

# Consecrating or Desecrating Filial Piety?: Korean Elder Care and the Politics of Family Support\*

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*This study examines the relationship between the characteristics of family change and the delayed social perception of older people's care in Korean society. The divergent and conflicting representations of the elderly and elder care found within family law, mass media (mainly newspapers), and academic research from the 1980s to the present were analyzed in order to understand how family support became a source of political conflict between patriarchal interests and women's interests during the period of compressed family change in Korean society. The main argument is that weakening family care for the elderly largely resulted from resistance against coerced care imposed on women by the authoritarian family relation. Nevertheless, this study also finds that the attempt to consecrate family support and to suppress the conflicts over family support persist and negatively affect elderly care.*

**Keywords:** *Care for the Elderly, Filial Piety, Family Politics, Patriarchy*

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## Introduction

People are living longer than ever nowadays, but the very high suicide rate among elderly people in Korea would seem to contravene the optimistic view of life extension as an important accomplishment of social development. Why do many older people decide to commit suicide and, in so doing, what messages are they trying to convey to society?

Frequent occasions of elderly suicides encountered on TV or in newspapers generate the image that older people tend to commit suicide when they suffer from a severe physical disability, often accompanied by financial hardship and a sense of burden to family.<sup>1</sup>

While societal effort to provide proper arrangements for the elderly in need of care has improved in response to declining family support and increasing need for elderly care, provision of social care by a specialized organization is also not likely to be satisfactory or meet the needs of the elderly people. Either families or care providers in specialized medical and care service organizations are likely to be confused as to what degree they should care for the elderly and why they should provide such care. Despite the normative perception that human life of any kind is dignified, it is extremely difficult to establish consensus around the question of what constitutes the basic principles of ethical and reliable care. In the conflicts and anomic disturbance over reliable care, physical illness is likely to be accompanied not only by physical suffering but also by severe psychological disturbance.

This study examines the social context in which tension and anomic confusion about elderly care in Korean society has come to replace the respectful regard with which elders were formerly treated. In order to understand the social context in which tension over the decline in elder care has grown, this study focuses on two important aspects of family change: continual family conflicts between generations and genders closely intersected with extended and nuclear family interests, and inertial emphasis of government and conservative discourses about family support, irrespective

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<sup>1</sup> For recent occasions of suicide of the elderly, one old couple killed themselves at the same time. Reportedly, they chose this fatal measure because they suffered from dementia and cancer and worried about being a burden on their children (*The Chosun Daily*, August 23, 2011). Lee, 77 years old, who lived alone in a remote rural area and depressed about her chronic arthritis and asthma, also committed suicide, leaving a will that stated she did not want to be a burden on her children (*The Shegye Daily*, March 10, 2011).

of the tension it causes. These combined forces had deleterious effects on the care of elderly people as well as on their self-perception.

Concerning the first issue, tension over family support can be explained as the fierce struggle between women and patriarchs over who owns the family in this era of compressed social change in Korea. What I'd like to evince in the following interpretation of public discourses, changes in family law, and changing social and economic environments is that weakening family care for the elderly largely resulted from the resistance against coerced care imposed on women by the authoritarian family relation. Family care for the elderly in Korea had long been enforced under the patriarchal family relations, which remained strong not only as the legacy of the traditional Confucian family, but it had also been newly strengthened during Korea's modernization process. Nevertheless, Korean women have fiercely resisted the patriarchal family relation over the years and have finally succeeded in obtaining higher status in their families. The authoritarian status once ascribed to elderly parents and husbands has diminished and women formerly subordinated to those authorities have tried to empower themselves as principal family makers during the period of compressed modernization. In the heated political conflicts between patriarchs and women, family care for the elderly became the most difficult matter to negotiate.

The second concern of this study is that the state and the conservative public opinion makers have made concerted efforts to consecrate filial piety and family care for the elderly. However, such conservative attempts to moralize family care have been ineffective in reconciling conflicts between patriarchal interests and women's interests and have instead aggravated family conflicts and anomic disturbance over elderly care. Furthermore, attempts to preserve older systems of family support have had detrimental effects on the development of new social perceptions of elder care and on collective efforts to frame elder care as a civil rights issue.

## The Origin of Tension over Family Support: The Covert but Fierce Politics of Family Support

### *Modern Construction of Family and Gender in Korea*

The family continues to exert important influence on the lives of Korean people. Concern for family wellbeing and parental commitment to children's educational and social success are regarded as the most important virtues in a

person's life (Cho 1985; Sim 1999). The perception that self and family are indistinguishable comprises the collective mentality of contemporary Korean people. Some scholars have argued that strong family orientation of Korean people has been regarded as the persistent cultural influence of the Confucian family (Choi 1987; Yoo, Choi, and Wang 2005). Others have argued that the family centrality derive from a much modern structural context such as poor level of public welfare systems (Chang 1997; Cho 2001). Feminist scholars, meanwhile, have addressed Korean women's lower status of not only being discriminated in the labor market but also being subordinated to the confines of the traditional patriarchal family relationship (Lee and Jee 1988; Lee 2003).

