain. Erin's last comment also points out that the senior authority has further declined because parents are no longer the primary provider and distributor of financial resources in the family.

Although many immigrant parents still contribute money or labor to their adult children, such as placing generous down payments for children's housing loans and offering free day care for grandchildren, they no longer expect future cohabitation and repayment for these investments. For example, Erin, who currently resides with her mother-in-law, mentioned a conversation she had with her 20-something son:

I told my son, 'After you get married, we will buy a bigger house, with a yard, a

swimming pool, so your kids can play.’ And he said, “What? I still have to live together with you after getting married?” I said, ‘Oh, you don’t want to? I can help you with childcare!’ He said, ‘No thanks, taking care of yourself is good enough.’

Immigrant seniors, like other elderly people, need care not only for their physical frailty and emotional loneliness, but also to achieve independence and autonomy. The latter goals may become more difficult for them to achieve because of the increase of linguistic and cultural barriers and the decline of parental authority in a foreign country. However, the U.S. government also provides new institutional resources that have helped some immigrant elders to empower themselves on foreign soil.

The American Filial Son

Immigrant adult children during interviews often refer to American norms to justify their residential separation and financial independence from their parents. Kevin Li, a 63-year-old retired manager, offered comments on this subject: “You know American laws are like this: Children grow up and leave their parents, so they are not obligated to take care of their parents. But our civil law [in Taiwan] is different. In Taiwan, if you don’t support your parents, you are guilty of abandoning them. This is a crime. The government can force you to take care of your parents! But it’s different in the States.”

Taiwan’s family law symbolically announces that children should respect parents filially and specifies children’s legal obligation to support their needy parents and cohabitating parents-in-law.³ Attached to the potential criminal charge of abandonment, the law honors and enforces the moral contract between parents and children in Chinese families. Delegating elder care to the private sphere, Taiwan’s government did not introduce any social security or welfare programs for senior citizens until the mid-1990s.⁴ The web of social security is even thinner in Hong Kong, where a compulsory retirement pension scheme is still absent and only

10 percent of elders are receiving a meager amount of public assistance (Chow 1993).

In contrast, the social contract in European and American societies is characterized by an idealized reciprocity between citizens and the state: Citizens contribute taxes to the state during their competent adulthood, and the state is obligated to care for them if they become disable or frail. In the United States, Medicare, a universal entitlement, is the most important federal health insurance program for people over age 65. Because the majority of elderly immigrants own few assets and earn little income in the United States, given the middle-class status of their children, they are eligible for low-income elderly benefits, including Medicaid (or Medi-Cal in California), cash grants of SSI (Supplemental Security Income), rental assistance,⁵ food stamps, and in-home care service.

My informants, both adult children and aging parents, called the U.S. government the “American filial son” who sends them monthly allowances on time without bargaining or complaints. Many immigrant seniors also prefer living in senior apartments under public subsidy to living with their adult children in a suburb, because the former provides them with convenient accesses to public transportation and peer support of elderly neighbors. A widowed elderly woman explained why she decided to move into a senior building: “My friends told me to come here. Living here is the same as living with my children. They work all day long. I was still home by myself anyway.”

The state of California also provides the elderly with in-home care services through the program of In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS). This program currently employs over 200,000 independent providers, mostly immigrant and minority women, who offer nonprofessional, custodial care in the homes of low-income elderly and disabled individuals (SEIU 1999). For home care workers in the IHSS program, the California government is the “employer” who pays for their services, and care recipients are “clients” or “consumers” who hold the decision to subsume or terminate contracts. This framework of employment has

facilitated the unionization of home care workers and campaigns for wage increases and health insurance in alliance with client groups (both disabled and senior organizations). Third-party payment also assists alliances between individual care workers and their elderly clients. Some home care workers reported to me that government-funded care recipients tend to be more benevolent and flexible on working hours and sick leaves than clients who purchase services out of their own pockets.

IHSS not only subsidizes care services provided by non-family workers, but also compensates previously unpaid caring labor offered by family members. Family caregivers may become waged employees of IHSS. Adult children who accommodate their low-income parents can also apply for food and housing subsidy. By placing monetary value on caring labor between family members, this policy frames care as a public interest rather than a private matter. This idea contrasts with the privatized notion of elder care in the Chinese cultural context. As John Chen, who resided with his parents and was one of the primary caregivers for his ill father, commented: “I never heard that the government would pay you for taking care of your own parents. In Taiwan, taking care of your own family is your own business.” Other informants criticized these measure as “ridiculous” or “not right” because they consider care for parents a family obligation and moral duty, rather than a paid job.

