

## THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2022

### A Critical Study of Filial Piety in Singapore

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#### ***Abstract***

Contemporary social developments in Singapore such as population aging and changes in family structures raise doubts about the fairness and sustainability of the family-centered intergenerational contract in Singapore, which is encapsulated by the traditional Chinese virtue of filial piety. Some scholars question if it is productive to employ the language of filial piety at all as we renegotiate the Singaporean intergenerational contract. However, in this essay, I argue that we should retain a critical conception of filial piety because the concept enables us to pinpoint injustices within Singaporean society and to institute appropriate reforms. This essay employs a four-step strategy to demonstrate the productivity of thinking and acting in terms of filial piety. Firstly, I will lay out some of my assumptions about nonideal theorizing about justice in the Singaporean context. Secondly, I will examine the constitutive and explanatory roles of filial piety in shaping Singaporean societal organization and intergenerational relations. I will provide an analysis of the good, bad, and ugly of filial piety within the Singaporean State and the family. I will show

that we may benefit from a more critical and expansive conception of filial piety. Thirdly, I will analyze current policies and show that they lack the orientation towards societal justice because of their restricted conceptions of filial piety. In the last section, I will propose four specific reforms that are guided by my expanded conception of filial piety. I propose that we must increase the protection of underprivileged families, destigmatize long-term care, rethink dichotomies about social and familial welfare, and reconsider coercive policies in favor of voluntary familial care. I will also show that these reforms are feasible and manageable. In all, this essay argues that we ought to retain filial piety within the Singaporean intergenerational contract due to its sustained value as a diagnostic tool and normative goal to guide social policy.

### ***Filial piety: the Singaporean intergenerational contract***

Filial piety is an ancient Chinese virtue that emphasizes duty, hierarchy, respect, and affection for one's parents. In Singapore, traditional notions of unconditional respect for one's parents are largely replaced by considerations of contractual reciprocity. Typically, Singaporeans, myself included, deem it fair and desirable to be filial children— to care for and financially support our parents in their old age because of their contribution towards our upbringing. Given its quid pro quo nature, Singaporean filial piety may be understood as an intergenerational contract of *reciprocal care within the family*.

However, the value of filial piety is in crisis today. Singaporeans are moving away from extended-family households, and some are reconsidering cohabitation with their parents. Further, Singapore faces an acute problem of population aging: by 2030, more than 900 thousand out of 4 million Singaporeans will be over 65, due to increased life expectancies, low fertility rates, and delayed or non-marriages. These developments threaten the fairness and sustainability of a family-centered intergenerational contract; some academics question if it is even productive to think in terms of *filial piety* at all as we renegotiate the contract.

Nevertheless, I argue that filial piety remains a powerful diagnostic tool and normative guide to social policy. I will show that a critical understanding of filial piety allows us to formulate a just intergenerational contract for all future Singaporeans.

### ***Nonideal justice***

I begin by stating my Rawlsian assumptions. I assume that all societies are systems of social cooperation over time. Justice ensures the equitable distribution of rewards in accordance with individual contributions and choices, regardless of one's place (or time) in society. John Rawl's nonideal theory of justice

suggest that we consider real societal contexts and not ideal utopias.<sup>7</sup> As such, my primary targets in this essay are the basic institutions of the Singaporean State and the family. These institutions profoundly shape the life circumstances and attitudes of individual Singaporeans, and thus each one of us has a legitimate moral claim upon them. We should support these institutions if they are largely just, and reform them if they are, or will become, unjust.

In the following, I explain the constitutive and explanatory roles of filial piety in shaping Singaporean societal organization and intergenerational relations. A critical analysis of filial piety will enable us to shed light on the injustices within the Singaporean State and the family.

### ***Filial piety: the good***

To begin, the ethics of filial piety are firmly rooted in the cultural consciousness of most Singaporeans today. Among most Singaporeans today there exists a strong preference and expectation to be cared for by their children in old age. The key benefit of widespread subscription to filial piety is the resulting closed loop of investment and reciprocal care within the family. The expectation of filial piety provides additional motivation for parents to invest in the upbringing of their children. Filial piety also potentially increases the productivity of each family unit, as many elderly parents are motivated to help out around the household or with the education of their grandchildren. More intangibly, filial piety encourages a general discursive climate within civil society that emphasizes compassion and respect for the elderly.

