

FILIAL PIETY IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of aging population in Malaysia has increased over the years due to better diets, improvement in medical facilities, and awareness of healthy lifestyles. This paper describes the trends of care-giving responsibilities towards the elderly in contemporary Malaysia and their perception on the concept of filial piety from the literature. As the neglect of elders is becoming a chronic issue in this country, policies and law have been enforced to ensure that the elderly would be taken care of. The implication in the nursing profession is to assist the Malaysian government to provide best care for the elderly through practice and further research.

Keyword: filial piety, elderly, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

A short movie clip was once aired in the Malaysian television about an old man who went to live with his son, daughter-in-law and four-year-old grandson. The old man's hands trembled, his eyesight was blurred and his step faltered. As they ate together at the table, the old man's shaky hands and failing sight made eating difficult. Peas rolled off his spoon onto the floor. When he grasped the glass, milk spilled on the table cloth. The son and daughter-in-law became irritated with the mess so they set up a small table in the corner with wooden bowls for the old man to eat alone while the rest of the family members enjoyed their food at the family table. When the family glanced in the old man's direction, tears were seen in his eyes as he sat alone eating. Still, the only words the couple had for him were sharp admonitions when he dropped a fork or spilled food.

Their four-year-old boy watched it all in silence. One evening before supper, the father noticed his son was playing "masak-masak" (cooking) and he observed that there were two tables being prepared. Puzzled, the father asked his four-year-old son sweetly why there were two sets of tables. The child replied just as sweetly while pointing at the second table with "not-so-nice setting", "This is for you and mom when you grow old." The word struck the man so forcefully that he was speechless. Tears started to flow down his cheeks. Though no words were spoken, he knew what must be done. That evening, the man took his frail father's hand and led him to the family table. And

for some reason, neither the man nor the man's wife seemed to care any longer when a fork was dropped, milk spilled or table cloth soiled.

Indeed, how we treat our parents will teach our children how to treat us later. If our children are taught the importance of filial piety when they are young, their children will also love them in return when they grow old. Family is the basic institution where norms of behaviour are inculcated into the child. Values and customs are transmitted through family systems where respect for one another is propagated. Arokiasamy (1997) stressed that it is through care and love that the child learns to share and to experience a cohesive and harmonious life with the elderly. To ensure that children continue to care for the parents in their old age, the bond of attachment needs to be nurtured and strengthened earlier in life.

FILIAL PIETY – DEFINITION

According to Confucian ideals, filial piety is one of the virtues to be held above all others: respect should be given to parents and ancestors. Confucius once stated that "In serving his parents, a filial son reverse them in daily life; he makes them happy while he nourishes them; he takes anxious care of them in sickness; he shows great sorrow over their death; and he sacrifices to them with solemnity." Essentially, filial piety is one of the "right relationships" for which Confucius advocated. The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines filial piety as "reverence for parents considered in Chinese ethics the prime virtue and the basis of all

right human relations.” The Dictionary.com defines filial piety as the important virtue and primary duty or respect, obedience and care for one’s parents and elderly family members. Filial piety is not a religious concept. It is an essential element of Chinese culture how adult children relate to their parents, elders, and ancestors. Laidlaw, Wang, Coelho, & Power (2010) stated that filial piety implies a set of behaviours and attitudes that indicate feelings of love, respect, and care towards one’s parents. According to Sung (2001) as quoted by Laidlaw *et.al.* (2010), there are six important dimensions of filial piety which consist of showing respect, fulfilling responsibility, harmonizing family, making repayment, showing affection and making sacrifices.

Arokiasamy (1997) stated that respect and care for the elderly is not only the responsibility of individual families but it is also a function of the society to develop norms and sanctions that promote such respect and care. It is easier to get the family to look after their aged parents in a community that treasures and values this virtue. To ensure that positive attitudes of the elderly prevail, the values of a caring society have to be inculcated from when the child is young. These attitudes can make the elderly themselves, their carers, others dealings with the elderly and to view ageing in the correct perspective. So that, healthy and active ageing becomes a reality.

PREVALENCE OF AGING POPULATION IN MALAYSIA

In recent years, several countries in Asia, including Malaysia, have experienced spectacular economic growth and social change together with the declining fertility and mortality rates, accompanied by increased life expectancy at birth. This is due to better diets, improvement in medical facilities, and awareness of healthy lifestyles. This has contributed to the rapid growth in ageing population. In Malaysia, the social system uses the age of 60 years and above as the cut-off point for ageing as adopted by the United Nations (UN) World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna in 1982 (Yahaya, Abdullah, Momtaz & Hamid, 2010). The number of younger generations has significantly decreased despite people living longer and healthier lives. According to Narender & Kamlesh (2008), this phenomenon is due to the general trend of late marriages or non-marriage, high divorces, low fertility, increased longevity and migration.