Cash subvention from welfare states to family caregivers holds the progressive component of treating care as a social responsibility and recognizing the value of unpaid labor often performed by female kin. Public funds may also reinforce family bonds by enhancing the incentive of family members to take care of their parents. However, it can also create controversial consequences upon family relations, such as the marketization of intimacy and commodification of care (Ungerson 2000). Additionally, most elderly benefits in the United States, except for Medicare, are means-tested programs rather than universal entitlements. An elderly beneficiary needs to demonstrate low-income status to meet the

eligibility.⁶ Some immigrant parents thus transfer their savings or properties to adult children. Family tragedies may happen when adult children consume or relocate parents' money without acknowledgment, leaving the immigrant elderly in real poverty and dependent on welfare.

Different Patterns of Subcontracting Elder care

In this section, I will introduce four ethnic Chinese immigrant families that hold different opinions toward receiving public benefits for the elderly; they also illustrate four different arrangements for subcontracting elder care. First, upper-middle-class families employ care workers at private costs because they consider the reception of public funds to be socially stigmatizing or morally inappropriate. Second, lower-middle-class families rely on IHSS home care service and other means-tested public elderly benefits to solve their deficiency of money, time, and care. Third, some families combine IHSS funds and private money to employ home care workers so they can enjoy service with better quality and longer hours than if they used public care alone. Finally, in order to receive government subsidies, some families marketize the intergenerational relationships, for example, adult children charge parents rent to receive a housing subsidy or apply for public funds to compensate for their care of parents.

“It’s Very Easy for Us Children. We Only Have to Pay.”

Paul Wang came to the United States to pursue a master’s degree in the mid-1960s and, after graduation, started working in Silicon Valley. He later established his own software company, with the assistance of his wife. Three of his siblings followed a similar immigration path and are now all employed as professionals in California. In the early 1980s, they proudly moved their parents from Taiwan to enjoy the pleasant climate in California as well as to

witness the success of their children. The parents lived with Paul, the eldest son, in an affluent South Bay suburb. Paul explained why they chose to reproduce the traditional pattern of three-generational cohabitation in the United States: “Living together is a must-be in our culture. I like that way, too. To place parents in a strange place, and in a strange culture like the U.S., it’s a crime in my perspective.”

Paul’s mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease a few years ago. Paul firmly objected when one of his siblings suggested that their mother should be placed in a nursing home, and he insisted on hiring full-time home care workers at whatever costs. Since then, they have been hiring home care workers for three shifts to accompany his mother day and night. Because the mother doesn’t speak much Mandarin, to ensure the quality of emotional care, they seek Taiwanese home care workers instead of those from mainland China who charge a lower rate. The employment costs about \$4500 a month, which is shared by the four siblings residing in the United States.

When I asked Paul if his mother is eligible for SSI or IHSS home care service, he answered: “I know many people do that. I didn’t. I can afford without doing that. It looks kind of bad to receive checks from Social Security.” Paul considers receiving elderly benefits as a social stigma and holds doubts about the quality of free public care. Because the employment cost is divided among four siblings who are all professionals, hiring live-in home care workers out of their pockets does not pose a serious financial burden but rather becomes a status marker that underscores their filial concern for his mother. In Paul’s own words: “I dare say that I am a filial son. How many people can do something like we do? There is always someone to be her [Paul’s mother’s] company. And it’s very easy for us children. We only need to pay.”

Although praising himself as a filial son, Paul admitted to me that the difficulty involved in personal care is another reason why he decided to outsource care for his mother: “Honesty,

taking care of the elderly, like helping them with a bowel movement...that is really hard and dirty. Once I had no choice and I had to help my mom do it. I had to close my eyes during the whole time.” Paul defines his duty instead as a supervisor who makes frequent visits to check on the workers and ensures that his mother is in good hands. Joan Tronto (1993) argues that the practice of care consists of four phases: caring about (recognizing the necessity of care), taking care of (assuming some responsibility for the identified need and determining how to respond to it), care-giving (the direct meeting of needs for care), and care-receiving (the object of care responds to the care it receives). She insightfully remarks, “Caring about, and taking care of, are the duties of the powerful. Care-giving and care-receiving are left to the less powerful” (p.114). In this case, Paul Wang considers his filial responsibility as “taking care of” his mother, a duty achieved by his generous financial contribution in paying caregivers and his efforts to supervise the care quality. In contrast, the daily chores of “care-giving,” especially the emotionally stressful hand-on care tasks (Isaksen 2000), are transferred to home care workers who are usually low-income immigrant women.

