

**Subcontracting Filial Piety:  
Elder Care in Dual-Earner Chinese  
Immigrant Households in the Bay Area**

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*Working Paper No. 21  
April 2001*

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Acknowledgements: I am grateful to all the informants for their time and kindness. Barrie Thorne, Arlie Hochschild, Marta Gutman, and Chris Wellin have offered useful comments for revision. I also thank Shirley Ouyang for transcribing interviews, as well as Bonnie Kwan and Janet Oh for administrative assistance. This research is funded by the Alfred Sloan Foundation Center for Working Families at the University of California, Berkeley.

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## **Abstract**

The cultural norm of filial piety has traditionally governed intergenerational relationships in ethnic-Chinese families. Based on in-depth interviews with middle-class dual-earner Taiwanese and Hong Kong immigrant families in the Bay Area, I examine the modification of the cultural meanings and social practices of elder care in the contexts of resettlement in the United States. I use the term “subcontracting filial piety” to describe that adult children employ non-family care workers to be filial agents paid by private or public funds. I analyze the commodification of elder care from three dimensions – where care takes places, who gives care, and who pays for care –and examine the impacts on the meanings and boundaries of Chinese families. Although three-generational cohabitation may have declined on foreign soil, the family remains the nexus of care networks and economic ties among Chinese immigrants. Through recruiting home care workers as fictive kin, immigrant adult children are able to maintain the cultural ideal of filial care. The receipt of public care among immigrant elders does not necessarily indicate the diminishment of family bonds, but reinforces kin connections as channels for circulating economic resources.

“I told her that I hire you to help me achieve my filial duty,” Paul Wang, a 60-year-old Taiwanese immigrant and an owner of a successful software company in Silicon Valley, told me, describing a conversation with the in-home care worker he employed to care for his 85-year-old mother suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. The cultural norm of filial piety governs the care for aging parents in ethnic Chinese families.<sup>i</sup> However, many dual-earner Chinese immigrant households, like their American middle-class peers of other ethnic origins, now seek services provided by non-family workers to solve the thorny problem of elder care. The commodification of elder care, what I call “subcontracting filial piety,” reveals the transformation of this traditional cultural logic and the reconstitution of family relations among ethnic Chinese immigrants in the United States.

This article underscores the significance of ethnicity in the formation of cultures of care. The issue of ethnic diversity is especially crucial in California, where 25 percent of current residents are foreign-born (10 percent of the U.S. population is foreign-born).<sup>ii</sup> Kritz et al. (2000) analyzed the U.S. census data and found that elderly immigrants from Asia and Latin America, compared to natives and other immigrants, are more likely to be living with children and less likely to be living alone or with spouses only. However, scholars have pointed out that it is unclear whether variations in the arrangements for elder care along the lines of ethnicity reflect cultural differences or disparities in economic resources (Abel 1990). To disentangle this analytic conflation, my research focuses on middle-class dual-earner immigrant families from Taiwan and Hong Kong. I argue that ethnic culture is not a static heritage, but is constantly reconstituted in varying institutional contexts. The examination of care for the immigrant elderly provides a focal point for observing how cultural norms and practices may be challenged and transformed in response to different institutional prerequisites in the new country.

In this article, I introduce the concept of “a transfer chain of filial care” to describe how the filial duty of elder care is achieved through gender transfer (from sons to daughters-in-law) and market transfer (from female kin to non-family care workers). As intergenerational relationships in ethnic Chinese families have changed in the institutional context of the United States, immigrant families develop varying arrangements for subcontracting elder care. I argue that the commodification of elder care, which involves where care takes places, who gives care,

and who pays for care, has reconstituted the meanings and boundaries of Chinese families on three levels: organizations of kin, residential cohabitation, and economic ties.

### **A Transfer Chain of Filial Care**

The cultural tradition of filial piety has been understood as central to intergenerational relationships in ethnic Chinese families. Two major theories explain the motivations of filial responsibility for one's aging parents. First, children may perceive filial norms to be morally and socially acceptable. They internalize the norms during the process of socialization or abide by them under social pressure (Blieszner and Hamon 1992). Second, social exchange theory explains filial duty as an act of reciprocation because intergenerational relationships serve as channels for the exchanges of resources and power (Pyke 1999). Based on the principle of social exchange, an implicit moral contract governs relationships between parents and children in ethnic Chinese societies. Child rearing is viewed as a process of social investment with an expectation of delayed repayment, in the Chinese term, "*Bau-Da*" (payback). Parents undergo economic and emotional costs in bearing and rearing children, associated particularly with investments in education, purchasing houses, and preparing bride prices for sons. Children, especially sons, are thus obligated to return the debts through filial care for their aging parents.

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

The traditional household pattern in ethnic Chinese societies is three-generation cohabitation based on a patrilocal principle. Placing parents in a nursing home is stigmatized as an immoral act of children who disregard their filial duty. The majority of elders in Taiwan and

Hong Kong reside with family members (Chow 1993; Kao and Stuijbergen). The duty of taking care of aging parents is traditionally assigned to the elder married sons. According to the Han Chinese cultural tradition, family membership, inheritance of property, and distribution of authority are defined through the main axis of father and son. A daughter is considered “spilled water,” given away after marriage to another family headed by her husband’s father. In contrast, giving birth to sons assures more security for the future welfare of parents (Thornton and Lin 1994; Wolf 1972). As a Chinese proverb says: “To raise a son, to protect yourself at old ages.”