The total number of the population in Malaysia in 2010 was approximately 27 million and is projected to grow by two percent annually. With this estimation, the country’s population is expected to reach nearly 34 million by 2020. Data from the Department of Statistics of 2000 Census reveals an increase in the percentage of elderly from 5.9 percent in 1991 to 6.2 percent (about 1.5 million) in 2000 and projected that by 2020, the percentage of elderly will increase to 9.5 percent, which will be equivalent to 3.2 million people. The census also reported are about seven percent (94,000) of the older persons lives alone as single-member households in 2000. Eight percent of the rural population comprised of older people as compared to only five percent in the urban population. According to Hairi, Bulgiba, Cumming, Naganathan & Mudla (2010) the higher number of elderly in the rural areas is due to the migration of the younger population to the urban areas to seek employment leaving behind their old folks to look after themselves. Norzareen & Nobaya (2010) predicted that the Malaysian society will become an ageing society by 2035 when the population of people aged 60 and above will reach 15 percent of the total population size. Our challenge in nursing is to assist in supporting the wellbeing of the elderly through coordination and leading the community to meet the needs of ageing population.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF THE ELDERLY IN MALAYSIA

According to Williams (1995), with the passage of time, deterioration in elderly tends to occur first with sociability, followed by breakdown in carrying out domestic tasks and finally in personal tasks. Arokiasamy (1997) stated that to lead an independent life, the elderly need basic skills for day to day living that include the ability to undertake social activities, and perform personal and domestic tasks. At the outset it is important to recognise that the relationship between the social state and health status is nowhere more important than amongst the elderly. Health problems in elderly relating to smoking, alcohol consumption and eating habits can result in functional, psychological and social disabilities. Hairi *et. al.* (2010) concluded in their study that physical ability and functional limitations are common among older people leading to adverse consequences such as dependency and institutionalisation. Functional disabilities would result in restricted activity, inability to work, drop in

activity tolerance, bone loss, and feelings of physical incompetence. These can lead to social isolation that can end up with psychological disability such as loss of confidence, exaggerated withdrawal from unusual activities, depression, anxiety, hypochondriasis, sleep disturbances, and suicidal tendencies. For the elderly, it is important for them to function independently. These consequences have profound public health implications with increased utilization of health care and a need for supportive services and long term care.

According to Norazizan & Hamid (2007), to live an active and productive old age, older people needs to practice healthy lifestyles by becoming involved and by participating in social activities. Chan, Cheng, and Philips (2002) stressed that for the elderly to be active socially, they need to keep up an active social life, helping others, obtaining social support in times of need, and being supported by children or relatives. To fulfil this need, the Malaysian government has constructed day care centres for senior citizens in cooperation with the Central Welfare Council in Peninsular Malaysia for the elderly to socialize and organize recreational activities. Social activities would include exercising, dancing and singing as well as religious activities which are more popular among the Malays. This day care centre will not only benefit the elderly as a person but encourages families to assume responsibility for the care of the elderly by providing relief in the form of day care services during working hours. This can reduce some burdens of the family members and at the same time contributes to the quality of life of the elderly.

CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVES ON FILIAL PIETY – THE TRENDS

Earlier work on filial piety regarded it as a traditional Chinese virtue (Hwang, 1999). Filial Piety is actually a cultural and ethical principle guiding social behaviours in Chinese societies with important implications for personal and intergeneration relationships. In Malaysia, providing care and financial support for the elderly is the general responsibility of the family. This is typical of Asian culture. Norzareen & Nobaya (2010) stated that the responsibility to care for the elderly parents is assumed as a part of life's duty. These authors continued that the responsibility of caring for the elderly from the view of traditional

societies is the duty of adult children to fulfil the needs of their ageing parents. Both ageing parents and their adult children are aware of this responsibility as expected by society. To the Chinese community in Malaysia, filial piety or xiao means complete obedience to one's parents or parents in-law and nothing can be more important than looking after your own parents when they are old. For the Malay society, they also are tied to traditional responsibilities of caring for their elderly. The old Malays have a saying, "Biar mati anak jangan mati adat" that means "They'd rather let their children die than abandon their customs." Filial piety is one of their customs. Muslims are often reminded of Surah Luqman (31) verse 14 in the Quran that states "And we have enjoined on man to be good to his parents: In travail upon travail did his mother bear him, and in years twain was his weaning: Show gratitude to Me and thy parents; to Me is thy final goal." The Christian community in Malaysia are adhered to the fifth law in the Ten Commandment that is found in the Bible in Exodus 20 verse 12 (Holy Book), to honour their father and mother so that they may live long. For the Malaysian Indians, filial piety is not in their shared cultural values (except piousness and observing rituals and except traditions). As mentioned by Zawawi (2008), they base their respect to their parents using the excerpt from the Laws of Manu that ordered them to constantly please both their mother and father. Indians in Malaysia believe that their incarnation after death depends very much upon their conduct in their present life, just like any Indian customs in any part of the world (Nordin and Hussein, 2004). Their beliefs focus on individuals should portray of their best behaviour in order to be reborn in higher caste. This includes being polite to others which in turn includes their parents (Zawawi, 2008).