Lily Yu, a 40-year-old single Taiwanese immigrant, has been caring for Paul’s mother for over three years. The memory of the mother has been significantly deteriorating, and she sometimes thinks that she is in Taiwan rather than in the U.S. Lily helps her with almost everything, including cooking, house-cleaning, bathing, dressing, and, most important, emotional attendance. Lily explained to me the principle of her caregiving:

One of my major jobs is to listen to her. She’s losing it day by day. She sometimes called me the name of her daughter. The other worker would correct her and told her to do this and that, and she would be mad. I don’t. I see her as my mother. So I know what I shouldn’t say to my mom and what made my mom mad. I don’t correct her; I just follow her thoughts and finish what she said. I just told her what happened on TV, to distract her, so she won’t keep asking why her children are not coming to see her.

Not only that the adult children of care recipients project the image of filial agent onto the care workers, but the workers themselves also accept the obligation of performing the role of surrogate children. Lily uses care for her mother as an analogy to describe the ideal care she provides for her client; she also avoids correcting Mrs. Yang when the latter accidentally calls Lily by the name of her daughter. Lily implicitly accepts the job requirement of being a substitute for the often absent adult children, so the mother “won’t keep asking why her children are not coming to see her.” Although the mother may mix up the names of her biological children and surrogate children (home workers), Lily also told me that Mrs. Yang often insists that her daughter, when coming to visit, should bathe her, a task usually performed by the care workers. Without explicitly stating it, the mother clearly expresses her desire for a kind of filial care that involves interactions on the basis of personal intimacy instead of merely monetary contributions from her children.

“My Life was like Standing on a Fire Wheel.”

Carol Yang and her husband were born in Canton in the 1960s, fled to Hong Kong during the Cultural Revolution, and immigrated to the United States in the early 1980s. Both high school graduates, they work full-time as laboratory testers and struggle to make ends meet—particularly to pay the mortgage on their house in a lower-middle-class suburb near Oakland. Financial tightness is not the only challenge in their lives; they also face a serious time bind. In addition to running between jobs and taking care of her three children, Carol has to make frequent visits to her mother and mother-in-law, who both live alone in Oakland.

Soon after Carol acquired U.S. citizenship, her mother, Mrs. Yang, came to the United States and lived with Carol, helping raise the grandchildren. Carol’s brother, who has a green card but resides mostly in Hong Kong for business purposes, later purchased a house across the street from Carol’s. Mrs. Yang decided to live in this house by herself because she did not

get along well with Carol's husband. Yet, Carol thinks that her mother holds a traditional perspective on the patrilineal family and prefers to live in her son's house, albeit an empty one.

Before hiring a care worker for her mother, Carol went over to her mother's house to cook every morning before work, so Mrs. Yang could microwave her meals during the day. After work, Carol went over again to clean up and help her mother take a bath. She described her hectic schedule in the past: "My life was like standing on a fire wheel!" Six years ago, Mrs. Yang fell down at home and became dependent on a wheelchair. Carol considered sending her to a nursing home, but the mother strongly objected. In extreme despair, Carol found out about the IHSS program. The social worker visited to make an evaluation of eligibility based on Mrs. Yang financial need and health condition. The government then granted her 120 hours of home care service per month. The public funds allow Mrs. Yang to hire a home care worker who provides service five days a week, five hours a day.

Mei-Lan Wu is a 56-year-old junior college graduate and a former supervisor in a local government in Canton. She has been caring for seniors or children of immigrant families since she moved to the United States in 1993. When I met her, she had cared for Mrs. Yang for over two years. The first time I accompanied Mei-Lan to work, I could see from far away that Mrs. Yang was sitting by a window eagerly waiting for her arrival. Because Mrs. Yang speaks only Cantonese, I relied on Mei-Lan to translate her words into Mandarin. During the interview, Mrs. Yang reminded Mei-Lan a few times not to tell me something. As I asked Mei-Lan what she did not want to tell me, Mei-Lan said, "She said [she has] only me. She doesn't want to talk about the others [the children], not in front of you."

