

PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

Uncovering connections between ageism and child-centric care

Lynn Yu Ling Ng*

Department of Politics, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

Drawing on personal reflections of my research experience on eldercare in East Asia, I suggest some directions for future research on demographic patterns and social welfare that complicate the concepts of care work and filial piety in understanding the population. Since the global pandemic has made its mark, existential anxieties grounded in the coupling of declining fertility rates and rising elderly dependence (lengthening lifespans amidst advances in medical technology) are running high. In this broader social problematic, I advocate for colleagues especially in East Asia to unpack the social dynamics of age relations and the specific predicaments of eldercare amidst an increasing overreliance on foreign domestic workers for live-in eldercare. The literature on changing trends of eldercare policy and practice is highly contextual and dynamic, and thus does not have a one-size-fits-all model. Nonetheless, broader commonalities in the commodification of family care, including its rising privatization and outsourcing to paid market options, leaves much to be uncovered across diverse cultural contexts and geographical locations. Crucially, ageism in market society is openly recognized in Western cultural contexts but less so, if at all, among East Asian populations where Confucian virtues of filial piety in (stay-at-home/live-in) care take precedence. In this paper, I weave together fieldwork observations and secondary literature to suggest that there is much analytical merit in pushing the boundaries of social reproduction concepts that make room for later-life issues.

Keywords: Age relations; Childcare; Eldercare; East Asia; Filial piety; Foreign domestic workers

***Corresponding author:**Lynn Yu Ling Ng
(lynngyl@yorku.ca)

Citation: Ng, L.Y.L. (2025).
Uncovering connections between
ageism and child-centric care.
*International Journal of Population
Studies*, 11(4): 1-6.
<https://doi.org/10.36922/ijps.4971>

Received: September 27, 2024**1st revised:** November 30, 2024**2nd revised:** January 7, 2025**3rd revised:** January 16, 2025**4th revised:** February 11, 2025**Accepted:** March 5, 2025**Published online:** March 19, 2025

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s).
This is an Open-Access article
distributed under the terms of the
Creative Commons Attribution
License, permitting distribution,
and reproduction in any medium,
provided the original work is
properly cited.

Publisher's Note: AccScience
Publishing remains neutral with
regard to jurisdictional claims in
published maps and institutional
affiliations.

1. Background

This perspective article speaks to population studies scholars interested in the intersections of eldercare planning (in social welfare) and immigration policy in East Asia and internationally. Researchers increasingly approach issues of eldercare, such as its poorly managed service quality and general lack of adequate physical care and emotional attention, from interdisciplinary perspectives that consider both large-scale survey data and personal stories to showcase some finer details or nuances in larger trends (Chiu & Yen, 2024; Munkejord *et al.*, 2021; Ng, 2023). In addition, with regard to rapidly aging population woes, critical social gerontology frameworks that debate the subjective constructions of aging, old age, and dependency are gaining traction (e.g., Chew, 2022; Tadaei *et al.*, 2023; Xue *et al.*, 2022). With the global pandemic's onset, issues

of care shortage alongside an overdependence on migrant care workers at a global scale emerged with renewed vigor (Ng, 2022; 2023). In this fashion, population studies scholars have advocated for the wider society to challenge the dominant negative connotations associated with elderly citizens and migrant workers who are marginalized through derogatory population categories; “foreign others” and “unproductive” seniors who are part of an imminent “silver tsunami” are cases in point (Teo, 2023; Yeh, 2022). The underlying concern is the poor plight of social institutions for family care and people’s growing struggles to secure adequate care in old age. In this perspective article, I do not offer detailed overviews of eldercare predicaments in specific locations but draw on observations from Singapore and the Taiwan Province of China (hereafter Taiwan) in East Asia to point to broader global trends in market convergence of eldercare management.