However, there is in fact ambiguity in the knowledge of diversity of Korean people's family values and the origin of such family values. One misconception generated from this ambiguity is that many elderly parents are able to receive family support. In other words, seemingly strong consciousness of family values falsely assumes solidarity of extended family relations. However, the extended family relationship has declined and care for elderly parents by the family has also weakened substantially because family has continued to be a contested terrain amid the conflict between patriarchal interests and women's interests during the compressed modernization of Korea.

The strong family orientation of Korean people today has involved many inner conflicts inherent to recent familial changes. As Chang (2009, pp. 20-1) emphasizes, modern Korean society has undergone compressed changes. By "compressed changes," Chang means not only that major principles of social organizations have rapidly been replaced with one another, but also that different and conflicting elements have been mixed and synchronized. The so-called "synchrony of the asynchronous" generated social vitality with many emerging characteristics. At the same time, compressed changes caused high tension and conflict to become constant and immanent. Family structures have also been affected by the compressed change. Family tension results from ideational and political conflicts between generations and genders, often intersecting with the differing preferences of extended and nuclear families. It is also noteworthy that the coexistence and tension between diverse family values is not only caused by the accidental or temporal coexistence between the traditional family and the modern family resulting from rapid social change, but rather, the unintended consequence of subsequent projects of making modern but inherently conflicting families, which includes both patriarchal elements and resistance against them.

*Patriarchal Construction of the Modern Family*

Confucian ideas were the primary principle reinforcing family and social orders throughout the ancient and feudal periods of East Asian societies. Confucian ideas, placing high value on benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and sincerity formed the core social precept for families, clans, and feudal reigns. Filial piety, cementing all these core Confucian ideas, prescribed obedience to parents, seniors, and anyone with high status in the social order (Lee 2005, p. 410).

It is not hard to imagine that the elderly would be respected under the influence of Confucian norms. In the ancient and feudal periods of East Asia, the elderly (老人) were referred not just because of their age but also because of their respected status. Parents and seniors in social organizations, even when they were not aged, were called “the elderly” and received respect from family and community (Xie and Wang 2002, pp. 10-1). It is the filial duty of a child, as noted in renowned Confucian scriptures, to take care of their own bodies inherited from his/her parents, to take care of elderly parents, to make parents happy, to celebrate parents’ longevity, and to glorify the family name through social success. Respect for the elderly was also demonstrated in rituals to consecrate the peaceful rule of wise emperors over different dynasties and periods.<sup>2</sup>

Korean society was strongly influenced by Confucian ideas throughout its ancient and feudal periods (Deuchler [1992] 2003; Han 1997; Choi 2002). In particular, family and social relations were firmly legitimized by Confucian ideas throughout Chosŏn Dynasty society (1392-1910). Family matters, such as ancestor worship, family assets, and inheritance, were passed down through the patriarchal lineage from father to eldest son. Children were obliged to preserve the well-being of their elderly parents. According to earlier studies, patrilineal families were consolidated among both the noble class and ordinary people in the period from seventeenth century to late nineteenth century, suggesting that the influence of the Confucian family on ordinary people’s lives was substantial (Han 1997; Choi 2002). In this regard, filial piety was the primary ethic governing pre-modern Korean society. Authority and the roles of family members were strictly stratified according

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<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding, aging was a matter of deep ambivalence even then. While Confucian ethics emphasize respect and care for elderly parents, many stories are also told that traditional families in China, Korea, and Japan abandoned old and disabled parents. Additionally, there were relatively few elderly people who enjoyed long lives because mortality was very high.

to generation and gender. Women were obliged to obey and persevere under the authority of father, husband, and son, while their status also varied based on their family origin, marital status, birthing of sons, and sons' secular success (Lee 1990, pp. 16-23).

It is noteworthy that patriarchal relations have been an essential element in the modern construction of social organizations and families. China, Korea, and Japan have all taken patriarchal family structures and practices to be an essential aspect of modern society (Gawasima 1950; Oguma 1998). In the face of fierce imperial conflicts throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, East Asian societies tried to build nations and families by firmly protecting their boundaries, disciplining their people and appealing to their loyalty in the name of family and nation. Family register was one of the key devices for identifying, differentiating, and integrating people under the governance of nation and family (Lee 2000; Park and Seo 2003; Park 2012). Every person was required to be registered in a family and to obtain nationality based on his/her family registration. The family register was simultaneously the register of nationhood and of hierarchical citizenship in the imperial reign. The sense of belonging to a family was inherently linked to the sense of nationhood. The people's love of family and nation was the corollary to the categorizing and naming of their nationhood and family. In this close interplay of family and national identity, as Choi (2002, p. 135) has argued, people's public and private behaviors were blurred, often generating behaviors of abusing public authority by referring to their private or family interests. Given the strong influence of national and family obligations, it is also noted that individual subjectivity often associated with modernization was significantly oppressed, despite the fact that modernity had been the object of longing among East Asian people (Morioka 2005, p. 41).