On my first visit, Mrs. Yang happily showed me the picture of her son and grandchildren in Hong Kong. Her favorite gift from them is a cushion embroidered with the words, "My grandma is the best." She never talked about her eldest son, who lived nearby. Later Mei-Lan

told me that Mrs. Yang studied English at the age of 74 to acquire U.S. citizenship so that she could sponsor her oldest son to come to the United States. She also avoided receiving any elderly benefits at that time because she was afraid that welfare status would defer the processing of her son's documents. The son finally immigrated in the United States, but rarely visited her after that.

Mei-Lan spent more time with Mrs. Yang than any of Mrs. Yang's adult children did. From Monday to Saturday, she arrived by noon and prepared lunch; Mrs. Yang had to finish dinner so Mei-Lan could clean up before she left at 5 p.m. The late lunch and early dinner schedule was due to the time constraint of the IHSS subsidy, which, in this case, paid for five hours of care work per day. Debra Stone, who interviewed home care workers in New England, found that "not having enough time to do what you think the client needs is a source of stress and guilt for caregivers" (2000: 104). Mei-Lan and several other home care workers, who often confused a sociologist with a social worker, urged me to request more hours of care service for their clients. They did so less for the purpose of increasing their working hours than for the benefits of their clients.

Although restrained by bureaucratic schedules, Mei-Lan developed a personal relationship with Mrs. Yang and provided customized care, such as learning her preferences in food, always preparing chewable and warm dishes, and bringing her favorite pastries from Chinatown from time to time. The most considerate services provided by Mei-Lan included putting red lipstick and nail polish on Mrs. Yang and purchasing colorful undergarments for her, both acts supposed to bring good fortune for the ill and elderly according to the Chinese custom. Wellin and Jaffe (2001) develop the notion of "personal care" to describe that care for patients of Alzheimer's disease requires maintaining the biological and social identity of the care recipients. Mei-Lan's care for Mrs. Yang further demonstrates that personal care for immigrant elders involves maintaining the *cultural* identity of care recipients, which is

facilitated by the common language and cultural knowledge shared between home care workers and elder clients.⁷

After Mei-Lan acquired U.S. citizenship, she decided to take a long vacation to visit her son in Canton. After Mei-Lan quit, Mrs. Yang called her almost every day and cried on the phone, complaining about the replacement worker. When Mei-Lan went back to visit Mrs. Yang, the new worker questioned her: “How could you work for her “*mong-cha-cha*” [Cantonese, literally translated as “blurry sight,” meaning being muddleheaded due to the lack of information]?” The new worker referred to the situations such as Mei-Lan staying late without overtime pay or Mei-Lan performing duties not specified in the contract, like offering massages. The new worker made no unreasonable demands but followed the contract rules negotiated by the union. Mrs. Yang cried and said to Mei-Lan, “The union is helping her [the new worker] exploit me!”

Mrs. Yang’s daughter, Cathy, said to me, “My mother likes Mei-Lan, exactly because she’s ‘*mong-cha-cha*!’” Mei-Lan has been “adopted” by both Mrs. Yang and Cathy as their “fictive kin” whose role is beyond an employee. Tracy Karner (1998: 70) says of “fictive kin”: “Those who provide care like family and do what family does are given the labor of kin with its attendant affection, rights, and obligations.” A fictive kin member provides not only the service of “caregiving,” but also emotional attachment as “caring for,” with Tronto’s categorization. As a fictive kinship relationship emerges within the realm of employment, home care workers face tensions over reconciling a family-like relationship, characterized by love, patience, and specialness, with an employment relationship that features rational calculation of rights, bureaucratic schedule, and fairness (Stone 2000).

A fictive kinship relationship is a two-edged sword for home care workers. On the one hand, home care workers retrieve meaning for this undervalued job through building emotional bonds with care recipients. As Mei-Lan said, “I felt so ashamed when I walked my

first client in the wheelchair on the street. But I told myself this job is about love. I take good care of Mrs. Yang, so Carol doesn't have to worry at work." On the other hand, the kinship analogy may disadvantage workers by obscuring their rights in employment relationships. Care recipients may manipulate workers' emotional attachment to extract additional unpaid labor, such as asking the caregiver to work overtime or stay overnight without compensation, the situations commonly mentioned during my interviews with home care workers.

"My Father Cried and Said We don't Want Him Anymore."

