

**CENTRAL POLICY UNIT**  
**THE GOVERNMENT OF THE HONG KONG**  
**SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REGION**

**THE MEANING AND PRACTICE OF**  
**FILIAL PIETY IN HONG KONG**

**THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG**  
**DECEMBER 2009**

# The Meaning and Practice of Filial Piety in Hong Kong

Final Report  
submitted to the

Central Policy Unit  
The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

Kwok-fai Ting  
Department of Sociology and Centre for Chinese Family Studies  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

22 December 2009

## Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
Executive Summary (In Chinese).....	5
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	6
Chapter 2: Research Design.....	8
Chapter 3: The Meaning of Filial Piety .....	11
Chapter 4: The Generational Gap in Filial Expectations.....	15
Chapter 5: Gender Norms .....	18
Chapter 6: Reciprocal Support.....	20
Chapter 7: Constraints on the Practice of Filial Piety .....	22
Chapter 8: Policy Implications .....	24
Chapter 9: Conclusion .....	27
References.....	28

## Executive Summary

1. Filial piety is a powerful cultural value that prescribes the proper relationship, that is, the obligations and legitimate claims, between children and parents. It governs family functioning, especially regarding the care of elderly parents, and hence has implications for public policy toward the elderly.
2. As a cultural construct, filial piety is subject to interpretation and thus its meaning continues to evolve, albeit slowly. Research indicates that it has multiple domains. This study attempts to identify these domains and evaluate their importance to intergenerational relationships in Hong Kong.
3. In the past, filial piety was defined as children's obligations to parents and absolute respect for parental authority. Although these elements remain relevant, the level of their importance has declined considerably. Financial support of parents continues to be seen as desirable filial behavior, but its fulfillment is considered to be situational, and is often symbolic in practice. Among the younger generation, greater emphasis is given to subjective aspects of filial piety, including love, care, and respect for parents. This generation also prefers to treat parents as equals and values open communication.
4. The discrepancy in filial practice between the younger and older generations is obvious. Many of our interviewees attribute this difference to social change, which is irresistible and irreversible. The older generation has generally managed to adjust its expectations.
5. Today, filial piety is no longer prescriptive mainly among sons, and parents seldom have higher expectations of sons compared to daughters. After marrying, many daughters continue to take care of their parents. Some respondents find that the attentive and caring character of daughters leads them to contribute more to the care of their parents. The gender differences that we identify are not biological but rather are related to the subtle and small gestures through which one expresses love. The findings also shed light on the filial role played by daughters-in-law.
6. Many adult children in their early 30s are still being cared for by their parents or parents-in-law. As parents are still quite active into their 50s and 60s, they contribute in many ways to their children's lives. Child care is recognized as one key area in which parents can make a contribution by playing an advisory role.
7. Devotion to work and living apart from parents are the reasons most commonly cited by young people for finding it difficult to express their love and to care for their parents. Both parents and adult children consider their living in the same neighborhood to be a viable solution to maintain contact and mutual support.
8. Elderly parents are fully aware that their adult children may not be able to look after them as the health of the former deteriorates. Few interviewees consider elderly homes to be an acceptable option for their future. Most prefer home care with the aid of domestic helpers. The government should consider providing services and financial support to make home care a more feasible

option. Our interviewees also unanimously identify health care as their first priority regarding government support for the elderly, as declining health is their primary concern. Finally, although the stigma associated with public assistance has not yet been completely eliminated, an increasing number of people consider needy elderly to be entitled to receive such assistance.

## Executive Summary (In Chinese)

1. 孝道是強而有力的文化價值觀，對父母、子女的代際責任與義務有規範作用。孝道關乎家庭的運作模式，尤其在老人照顧方面，對老人政策具關鍵性的意義。
2. 孝道是文化建構出來的概念，其意義因不同時代的演譯而進化。前人的研究顯示，孝道並非單一概念。是項研究嘗試列舉孝道的各個面相，並評估它們在代際關係的重要性。
3. 孝道自古被認定為子女侍奉父母的責任，以及子女對父母權威的絕對敬畏。這些傳統元素雖然仍然存在，它們的重要性卻遠不如前。供養父母仍然為社會鼓勵的孝道行為，但它的實踐變得具彈性，其象徵意義多於實質的支援。年青一輩較着重主觀的孝道實踐，強調關愛與尊重，視父母為朋輩，着重開放的互相溝通。
4. 兩代對孝道的實踐存在一定的分歧。被訪者多把代際差距歸因於社會變遷，並視之為不可抗拒和不能逆轉的過程。父母一般都能夠適應時代的變遷。
5. 現今的父母甚少視孝道純為兒子的責任，對兒子與女兒的期望並無明顯差異。女兒婚後仍然肩負照顧父母的責任。部份父母更指女兒較兒子細心體貼，更懂得照顧父母。性別在照顧行為的差異並非與生俱來，兩性在照顧父母的表現，分別往往在於能否自細微的舉動表達關愛。研究亦發現媳婦在孝道的特殊角色。
6. 不少成年子女仍然依賴父母的照顧。年屆五、六十歲的父母身體依然健壯，能夠支援子女多方面的生活需要。成年子女一般都非常重視父母可以協助自己照顧下一代。
7. 工作繁忙與分開居住使年青一輩較難照顧父母及表達關愛。父母與成年子女均認為，在同一社區生活可以互相探望和照顧，是較理想的居住安排。
8. 若身體狀況走下坡，父母都明白子女不一定能夠照顧自己。極少父母會接受入住養老院，較多認為聘請家居傭工為可接受的安排。政府應在家居照顧方面提供服務與金錢支援。健康為父母首要關心的問題，他們一致認為政府的醫療支援至為重要。最後，接受政府援助是不光彩的想法沒有完全消失，但較多人認為這是有需要長者應有的權利。

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Background

- 1.1 In his 2007-08 Policy Address, the Chief Executive emphasized “the family as a core value” and stressed the importance of cherishing the family as a main driver for social harmony. Hong Kong is not alone in appealing to traditional family values – Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, which share a common Confucian tradition, are doing the same in a bid to tackle pressing social issues, among which the aging population is a key one. Filial piety, as a core family value, is a virtue that can be encouraged and nurtured to ensure that the elderly receive proper care (Miller 2004).
- 1.2 Filial piety is a very powerful concept among Chinese families as it governs the parent-child relationship, including the responsibility of children to support and care for aging parents. Salaff (1981) found that in the 1970s, Hong Kong was still very traditional in terms of filial practice among working daughters. The concept of filial piety, however, has changed considerably since then. Most studies point to a decline in filial piety and the modification of its practice because of factors including modernization, the expansion of education, and the increase in female labor force participation (Lieber, Nihira & Mink 2004; Ho 1996).
- 1.3 Although filial piety is still ideologically and culturally relevant among Chinese (Whyte 1997), many find it hard to fully translate its prescriptions into practice. Through in-depth interviews with adult children and their parents, this study assesses the adult child-parent relationship in terms of the shifting meaning of filial piety and the tension between traditional values and modern practices in family life. The findings will provide an empirical basis for (a) evaluating whether current policy initiatives adequately address elderly care and (b) identifying the kinds of support that families need to provide care for elderly members.