During the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945, the patriarchal family system remained intact and was modified by the introduction of the Japanese concept of *ie* (家), which gave patriarchs the legislative status of family head. Japan's peculiar patriarchal family system *ie* (家) was the underpinning of social order in Japan's imperial government, permeating schools, business corporations, and armed forces, and engendering a quasi-family ideology, as seen in patron-client relation, age-grading authority, and nationalism in various social organizations (Gawasima 1950, pp. 72-5). This concept of *ie* was introduced to registered families in colonial Chosŏn to make a distinction between Japanese and Chosŏn nationhood under the reign of Japanese imperialism. The family register, once used to regulate labor and the tax system during Korea's feudal period,

was comprehensively reshuffled by transplanting the concept of *ie*. It was reframed as the legal register of the patriarchal family, giving the family head exclusive power over his family members (Lee 2000).

The modern family law of Korea, legislated in 1958, did not eradicate these patriarchal elements rooted in the traditional and colonial family system (Yang 2011, p. 102). This family law itself was based on contradictory principles: traditional family ideas, a family-head system devised during the colonial period, and ideas about the nuclear family that were largely influenced by the American family culture.

While the blending of family ideals in the law led to incessant conflicts in actual family life, the patriarchal extended family remained solid partly due to its role in boosting people's longing for development. Korean society began to rapidly transform itself out of poverty starting in the 1960s. The aspiration to achieve economic development united people as much as did the ideology of national security. In the interplay of the aspiration to achieve economic development and the historically rooted family interests, intergenerational support became vital in fostering economic development. During the period of rapid industrialization between the 1960s and the 1970s, the extended family did not give way to the configurations of the nuclear family with its private and emotional cohesion. Disproving the argument that the extended family was supposed to decline as a nation industrialized, extended family relations remained solid to some extent as an intergenerational strategy for economic development.

At the same time, the nuclear family—the idealized modern family with conjugal relations and emotional affinity—had not been established as the universal derivative of modernization in Korea as the extended family endured. Rather, the nuclear family has been suppressed and its characteristics have been transformed in the incessant conflicts between proponents of development and gender emancipation on the one hand and proponents of patriarchal and developmental systems on the other.

#### *Family Became a Contested Terrain between Generations and Genders*

Filial piety has been imbued in the minds of ordinary Korean people, fostering children's sense of responsibility to preserve the well being of their elderly parents. However, as Lee addressed, "it is not the universal sentiment but the ideology which justifies patriarch's exclusive possession and power prescribing in family property, labor, lineage, and ancestor worship" (Lee 2005, pp. 409-14). Just because of its longstanding symbiosis with the

patriarchal system which has had substantial influence in Korea and still does to this day, filial piety has entailed the coercive subordination of women and forced them to make sacrifices (Park 2007).

Thus, tension grew between the extended family and the nuclear family, implying political conflicts surrounding family ownership between gender and generations along with compressed social changes. One of the important social forces to trigger family politics is women's increasing awareness of their own interests and of their own family. As more women acquired higher education and were free to have desires for secular success, mirroring the collective mentality of the broader population, the patriarchal prescription of family relations became an increasing source of tension among parents, who emphasized patriarchal lineage and authority and the responsibility of their children to take care of them, and those of children (daughters-in-law in particular) who may regard these old prescriptions as unfair.

Various symptoms of tension in family support have lasted in the prolonged context of family politics between the interests of the extended and the nuclear families. Looking into contents and views reported in newspapers throughout the period of the 1980s, some significant changes in the power relationship between extended and nuclear family ideas can be discerned.

In the early 1980s, main newspapers in Korea (such as *The Chosŏn*, *Joong Ang*, *The Donga Daily*) drew attention to the new family (nuclear family) and the decline in extended family relations. Very often, the embellished images of traditional women in the extended family designated as "palbang mi-in" (八方美人, a beauty, skillful in both family and work, respectful and obedient) intersected with the negative images about the new family with children-centered family culture, proactive wives, and extravagant consumption.<sup>3</sup>

Until at least 1980, most Korean elders aged 65 and over lived with their children and received support from them, but even during that period, elderly parents who lived with their children reportedly experienced great feelings of deprivation regarding their significant loss of power within the family. While many elderly people who lived with their children could perceive their children as faithful, they felt themselves weakening within the family.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "There Are Many Virtues to Revive in Traditional Ideals of the Daughter-in-law," *The Chosun Daily*, April 19, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Relevant stories reported: "Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law, What Is the Problem?" March 17, 1984; "The Elderly Also Don't Want to Live with Their Children," August 21, 1984; "Family in Collapse," May 20, 1984; "Death of One Elderly Person amidst the Confusion of Nuclearization,"