Shirley Huang and all of her extended family relocated across the Pacific Ocean during the 1980s. Their immigration was sponsored by her eldest brother, who had been working in California as a doctor since the early 1970s. Shirley hesitated about moving overseas because her husband was a senior corporate manager in Taiwan. Shirley and her husband finally decided to live apart so their children could benefit from American education. In 1987, Shirley, who was then 43 years old, spoke broken English and barely knew how to drive, brought her two children, then 9 and 12 years old, to start a new life in San Jose. Shirley helped her sister with the motel business on a part-time basis, and her husband did not emigrate until 10 years later.

Shirley's parents immigrated in 1984 to reunite with their adult children and also to help care for their grandchildren. They lived with Shirley's sister, a motel manager who had little time to attend to her young children. Shirley's parents stayed on as unpaid care providers until their grandchildren went to high school. They then moved into a senior apartment. Because most of their savings and properties remained in Taiwan, they were eligible for SSI and a housing subsidy. With the financial resources secured by "the American filial son," they were able to maintain a decent living without much financial and social dependence on their children.

Nevertheless, the self-sufficiency of Shirley's father was shattered after he suffered a massive stroke and became partially paralyzed. He became a patient in need of intensive care and daily assistance, and his wife was too frail to be the primary caregiver. Shirley and her three siblings decided that their parents would be better off living with the family—taking turns living in each child's house on a monthly basis. As all the adult children held waged jobs, they needed to hire someone to attend the father during the week. The hours of IHSS service Shirley's father was entitled to were far less than those they needed for a live-in caregiver working five days a week. Shirley and her siblings chipped in to cover the extra employment costs, so they could supply the father with care of better quality and longer hours. In fact, on the IHSS document, the name of the employed caregiver was Shirley Huang instead of the name of the actual workers (Shirley was working part-time in her sister's motel at that time). This kind of arrangement is common because many home care workers are aliens without a legal working status in the United States.

With the employment of live-in care workers, Shirley's parents were able to reside with their dual-earner adult children. However, immigrant home care workers themselves often experience family separation when they care for others' families. A Chinese woman caring for Shirley's father was on a temporary visa visiting her daughter who was studying in the United States. Once, she requested a leave from her home care job because her husband, who remained in China, came to visit for a week. Shirley's family could not find a temporary replacement, and they finally decided that the care worker should take the father with her while she stayed in her daughter's house that week. This experience deeply hurt the feelings of Shirley's father. Shirley described what happened then: "My father cried and said we don't want him anymore. I said, 'Dad, we don't have a choice. She has to get together with her family, and we need to have someone to watch you.' I felt bad but he had to go there anyway."

Unlike Paul Wang, who could afford to hire costly Taiwanese care workers, Shirley's family sought recent immigrants from mainland China who charge a lower rate. Shirley, however, believed that Chinese workers lack the work ethic demanded in a capitalist society: "They were under the Communist rule for a long time. They work in slapdash manner because they got paid for whatever." When I asked Lily, the Taiwanese home care worker, if she experienced any difficulty in finding jobs, given competition from low-cost Chinese immigrants, she expressed total confidence based on her familiarity with Confucian moral education: "No-no, because we were educated in different ways. We [Taiwanese] learn Confucianism. We know how to respect the elderly. We have better ethics and manners. Mainlanders—they have got rid of all these during the Cultural Revolution, right?"

Chinese home care workers, on the contrary, explained their conflicts with Taiwanese clients in terms of class inequality that parallels the economic disparity between countries of origin. Two Chinese home care workers told me, "There are three kinds of Chinese: Taiwanese are the most wealthy, people from Hong Kong are the next, mainlanders are the poorest." "We are most afraid of Taiwanese clients. They're harsh and demanding. They treat you like servants."

Scholars who study the employment of childcare workers have found that most parents are willing to pay a higher salary to caregivers of similar ethnic backgrounds, whom they consider more trustworthy (Uttal 1997; Wrigley 1995). A similar rationale can be used to explain why Taiwanese employers prefer Taiwanese home care workers to Chinese workers. They consider workers of similar cultural, social, and educational backgrounds to be more reliable filial agents and more qualified to become fictive kin. When hiring a Taiwanese worker, Taiwanese employers place cultural connection over class difference; in contrast, class hierarchy is underscored in their employment relationships with Chinese workers, where distrust often emerges along cultural and social distances.

“I Charge Them Only Half the Market Price.”