### Objectives

- 1.4 Our first objective is to understand how adult children and their parents interpret filial piety and rank priorities. Studies show that most Chinese embrace the idea of filial piety; however, there may be substantial variation in how they interpret this value. Respect for parental authority, for example, which is emphasized in the Confucian classics, may no longer play a key role in governing the parent-child relationship among Chinese.
- 1.5 Our second objective is to explore the generation gap between the filial expectations of the older generation and the filial practices of the younger generation. Because the former may not be consistent with the latter, it is important to understand how people, especially the older generation, reconcile this difference.
- 1.6 Our third objective is to study gender differences in filial behavior. Filial piety

is a set of gender-specific behavioral prescriptions, which dictate that sons shoulder most of the responsibility in taking care of elderly parents. In reality, daughters and daughters-in-law may play an equally important role in providing care for elderly family members. This study will investigate the gender division of labor in elderly care within the family context.

- 1.7 Our fourth objective is to examine reciprocal support between adult children and their parents. Although filial piety is a set of one-way cultural claims that include the responsibility of children to care for their parents, many adult children receive financial and other assistance from their parents. Such mutual support may contribute to a healthy relationship between generations.
- 1.8 Our fifth objective is to identify constraints on the practice of filial piety. These may arise from conflicting demands of work and family, resource deprivation, costly housing, and potential trouble in the in-law relationship. We look into the compromises that people make to accommodate constraints.
- 1.9 Our sixth objective is to provide policy implications based on the views of our subjects. We address three issues: (a) elderly homes as a solution to elderly care; (b) attitudes toward public assistance for the elderly; and (c) government's role in elderly care. These issues are inevitably linked to the concept of filial piety, which dictates the degree to which caring for elderly parents is a private versus a public obligation.

## Chapter 2: Research Design

### Background

- 2.1 This study used a qualitative approach to investigate the change in the meaning and practice of filial piety in Hong Kong. In-depth case interviews were useful in unveiling the subtle process by which people develop their own interpretations of filial piety, reconcile discrepancies with the traditional definition, and work out strategies to deal with the conflict between cultural ideals and reality.

### Sample

- 2.2 Because the goal of this study was to investigate the subjective meaning on filial piety, a representative sample through random sampling was not necessary. We used the convenience sampling method to identify respondents through referrals from acquaintances, with two criteria. First, the sample had to be representative of both working and middle class families, as filial attitude is found to be associated with social class (Ho 1996) and financial position may determine the ways in which filial piety is expressed. Second, the sample needed to be gender balanced to capture different family roles and family relationships.
- 2.3 Whenever possible, we interviewed two persons from each family, one from each generation, to compare how adult children and their parents make sense of their own situation and relationships in terms of filial responsibility. Our final sample consists of 44 people from 27 Chinese families, among which 10 are working class families. The following table shows the sample composition.

Table 2.1 Sample composition

<b>Family members interviewed</b>	<b>Number of families</b>
Mother and daughter	3
Mother and son	9
Father and daughter	2
Father and son	1
Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law	1
Son and daughter-in-law	1
Mother only	2
Father only	1
Daughter only	2
Son only	5

- 2.4 In most cases, we arranged to have two interviewers conduct an interview so that they could react more quickly to unexpected responses and support each other in following new leads and formulating new lines of inquiry. Before the

interviews, our interviewees were informed of the purpose of this study and the voluntary nature of their participation. We also assured them that all information collected would be kept confidential and not be disclosed to any members of their family. All conversations were recorded with the permission of the interviewees and transcribed. The interviews lasted on average 70 minutes.

- 2.5 To show the interviewees our appreciation for their participation and partially compensate them for their time, we presented them with a souvenir and a 100-dollar supermarket coupon at the end of the interview.

Table 2.2 Case profile

<b>Family ID</b>	<b>Relationship</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Social class</b>
01	Mother	50s	Middle class
	Son	26	Middle class
02	Mother	60	Middle class
	Daughter	26	Middle class
03	Mother	50s	Middle class
	Son	30	Middle class
04	Mother	69	Middle class
	Son	36	Middle class
05	Mother	72	Working class
	Son	50s	Working class
06	Mother	60s	Middle class
	Son	30s	Middle class
07	Father	50s	Middle class
	Daughter	20s	Middle class
08	Mother	83	Working class
	Daughter	52	Working class
09	Son	46	Working class
	Daughter-in-law	40s	Working class
10	Father	51	Working class
	Daughter	30s	Working class
11	Son	25	Middle class
12	Mother-in-law	58	Middle class
	Daughter-in-law	30	Middle class
13	Mother	50s	Working class
	Son	38	Working class
14	Mother	62	Middle class
	Son	28	Middle class
15	Son	30s	Working class
16	Mother	50s	Middle class
	Son	23	Middle class
17	Mother	60s	Working class
	Daughter	40s	Working class
18	Son	30s	Middle class
19	Son	20	Middle class
20	Mother	49	Middle class
	Son	27	Middle class
21	Father	50s	Working class
	Son	20s	Working class
22	Daughter	30s	Working class
23	Mother	57	Middle class
24	Daughter	20s	Middle class
25	Father	70	Working class
26	Son	37	Middle class
27	Mother	50s	Middle class