The conflicts between mothers- and fathers-in-law and daughters-in-law were often addressed in the mass media, reflecting the tensions inherent in the transfer of power from elderly parents to their children. It is noteworthy that the shift in authority among family members has been often led by the conflict between substantial family keepers, i.e., between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law, rather than between the nominal family head and the son. One interesting representation of the conflict between “the two women” can be seen in the newspaper article titled “Mothers-in-Law and Daughters-in-Law, What Is the Problem?” (*The Joong Ang Daily*, March 17, 1984). The report was based on a survey conducted in 1979 by the Korea Association of Wives (Hanguk Buinhoe). It was reported that for families with mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law living together, 59.1% of the mothers-in-law lived in the main room, while 40.9% of the daughters-in-law lived in the main room, signaling the intense struggle between the two generations for family leadership. When asked about their attitude toward living together, 60.5 % of the mothers-in-law said they preferred living together, while only 29.6% of the daughters-in-law said they preferred this arrangement, indicating much difference in ideas about family.

The intense conflict between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law is quite an interesting aspect of generational and gender conflicts in the declining power of the patriarchal family. Patriarchal prescription, no matter how its ideological and legislative influence remained solid at least until then, had weak material basis given that the head of the family rarely had resources to control and to guarantee the faith of his children in the face of political disturbance and chronic poverty during the early period of modernization in Korea. The family head’s weak place in the material resource and the common ignorance of responsibility ascribed to the family head was likely to allow his wife to have substantial responsibility and a voice in his stead to maintain the family, to educate the children, particularly sons, and to have control over daughters-in-law.

However, women’s persistent resistance against the patriarchal family structure and their efforts to shape their own families seemed to have

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November 19, 1984; “The Victim of the Conflict between Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law Is the Mother-in-law,” *The Joong Ang Daily*, July 5, 1985; “In Spite of Children’s Filial Piety, Elderly Parent’s Alienation Because of the Loss of Their Autonomy to Govern the Family,” May 15, 1980; “Younger Women Dislike Serving the Elderly,” January 13, 1982; “Divulging Children Who Threw Their Parents in an Institution,” July 31, 1983; “New *Goryojang*” (old Korean burial custom whereby an old person was left to die in an open tomb), August 11, 1983; “Modern *Goryojang*,” *The Chosun Daily*, June 14, 1987.

progressed within the very complex context of rapid industrialization, social movements for political democracy, and the national modern family planning project. In this highly patriarchal context, Korean women's status is likely to change rapidly because they have succeeded in mobilizing immanently dominant social forces for their empowerment. While the authoritarian state, economic bureaucrats, and intellectuals who were mostly men took for granted that the conservative social order would be preserved, they nonetheless pushed for the national project of modernization and family planning. A flurry of family planning campaigns and slogans propagated by the government and civil organizations throughout the 1960s and 1980s made people believe that population control and family planning were the inevitable requisite for modernization and development (Kim 1988). While not the intended consequence, this national modern family project helped empower women as they took on the roles of main reproducer and care giver independent of the influence of the patriarchal family. Moreover, women gained the ability to be beneficiaries not only as housewives but also as daughters. Preference toward male babies persisted even in the context of highly regulated reproduction, causing ferocious prenatal gender selection throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s in Korea (Park and Cho 1994). Nevertheless, parents' anxiety about raising successful children led them to value both sons and daughters, and increasingly, daughters have acquired higher education and found their voice. The rapid growth of industry and economic production also contributed to the material basis of gender role division. Women's voice also received great support from social democratization. It is interesting to note how newspapers reflect that people's views about the nuclear family became more favorable during the period of democratization in Korean society in the late 1980s. Earlier, people expressed worries about the decline of the extended family and fears about many misbehaviors/ill practices entailed in the new family. In the later period, these worries about the new family shifted toward positive perceptions of the nuclear family, new housewives, and the improvement of women's rights.<sup>5</sup>

Supported by these favorable economic and political conditions, women undertook concerted effort to remove the patriarchal elements in family relations. Women's resistance came to fruition in subsequent modifications of the family law that made it more gender egalitarian. As Lee (2002) noted,

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<sup>5</sup> In the late 1980s, newspapers focused mainly on reports about social democracy, reporting less on other subjects. While the frequency of family-related reports also declined to a great extent, more positive and objective views were expressed about the new family, conjugal relations, roles of housewives, education for children, and women's improving status.

Korean family law has significantly changed since the 1990s to improve women's legal status as mother, wife, and daughter. Finally, the symbolic skeleton of the patriarchal family in the form of *hojuje* (family head system), which was legislated during the colonial period, was abolished through the fierce legal battle fought between 2005 and 2008. The abolishment of *hojuje* is worth emphasizing because it eliminated the legal basis of patriarchal family relationship.