In Malaysian society, we still hold filial piety and family responsibility in very high esteem. This is the reason we still have many intact families as compared to our Western counterparts. The majority of Malaysians still cares for their ageing parents. However, due to rapid urbanization and commercialisation, filial piety that was once a pride of our culture seems to be gradually eroding. Due to rapid invasion of modernism, attitudes towards the elderly in general tend to be negative. As a result of this, an issue that is of concern is the abuse of the elderly which is implicated by family, relatives, service providers,

and the society. The types of abuse can be verbal, physical, psychological, and financial (*Ariokiasamy, 2007*). Many research studies have indicated a decline adherence to filial beliefs and commitment occurs among young people. It is a concern that the values of filial piety value is becoming a thing of the past. Neglecting parents is a new phenomenon which may be difficult to understand but unfortunately is becoming an acceptable practice even in eastern cultures where filial piety used to be firmly rooted and admired.

It is of further concern that the new generation in Malaysia needs to be reminded to observe traditional values and cherish their families. In the Malaysian newspaper, *The Star*, dated February, 5 2011, the Selangor Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) chairman, Datuk Donald Lim Siang Chai said that, filial piety needs to be second nature to all youngsters. He urged all children to find time to care for their parents despite the harried lifestyle of today. "Most of the time, children who work in Kuala Lumpur tends to neglect their parents and some do not even go back for Chinese New Year (or any festive season) reunion dinner" he said during any of the event for the old folks. Lim added that most youngsters were caught up in the rat race to earn more and chose not to go back to their villages thus causing much strain on families ties. He also agrees with the fact that in Malaysia, there are increasing numbers of families placing their elders in nursing homes, and in many cases, forgets about them. An unknown Malaysian writer who wrote to the "*The Star*" newspaper (*November, 13 2011*) stated that "There are real fears that a day will come when such emotional attachments to our ageing and "useless" parents will be lost forever. There are fears that a day will come when our parents will be left abandoned to die in isolation and indignity." It is this fear that has prompted many concerned citizens to suggest the government to enact laws to prevent such a pathetic and inhumane situation from taking roots in Malaysian society.

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND POLICY IN MALAYSIA

The Malaysian government, just like other countries is enacting law due to neglect of elders that is becoming a chronic issues in this country. In Singapore, the Maintenance of Parents Act 1995 allows any person who is 60 years old or above and who is unable to maintain himself to apply to the Tribunal for

the Maintenance of Parents for an order so that one or more of his children pay him a monthly allowance or any other regular payment or a lump sum for his maintenance. In India, the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Bill 2006, was tabled to ensure that if a person responsible for the upkeep of his parents, failed to take care of them, he can face up to three months' imprisonment and a fine in addition to being disinherited from the parent's will. Chaynee (*2006*), stated that, in Malaysia in the year 1995, even though there is a policy from the National Welfare which was enacted in 1990, this policy only identify older person as one of its many target group. It was not enough to ensure that Malaysian elderly would be taken care of. This is because the policy was more welfare-orientated rather than development oriented. The formulation of the National Policy for the Elderly in 1995, and the setting up of the National Advisory and Consultative of the Elderly in 1996 and the National Action Plan for Older Persons in 1998 indicates the serious commitment by the Malaysian government to provide care and services to the nation's elderly. This policy caters to the developmental needs of the older population. The main aim of this policy was to improve and maintain the health and functionality of older people and subsequently several action plans were initiated in line with the objectives of the policy. Sub-committees were established to implement programmes and activities specifically for the older population. The Malaysian government continues to encourage a family-oriented support system to minimize budgetary burden. The Malaysian Department and Social Welfare under the ministry plays an important role as focal point for all matters related to ageing. There are many nursing/old folk's homes or assisted living facilities available in Malaysia. These facilities are either privately managed or built and owned by the government. This indicates that there is demand from the society for placing their elders in these homes.