## Chapter 3: The Meaning of Filial Piety

### Background

- 3.1 Filial piety is considered to be the supreme virtue in Chinese culture. Essentially, it means that children should be grateful and good to their parents. However, exactly what constitutes “good” is subject to interpretation. A cultural construct such as filial piety is not a constant as it is passed down from one generation to the next; hence, its meaning evolves to fit current social conditions and needs. The concept of “utilitarianistic familism” proposed by Lau (1982) encapsulates this repackaging of a millennia-old value, while the term “rationalistic traditionalism,” coined by King (1996), describes how Hong Kong people selectively apply practical elements of Chinese tradition to modern life.
- 3.2 It is argued that filial piety is multifaceted. Sung (1995), for example, identified six elements: (a) love, (b) repayment, (c) family harmony, (d) respect, (e) obligation, and (f) sacrifice. Although this is not an exhaustive list, we examined the extent to which these elements are relevant to the local context. We asked our respondents what constitutes filial piety, how they practice it, and in which aspects they feel inadequate in accomplishing the ideal. Their responses help us to understand how Hong Kong citizens define filial piety and prioritize elements pertaining to the concept based on their own circumstances.
- 3.3 Our interviewees identified a range of behavioral attributes that define filial piety, including obedience, repayment, respect, and love. Other traditional notions of filial piety such as family harmony, sacrifice, and procreation were not mentioned. Among those elements that were considered to be the defining characteristics of filial piety, the meanings had been modified from the original ones.

### Obedience

- 3.4 Traditionally, parents had absolute authority over their children, and strict compliance with parental commands was required. Children were not allowed to argue with their parents, and thus family harmony was achieved. Today, strict obedience is not considered to be essential to fulfill filial obligations; however, a milder form of compliance is still relevant.
- 3.5 Miss Hui (Family 24) lives in a three-generation family. She remarked that whenever her grandfather does anything irritating, “my dad and mom won’t say a word, but I will talk directly to grandpa.” She recognized that her sense of filial piety was not the same as that of her parents: “I express myself more. My parents dare not say much, fight back, or argue (with my grandfather). My generation will.”
- 3.6 Mr. So said, “My dad feels (this is my own interpretation) that filial piety means listening to him, and he gives orders on everything. My mom probably is a little better . . . Among people of my generation, filial piety means being

sincere with and good to [parents], and trying to be a good friend.” His mother confirmed the importance of obedience: “How do I feel that my children are being filial? They are not at all willful. They listen to me and this is good enough. There are kids who don’t listen to their parents and become bad, and that is a problem.” She and her husband stressed that children should listen to their parents, but she was not concerned about holding absolute authority. Rather, she considered that her role was to show children the right way to live.

- 3.7 Mrs. So rejected traditional practices, which emphasize parental authority: “Really, our generation was very afraid of parents, but is this filial piety? Sometimes it is, if it comes from your heart. But some children fear their parents because they are forbidding and authoritative. Sometimes you are scared, but this isn’t necessarily filial piety . . . My parents’ generation didn’t know how to communicate with children . . . They were harsh on kids and would beat them up for no reason. Now, we reason with kids. Even though you are their mom, you can’t be unreasonable. It’s the same for fathers. People nowadays communicate in different ways from those of the past.”
- 3.8 Many parents preferred to have a friendly relationship with their children rather than maintaining the traditional parent-child hierarchy. Mrs. So said, “As for the children, I would like for us to be friends and able to chat casually. I don’t like to present myself as the older generation (zhǎngbèi). I don’t feel comfortable in that role.”

### Repayment

- 3.9 Repayment was found to be a strong motivating factor for filial behavior. When asked why she should be filial, Miss Hui (Family 02) said, “When I was small, I saw that my parents led a difficult life. I didn’t know how to thank them then, but now is the time . . . especially as I am working. I should take care of mom [and dad] in return, be filial, that is, repay them for what they did for me.” This desire for repayment grew out of gratefulness, and was not an exchange in any sense. Miss Hui’s response to the question “What is true filial piety?” indicated that material obligation was foremost. She replied, “I think, the basic [responsibility] is to ensure that they need not worry about how they are going to live. This is fundamental. You don’t need to be very rich, but [they] shouldn’t need to worry about how they are going to get by. Secondly, I think . . . respect them, and care about them.”
- 3.10 Whereas Miss Hui pays family expenses (jiā yòng) on a regular basis as an expression of filial piety, her brother, who earns much less, does not do so. Mrs. Hui, their mother, commented, “It doesn’t matter to me whether or not my children give me money, because I have savings . . . I don’t expect my son to give me money – I am OK with it. He is frugal; he won’t save up the money only to spend it lavishly.” Mrs. Hui accepted that her son needed savings to pursue his plans to pursue a master’s degree and marry. When we pressed this issue, she did add, “Children should give money to their parents, even a very small amount.” However, despite this comment, she regarded her son as filial.
- 3.11 The traditional wisdom of “raising children against old age” (yǎng ér fáng lǎo) has a strong connotation of repayment. Mrs. So (Family 03) recounted her own story as follows: “We don’t really consider whether this is filial. After I

started working, I took my entire income home. Does this count as filial piety? I don't know. In fact, this was not up to me. You could sense your family's expectation that you do so. Anyway, if you didn't surrender your income, you might be beaten." She continued, "In the past, you had to support your parents, because they didn't have much money and there was no pension. Unless their parents were rich, children had to take money home." The obligation of adult children to provide for parents was a matter of family survival in the past.

- 3.12 The idea of material repayment has weakened. Mrs. So commented: "It is just the opposite for this generation. They don't have enough for themselves, so how can they support their parents?" She rationalized this trend: "Really, taking care of parents and giving financial support are two different things. Children may not be able to afford financial support as the cost of living in Hong Kong is quite high, but caring is different . . . I think filial piety means to show concern and care for parents." She added, "An aging body is like a broken machine. Elderly parents wish for more attention and care."
- 3.13 Growing up in a working class family, Miss Choi (Family 10) was fully aware of the difficulties in supporting parents: "My parents never ask us to support them. They understand that it is difficult for our generation to earn enough and therefore do not expect us to take care of them financially. If they think that way, they will be very disappointed. Really, it is best for them to prepare to take care of themselves." She concluded, "Regarding support for parents, it all depends on the needs of one's parents and one's ability."
- 3.14 Supporting elderly parents was traditionally a must, especially for sons, but the views of parents today have changed with respect to this requirement, and its fulfillment can be situational and even symbolic. Many middle class parents realize that their children are not on solid financial ground and are even prepared to give them financial support rather than expecting monetary repayment. The prospect of receiving adequate financial support from children is slim.