Although the sons, especially the eldest one, are obligated to provide care for their aging parents, the actual duty of serving aging parents is mostly performed by their wives, the daughters-in-law. Elder care is divided between a couple: The husband, as the major breadwinner, provides economic support for his parents. The wife, serving as an agent for her husband, offers filial care on a daily basis, such as cooking, serving food, and doing laundry for her parents-in-law and providing other personal care if necessary. The typical caregivers in Chinese families are female kin in subordinate positions to patriarchal authorities, such as a wife serving her husband and a daughter-in-law serving her parents-in-law. The traditional image of these women caregivers is associated with the hierarchical concept of “serving” rather than the more egalitarian conception of “caring” (Liu 1998).

However, intergenerational power dynamics have changed and sometimes reversed in the process of modernization. Anthropologists and historians have made similar observations on the transformation of family relations embedded in different societies or various historical periods.<sup>iii</sup> As a society shifts from an agricultural to industrial economy, adult children gain most of their income in the market economy, thus depending less on economic resources provided by the family. Younger generations choose their marriage partners on the basis of romantic love rather than compatibility to family needs or parents’ expectations (Dizard and Gadlin 1990:11). Their resistance to three-generation cohabitation may still induce social blame for failure to achieve filial piety, but it involves less monetary loss of family assets and properties than in the past.

The decline of parental authority is often class based. Anthropologist Rita Gallin (1994) observed class variations among Taiwanese mothers-in-law who hold different amounts of resources in the family. Mothers-in-law in a wealthy family may still enjoy the power to

distribute wealth and hence maintain traditional family authority; by contrast, poorer mothers-in-law have to “strive to make themselves dependable sources in order to ensure a measure of security” (Gallin 1994: 138). Many retired parents nowadays have to volunteer to offer unpaid or underpaid childcare and housework in exchange for residing with their children in order to receive economic as well as emotional support (Hu 1995).

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

To further explore the transformations of filial norms and care arrangements for the Chinese elderly, I interviewed ethnic Chinese dual-earner immigrant families in the Bay Area and sought to understand the following questions: What happens to intergenerational relationships and power dynamics when ethnic Chinese families resettle on foreign soil? How do adult immigrant children arrange care for their aging parents while negotiating cultural traditions and new social resources in the United States? What are the varying patterns of subcontracting filial care in mediation of the mechanisms of kinship and market? How does the commodification of care impact on the formation of family relations and boundaries?

### **Method and Data**

My data were collected between November 2000 and February 2001. I conducted in-depth interviews with 16 immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong in eight households residing in the Bay Area. These households share a similar immigration pattern in which adult children settled in the United States first, and their overseas parents and other immediate relatives came later as “legalization dependents” (Portes and Rumbaut 1996: 15). Eight informants were elderly parents between 68 and 88 years old, including three windowed women, one windowed man, and two couples. Their physical conditions varied: One was diagnosed as having Alzheimer’s disease, two had impaired eyesight or hearing, two needed assistance in walking or eating, and the rest

had no major health problems. Overall, the kind of care they needed was mostly personal and custodial attendance rather than medical care. The other half of my interviewees were adult children in dual-earner households, including one son, three daughters, and two couples. Their ages ranged between 38 and 60, and all had parents residing in the Bay Area before or at the time of the interview. In four of the households, both parents and children were interviewed; I failed to do so in the other four households due to the death of the parents or unavailability of the adult children.

These informants were recruited through snowballing personal referral, but I tried to cover sufficient variations in their places of origin, immigration patterns, and economic statuses. Among the six immigrant households from Taiwan, the parents in four had been born in Taiwan, and those in two households had been born in China and fled to Taiwan during the civil war in 1949. Their children originally entered the United States in pursuit of graduate education, professional employment, or business investment. The other two households fall on the lower end of the middle-class spectrum. Both parents and children in these households had been born in Canton and escaped to Hong Kong in the 1970s. The first family member was admitted to the United States as a refugee. To situate these cases in a broader context, I also conducted a structured survey among 52 Taiwanese immigrants randomly selected on the annual Lunar New Year gathering hosted by the Northern California Formosan Federation in Fremont in January 2001.

The eight households that I studied in depth included a variety of care arrangements and residential patterns. Three households, whose children were upper-middle-class professionals or business people, hired home care workers fully or partially at their own costs, three households used home care services paid by public funds, and two households never hired paid caregivers but received other government benefits for the elderly. The majority of adult children and their spouses lived apart from their parents. The parents in four families lived alone in a house or condominium purchased by the parents or adult children; two elderly informants lived in senior homes; in only two cases did parents and children share a place of residence.

I also interviewed 11 home care workers, all of them women. Ten are from mainland China and aged between 51 and 64. One is a 40-year-old Taiwanese immigrant. All these workers had

legally entered the United States to join their siblings or other immediate relatives. Most workers had received education no higher than high school, and many had lost their chance to attend college during the Cultural Revolution. However, the majority of the workers had held middle-class jobs in China such as teachers and administrators. My access to these workers was facilitated through referral from the Alameda County branch of SEIU (Service Employee International Union). Besides personal interviews, during the research period, I regularly attended union activities and social gatherings of these home care workers. Four of the home care workers were employed by the families in this research. I also spent some time observing interactions between elderly clients and home care workers.