Meanwhile, gender roles seemed to have been settled and people came to believe that men's authority depended on their role as breadwinner, making a big change from earlier beliefs that a husband's or a father's authority arose naturally in traditional extended family relationship (Park and Kim 2005). It must be noted, however, that women's fierce attempts at creating gender equality were largely focused on the family. Despite severe gender inequality in the workplace, labor issues failed to mobilize women in general. Rather, women made efforts to empower themselves within the family. Instead of thinking of themselves in terms of their work outside the home, women seemed to put most value on their roles within the family. While women succeeded in improving their status within the family and even became the primary person within the family, in doing so, women made themselves more entrenched within the family.

### *Declining Family Care for the Elderly*

Newspaper reports about the elderly have exploded through the periods of the 1990s and 2000s. The viewpoints they expressed have also been diverse. Appraisals of declining family support and intergenerational co-residence came to emphasize the pathetic view of disadvantaged elderly people.<sup>6</sup> Reportedly, many elders were abandoned by their families, and this abandonment was often explained in terms of a pathological decline in social norms.<sup>7</sup> As criticism of the nuclear family decreased, particular voting

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding declining family support, see "Rapid Increase in Elderly People Living Alone," December 9, 1996, December 22, 1997; "Elderly People: 46.8% Living Apart from Their Children," *The Donga Daily*, February 12, 1999; "Elderly People: 53% Living Apart from Their Children," *The Joong Ang Daily*, February 4, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> The grievances of the elderly are reported as in "There Are Many Elderly Men on the Road," *The Donga Daily*; May 9, 1994; "A Succession of Suicides among the Lonely Elderly," March 8, 1992; "Pathology of Matricide," September 10, 1994; "Society Abandoning the Elderly," September 6, 1995; "Contemporary *Goryojang*," September 5, 1995; "Two Old Men Taking Their Own Lives, Depressed about Physical Suffering," October 29, 1995; "Suffering from Children's Harsh Words," May 7, 2002; "You Don't Know What I Feel," *The Joong Ang Daily*, April 16, 2004; "Who Cares for the Elderly

interests also called for the legalization or maintenance of filial piety.<sup>8</sup> Discourses on aging society since the 2000s have been largely concerned with reforms of the public pension system and medical expenditure. Alongside images of grieving elderly people, it is also interesting to note that countervailing images have also been commonly reported since the late 1990s, emphasizing independence among older people.<sup>9</sup> Such flood of diverse images and views about aging society and the elderly since the 1990s reflects growing awareness and anxiety about the rapidly aging population and weakening family support for the elderly.

Declining family support is well reflected in the rapid decline in elderly people living in multi-generational households: Generational co-residence has rapidly declined since the 1980s. Meanwhile, the proportion of the elderly either living alone or living with their spouses has increased greatly, comprising more than half of the current living arrangement of elderly people (figure 1). Moreover, generational co-residence has no longer become the ideal preference since the late 1990s and more likely considered to be a burdensome choice due to lack of independence and the need to care for the elderly.

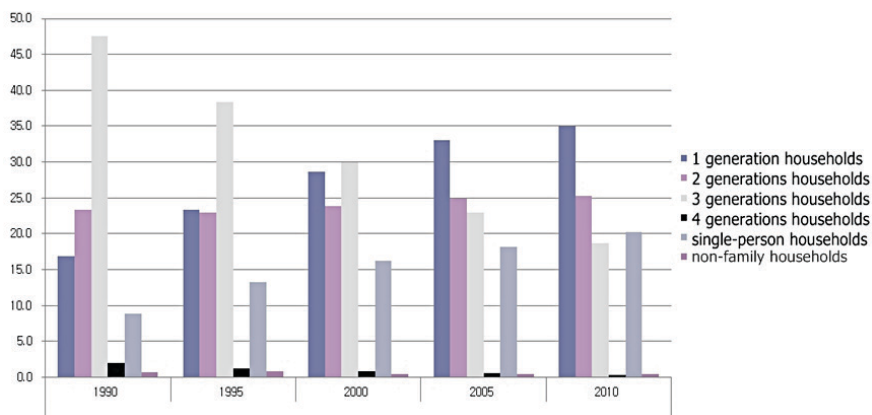
Generational exchanges have also changed significantly. The typical traditional exchange was regarded to be practiced in a way in which children served their elderly parents with honor, such as living together with them and providing them with financial, instrumental, and emotional support. Analysis of generational exchange since the 1990s, however, illustrated that