## Respect

- 3.15 Respect was frequently mentioned as a defining characteristic of filial piety by the participants in our study. Mr. Ng's (Family 06) father had passed away early and he had a very close relationship with his mother and sister: "Filial piety . . . generally means listening to mom . . . not hiding your feelings, talking to each other, sharing problems. In addition, the most basic thing is that mom should feel our respect for her. We put her above everything." He said that although his mother's opinion greatly influenced his decisions, his respect for her did not mean that he would always follow her advice. It depended on the kind of issue involved. He noted, "If you talk about filial piety, I see it as respect. It really means not just my respect for mom but also her respect for me. The definition of respect is: We try to understand each other's problems, even needs, when making a decision or offering an opinion."
- 3.16 The Ng family emphasized communication. Mr. Ng clearly did not see filial piety as unidirectional. He explained, "I don't merely listen to mom . . . the one-way kind of listening . . . I see changes in mom's mentality . . . she has adjusted very well, that is, she has adapted to the current trend." He said, "We

do not function in a traditional way; that is, [my sister and I] call [our mother] mom but sometimes consider her to be a friend . . . Sometimes we tease her, challenge her. Mom sometimes fights back. In this kind of communication, our relationship is not purely hierarchical but rather sometimes equal.”

### Love and Care

- 3.17 When asked to define filial piety, our interviewees often described it as love and care rather than an obligation. Mr. So (Family 03) pointed out, “We have arguments, but I still love [my parents]. Love is filial piety, and I will try to be accommodating.” His mother held similar attitudes, and gave a very straightforward reason for this: “Care for old parents. Aging causes their condition to deteriorate.”
- 3.18 Mrs. Lau (Family 12), who comes from a middle class background, emphasized the subjective aspect of filial piety: “I think it is about an attitude, a kind of internal value, and a mentality . . . The essential thing is love and a kind of gratefulness.”
- 3.19 Miss Choi (Family 10), who comes from a working class background, looked at filial piety from a similar angle: “In fact, filial piety is not necessarily measured by material support. It’s like, you can feel whether a guy loves you . . . you can feel it. If you are good to your parents, they can feel it too . . . Filial piety is part of your life; one should practice it, but it is not your whole life.” She said, “The most important thing is to take good care of yourself and let them know you are happy (xìngfú) . . . to spend time and share your life with them. I think that is filial piety.”
- 3.20 Her father considered Miss Choi to be the most filial of his children: “My older daughter sometimes buys me tea bags and coffee, makes coffee or milk tea . . . or asks me out for afternoon tea. She shows it [filial piety]. Every month, despite her small earnings, she offers me money, a few hundred dollars to buy snacks. Really.” He added, “She visits more often, and offers money to her mother. We know that she earns little, so usually we refuse to take it.” Of his other children he noted, “They are not unfilial, but usually a bit lazy. My older daughter will try to please us, but the others are not that willing to do so. However, if anything happens to this family, they are united and care about the family.” The case of the Choi family illustrates that the practice of filial piety can be a matter of small gestures showing love and concern.

### Summary

- 3.21 In the past, filial piety was defined as children’s obligations to their parents and absolute respect for parental authority. Although these elements continue to be relevant, the level of their importance has declined and their meaning has changed considerably. In addition, financial support of parents is no longer a must. Although it is still seen as desirable filial behavior, its fulfillment is considered to be situational and can even be symbolic. The findings show a greater emphasis among the interviewees on subjective aspects of filial piety, namely, love, care, and respect for parents. The adult children also prefer to treat their parents as equals and value open communication with them.

## Chapter 4: The Generational Gap in Filial Expectations

### Background

- 4.1 Behavior-related cohort asynchrony describes the tendency among older people to hold on to the behavioral standards of their past and find themselves at odds with current ones (Riley, Foner & Waring, 1988). This is the case for filial piety. Studies show that parents are uncertain whether the filial behavior that they practiced in the past will be followed by their children (e.g., Lieber, Nihira & Mink 2004). How to manage and resolve the difference in expectations between generations is a dilemma with which both parents and adult children need to come to terms in their daily interactions with each other. This issue is also related to the broader issue of the sociohistorical tension between tradition and change.

### Generational Gap

- 4.2 From the perspective of the younger generation, the filial standards of the past are too high to attain in modern life. Mr. So (Family 03) said, “No one can say one word about my dad to grandma; he had done the best possible. My mom is the same regarding her parents. If you ask: How about me? I can achieve no more than one tenth of their filial piety.”
- 4.3 Among the older generation, devotion to family comes naturally. Mr. Choi (Family 10), who is in his 50s, told us that his wife takes good care of her own family, even though her doing so is somewhat burdensome to his family. “My wife does too much. She takes care of her parents, her brothers, and even her little brother’s kids. I don’t know why, but she is used to it and is glad to do it. She gives up everything she has for her family . . . with no regrets, just like she owes them . . . She even borrow money [from others] to help them. I just don’t understand.”
- 4.4 Mrs. Yang (Family 09), who is in her late forties and from a working class background, maintains a high standard of filial piety and thinks little of it. She insisted that helping family is natural and unconditional: “I left mainland China at a very young age. I sent almost all my income home, or all of it . . . This was about 1980.” She said, “I started working when I was a teenager. I sent [my parents] almost all of my money; therefore, they didn’t need to worry about how to live . . . I don’t know whether this is filial piety . . . I don’t mind sending them money at all. I am proud of it.”
- 4.5 To examine discrepancies in the ideal of filial piety and its practice between generations, we asked our interviewees how practical the traditional wisdom of “raising children against old age” (yǎng ér fáng lǎo) is. Only a few interviewees responded affirmatively. Although firmly agreeing with this principle, Mrs. So (Family 03) acknowledged that “young people today aren’t like that . . . They spend the money first and take the remainder home. In the past, it wasn’t like that. We took our entire income home and then our parents reallocated some to us. If that was not enough, you had to deal with it yourself.

It is just the opposite now. In the past, we supported our parents and even took care of brothers and sisters. Now, young people don't even have enough for themselves. They may give their parents one or two thousand dollars, but they live and eat at home, and the money actually isn't enough to cover their expenses."