Julia Lin is a 48-year-old software engineer in San Jose. She and her husband both came to the United States for graduate education and started their careers in the fast-growing high-tech industry. The couple spends long hours at work and frequently stay in the office during evenings and weekends. Julia’s parents, relocated from Taiwan to San Jose in the mid-1980s, assisted them with childcare, cooking, and other household chores. After the grandchildren went to high school, Julia’s parents moved to another house owned by Julia and her husband that had previously been rented to others. Julia’s 75-year-old father, Mr. Lin, explained to me why they moved out from their daughter’s: “There’s more freedom [living apart]. Everybody can keep his or her own territory. They [the daughter and son-in-law] are rearing their children. They have their own parenting style. We would become dislikable if we intervene. But we would intervene more or less if we lived there, right?”

In fact, Mr. and Mrs. Lin “rent” the house from their daughter. I was really surprised when Julia first told me of this practice, which seems to significantly violate the filial norm. I carefully phrased my question: “They pay rent to you? Your parents are quite courteous, aren’t they?” Julia answered me in a taken-for-granted tone: “I have to pay mortgage, too. Plus, I charge them only half the market price.” The rent Julia charged her parents, \$500 per month for a moderate-sized house in San Jose, is indeed far below the market value. While I was wondering whether Julia had become so assimilated to the individualist culture in the United States that she felt at ease marketizing relationships with her parents, Julia added more comments that helped solve my puzzle: “You probably know that if they [the parents] live in their own house, there is no government subsidy. If they rent one, the government will give them some money, not much but enough to cover [the rent].”

Julia’s case is not a rare one; quite a number of Chinese immigrant adult children

charge rent to parents who stay in their houses. In addition to facilitating a rental subsidy from the government, paying rent becomes a means for the elderly to transfer income to their children so the parents can still maintain the eligibility for low-income benefits. “Many people make money out of the parents in the United States!” was said by an informant to mock other immigrants who manipulate the U.S. welfare system to maximize family incomes. Although the practice of charging rent seems to indicate the marketization of parents-children relationships, it actually reveals strong family bonds without which the trading of economic resources among kin would be impossible.

However, to avoid the social stigma attached to the receipt of public funds and services, the elderly immigrants have to legitimize these benefits as an “entitlement” rather than “welfare.” They also compare themselves with immigrants of other ethnicities to emphasize their lesser dependence on welfare. For example, Mr. Lin underscored the difference between receiving SSI and receiving food stamps, a distinction related to class hierarchies between Taiwanese and Vietnamese immigrants: “In the past, we Taiwanese didn’t get this [welfare]. My daughter also told me not to. [PCL: Why not?] They think this is charity, but no, it’s actually entitlement. We only get housing subsidy. Some Vietnamese, they take food stamps, too, \$125 for a month. But Taiwanese don’t like it. It’s okay if you go to Vietnamese stores, but they’re very unpopular in American supermarkets. People look down at you [when you use food stamps].”

At a later point of my interview with Mr. Lin, he revealed another reason why they moved out of their daughter’s house and “rent” one from her: “We decided that we better move out. Otherwise our in-laws may think we are taking over their space. Because we are the daughter’s family—they are the Changs and we are the Lins—it’s different. And we pay rent, so nobody can say bad things about us. To others we still say our daughter offers us the house to live, so we can save faces for both sides. But my daughter can justify this to her

parents-in-law, since we actually pay them rent—Although, I don't know if they're really going to move here or not.”

Mr. and Mrs. Lin moved out to avoid the possible criticism that they are taking over the slot of their in-laws, since Chinese parents are supposed to reside with and be cared for by the son's family. In addition, they use paying rent as a symbolic act to mark the “appropriate” order of the patriarchal family tree (“They are the Changs and we are the Lins”). However, they also downplay the fact of paying rent in order to save face for their daughter in front of others because a filial daughter should still offer unpaid care for her parents out of filial obligation.

To subcontract filial care via public funds involves multidirectional flows of money among parents, children, and the government. This case also reveals the complex social and symbolic significance of money, which Vivian Zelizer (1989) calls “special monies.” Public cash grants for the elderly can be interpreted as “entitlement” associated with dignity and respect for seniors or “welfare” with the stigma of dependency and incompetence. The act of paying rent in this case is not a simple economic transaction, but a family conspiracy of trading financial resources among kin to extract public funds, as well as a symbolic performance that honors the patrilineal kinship scheme.

Remaking Families via Commodification of Care

The commodification of elder care may indicate the weakening of intergenerational ties, but it may also facilitate the maintenance or reinforcement of family bonds. In this section, I analyze the commercial transfer of elder care from three dimensions—*where care takes place*, *who gives care*, and *who pays for care*—and examine the impact of subcontracting filial care on the formation of Chinese family relations and boundaries.