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Living Alone?," May 1, 2000; "Elderly Woman in Her 80s Takes Her Life, Leaving a Will on Not Being a Burden on Her Children," October 3, 2000; "Seven Elderly Persons Commit Suicide Every Day," September 30, 2003; "Suicide Rate among Elderly Persons, Increased Five Times over the Last 20 Years," July 21, 2005; "Abusers of Elderly Persons, Mostly Their Sons," *Hankyoreh* February 4, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Regarding reports of the legal enforcement of family support, see "Law for Elderly Welfare Revised to Demand Children Who Abandoned Their Parents to Pay Compulsory Compensation," August 20, 1996; "Filial Piety Supported by Law," *The Donga Daily*, July 29, 1998; "Filial Piety of Old Married Couple in Their 70s," *The Joong Ang Daily*, May 8, 1995; "Proposed Revision of Civil Code, Abolition of Prohibited Marriage between Couple of the Same Family Name, and the Legislation of Filial Inheritance," November 9, 1998; "Opposition Party, Proposing a Special Law for Filial Piety, Providing Pension Benefits for Those Aged 65 and over," *The Chosun Daily*, May 8, 2005; "Both Ruling and Opposition Parties with Same Voices on the Legislation of Filial Piety," *Hankyoreh*, May 14, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Discourses on generational independence, healthy and active aging were frequently reported as in "A Bad Wife Is Better than a Pious Son," May 8, 1994; "I Will Find My Life, Not Caring for Grandchildren," *The Donga Daily*, August 31, 1994; "Prefer Senior Town, Do Not Want to Live off of Children," *The Joong Ang Daily*, June 29, 2006; "Elderly People, 45% Do Not Want to Live with Children," *Hankyoreh*, February 24, 2003.



**FIG. 1.**—Changes in Living Arrangements of the Elderly Aged 65 and Older. Source: Population census each year, Korean Statistical Office.

the reality of the generational exchange was far from this ideal pattern (Park et al. 2005; Han and Kim 2010).<sup>10</sup>

There were many research findings that indicate the severe burden of family support for the elderly (Choi 1991; Kim and Choi 1993; Kim and Jun 1995; Lee 1995; Kim 2008).<sup>11</sup> The sense of burden over family support is not only the story of care givers; elderly parents increasingly felt the burden of receiving one-sided benefits from their children (Jung and Kim 2012). In response to the social perception that elderly parents are perceived as being burdensome, older people themselves used to deny reliance on their children, emphasizing the need for self-reliance and institutional access to elderly welfare (Kim 2005).

Voluntary motivation for care is very important in enhancing the well being of both caregivers and care receivers. If caregivers do not assign a positive meaning to care, their negative emotions may be easily transmitted through their care behavior and, in turn, harm the self-perception of care receivers. When patriarchal dominance has had substantial influence, most

<sup>10</sup> Intergenerational relations changed with increasing tendency of generational independence, reciprocity (Park et al. 2005), and bilateral support from both husband and wife's sides (Han and Kim 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Kim (2008) analyzed research articles published from 1980 to 2008 in *The Journal of the Korean Gerontological Society*. She argued that there has been an explosive increase in research on various aspects of elderly welfare since the 1990s. Issues of family support, caregiver's sense of being burdened, care satisfaction and maltreatment of the elderly, etc. remained the main research topics of articles from the 1990s to 2008.

care giving women have had to endure the coercive element of care giving. However, along with the growing resistance against patriarchal oppression as manifested in the area of family care, the uneasiness of women providing the care often exceeded their level of tolerance. These women assert their right to reciprocity, comparing the care they provide with the benefits they receive or received from their elderly parents; they also tend to justify their possible faults and sense of burden as the proper response to lack of support from elderly parents. Alongside the claim of reciprocity, decisions about who is in charge of family care have become a matter of intense conflict and negotiation among family members (Kim and NamGung 2011). In such circumstances, elderly parents feel they present a burden to the family members and repress their need for care, or else they simply endure the threatening complaints from children. In that way, family care coerced by filial obligation has a deleterious impact on the subjective well-being of elderly parents.

While the family has continued to play a crucial role in providing economic and physical support for the elderly, the extent of that economic support has been insufficient to meet the needs of elderly parents, and coercion of care often leads to deterioration in the elderly parents' self-esteem and health. There have been reported several legal disputes between parents and children regarding rights and duty over entitlement and care.<sup>12</sup> In fact, conflicts over family support have sometimes been so filled with tension that they have even led to elderly abuse. Moral criticism has followed, but this has likewise been confronted with moral arguments for women's civil right to independence. In this stalemate resulting in growing tension regarding family support, the conflict has sometimes become chaotic. These current symptoms of tension in family support have not come about suddenly, but have resulted from longstanding political conflicts between the interests of the extended family and the nuclear family.