- 4.6 Although Miss Hui (Family 02) is only 26 years old, she responded, "I feel an obligation to support my parents, but I don't expect the next generation to do the same. Young people nowadays study for a much longer period . . . Their parents might retire one or two years after they have left school, housing is expensive, and together with inflation, they probably can't support themselves. Therefore, I don't expect the next generation to take care of me. However, in spiritual terms, young people should care for their parents."

### Social Change and Adjustment

- 4.7 Almost all interviewees recognized that the generation gap is due primarily to social change. We asked Mrs. Hui (Family 02) to use her own filial practice as the standard to measure her children's filial performance. At first, she attributed the generation gap to differences in mentality, but then she added, "It's different! They are now more educated. Their thoughts and ways of doing things are different from mine. However, there is one thing; that is, they don't know how to take care of their home. For example, they don't clean it even if it is messy. They don't know how to take care of it; they don't care. Although their career is fine, their life is not." Her comments suggest that as members of the younger generation pay more attention to their careers, they inevitably do less for their families.
- 4.8 Social change can cause confusion and uncertainty. Mrs. Ng (Family 06) stressed that children must support parents: "Talking about my daughter, it depends on her situation. If she is doing OK, I would demand that she support me. It doesn't matter whether it is one thousand dollars or one hundred dollars. I would be very happy. She has done her part. . . . About my son, it is a must regardless of his financial situation. I may be traditional, whatever, he must support his mother." Regarding "yǎng ér fǎng lǎo," however, she contradicted herself: "No more yǎng ér fǎng lǎo, that is, I don't need them to support me. I only need their caring and respect. No more yǎng ér fǎng lǎo. I would be very happy if they don't come back to ask for money."
- 4.9 The older generation has tried to retain some traditional practices. Mrs. Leung (Family 04), a 69-year-old mother, still performs the ritual of kneeling and bowing her head when offering tea to the older generation during the Chinese New Year. She hinted to her sons that she would like to be honored in the same way. She eventually got what she wanted. It seems easier to keep symbolic traditional practices, but reversion to the past model of the parent-child relationship looks impossible.
- 4.10 Many of our interviewees understand that social change is both irresistible and irreversible. The older generation has tried very hard to adjust to change. As noted, Mr. Ng (Family 06) observed, "I see changes in mom's mentality. She belongs to the older generation, which emphasizes parental authority, but . . . she has adjusted very well, that is, she has adapted to the current trend." A

major reason for this change, according to Mr. Ng, was that the younger generation has more education.

- 4.11 Another response is to stress independence and self reliance. Mrs. Hui (Family 02) told us, “I don’t expect that [yǎng ér fǎng lǎo]. I haven’t thought about it. But, let’s say, if I have money, I won’t tell my son, as he told me . . . he can’t support me much in future.” Mrs. Yang (Family 09) cited the case of her janitor colleague to illustrate that one cannot depend on one’s children: “She is in her sixties and still has to work as a cleaner . . . She needs to survive. Her children may not have much money, but they never give her anything. She pays the rent, and they live with her!”

### Summary

- 4.12 There is an obvious difference in filial practice between the younger and the older generation. Many of our interviewees attribute this to social change. People recognize that social change is irresistible and irreversible; however, rapid change can cause confusion and uncertainty about what filial expectations are reasonable. Some people may cling to past practices, often ritual, symbolic gestures. However, in general, those of the older generation have managed to adjust their expectations.

## Chapter 5: Gender Norms

### Background

- 5.1 Filial norms are gender specific. Filial piety requires that sons live with and provide for their aged parents, but such obligations are not imposed upon married daughters, although daughters often play an important role in caring for ailing parents. Recent surveys and case studies indicate that an increasing number of parents prefer to have daughters than sons (Family Planning Association of Hong Kong 1999; Miller 2004) as they have begun to recognize the contribution of daughters to their future well-being. Women often play the role of “kinkeeper,” maintaining frequent contact with parents as well as providing daily assistance and emotional support (Lye 1996). The redefinition of the filial role of daughters is especially important in light of the recent trend toward the one-child family.

### Gender stereotypes

- 5.2 Regarding gender differences in meeting filial obligations, Mrs. Yang (Family 09) observed, “In mainland China, sons had great responsibility, but now, daughters and sons are the same. [In fact, it’s] just the opposite: I think daughters take care of their parents more often.” She added, “I observed that in Hong Kong, if parents need anything, they look to their daughters rather than their sons . . . With sons, you have to have a good relationship with your daughter-in-law. If not, she will not take care of you. This is especially true for this younger generation. However, daughters will not leave their parents behind. Really, the impression of sons is somewhat negative. Among the younger generation, boys don’t know how to take care of their parents. Girls seem better . . . [They] are more attentive . . . I am not saying boys are unfilial, but they are rude.”
- 5.3 Daughters are keen to keep in touch with their parents after they have moved out of the family home. Mr. So (Family 03) described his sisters’ links with the family as follows: “In fact, my older sister continues to think a lot about this family even after marrying, because she comes back for dad’s birthday, all other celebrations, and we go out together pretty often to have fun . . . My little sister is not in Hong Kong . . . but she calls four to five times a week to chat with mom, and to dad too. My older sister comes three to four times a month for dinner.” Mr. So said, “There is no difference between boys and girls. Whoever has the ability should do more, not necessarily boys or girls, because society has changed.”
- 5.4 In the Hui family (Family 02), Miss Hui felt that there was little difference in filial practice between her and her brother, as both of them actively sought to share their parents’ worries (xīnshi). Although Mrs. Hui, her mother, spoke highly of both the children, she felt that her daughter was somewhat more filial because she was more attentive (xìxīn) and caring (guānxīn). Gender differences were observed in how the children expressed their love. Mrs. Hui

said, “My son . . . in his heart, he loves me dearly, but he always challenges me. Ha! He loves to argue with me.” About her daughter, she noted, “[She] always says: ‘Mom, when I earn enough money, I will buy you a big house, a beautiful car.’ Ha! Although it is merely talk, not real, you can see her heart, that she cares about me in every way. My son is not that sensitive.” Obviously, the daughter’s expression of her care for her mother was more endearing to Mrs. Hui, whose remarks support gender stereotypes.