The Chinese term *chia*, which has been said to constitute the basic unit of ethnic Chinese

society, actually has multiple meanings. It may refer to “family,” whose members are related by blood, marriage, or adoption; it may refer to “home” or “household,” which is defined as all persons occupying a residential unit. The third definition of *chia* identifies the economic ties that bind members as a property-holding unit (Cohen 1978). These three levels usually overlap in the traditional patterns of stem family (vertical extended household) and joint family (horizontal extended household, including additional relatives), but they do not necessarily converge in contemporary modes of family and household. Drawing on the tripartite definition of family—*kinship organization, residential cohabitation, and economic ties*—I examine the reconstitution of Chinese family face with the impact of subcontracting elder care.

The first dimension—*where care takes place*—is associated with the physical residence of frail parents. *Tong-zhuo-kong-shi* (living together and eating together) is traditionally considered the substance of Chinese family life. Given the decline of three-generational cohabitation, contemporary Chinese families still attempt to maintain residential proximity, such as living in different flats of the same building, to facilitate frequent visits and dinner sharing. Since placing parents in a nursing home is a care arrangement considered to be a violation of filial norm, employed adult children, like Shirley Huang and Paul Wang, manage to maintain residential cohabitation with their ill parents by hiring non-family workers who provide full-time care.

In addition, the physical residence of aging parents symbolizes the social order of a Chinese kinship organization. Although the responsibility of serving parents is no longer enforced along gender lines due to the empowerment of employed daughters-in-law, the patrilocal principle still has normative impact on care arrangements. For example, Paul Wang invited his father-in-law, who was living alone in a senior apartment in L.A. near Paul’s brother-in-law, to move in with Paul and his wife. This suggestion infuriated the

brother-in-law, who considered it an insult that implied his failure in the social role of a filial son. Following a similar cultural logic, Mr. Lin pay rent to stay in the house of his daughter, Julia, using money to symbolize their “appropriate” place in the patrilineal family tree.

The second dimension—*who gives care*—indicates shifting interdependence among family members. As exemplified by three of the previous cases, many elderly immigrants came to the United States to care for their grandchildren whose parents were struggling with careers in a foreign country without sufficient kin support. The pattern of residential cohabitation often breaks down when intensive care is no longer needed for teenaged grandchildren. Intergenerational cohabitation usually resumes when aging parents become frail or ill, shifting their role from care provider to care recipient. The employment of home care workers becomes a necessary means for dual-earner families to maintain kin ties and co-residence. Adult children usually make collective decisions about employment matters, and they share financial responsibility for the costs of home care. These care practices reinforce economic ties among immigrant family members.

The employment of home care workers also reconstitutes the boundary of family. As Tracy Karner (1998) has nicely phrased it, through adopting the home care worker into the family as “fictive kin,” “the family-type tasks provided by the stranger-caretaker can be reconstructed as *appropriate* and the realm of privacy and intimacy can be maintained” (p.72, original emphasis). Kinship analogies enable Chinese adult children to maintain a cultural sense of filial care and allow elderly recipients to place on care workers kin expectations beyond the assigned duties in a contract relationship. Home care workers also understand the cultural significance of the kinship metaphor and accept the job obligation of being the surrogate children of care recipients. Family-like attachments are especially significant in situations where elderly clients live alone and when elderly clients and care workers share similar class background and cultural knowledge.

The third dimension—*who pays for care*—goes to the core issue of the commodification of care. Vivian Zelizer (1989) argues that money is not only a medium of exchange and measure of utility, but also a symbol of social value. The subcontracting of filial care reveals a complex interchange between money and love: Can money buy love and become an indicator for children’s concern for parents? When different kinds of money are involved in the purchase of care services—parents’ savings, children’s contributions, and government subsidies, how do these different “monies” symbolize the meanings of care and relate to the formation of parents-children relationships?