Korean people are unlikely to be freed from the cultural prescription of filial piety even today. Nevertheless, their sense of cultural pressure is not put under the hegemonic influence of the tradition that has been transmitted for a long time. Rather, it is embedded from their experience of receiving the sacrificing support of the parents. In fact, Korean family of today is one type of modified extended family, a term proposed by Litwak (1985), in the sense that inter-generational transfer persists even after the children are married and form their own families. For this reason, most young people these days

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<sup>12</sup> "Inheritance in Danger," *News Who*, MBC, May 20, 2009.

also show a willingness to support their parents in times of need. The reality, however, often differs from their willingness. Between willingness and unwillingness, and between opportunities and constraints, Korean people have the complex and contradictory feelings of guilt over not taking care of their elderly parents and feelings of burden over taking care of their elderly parents and wishing to be freed from doing so.

Elderly parents also have complex feelings about receiving family support. Declining support has been interpreted as deprivation in comparison with the authority formerly given to elderly parents. Later, this sense of deprivation splits into two directions according to the resources held by the elderly parents. In recent years, elderly parents with resources have tended to seek independence in place of their weakened authority and feeling of being a burden to the family. In times of urgent need for support, they now prefer to choose alternative support systems such as nursing homes. On the other hand, elderly parents without available resources are likely to accept their subjugation and count on their children in exchange for providing major assistance to their children's families in return.

#### *Inertial but Abortive Trials to Moralize Family Care*

Growing perceptions about patriarchal oppression, along with the growing aspiration for autonomous agent imbued by modernity, have caused women to struggle on behalf of their own families. In this regard, what deserves emphasis is the progressive aspect inherent in the declining norms of family support. Although neither older people nor women have managed to consider the possibility of a new symbiosis of the concept of filial piety in the context of gender egalitarianism, this tension also takes a step forward to reinterpreting filial piety as voluntary intimacy and reciprocal support.

However, inner confusion and conflict among family members regarding elderly care has been exacerbated by persistent and repetitive expression of the state and conservative politicians, employers, and social service organizations to moralize family support. Filial piety was included in the official prescription of elderly welfare legislated in 1981 and subsequent revisions of the law of elderly welfare. Discourses on filial piety also have been repeated by political parties and social organizations to draw voter interests but not really in the interest of the elderly people (Park 2007). For example, discourse about the legal enforcement of family support has been publicized since the late 1990s. Religious leaders, representatives in social welfare organizations, and the main media transmitted the discourse about

the legislation on filial piety, emphasizing that filial piety should be the basis of nation and family.<sup>13</sup> Poems, songs, and dramas containing memories of parents have been revived frequently to appeal to people's moral and emotional sentiment of filial piety. Politicians also moved quickly in their campaign to legalize filial piety. As population size of old people has determined the outcome of election since the early 2000s; both opposing and ruling parties competed to attract the votes of elderly people and to make promises of legalizing filial piety.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, these various attempts to moralize family support are not the particular phenomenon of Korea but commonly expressed and learned in East Asian societies today as in the legislation of family responsibility for the elderly and the use of mass media to revive the ethical sentiment of filial piety. This retrieval of filial piety in the public can be intended to divert social responsibility for elderly care into family or to realize other interest than that of elderly people. But it also looks after and reinvents the historically embedded device to suppress the awareness of coercion and conflict over family support.

For a long time, social welfare for the elderly in Korea had been imbued with a sympathetic view. While this view has developed out of poor welfare systems on the one hand, the sympathetic attitude for the unfortunate elderly has in turn served to deter the institutionalization of a more universal welfare system. It is also interesting to note that the association between the concept and the institutional attributes of residual welfare promulgated by good Samaritans is exquisitely combined with the transformed traditional value of respect for the elderly. The irony is that these seemingly contradictory values, charity and respect for the elderly, came to be combined together.

This peculiar conjoining happened at a time when many elderly people came to be in a miserable state of life while the traditional value of filial piety was correspondingly still in the minds of ordinary people.<sup>15</sup> These traditional

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<sup>13</sup> See "A Song for Filial Piety," *The Daily Gookmin*, May 6, 1997; "Conference for Legislation of Filial Piety," *The Daily Moonwha*, September 27, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Relevant news was reported in "Opposition Party, Proposing a Special Law for Filial Piety, Providing Pension Benefits for Those Aged 65 and Over," *The Chosun Daily*, May 8, 2005; "Both Ruling and Opposition Parties with Same Voice on Legislation of Filial Piety," *Hankyoreh*, May 14, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Law for Elderly Welfare was legislated in 1981 during the inauguration of Chun Doo Hwan. Chun's government implemented several measures for the elderly, such as making the charter that prescribed people's respect for the elderly, establishing several benefits for the elderly and instituting several memorial ceremonies in honor of the practice of filial piety. Relevant news was reported in "Fare Discount for the Elderly Aged 70 and over," April 12, 1980; "Making Seats for the Elderly in the



values were reinterpreted to include helping the poor elderly, and the notion of charity for the weak elderly was linked to the traditional value of respect for the elderly.