- 5.5 Mrs. So (Family 03) made similar remarks about gender differences. We asked whether she preferred daughters or sons, and she responded, “Difficult to say which gender is better, it isn’t your choice . . . However, sons are careless. Daughters are more careful and attentive. This is a fact.” She pointed out subtle differences in gifts: “My daughter buy me gifts more often, probably because girls like shopping, like buying things. Sometimes, she buys a lot of trifles. Boys don’t like shopping, so my son buys snacks to share with us.”
- 5.6 The filial role of the daughter-in-law has often been overshadowed by that of her husband, and is neglected in the literature on filial relationships. This is due in part to the awkward position of the daughter-in-law as an “outsider” in the family. Miss Hui (Family 24) told us about her mother’s experience as a new member of her father’s family: “According to my aunt, grandma treated mom really badly right after [mom and dad] married . . . There was one time mom went back to her own family to celebrate her mom’s birthday. Mom got home a bit late and was scolded by grandma for paying the visit and returning home late. Now that I am older, my sister and I will defend my mom.” However, the relationship between the in-laws had improved gradually.
- 5.7 Mrs. Lau (Family 12), who is in her early 30s, told us that when she and her boyfriend (now husband) were dating, she observed and tried to fit into his family. Her husband is rather carefree and not good at expressing his feelings. Very often, Mrs. Lau serves as a bridge between him and his family: “As I am in the middle, I encourage and push him a little. For example, on Mother’s Day and his mother’s birthday, he always buys a bottle of red wine to celebrate. His sister puts a lot of thought into writing a card. So, I suggest something more thoughtful to make his parents happy.”

## Summary

- 5.8 Chinese familism emphasizes the son’s role in fulfilling filial duties and neglects the daughter’s contribution to caring for parents, especially after her marriage. However, traditional gender roles with regard to filial obligations no longer hold in today’s Hong Kong. Parents seldom have higher expectations of sons compared to daughters, and after marrying, daughters are more likely than sons to take care of their parents. Some parents feel that daughters contribute more because of their more attentive and caring character. The gender differences that we identify are not biological but rather a matter of the expression of love through small, subtle gestures. Our findings also reveal the filial role played by daughters-in-law.

## Chapter 6: Reciprocal Support

### Background

- 6.1 Filial piety is often practiced in the context of reciprocal support. Although filial piety is considered to comprise the one-way obligations of children to their parents (Sung 2004), many parents provide financial support and childcare services for their adult children (Bumpass 1990; Cooney & Uhlenberg 1992). Whyte's (1997) study conducted in urban China, for example, showed that adult children considered mutual help between generations as the greatest benefit of living with parents.

### Parental contributions

- 6.2 In the sample, many of the adult children were still single in their late 20s and early 30s and lived in their parents' home. They and many of those who were married were being cared for by parents rather than the reverse. Miss Choi (Family 10) lived with her mother-in-law and described her situation as follows: "I don't do anything. She does everything. Every night when I come home after work or before I go out, at about eight o'clock, she asks whether I will eat at home. If I say yes, soup will be ready. After dinner, she takes care of the dishes. I take my clothes out and she does the laundry for me. That's why I think living with my mother-in-law isn't that bad."
- 6.3 There are many things that parents can do to help their adult children, including helping in their lives after marriage and taking care of children. Miss Hui (Family 02) said: "[My mother will need to] teach me how to take care of children, because it is likely that I will have kids. Also, I will assume a different role after marriage – being a daughter-in-law. I need to think more about how to deal with different types of relationships. I can consult mom and dad on this. And then, cooking, that is, how to manage a family, I also need to consult mom."
- 6.4 Mr. So (Family 03) preferred not to live with his parents after marriage, but he admitted that there would be advantages if he and his wife did: "There are a lot of advantages: cooking, laundry. Let's say, I do a little and they do some; it saves a lot of work. Mom said that she won't take care of my children. Then, we are not going to have any. She may become desperate." However, he did not see that it was his mother's responsibility to look after his children: "It is not a duty. She has taken care of me for 20 years – and then 20 more years for my children? That is asking too much!"
- 6.5 Most adult children valued the experience and wisdom of their parents, especially their mothers, in looking after their children. In some cases, the assistance of parents was pivotal to a dual earner couple. Mr. Ng (Family 06) commented: "Given my current [financial] situation, my [future] wife won't be able to look after our baby, because my earnings are not great. If we have a baby, both my wife and I will have to keep working. Who will take care of the baby? There is a real possibility that mom will take care of the baby. Or, my

mother-in-law could be another possibility. I accept this arrangement, but it depends on their ability. If they are able and willing to do so, then it will be OK.”

## Summary

- 6.6 Filial piety is unidirectional, with children expected to support their parents. However, in our sample, many adult children in their early 30s are still being supported, financially and otherwise, by their parents or parents-in-law. As parents are still in fairly good health in their 50s and 60s, they contribute in many ways to their adult children’s lives. Child care is recognized as a key area in which parents can make a contribution, but few consider this to be a responsibility. Rather, many adult children see their parents as playing an advisory role.

## Chapter 7: Constraints on the Practice of Filial Piety

### Background

- 7.1 Studies show a discrepancy between the attitudinal expression and behavioral manifestation of filial piety (Lieber, Nihira & Mink 2004). Although most Chinese wish to meet the traditional standards of filial piety, their practice rarely reflects their aspiration. We looked into the constraints that prevent people from aligning the former with the latter and investigated how people reconcile the discrepancy between cultural ideals and reality.