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

### **Transplanting Families on Foreign Soil**

Not to mention that they [parents] now become the ones who need to be taken care of, the minute you arrive here [in the United States], you switch the roles. This situation is even more horrifying for younger immigrants like those Vietnamese. They have to depend on their ten-year-old children to translate—that's a real [role] conflict! Taiwanese immigrants are at least adult children. But still, they [parents] don't speak English; they don't know how to drive; it's as if they become children again (Jessica Chao, retired 60-year-old teacher).

According to Emily Abel (1991), the process of caregiving demands that adult children and aging parents redefine their roles vis-à-vis the other party—frail parents ask for help but feel ambivalent about receiving it, because adult children as care providers are required to exert some authority over their parents. As the previous quote indicates, power dynamics between immigrant adult children and their aging parents are subject to change, not only because of the shift of their roles in the process of caregiving, but also due to the experiences of immigration in a new country. Relocated at postemployable ages, the immigrant elderly usually own little personal income and social resources in the new country. Compared to life in their home countries, it becomes more difficult for them to achieve self-reliance financially and socially after

resettlement. Elderly immigrants, who mostly speak little English and lack driving skills, experience a significant degree of alienation after they move to the United States. They are no longer the figures of parental authority, but become dependent on their children, or sometimes grandchildren, to assist in all sorts of daily affairs.

The material base of parental authority in Chinese families—the distribution of economic resources and properties among children—has diminished in the context of immigration. The major economic resources in most middle-class immigrant families come from the income of adult children. In addition, social punishment entailed in the breaching of the family moral contract, such as receiving bad reputations among kin networks and local communities, has weakened after resettlement in a new country. Separate residence has become the dominant intergenerational residential pattern among middle-class Chinese immigrant families in the United States. Based on a survey I conducted among 52 Taiwanese immigrant parents and adult children, in Taiwan, 54 percent of the parents resided with sons, 15 percent resided with daughters, and 23 percent lived on their own. However, after they moved to the United States, 14 percent of the parents resided with sons, an equal proportion resided with daughters, and 67 percent of them lived by themselves.<sup>v</sup>

Among the eight households I studied in depth in this research, in only two cases did aging parents and adult children share the same residence. One of them is John Chen, a 55-year-old business owner from Taiwan residing with his father, suffering from cancer, and mother. When I asked him if he ever thought of alternative residential arrangements, he lowered his voice even though his parents lived in the other annexed building. He said:

We dare not think about it.... People might say you're not filial, right? Why taint yourself with that stigma? But the filial norm is rooted in Taiwan. When people are in the U.S., who cares? Your neighbors here don't know you. Who minds what you did? Not like in Taiwan, where your neighbors all know you. So the norm becomes different.

Although following the traditional custom, John keenly recognized the diminishing effect of social control conveyed by the norm of filial piety in the United States. The patrilocal principle of residential arrangement is undermined by resettlement in the United States. Many immigrant

seniors live with their daughters instead of their sons. John Chen and his wife, Erin Chang, explained this transformation:

PCL: In Taiwan, most parents live with their sons, but this seems not necessarily true when they live in the U.S.?

EC: Many live with their daughters. Most of my friends are like that. It's easier to get along with daughters.

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

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

PCL: Is this situation different in Taiwan?

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

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

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

Kevin Li moved to California after retiring from a managerial position in Taiwan and worked as a security guard in a San Jose senior housing unit. Based on his observations of the elderly tenants, he pointed out a common intergenerational family scenario in which the immigrant elderly prefer living alone in order to avoid conflicts or frustrations resulting from living with their “modern” daughters-in-law and English-only American grandchildren.

When I worked there, many Chinese came to me for help. They needed to move out [of their children's households] in a hurry because they got kicked out by their daughters-in-law! Well, originally the son moved the parents from Taiwan since the welfare is better in the U.S. and they can apply for SSI. But many problems came out after they lived together, especially because of difference in lifestyle. The young couple have children and they wanna go out. But it's too much trouble to bring two old folks along—they like different things and they eat different food from the children. So the grandparents end up staying home all the time because they don't know how to drive or even how to speak English! Feeling bored is one thing. The other is they can no longer discipline their grandchildren. As they grow up, they speak English. There are language barriers, and more and more complaints and problems follow. Then, the daughter-in-law would say to the son: Send them to a senior home! They have their SSI anyway!

After Kevin finished, his wife, Shirley, murmured to herself: "That's right. We should never mind their [children's] business after they grew up." Although most immigrant parents still contribute money or labor to their adult children, such as placing generous down payments for children's housing loans and offering free day care for grandchildren, they no longer expect future cohabitation and repayment for these investments. For example, Erin Chang, who currently resides with her mother-in-law, mentioned a conversation with her 20-something son regarding their future residential arrangement:

I told my son: "After you get married, we will buy a bigger house, with a yard, a swimming pool, so your kids can play." He said, "What? I still have to live together with you after getting married?" I said, "Oh, you don't want to? I can help you with childcare!" He said, "No thanks, taking care of yourself is good enough."