The cultural rootedness of filial piety also ensures the popularity of conservative fiscal policies that confine most elderly-related expenditures within the private sphere. For one, Singaporean healthcare is largely afforded by mandatory personal and household savings such as the "Medisave" program.

Singaporeans are generally amenable to these policies— many even voluntarily contribute towards the medical savings accounts of their parents. Overall, the state is enabled to maintain low social spending, and consequently, competitive tax rates that enhance the competitiveness of Singapore’s economy.

### ***Filial piety: the bad***

However, the obligations of filial piety are and will be unjustly distributed. Anticipated population shifts imply that the younger generation will be required to fulfil heavier filial obligations than their predecessors. Further, working-class children of the future are likely burdened with heavier filial obligations due to the penury of their parents. As recent projections of the State-mandated individual savings of working-class adults suggest, many may not even afford the basic necessities for retirement in the future. In addition, vestiges of traditional gendered conceptions of care persist and threaten to unjustly burden female caregivers.

The benefits of filial piety are also unjustly divided. Well-to-do parents are able to spend time and effort on their family and stand to benefit from a virtuous cycle of meaningful and fulfilling care. For some middle-class and the large majority of working-class families, the cycle is often vicious. Primary caregivers may become especially burdened by the increasing costs of care and the demands of their work, and may lack as much time and space to nurture meaningful and affectionate relationships with their family. Consequently, their children might face an absence of affection and love in their childhood, potentially leading to a weaker sense of the meaning of filial obligations.

### ***Filial piety: the ugly***

At its worst, filial piety reinforces prejudices and social exclusion. The Singaporean State holds a deep conviction that filial piety is an “Asian value” that is antithetical to “Western” ideas such as the welfare state. The State is unequivocal about the hierarchy of the forms of care: the family is the “first line of support,” and the community and the State are to play secondary and tertiary facilitative roles. The main corollary is that institutional (dubbed “community-centered”) care is often prejudicially viewed as an inferior option reserved for the destitute. Even if community-centered care is accessible and of high quality, many elders opt not to seek community care in fear of societal shame or admonishment by their own children. For the elderly without children, filial piety engenders a sense of exclusion from the rewards of mainstream society.

This narrow conception of filial piety also justifies coercive policies such as the 1997 Maintenance of Parents Act (MPA). The MPA stipulates that indigent parents may legally obtain maintenance from their children. Such legislation risk reinforcing harmful stereotypes. For instance, social workers are known to coach elderly parents to play the part of a “virtuous victim” instead of an “irresponsible villain” to obtain favorable court orders. Aside from the costs to human dignity, these legislations also blur the lines between the public and private spheres by imposing public shame upon private family matters.

### ***Current policies and their inadequacies***

Current social policies are divided into four areas of concern:

- Increase economic productivity of seniors
- Provide accessible housing, healthcare, and transport infrastructure
- Improve community-centered care
- Encourage research and innovation

These policies are progressive but lack an

orientation towards societal justice because of a restricted conception of filial piety. For one, while employability programs and infrastructural support may be effective in reducing the burdens of care, most of them are not targeted at vulnerable groups who bear the brunt of demographic change.<sup>23</sup> Improvements in community-centered care may ensure that the elderly without families or with uncooperative children are treated *better*, but they may still be treated *unjustly*. The policies also do not address the potential unsustainability of family-centered care.