### Constraints

- 7.2 Although love and care are emphasized as elements of filial piety, adult children often find it difficult to express and practice them. Mr. Choi (Family 10) said: “The full practice of filial piety requires a lot of time and thought, particularly if [parents] are old – spending time with them and taking time to care for them. Going out more often for tea, chatting, and spending more time together would be good.” Simply put, time is essential.
- 7.3 Time is a scarce resource, particularly among young people still struggling to establish careers. When we asked what more she could do for her parents, Miss Hui (Family 02), an accountant, said, “I think . . . to chat more often with them and go out together for tea (“yǐn chá”), because just once would make them very happy for a long time.” But she admitted that tea together in a Chinese restaurant was rare: “It must be a long time since we last went . . . I can’t remember, really not often – most of the time we eat at home.” Miss Choi (Family 10) jokingly suggested that the government should limit work hours so that children can have more time with parents.
- 7.4 Distance is another factor that limits the delivery of care. We asked Mrs. So whether she would ask her older daughter to accompany her to see a doctor, and she replied, “No, not because she doesn’t want to, but she lives too far away and has a child. By the time she arrives, I have already seen the doctor and taken the medicine.” She added, “Sure, someone who lives with you will take better care of you, but then there will be more arguments, too.”
- 7.5 Co-residence is an ideal arrangement for many parents, but few adult children consider it viable after they marry. Mrs. Hui admitted that deep down in her heart, she wanted to live with both of her children. Even though Miss Hui wanted the same thing, she worried that her future husband might not get along with her family: “If I get married, we will have to discuss the living arrangement. They will probably not get along . . . Mom may not want to live with him.” An ideal solution for her is to move nearby after marriage. Many people shared this view.
- 7.6 Mr. So (Family 03) repeatedly cited the conventional wisdom that it is easy to socialize but much harder to live together (xiāng jiàn hào, tong zhù nàn) to rationalize his preference for not wanting to living with his parents or parents-in-law if it was financially possible. His mother agreed: “Really, I feel that

there is a gap between me and younger people. I am sure of it. Does living together have advantages? We can take care of each other; this is true. But if the [financial] situation allows, really it is best that we live on our own. Our lifestyles are really different. This is my view.”

### Summary

- 7.7 Time and space influence the ways in which people relate to one another. The practice of filial piety is limited by these two factors. In the past, living with parents was a requirement, but fewer people today consider this to be a viable option. A popular alternative is to live in the same neighborhood.

## Chapter 8: Policy Implications

### Background

- 8.1 Taking care of the elderly is both a private and a public responsibility; the difficulty is where to draw the line between the two. The perceptions of filial piety held by the younger and older generations inevitably dictate the ways in which the government is involved in elderly care and the associated domains of social service provision. In this study, we focused on three issues related to the practice of filial piety: whether people consider elderly homes to be an acceptable solution to elder care; whether public assistance for the elderly has a negative label; and what role the government could play to improve the life of the elderly.

### Attitudes toward Elderly Homes

- 8.2 Sending parents to an elderly home is considered to be extremely unfilial, for the notion that children should take care of their elderly parents is still firmly rooted in Hong Kong society. Miss Hui (Family 02) flatly rejected the idea of sending her parents to an elderly home: “I think it is like shifting your own responsibility to others. The helpers in elderly homes are not your own family. If you are not there, you don’t know how they treat your parents. And, you make your parents feel like they have been abandoned.”
- 8.3 Miss Hui’s mother preferred not to think about the time when she could not care for herself: “I dare not think about it now . . . I hope that I don’t need to go [to an elderly home], but it is difficult to tell. In the future, when [my children] are busy with their work and no one can take care of me, you have to let nature takes its course. There isn’t really anything I can do now. I don’t want to go there – a family should be together. . . . Actually, I prefer euthanasia. Ha!”
- 8.4 Mrs. Ng (Family 06) shared this sentiment: “An elderly home . . . going there is pitiful (qīliáng). I would be lying if I told you that I am willing to go there, but I don’t want to make it difficult for my children. Living in an elderly home is really miserable.” Her son, a physiotherapist, fully understands the conditions of elderly homes. He told us that he will not send his mother to one and added, “I see a lot of cases because of my job. The quality of elderly homes is really bad, especially the private ones. A healthy old woman going in there would become . . . that is, those with four healthy limbs would become crippled.” Although Mrs. Ng has a very good relationship with her son, she expressed uncertainty about her future: “I told my son that when I am old, I will go to an elderly home. My son told me not to be silly: ‘Living in an elderly home is deplorable; I won’t put you there.’ I told him, ‘You won’t send me there, that is what you are thinking now, but no one can tell what will happen in the future.’”
- 8.5 Almost all interviewees considered an elderly home to be a desperate measure. Mr. So (Family 03) told us, “I think that sending parents to elderly homes

depends on the situation, [for example,] if you really can't take care of them and they can't take care of themselves . . . However, I myself really don't want to send my parents to an elderly home. If you think sending your parents to an elderly home solves the problem, it's not true." Mr. Ng (Family 06) had the same mentality: "[I would not send my mother to an elderly home] unless [the situation] were really very unfortunate, that is, if she had a serious condition. Then, there would be no other choice, because she could receive better medical attention there."

- 8.6 Miss Chan (Family 07), a high school teacher, is an exception. As a volunteer, she had visited an elderly home sponsored by the Hong Kong Jockey Club. The elderly home had a garden and was well maintained. Thus, she had a rather positive attitude toward elderly homes and was receptive to the idea of sending her parents to one when necessary. Her father expected to live in an elderly home some day, but preferred a better one if he could afford it. However, he realized that this was not under his control and felt somewhat helpless.
- 8.7 The members of the older generation were fully aware that their health would deteriorate and were caught in a dilemma: being a burden to children or living in an elderly home. Some preferred not to think about the unavoidable. Among the younger generation, a popular option was to hire a domestic helper. Miss Hui (Family 02) said: "I will hire a domestic helper. When I am at work, my parents will be taken care of. When I come home, I can see them every day and know what has happened." Another option for Mr. Choi (Family 10) was to retire to mainland China. He didn't have a concrete plan but said, "I wish to earn enough money. If people here can't take care of me, I would prefer to go back to my village and hire someone to take care of me there. I really don't like the idea [of living in an elderly home]."

### Attitude toward Public Assistance

- 8.8 The dependence of an elderly person on public assistance means that his or her children have failed to perform their filial duty; thus, it is shameful for both the parents and the children. Mr. Choi (Family 10), who is from a working class background, did not say that receiving public assistance is shameful but resisted the idea of getting it: "To get public assistance . . . I've never thought of that, never . . . In all of the time that I have lived in Hong Kong, I have never depended on the government." Although there is increasing concern about the abuse of social welfare, this was not the case among our interviewees. Mrs. Yang (Family 09), a janitor, made it very clear: "We don't need the government to help us, because we don't need to pay tax."
- 8.9 Quite a number of interviewees, both adult children and parents, felt that elderly people are entitled to public assistance if they need it, for they had contributed to society when they were young. However, not all were completely at ease with it. Mr. Ng (Family 06) admitted that he would feel that he had lost face if his mother received public assistance. For him, taking public assistance could only be a temporary arrangement: "I am not cheating or robbing. As a temporary measure for the transitional period, it is OK. However, I would not depend on it for long."