Under such circumstances, parental authority in Chinese immigrant families further declines in the United States. Immigrant seniors, like other elderly people, need care not only for their physical frailty and emotional loneliness, but also to achieve independence and autonomy. Although the latter may become more difficult for them to achieve in a foreign country due to the linguistic and cultural barriers, elderly benefits offered by the U.S. government have provided crucial social resources for the immigrant elderly to empower themselves on foreign soil.

### **The American Filial Son**

Immigrant adult children during interviews often refer to American family norms to justify their residential separation and financial independence from their parents. Kevin Li, a 63-year-old retired manager, offered succinct comments on this subject:

You know American laws are like this: Children grow up and leave their parents, so they are not obligated to take care of their parents. But our civil law [in Taiwan] is different. In Taiwan, if you don't support your parents, you are guilty of abandoning them. This is a crime. The government can force you to take care of your parents! But it's different in the United States.

Taiwan's family law symbolically announces that children should respect parents filially and specifies children's legal obligation to support their needy parents and cohabitating parents-in-law.<sup>vi</sup> Attached to the potential criminal charge of abandonment, the law honors and enforces the moral contract between parents and children in Chinese families. Delegating elder care to the private sphere, Taiwan's government did not introduce any social security or welfare programs for senior citizens until the mid-1990s.<sup>vii</sup> The web of social security is even thinner in Hong Kong, where a compulsory retirement pension scheme is still absent and only 10 percent of elders are receiving meager amount of public assistance (Chow 1993).

In contrast, the social contract in European American societies is embedded in an idealized relationship between citizens and the state: Citizens contribute taxes to the state during their competent adulthood, and the state is obligated to care for them if they become disable or frail. In the United States, Medicare, a universal entitlement, is the most important federal health insurance program for people over age 65. Because the majority of elderly immigrants own few assets and earn little income in the United States, given the middle-class status of their children, they are eligible for low-income elderly benefits, including Medicaid (or Medi-Cal in California),<sup>viii</sup> cash grants of SSI (Supplemental Security Income),<sup>ix</sup> rental assistance, food stamps, and in-home care service. In my survey of 52 immigrant parents and adult children, about half reported that their parents or themselves were receiving or had received at least one of these means-tested elderly benefits. The number may be lower than the actual proportion since welfare recipients tend to conceal their status to avoid social stigma.

My informants, both adult children and aging parents, called the U.S. government the

“American filial son” who sends them monthly allowances on time without bargaining or complaints. Through the program of Section Eight Housing Choice Voucher, the California state government also offers rental assistance for low-income seniors. The participant tenants need to pay only 30 percent of their monthly income for rent, and the rest is covered by public funds. Many immigrant seniors actually prefer living in senior apartments under public subsidy to living with their adult children in a suburb because the former provide them with convenient accesses to public transportation and peer support of elderly neighbors. A widowed elderly woman explained why she decided to move into a senior building: “My friends told me, ‘Come. Your children live too far from us.’ Living here is the same as living with my children. They work all day long. I was still home by myself anyway.”

The state of California also provides the elderly with in-home care services through the program of In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS).<sup>x</sup> This program currently employs over 200,000 independent providers who offer nonprofessional, custodial care in the homes of low-income elderly and disabled individuals. Home care is promoted as a more human and inexpensive alternative to institutional care. The cost of the IHSS program is an average of approximately \$300 per client per month (SEIU 1999). The majority of workers employed by IHSS are immigrant and minority women.<sup>xi</sup>

For home care workers in the IHSS program, the California government is the “employer” who pays for their services, and care recipients are “clients” or “consumers” who hold the decision to subsume or terminate contracts. This framework of employment has facilitated the unionization of home care workers and campaigns for wage increases and health insurance in alliance with client groups (both disabled and senior organizations). Third-party payment also assists alliances between individual care workers and their elderly clients. Home care workers told me that government-funded care recipients tend to be more benevolent and flexible on working hours and sick leaves than clients who purchase services out of their own pockets.

IHSS not only subsidizes care services provided by non-family workers, but also compensates previously unpaid caring labor offered by family members. Family caregivers may become waged employees of IHSS. Adult children who accommodate their low-income parents can also apply for food and housing subsidy. By placing monetary value on caring labor between

family members, these government measures frame care as a public interest rather than a private matter. This idea contrasts with the privatized notion of elder care in the Chinese cultural context. As John Chen, who resided with his parents and was one of the primary caregivers for his ill father, commented: “I never heard that the government would pay you for taking care of your own parents. In Taiwan, taking care of your own family is your own business.” Other informants criticized these measure as “ridiculous” or “not right” because they consider care for parents a family obligation and moral duty, rather than a paid job.

Cash subvention from welfare states to family caregivers holds the progressive component of treating care as a social responsibility and recognizing the value of unpaid labor often performed by female kin. Public funds may also reinforce family bonds by enhancing the incentive of family members to take care of their parents. However, it can also create controversial consequences upon family relations, such as the marketization of intimacy and commodification of care (Ungerson 2000). Additionally, most elderly benefits in the United States, except for Medicare, are means-tested programs rather than universal entitlements. An elderly beneficiary needs to demonstrate low-income status to meet the eligibility.<sup>xii</sup> Some immigrant parents thus transfer their savings or properties to adult children. Many informants mentioned family tragedies in which adult children consumed or relocated parents’ money without acknowledgment, leaving the immigrant elderly in real poverty and dependent on welfare.