### ***Increased protection of vulnerable families***

Let us now consider four ways that my analysis of filial piety may complement current policies. Firstly, we must appreciate that demographic changes affect different families unequally; the choice to be filial is deeply affected by an individual's experience within their family. We need to proactively identify the vulnerable families within which the virtuous cycle of care may be broken due to economic and social factors. Two broad thrusts of remedial policies may then be taken. Firstly, the State may ensure that all individual caregivers possess the time and resources to devote to their families, by emulating legislative precedencies such as the European Union Work-life balance directive. It is especially important to extend more benefits of care leaves and flexible work arrangements to blue-collared workers and gig-economy workers. Secondly, we must ensure that primary caregivers actually spend their leave with their families. Both public and private enterprises may be encouraged or incentivized to offer syndicated cleaning, cooking, and laundry services at subsidized rates to alleviate the burden of household work. Employers, local businesses, public attractions, and entertainment venues may also take the initiative to offer family care packages for those individuals on care leave.

### ***Rethink dichotomies***

Next, Singaporean society should rethink its dichotomous views of filial piety and social welfare. As main proponents of the welfare State model such as Sweden pivot towards a more pro-family approach to population aging,<sup>25</sup> Singapore may also meet them in the middle by selectively drawing from their strengths. I propose that we should normalize the view that familial and community care are complementary, and that one may alternate between both forms of care. After all, it is a matter of justice that the young should not be made to forgo their personal ambitions, nor should the old be made to forgo their predilection for familial care. My proposal allows families the flexibility to juggle both commitments. The State may effect this shift in mindset by designing, incentivizing, facilitating, and normalizing the take-up of short-term and flexible arrangements of community care. The State should also extend further incentives to female caregivers and implement safeguards against the reinforcement of gendered division of care at home. Overall, this strategy synergizes with my proposal of the introduction of work-life balance directives: if primary caregivers are given the space to find meaning in their work, the quality of both familial and community care will be greatly increased.

### ***Destigmatization of long-term community-centered care***

Relatedly, I call for both a top-down and a bottom-up destigmatization of long-term community-centered care. From the top-down, the State ought to decisively reduce bureaucratic barriers to care by empowering local providers of community care with increased autonomy and resources. On the micro-level, social workers may step up to build personal relationships with vulnerable elders and provide counselling to dispel prejudices of long-term institutional care. On the organizational level, community care providers may proactively involve the elderly in the design

and implementation of programs. Current efforts such as the “senior-voluntarism” programs are in the right direction and will benefit from deeper engagement with elderly stakeholders. Secondly, educational institutions may be called upon to effect changes in the moral regard for the institutionalized elderly. Existing community engagement practices such as the “values in action” program in schools may be supplemented by an emphasis on the reciprocity of care work. Educators may guide schoolchildren to approach the elderly as people with experience and wisdom to share, and not mere beneficiaries of social work.

### ***Sincere familial care is voluntary***

Finally, familial care should be freely chosen and not unilaterally imposed on subsequent generations. The cultural and psychological essence of filial piety lies in sincere affection and love, and not political or social coercion— in fact, external expectations directly and negatively impact the meaningfulness of caregiving duties in Singapore.<sup>29</sup> Thus, as a start, the State should retract all coercive legislations such as the MPA. In their stead, the State ought to implement incentive policies (some of which I have proposed), coupled with increased support for societal groups such as scholars, religious leaders, and artists to spearhead efforts to rethink the value and desirability of filial piety. Ideally, the State should also ensure that the individuals who opt out of

reciprocal familial care face no indirect penalties— for one, the State ought to protect childless elderly from market forces that might seriously compromise the quality and dignity of their employment and their subsistence.

One concern is that a non-compulsory conception of filial piety may lead to the “moral hazards” of social welfare. This should not be the case. We are confident in the persistence of Singaporeans’ predilections to give and receive familial care. Instead, as I have argued, the pressing problem today is the sustainability and justness of Singaporean filial piety. Thus, even without placing a price tag on societal justice, my proposals have the potential to improve the sustainability of family-centered care by targeting overall willingness to fulfil their filial duties.

### ***Conclusion: a case for filial piety in Singapore***

To end, I hope I have demonstrated that the concept of filial piety deserves its place within the Singaporean intergenerational contract. A critical analysis of filial piety allows us to shed light on crucial injustices and puts us in the position to propose specific remedial solutions. That said, filial piety is no mere analytical tool— filial piety is real for most Singaporeans because it comprises a set of practices and norms that regulate intergenerational relations, which are, and always been, open for negotiation.

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