## Government's Role in Elderly Care

- 8.10 Among the many things that the government can do for the elderly, the first thing that came to mind among our interviewees was medical care. Mrs. Hui (Family 02) said: "Medical care is the most important [form of government support], because old people have many types of diseases. It is very expensive to consult a doctor; therefore, medical care is very important." An underlying reason for her emphasis on medical care was her concern about her health. She was afraid of sickness and suffering, and the extra burden that would entail for her children, who have to work.
- 8.11 Mr. Ng (Family 06), because of his work experience in elderly care, asserted that it was the government's responsibility to care for old people: "In terms of facilities, the hardware, it is good enough . . . but when it comes to the software, the psychology of the elderly, I don't think it is enough." As a physiotherapist, he had a rather bad impression of elderly homes. He said, "Very often the government talks about giving money to support the elderly to live in elderly homes, but I prefer the possibility of the other way around. You can give money to the elderly not to live in an elderly home but to hire a helper at home. My view is that, for the elderly, this can take care of their material and psychological needs, because, in the end, they live in their own place and have their own social circle." He reasoned that the money involved would be about the same but that the arrangement would be much more humane.

## Summary

- 8.12 Health is a major concern among the elderly. They are fully aware that their adult children, however filial, might not be able to take care of them when they need intensive care. However, at present, elderly care is still mostly a private responsibility. Few of our interviewees consider elderly homes to be an option for elderly care. For one thing, the level of quality of most elderly homes in Hong Kong is quite poor. Many adult children prefer home care for their elderly parents with the aid of domestic helpers. The government might consider providing services and financial support to make home care more feasible for these families. Our interviewees unanimously name health care as their first priority for elderly support, as the decline in their/their parents' health is their primary concern. Finally, although the stigma of receiving public assistance has not yet been completely eliminated, an increasing number of people consider such assistance to be an entitlement of the needy elderly.

## Chapter 9: Conclusion

- 9.1 In this study, we begin with the assumption that filial piety is an evolving cultural concept with its contents defined by social interpretation. The purpose of our in-depth interviews is to probe into people's subjective views on what constitute filial piety. We found that few people still adhere to the traditional view that filial piety is the respect of absolute parental authority. Although financial obligation is still a relevant filial expression, its importance has declined. More people today emphasize love and care as the key elements of filial practice.
- 9.2 As the ideas of filial piety keep evolving, reference to an absolute standard is impossible and this necessarily causes confusion. Generational gap in filial expectation is one example evident in this study. Although our respondents understand that social change causes generational differences, a process that is both irresistible and irreversible, members of the older generation express uncertainties about their future as they don't know what filial obligations to expect from their children. Mutual understanding from both sides is needed in order to bridge the gap.
- 9.3 A fundamental change in the filial norm is that filial practice is now less differentiated by adult children's gender. Married daughters continue to take care of parents; many parents actually consider daughters as better caregivers because they are more attentive and caring than sons. Expressiveness and attention to details are more a matter of gender role socialization than biological differences. There is no reason that sons cannot relate themselves to parents in a similar way as daughters have done.
- 9.4 There are structural factors hindering the practice of filial piety. As work becomes more and more demanding, many young adults find it difficult to squeeze out time to be with family. At the same time, co-residence with elder parents is less common due to a concern with potential conflicts between in-laws. These developments limit family as the base for elderly care. But elders are not necessarily a liability for young people. On the contrary, many elders actually help to take care of their adult children and grandchildren.
- 9.5 The practice of filial piety today emphasizes emotional support to elder parents, but individual families may not have sufficient resources such as time, finance, and expertise to take care of dependent elders. Currently, elderly homes are poorly developed to become a welcomed solution to most families. Home care seems to be more consistent with the filial norms, but the government needs to provide sufficient financial and service support to make it feasible for frail elders. Public policy also needs to address the health care needs of elders as this is their primary concern. Welfare abuse, while getting much public attention, may have been exaggerated as most families consider getting public assistance as a desperate move and the last resort.

## References

- Bumpass, L.L. 1990. "What's happening to the family? Interactions between demographic and institutional change." *Demography* 27:483-98.
- Cooney, T.M. & Uhlenberg, P. 1992. "Support from parents over the life course: The adult child's perspective." *Social Forces* 71:63-84.
- Ho, D.Y.F. 1996. "Filial piety and its psychological consequences." Pp. 155-165 in *The handbook of Chinese psychology*, edited by M. Bond. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- King, Ambrose Y.C. 1996. "The Transformation of Confucianism in the Post-Confucian Era: The Emergence of Rationalistic Traditionalism in Hong Kong" In *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons*, edited by Tu Weiming. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lieber, E., Nihira, K. & Mink, I.T. 2004. "Filial piety, modernization, and the challenges of raising children for Chinese immigrants: Quantitative and Qualitative evidence." *Ethos* 32:324-347.
- Lau, Siu-kai. 1982. *Society and Politics in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.
- Miller, E.T. 2004. "Filial daughters, filial sons: Comparisons from rural North China." Pp. 34-52 in *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia*, edited by Charlotte Ikels. Stanford:CA, Stanford University Press.
- Riley, M.W., Foner, A., & Waring, J. 1988. "Sociology of age." Pp. 243-290 in *Handbook of Sociology*, edited by N.J. Smelser. Newbury Park: CA. Sage Publications.
- Salaff, J. 1981. *Working Daughters of Hong Kong: Filial Piety or Power in the Family?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sung, K.T. 1995. "Measures and dimensions of filial piety in Korea." *Gerontologist* 35:240-247.
- The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong. 1999. *Family Planning Knowledge, Attitude and Practice in Hong Kong Survey 1997*. Hong Kong: The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong.
- Wang, D.Y. 2004. "Ritualistic coresidence and the weakening of filial practice in rural China." Pp. 16-33 in *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia*, edited by Charlotte Ikels. Stanford:CA, Stanford University Press.
- Whyte, M.K. 1997. "The fate of filial obligations in urban China." *The China Journal* 38:1-31.