### **Different Patterns of Subcontracting Elder care**

In this section, I will introduce four ethnic Chinese immigrant families that hold different opinions and strategies toward receiving public benefits for the elderly, and further elaborate the commodification of elder care and its impacts on family relations. These cases illustrate four different arrangements for subcontracting elder care. First, upper-middle-class families privately employ care workers and consider the reception of public funds to be socially stigmatizing or morally inappropriate. Second, lower-middle-class families rely on IHSS home care service and other means-tested public elderly benefits to solve their deficiency of money, time, and care. Third, some families combine IHSS funds and private money to employ home care workers so they can enjoy service with better quality and longer hours than if they used public care alone.

Finally, in order to receive government subsidies, some families marketize the relationships between parents and adult children, for example, adult children charge parents rent to receive a housing subsidy or apply for public funds to compensate for their care of parents.

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

Paul Wang came to the United States to pursue a master’s degree in the mid-1960s and, after graduation, started working in Silicon Valley. He later established his own software company, with the assistance of his wife. Three of his siblings followed a similar immigration path and are now all employed as professionals in California. In the early 1980s, they proudly moved their parents from Taiwan to enjoy the elderly-friendly climate in California as well as to witness the success of their children. The parents lived with Paul, the eldest son, in an affluent South Bay suburb. Paul explained why they chose to reproduce the traditional pattern of three-generational cohabitation in the United States: “Living together is a must-be in our culture. I like that way, too. To place parents in a strange place, and in a strange culture like the U.S., it’s a crime in my perspective.”

About ten years ago, Paul’s father suffered a stroke and passed away in less than a year. Although he hired a part-time caregiver during that time, Paul blamed himself for failing to offer sufficient care and for accelerating his father’s physical deterioration: “We did something wrong. We didn’t provide him with good nursing. He felt lonely, sad, so he passed away so soon. This was my fault.” Paul’s mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease a few years later. Paul firmly objected when one of his siblings suggested that their mother should be placed in a nursing home, and he insisted on hiring full-time home care workers at whatever costs. Since then, they have been hiring home care workers for three shifts to accompany his mother day and night. Because the mother doesn’t speak much Mandarin, to ensure the quality of emotional care, they seek Taiwanese home care workers instead of those from mainland China who charge a lower rate. The employment costs about \$4500 a month, which is shared by the four siblings residing in the United States.

When I asked Paul if his mother is eligible for SSI or home care service sponsored by the IHSS program, he answered: “I know many people do that. I didn’t. I can afford without doing

this. It looks kind of bad to receive checks from Social Security.” Paul considers receiving elderly benefits as a socially stigmatizing act and holds doubts about the quality of free public care. Because the employment cost is divided among four siblings who are all professionals, hiring live-in home care workers out of their pockets does not pose a serious financial burden, but becomes a status marker that underscores their filial concern for his mother. In Paul’s own words: “I dare say that I am a filial son. How many people can do something like we do? There is always someone to be her [Paul’s mother’s] company. And it’s very easy for us children. We only need to pay.”

Although praising himself as a filial son, Paul admitted to me that the difficulty and stress involved in personal care are another reason why he decided to outsource care for his mother: “Honesty, taking care of the elderly, like helping them with a bowel movement...that is really hard and dirty. Once I had no choice and I had to help my mom do it. I had to close my eyes during the whole time.” According to Lise Isaksen (2000), intimate hands-on care is reported to be the most emotionally stressful burden of care, as incontinence often incurs the feelings of shame, humiliation, and taboo, and the loss of bodily control in particular reveals the helplessness and dependency of ill parents. Isaksen also points out that intimate personal care is often performed by daughters and other female kin, and sons tend to seek outside assistance in these matters.

Joan Tronto (1993) argues that the practice of care consists of four phases: caring about (recognizing the necessity of care), taking care of (assuming some responsibility for the identified need and determining how to respond to it), care-giving (the direct meeting of needs for care), and care-receiving (the object of care responds to the care it receives). She remarks insightfully, “Caring about, and taking care of, are the duties of the powerful. Care-giving and care-receiving are left to the less powerful” (p.114). Paul Wang defines his role as a supervisor whose responsibility is making frequent visits to check on the workers and ensuring that his mother is in good hands. He implicitly considers his filial responsibility as “taking care of” his mother, a duty achieved by his generous financial contribution in paying caregivers and his efforts to supervise the quality of care services. In contrast, the daily chores of “care-giving” are transferred to home care workers who are usually low-income immigrant women.

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

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

Lily uses care for her mother as an analogy to describe the ideal care she provides for her client. Her job also requires her to substitute for the often absent adult children, so the mother "won't keep asking why her children are not coming to see her." Although the mother may mix up the name of her daughter and the home workers, Lily also told me that Mrs. Wang often insists that her daughter, instead of the workers, should bathe her. Without explicitly stating it, the mother clearly expresses her desire for a kind of filial care that involves interactions on the basis of personal intimacy instead of merely monetary contributions from her children.