Given the reality that most adult children, including daughters-in-law, are gainfully employed, offering full-time elder care by family members is rarely a practical option. For upper-middle-class immigrants, spending money to purchase intensive and quality care provided by trustworthy non-family workers is perceived as an act of filial piety associated with the logic that “*the more you pay, the more you care.*” In contrast, receiving public funds generally incurs social stigma, and the quality of free public care is considered to be inferior. Some adult children refuse to receive public funds and services because this care arrangement may indicate a lack of concern for their parents, in other words, “*the more [public funds] you receive, the less you care.*”

The interchange between money and love involves a different equation for immigrant families who receive public care and elderly benefits. As most benefits for the elderly in the United States are means-tested programs (with the exception of Medicare), the eligibility is limited to the financially needy—which refers to elder parents without financial support and filial repayment from their children in the Chinese cultural context. In addition, the U.S. government subsidizes resources and services provided by family members to elderly recipients, such as room and board, food, and home care. In contrast, care for aging Chinese parents should be the children’s moral (read: unpaid) duty to compensate parents for giving

birth to and rearing them. The meeting of Chinese cultural norms and American institutional contexts creates an ironic logic, that is, “*the less children care, the more [public funds] parents receive.*”

However, we cannot take the marketization of intergenerational relationships at face value. Although the preconditions for receiving public funds may indicate a lack of care from adult children according to Chinese filial norms, in reality, these immigrant families circulate financial resources among kin to make their parents eligible for low-income benefits on paper. This becomes, in effect, a family conspiracy developed to extract public funds based on an individualistic assumption that parents and adult children are financially independent in the United States. As a result, the commodification of care does not weaken family bonds but actually reinforces kin connections as economic ties.

Conclusion

Joan Nagel (1994) uses the metaphor of “shopping cart” to describe the volitional and situational nature of ethnic culture: “Culture is not a shopping cart that comes to us already loaded with a set of historical cultural goods. Rather, we construct culture by picking and choosing items from the shelves of the past and the present” (p.162). The cultural norms of filial piety and parental authority, which have traditionally governed intergenerational relationships in ethnic Chinese societies, are modified and transformed after immigrant families resettle in the United States. Four major contextual factors enable Chinese immigrant families to breach traditional norms in the new country. First, empowered daughters-in-law become major financial distributors in dual-earner households. Second, the challenge to parental authority no longer imposes serious financial and social punishment upon adult children. Third, the European American model of the modern family encourages nuclear households and autonomy among extended kin. Finally, the majority of elderly immigrants

are eligible to receive senior benefits and public care offered by the U.S. government.

Under these circumstances, the commodification of care, through either private or public funds, has become a major mechanism for immigrant Chinese families to arrange elder care. The subcontracting of filial care indeed impacts on family relations; however, the filial norms and the ideals of the family do not disappear but remain elastic, taking on different social configurations. Through recruiting home care workers as fictive kin, immigrant adult children are able to maintain the cultural ideal of filial care, in spite of their absence from actual caregiving. Care arrangements for the Chinese elderly, especially related to the decisions of where care takes place and who pays for it, still hold significant symbolic meanings in the reproduction of patrilineal kinship. Although three-generational cohabitation may have declined on foreign soil, the family remains the nexus of economic ties and care networks among Chinese immigrants in the United States.

Notes

¹ Kritz et al. (2000) analyzed the U.S. census data and found that elderly immigrants from Asia and Latin America, compared to natives and other immigrants, are more likely to be living with children and less likely to be living alone or with spouses only. However, it is unclear whether this variation reflects cultural differences or disparities in economic resources (Abel 1990). To disentangle this analytic conflation, my research focuses on middle-class Chinese immigrants.

² I conducted a structured survey among 52 Taiwanese immigrant elders randomly selected from attendants in a lunar new-year gathering hosted by a local immigrant association. While living in Taiwan, 54 percent of the parents resided with sons and 23 percent lived on their own. After they moved to California, only 12 percent resided with sons and 67 percent lived by themselves.

³ According to the civil and criminal law in Taiwan (Republic of China), one is obligated to support his or her parents or cohabitating parents-in-law who cannot maintain a living on their own. Those who violate these obligations may commit the crime of “abandonment” and can be sentenced to as long as ten years.

⁴ A universal program of health insurance was implemented in Taiwan in 1996. Some counties offer a small amount of cash for the elderly on a means-tested or universal basis.

⁵ Through the program of Section Eight Housing Choice Voucher, the California state government offers rental assistance for low-income seniors. The participant tenants need to pay only 30 percent of their monthly income for rent, and the rest is covered by public funds.

⁶ For example, to be eligible for SSI, one cannot own assets worth more than \$2000 for individuals and \$3000 for couples, and one’s income should be less than the SSI grant.

⁷ I thank Elizabeth Rudd for her insight on this matter.

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