The New Sunday Times dated 22nd April 2007 reported the comments by the Jerai (Malaysia) Member of Parliament, Datuk Paduka Badruddin Amiruldin urging the parliament to enact stern law to punish errant children who abandoned their parents in the old folk's home or for not supporting them financially. The proposal was inspired from his own experience who witnesses many elderly people who have been

abandoned at old folk's homes and hardly being visited by their children even during festive seasons, as well as from the plight of elderly people who came to seek his help in this matter. He stressed the importance of religion which condemns persons who "derhaka" (betray) against their parents and suggested imprisonment to be the punishment that will act as deterrent so that children will take care of their elderly. With this proposal, Amiruldin urges elderly parents who feel neglected to report to the authorities or the Social Welfare Department so that investigation can be initiated. They can also report the matter to the elected representatives so that it can be forwarded to the department. According to Amiruldin, if the claims are true, the family or the child will be called in for counselling and if counselling fails, then they will be brought to court. Anyone in the society who knows about the mistreatment and neglect to the elderly can also make a report to the department.

The enactment of this law receives some negative comments from the Malaysian society stating that there is something wrong with the society if the government needs to compel the children to maintain and care for their parents. The majority of the younger generations are the ones that oppose such legislation as they feel love should keep the family together and not the law. According to this group of people, maintaining parents are the responsibility of the children, not the state or the government. The report from the *New Sunday Times* (April, 22 2007) quoted the president of the National Council Senior Citizens' Organizations Malaysia, Lum Kim Tuck, responding that the proposed law was unnecessary and if introduced can be "a disgrace to us." To some people, they believe that it is the power of love, not the law that will keep the families bonded together. However, with the increasing number of cases of parent neglect, love alone does not seem to yield such power today as it used to.

NURSING IMPLICATIONS

It is our challenge in the nursing profession to assist the government in providing the best care for the elderly. Although the implications of filial piety are relatively limited because it is mainly focused on parent-child relationship and not the more general caregiver-caretaker relation, nursing is concerned with families and communities as well as individuals. Therefore filial care giving issues have implications for nursing

practice as well as research. The increasing admissions of the elderly to the hospital due to chronic illnesses expose nurses to geriatrics care. With proper geriatrics training, health care workers, especially nurses, could easily provide the foundation for older people's health services in a hospital or community setting which is through implementation of physical and mental health screening and surveillance programmes. It is important for nursing education in Malaysia to provide better learning experiences to the nursing students to promote positive attitudes and with absence of stereotyping to benefit older people who seek health care. To achieve this, schools of nursing need to develop and incorporate a module of geriatric nursing to satisfy this demand for knowledge and prepare nurses to care for older people. This will indirectly impact the society as well.

For the elderly to remain active, it is important for nurses to emphasize the need for rehabilitation from acute illness to the level of pre-morbid function in elderly patients. According to Poi, Forsyth, & Chan (2004), the need for rehabilitation is often not appreciated in Malaysia. This inevitably leads to more elderly becoming prematurely dependent and increases health care costs. Because of this, some family members may need to give up full time employment just to assume the role of caregiver. The stressors that emerge from this situation may lead to situations where sending the elderly to nursing homes may be the best solution, or, worst case scenario, where there are incidents of children physically or emotionally abusing their own elderly parents.

Poi *et. al.* (2004) summarized that the lack of rehabilitation in elderly Malaysians is related to low expectations of functional recovery from a severe illness, and that informal care is often readily provided by their spouse or family which encourages an unnecessary state of dependency. Another reason is the provisions of informal care by the family members in the way they think fit which may lead to inadvertent neglect or overprotection and inappropriate placement in nursing homes. Thus, the role of nurses is to educate the public, the families and the individuals regarding the benefits of rehabilitation for older people.

CONCLUSION

Taking care of our parents is not only an obligation to life but an honour. Fulfilling our filial piety duties and living with and taking care of our elderly parents will definitely earn the respect of other family members and aggravate our own self respect. However, at the same time it places tremendous burden on the nuclear family, spouse and children. Increasing numbers of Malaysian are considering long term institutional care for their older relative as falling birth rates mean there may not be sufficient family members at home to provide care (*Poi et al., 2004*). With these developments, cultural values are rapidly changing. Filial piety seems to be less valued in this Millennium compared to the earlier times when it was

regarded as “loss of face” to institutionalise the elderly. The transformation of filial culture has implications for policy, service planning, and professional practice. Nursing has an important role to play not only in caring for the elderly but in promoting caring attitudes within the family. Another major role for the nursing profession is to study this phenomenon in depth so that a system can be developed to cope with the issue while recognising any cultural factors that will influence future health and social care needs. It is promising to note that more attention is being given to the elderly population in Malaysia especially with the enactment of government policy and supports to encourage the society so that the values of filial piety persevered.

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