### **"My Life was like Standing on a Fire Wheel."**

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

Soon after Carol acquired U.S. citizenship, her mother, Mrs. Yang, came to the United States and lived with Carol, helping care for the grandchildren. Carol's brother, who has a green

card but resides mostly in Hong Kong for business purposes, later purchased a house across the street from Carol's. Mrs. Yang decided to live in this house by herself because she did not get along well with Carol's husband. Yet, Carol thinks that her mother holds a traditional perspective on the patrilineal family and prefers to live in her son's house, albeit an empty one.

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

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

On my first visit, Mrs. Yang happily showed me the picture of her son and grandchildren in Hong Kong. Her favorite gift from them is a cushion embroidered with the words, "My grandma is the best." She never talked about her eldest son, who lived nearby. Later Mei-Lan told me that Mrs. Yang studied English at the age of 74 to acquire U.S. citizenship so that she could sponsor her oldest son to come to the United States. She also avoided receiving any elderly benefits at

that time because she was afraid that welfare status would defer the processing of her son's documents. The son finally immigrated in the United States, but rarely visited her after that.

Mei-Lan spent more time with Mrs. Yang than any of Mrs. Yang's adult children did. From Monday to Saturday, she arrived by noon and prepared lunch; Mrs. Yang had to finish dinner so Mei-Lan could clean up before she left at 5 p.m. The late lunch and early dinner schedule was due to the time constraints of the IHSS subsidy, which, in this case, paid for five hours of care work per day. Deborah Stone (2000: 104), who interviewed home care workers in New England, found that "not having enough time to do what you think the client needs is a source of stress and guilt for caregivers." Mei-Lan and several other home care workers, who confused a sociologist with a social worker, often urged me to request more hours of care service for their clients. They did so less for the purpose of increasing their working hours than for the sake of their clients. Although restrained by bureaucratic schedules, Mei-Lan developed a personal relationship with Mrs. Yang and provided customized care, such as learning her preferences in food, always preparing chewable and warm dishes, bringing her favorite pastries from Chinatown from time to time, and putting red lipstick and nail polish on Mrs. Yang to bring her good fortune according to the Chinese custom.

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

Mrs. Yang's daughter, Cathy, said to me, "My mother likes Mei-Lan, exactly because she is *'MON-CHA-CHA'*!" Mei-Lan has been "adopted" by both Mrs. Yang and Cathy as their "fictive kin" whose role is beyond an employee. Tracy Karner (1998: 70) says of "fictive kin": "Those who provide care like family and do what family does are given the labor of kin with its

attendant affection, rights, and obligations.” A fictive kin member provides not only the service of “caregiving,” but also emotional attachment as “caring for,” in Tronto’s (1993) words. As a fictive kinship relationship emerges within the realm of employment, home care workers face tensions over reconciling a family-like relationship, characterized by love, patience, and specialness, with an employment relationship that features rational calculation of rights, bureaucratic schedule, and fairness (Stone 2000).

A fictive kinship relationship is a two-edged sword for home care workers. On the one hand, home care workers retrieve meaning for this undervalued job through building emotional bonds with care recipients. As Mei-Lan said, “I felt so ashamed when I walked my first client in the wheelchair on the street. But I told myself this job is about love. I take good care of Mrs. Yang, so Carol doesn’t have to worry at work.” On the other hand, the kinship analogy may disadvantage workers by obscuring their rights in employment relationships. Care recipients may manipulate workers’ emotional attachment to extract additional unpaid labor, such as asking the caregiver to work overtime or stay overnight without compensation, the situations commonly mentioned during my interviews with home care workers.

### **“My Father Cried and Said We don’t Want Him Anymore.”**

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

Shirley’s parents immigrated in 1984 to reunite with their adult children and also to offer care for their grandchildren. They lived with Shirley’s sister, who managed a motel and had little time to attend to her young children. Shirley’s parents stayed on as unpaid care providers until

their grandchildren went to high school. They then moved into a senior apartment. Because most of their savings and properties remained in Taiwan, they were eligible for SSI and a housing subsidy. With the financial resources secured by “the American filial son,” they were able to maintain a decent living without much financial and social dependence on their children.

Nevertheless, the self-sufficient life of Shirley’s father was shattered after he suffered a massive stroke and became partially paralyzed. He became a patient in need of intensive care and daily assistance, and his wife was too frail to be the primary caregiver. Shirley and her three siblings decided that their parents would be better off living with the family—taking turns living in each child’s house on a monthly basis. All the adult children, however, lived in dual-earner households, so they needed to hire someone to attend the father during the week.

Shirley’s father was eligible for a limited number of hours of IHSS subsidy, far less than the hours of care service they needed for a live-in caregiver working five days a week. Shirley and her siblings chipped in to cover the extra employment costs, so they could supply the father with care of better quality and longer hours. In fact, on the IHSS document, the name of the employed caregiver was Shirley Huang instead of the name of the actual workers (Shirley was working part-time in her sister’s motel at that time). This kind of arrangement is common because many home care workers are aliens without a legal working status in the United States.