However, this conjoining created tensions from its very beginning, when the idea of respect for the elderly in this manner first came out in the official presentation of institutionalization of elderly welfare in the early 1980s. Hyon (1988) argued that except for its normative emphasis on respect for the elderly and some financial and service provisions for the elderly poor, the law on elderly welfare that was first introduced in 1981 lacked substantial prescription for welfare. Coupons for transportation and for access to parks and health facilities were introduced at this time under the doctrine of respect for the elderly. The primary effect of these meager means of support for the elderly poor was that the image of the value of respect for the elderly was magnified. This effect, however, produced few positive results. Many elderly people felt that the policy and the social response to it differed from the actual principles of respect for the elderly. Rather, they felt that the policy served to increase and solidify their social marginalization. Pious treatment for the elderly came to be none other than a stigma of being too old, often leading to maltreatment of the elderly.<sup>16</sup> In this combination of pauperism and traditional norm, benevolence expressed by the state often made the elderly exposed as comic and burdensome beings in the public and the media.<sup>17</sup>

In this regard, the national policy for the elderly welfare in Korea, if wearing the image of “traditional values,” has been institutionalized as a residual intervention for the unfortunate. While it is true that society has become more aware of the aging and the imperative need to extend welfare

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Subway,” August 20, 1980; “President Chun Instructed to Institute a Free Pass for the Elderly in the Subway,” May 23, 1984; “Giving Incentives to the Family That Provides Care for the Elderly,” *The Chosun Daily*, August 23, 1986; “Pious Daughter-in-law Helping to Relieve Urine and Feces of Mother-in-law,” December 18, 1981; “Providing Preferential Gifts, Such as Tuition, Introduction of Occupation for the Model Family, Practices of Filial Piety, and Good Parents,” December 6, 1983; “Reducing Inheritance Tax for Those Supporting Parents,” *The Joong Ang Daily*, October 21, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> “Policy on Not Making the Elderly Respected Is Better than Policy to Make the Elderly Respected,” December 27, 1981; “Preferential Treatment for the Elderly, Unpleasant,” February 6, 1982; “Is It Respect for the Elderly (敬老) or Light Treatment of the Elderly (輕老)?” December 11, 1984; “Beware of Boasting about Grandchildren So as to Not Be Treated as an Elderly,” November 28, 1985; “A Modern Edition of *Goryojang*,” *The Chosun Daily*, June 14, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> “Senior Discount Card, Treated Poorly,” November 25, 1985; “Announcement of a Public Bath with Elderly Abuse,” April 8, 1985; “A Shower of Complaints about an SBS Program, ‘Making a Good World’ by Suh Sewon,” *The Joonga Ang Daily*, March 11, 1998. See also Jung’s research on the subaltern image about the elderly (Jung 2006, pp. 65-70)

systems to the elderly and that expenditures for elderly welfare have increased significantly, the family-centered perspective and attendant lack of universal welfare for the elderly care have not changed much.

## Conclusion

Suicide occasioned among frail elderly people is often likely to occur under circumstances where these people feel they can no longer rely on wholehearted assistance and, consequently, suffer from a sense of social alienation which has accrued from negative perceptions ascribed to the notions of frailty and dependency. These negative perceptions about frailty become aggravated as coerced care becomes consolidated in both the private and the public spaces. The displacement of the elderly from care derives from the chaotic tension of family support and anachronistic intervention by conservative policy makers to maintain family support.

Family support, which has long buttressed care for the elderly, has become a locus of severe tension for women who have come to resist their subservient role in the realm of care giving. Growing tension in family support has highlighted the perpetual struggle of women who have resisted the dominance of patriarchy to counteract the perception of their subservient role as reproducer and care provider for the patriarch's family and to vindicate their rights to the family.

Nevertheless, filial piety was repeatedly called to emphasize family support, to make covert substantial coercion and conflicts underlying family support, to mobilize elderly people in the voting interest, and to make people believe that filial piety is the most humane virtue in preserving the prestigious treatment of the elderly. The emphasis on filial piety also tends to reproduce the mistaken notion of reducing old people's deprivation to pathetic family problems.

Ironically, the institutional invention of filial piety, combined with the ideological emphasis on that concept, fails to protect old people's civil right to care. The emphasis on family support, as buttressed by the ideology of filial piety, is likely to justify laissez-faire policies about social welfare, which in turn constrains civil consciousness concerning older people's right to receive proper care. The displacement, marginalization of old people, and generational conflict operate amid this covert linkage between the institutional and ideological apparatuses of family support and lack of societal responsibility for preserving civil rights to care.

Many old people still tend to uphold the notion of filial piety because they want to be respected in both the family and the society, but their proper wishes are likely to be drowned out by the loud voices calling for the preservation of filial piety but tarnished by authoritarianism and oppression. Elderly care in Korea is likely to remain in a stalemate of anomic conflict between consecrating and desecrating filial piety.

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