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

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

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

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

### **"I Charge Them Only Half the Market Price."**

Julia Lin is a 48-year-old software engineer in San Jose. She and her husband both came to the United States for graduate education and started their careers in the fast-growing high-tech

industry. The couple spends long hours at work and frequently stay in the office during evenings and weekends. Julia's parents, relocated from Taiwan to San Jose in the mid-1980s, assisted them with childcare, cooking, and other household chores. After the grandchildren went to high school, Julia's parents moved to another house owned by Julia and her husband that had previously been rented to others. Julia's 75-year-old father, Mr. Lin, explained to me that they moved out partly to avoid intervention in their children's family life and parenthood:

There's more freedom [living apart]. Everybody can keep his or her own territory. They [the daughter and son-in-law] are rearing their children. We would become dislikable if we intervene. We can neither discipline our grandchildren nor our daughter. They have their own parenting style. We should leave them alone. We would intervene more or less if we lived there. Plus, American kids are much tougher than their parents!

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

Julia's case is not a rare one; quite a number of Chinese immigrant adult children charge rent to parents who stay in their houses. In addition to facilitating a rental subsidy from the government, paying rent becomes a means for the elderly to transfer income to their children so the parents can still maintain the eligibility for low-income benefits. "Many people make money out of the parents in the United States!" was said by an informant to mock other immigrants who manipulate the U.S. welfare system to maximize family incomes. Although the practice of charging rent seems to indicate the marketization of parent-children relationships, it actually

reveals strong family bonds without which the trading of economic resources among kin would be impossible.

However, to avoid the social stigma attached to the receipt of public funds and services, the immigrant elderly have to legitimize these benefits as an “entitlement” rather than “welfare.” They also compare themselves with immigrants of other ethnicities to emphasize their lesser dependence on welfare. For example, Mr. and Mrs. Lin underscored the difference between receiving SSI and receiving food stamps, a distinction related to class hierarchies between Taiwanese and Vietnamese immigrants:

Mrs. Lin: In the past, we Taiwanese didn’t get this [welfare]. My daughter also told me not to.

PCL: Why not?

Mrs. Lin: They think this is charity, but no, it’s actually entitlement.

Mr. Lin: We only get housing subsidy. Some Vietnamese, they take food stamps, too, \$125 for a month. But Taiwanese don’t like it. It’s okay if you go to Vietnamese stores, but they’re very unpopular in American supermarkets. People look down at you [when you use food stamps].

At a later point of my interview with Mr. Lin, he revealed another reason why they decided to move out of their daughter’s household and why they pay rent:

We decided that we better move out. Otherwise our in-laws may think we are taking over their space. Because we are the daughter’s family—they are the Changs and we are the Lins—it’s different. And we pay rent, so nobody can say bad things about us. To others, we still say our daughter offers us the house to live so we can save faces for both sides. My daughter can still justify this to her parents-in-law because we actually pay them rent—Although, I don’t know if they’re really going to move here.

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

To subcontract filial care via public funds involves multidirectional flows of money among parents, children, and the government. This case also reveals the complex social and symbolic

significance of money, which Viviana Zelizer (1989) calls “special monies.” Public cash grants for the elderly can be interpreted as “entitlement” associated with dignity and respect for seniors or “welfare” with the stigma of dependency and incompetence. The act of paying rent in this case is not a simple economic transaction, but a family conspiracy of trading financial resources among kin to extract public funds, as well as a symbolic performance that honors the patrilineal kinship scheme.

### **Remaking Families via Commodification of Care**

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

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

The first dimension—*where care takes place*—is associated with the physical residence of frail parents. *TON-JU-KON-SHIR* (living together and eating together) is traditionally considered the substance of Chinese family life. Given the decline of three-generational cohabitation, contemporary Chinese families still attempt to maintain residential proximity, such as living in different flats of the same building, to facilitate frequent visits and dinner sharing. Since placing parents in a nursing home is a care arrangement considered to be a failure of filial

duty, employed adult children, like Shirley Huang and Paul Wang, manage to maintain residential cohabitation with their ill parents by hiring non-family workers who provide full-time care.

In addition, the physical residence of aging parents symbolizes the social order of a Chinese kinship organization. Although the responsibility of serving parents is no longer enforced along gender lines due to the empowerment of working daughters-in-law, the patrilocal principle still has normative impact on care arrangements. For example, Paul Wang invited his father-in-law, who was living alone in a senior apartment in L.A. near Paul's brother-in-law, to move in with Paul and his wife. This suggestion infuriated the brother-in-law, who considered it an insult that implied his failure in the social role of a filial son. Following a similar cultural logic, Mr. Lin pays rent to stay in the house of his daughter, Julia, using money to symbolize their "appropriate" place in the patrilineal family tree.

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

The employment of home care workers also reconstitutes the boundary of family. As Tracy Karner (1998) has nicely phrased it, through adopting the home care worker into the family as "fictive kin," "the family-type tasks provided by the stranger-caretaker can be reconstructed as *appropriate* and the realm of privacy and intimacy can be maintained" (p.72, original emphasis). Kinship analogies enable Chinese adult children to maintain a cultural sense of filial care and allow elderly recipients to place on care workers kin expectations beyond the assigned duties in a

contract relationship. Family-like attachments are especially significant in situations where elderly clients live alone and when elderly clients and care workers share similar class and cultural backgrounds.

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

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

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

ironic logic, that is, “*the less children care, the more [public funds] parents receive.*”

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

### **Conclusion**

Joan Nagel (1994) uses the metaphor of “shopping cart” to describe the shifting, volitional, and situational nature of ethnic culture: “Culture is not a shopping cart that comes to us already loaded with a set of historical cultural goods. Rather, we construct culture by picking and choosing items from the shelves of the past and the present” (p.162). The cultural norms of filial piety and parental authority, which have traditionally governed intergenerational relationships in ethnic Chinese societies, are modified and transformed after immigrant families resettle in the United States. Based on in-depth interviews with middle-class dual-earner Chinese immigrants in the Bay Area, I have examined how immigrant families negotiate the cultural meanings and social practice of elder care in a different institutional context. I use the term “subcontracting filial piety” to describe the most prevalent arrangement of elder care among immigrant Chinese families—Adult children employ non-family home care workers, paid by private or public funds, to be filial agents or fictive kin.

I introduced the concept of “a transfer chain of filial care” to describe how the filial duty of elder care is achieved through gender transfer (from sons to daughters-in-law) and market transfer (from daughters-in-law to non-family home care workers). Care arrangements for the elderly are embedded in cultural and institutional contexts that are always subject to change. Four major contextual factors enable Chinese immigrant families to breach traditional norms in the practice of elder care in the United States. First, empowered daughters-in-law become major financial distributors in dual-earner households. Second, the challenge to parental authority no

longer imposes serious financial and social punishment upon adult children. Third, the European American model of the modern family encourages nuclear households and autonomy among extended kin. Finally, the majority of elderly immigrants are eligible to receive senior benefits and public care offered by the U.S. government.

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

## Notes

1. To distinguish from the term “Chinese” defined on the basis of nationality (nationals of the People’s Republic China), I use the term “ethnic Chinese” to cover people of Chinese ancestry who may reside not only in mainland China, but also in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and other overseas Chinese communities.
2. According to the 2000 Census, 51 percent of the foreign-born residents in the U.S. were from Latin America, 25.5 percent were from Asia, and 15.3 percent were from Europe (Lollock 2001).
3. For example, anthropologist Jane Fishburne Collier (1997) observed the remaking of families in a Spanish village, and historian Lawrence Stone (1977) wrote about the transformation of family and marriage in England from 1500 to 1800.
4. In my previous research based on Taiwan (Lan 2000), I observed how the intervention of market creates a triangular relationship among the mother-in-law, the daughter-in-law, and the migrant home care worker. Different kinds of alliances may be formed among the three parties. In some cases, strong personal bonds develop between the elderly, who are left alone by their children, and their migrant caregivers, on whom they strongly depend physically and emotionally. In other cases, the daughter-in-law and the migrant worker develop some comradeship because they both face the maternal authority and share the hardship of serving the mother-in-law. And in some other cases, the daughter-in-law may reproduce an oppressive relationship with the migrant worker, becoming an authoritative figure similar to her mother-in-law to control another woman in the household.
5. The rest of respondents lived in the same building with their sons or daughters but in different flats.
6. According to the civil law in Taiwan (Republic of China), one is obligated to support his or her children, parents, cohabitating parents-in-law, and siblings when these family members cannot maintain a living on their own (§1114 and §1117). Those who violate these obligations may commit the crime of “abandonment” and can be sentenced to as long as ten years (the criminal law §294, 295).
7. A universal program of health insurance was implemented in Taiwan in 1996. Some counties offer a small amount of cash for the elderly on a means-tested or universal basis.
8. Medicare is a federal health insurance program for people age 65 and older and people of any age with permanent kidney failure and certain disabilities. Medi-Cal is California’s version of the Medicaid program and is funded jointly by the state of California and the federal government. Medicare is a universal entitlement program whose eligibility is determined by age and disability. Medi-Cal or Medicaid is a targeted means-tested program for low-income, financially needy people of all ages.

9. SSI is a Social Security program that pays cash benefits to the elderly, the blind, and people with disabilities whose assets and incomes are below certain levels. In 2001, the basic amount of the SSI monthly check was \$512 for one person and \$769 for a couple. The eligibility for SSI is limited to U.S. citizens under the law passed on August 22, 1996, but permanent residents who were already getting SSI on August 22, 1996, may continue to get benefits. In California, a state-funded program, CAPI (Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants) pays cash benefits to lawful non-citizens who do not qualify for SSI or SSP solely because of their immigration status. An eligible non-citizen has to have entered the U.S. before August 22, 1996, unless his or her sponsor is deceased, disabled, or abusive. [www.ci.sf.ca.us/dhs](http://www.ci.sf.ca.us/dhs). 03/05/2001.

10. The IHSS program has existed since 1973. The California government included personal care services as a benefit provided through the Medicaid program in an attempt to shift a substantial proportion of the costs of service to Medicaid and accordingly to the federal government. Since 1992, California state government has allowed counties to form a public authority to administer the program with consumer direction and input. The authority entity would take on the responsibility of acting as the employer of home care workers, maintaining a registry of competent workers and providing training and directing them to needy clients (SEIU 1999).

11. According to the survey based on workers active in the San Francisco IHSS registry between July 1996 and June 1998, 88 percent were female, near half (46 percent) were fluent in English, and 26 percent spoke no English. The average age of registry workers was 48 years. <http://www.inforcareu.com/sfpa/ihss/html>. 01/02/2001. Another survey conducted on home care workers in Alameda County shows similar demographic components: 70 percent of the respondents were female. The majority of them were aged between 36 and 54, but 19 percent were over 55 years old (EDG Planning 1999).

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

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