In both cases, the government’s decision to expand care labor migration for family care is primarily economic; a labor market strategy that draws on the availability of low-cost migrant labor for care service occupations shunned by the local workforce (Chiu & Yen, 2024; Ortiga *et al.*, 2021). This pivotal move enabled numerous post-war East Asian economies to maximize national income by increasing the workforce participation of female citizens, enabled by the social and cultural positioning of eldercare as a “3Ds” (dirty, dangerous, and difficult and/or demeaning) occupation (Munkejord *et al.*, 2021; Rozario & Hong, 2019; Teo, 2023). Rather and more than religious justifications for live-in care, especially for “Asian Tiger” economies, people’s cultural belief in the importance of aging-in-place (i.e., stay-at-home care) for elderly persons remains a strong social norm; the intense public stigma of elderly institutionalization (nursing homes) is unique to this part of the world (Hung *et al.*, 2021; Yeh, 2022). Even in some southern European societies where tight-knit family cooperation is more commonly observed in eldercare arrangements compared to North American counterparts, for instance, the general aversion toward long-term care (LTC) homes does not equate to the particular connotation of an adult child’s unforgivable sin of unfilial conduct (Wang *et al.*, 2023). These variations aside, I zone in on the imperative to unpack the complicated ethical and moral dilemmas arising out of dominant market imperatives that encroach on all corners and cultures of eldercare (Chew, 2022; Ng, 2023). Interrogating its customary lowly social status is a first step beyond studies of different policy trajectories toward enriched understandings of the social constructs of care’s valuation.

Deeper shifts in mentality about the “dirty” nature of care work, especially for elderly persons more so than

for infants and during early childhood, as well as about the foreign domestic workers (FDWs) paired with the elderly are needed. I suggest that prospective research can stay abreast of present trends by paying more attention to: (1) the ongoing dynamics of changing age relations, including the cultural role of Confucian values of filial piety, and (2) connections between ageism against the elderly and education as care labor for children in social welfare attitudes and policy practice. While the former is more pertinent to East Asian societies, the latter analytical angle has global resonances elsewhere that can inform more expansive definitions of social reproduction in care work studies that are of use for sustainable population planning.

2. Ageism and filial piety: An unwelcome but necessary duo for analysis

Compared to Western societies in Europe and North America where ageism is openly talked about in LTC policy – such as the tightening austerity measures of governments, which offload the costs of caring for the population’s health onto households – and recognized at an everyday level (e.g., Herron *et al.*, 2021 in Canada), East Asian societies face different challenges in coming to terms with creeping ageism in intergenerational household units. In my fieldwork experience across Singapore and Taiwan, Confucian cultural values of filial piety manifest rather specifically in the form of a dominant social preference for stay-at-home (live-in) care by adult daughters and/or daughters-in-law who are often assisted by FDWs in middle-class households (Ng, 2023). Although elderly institutionalization is gaining normative acceptance in China, Japan, and South Korea among other cases where live-out care options are more established, this has not been the case in Singapore and Taiwan where nursing homes are still strongly stigmatized (Peng, 2018; Rozario & Hong, 2019; Yeh, 2022). In my interviews with Singaporean and Taiwanese adult children and family caregivers, I often heard negative comments such as “a place to die” and “not an option” with regard to nursing homes; some made references to the onset of elderly depression triggered by bleak environments and feelings of abandonment or loneliness (e.g., Ng, 2023). Generally, at an emotional level, adult children who pledge allegiance to honor their parents’ wishes of aging at home – grounded in seniors’ familiar community and social networks – find it difficult to accept or even comprehend the idea that ageist processes are occurring (e.g., Chiu & Yen, 2024). In other words, both adult children and their elderly parents subscribe to a straightforward criterion of filial piety in which the 24/7 availability of a foreign “maid’s” service at one’s beck and call is key if not indispensable.

In light of the above, I argue that it is important to unsettle the harmonious façade of a migrant-in-the-family model of family care because the reliance on FDWs must be understood as part of a capitalist state strategy to minimize healthcare costs, which often hides behind cultural justifications (of adhering to the social virtues of filial piety) of informal care arrangements that may endanger elderly citizens (Chiu & Yen, 2024; Rozario & Hong, 2019). In contrast to many domestic employers who believe, simplistically, that a “maid” in the home symbolizes filial intentions, the FDWs I spoke to warned about the great risks posed to elderly patients of the existing market model. As one anonymous interviewee said, “people don’t realize that by treating us badly, like cheaply, people are also harming their own old people.” For context, governments approach FDWs as a market option for households needing family care rather than a workforce requiring adequate training in caregiving skills (Ortiga *et al.*, 2021). During the migration to the placement process, it is widely known that FDWs often receive little to no training by private recruitment agencies (labor brokers) that are not regulated by state agencies. This hands-off approach, as the women explain, creates abusive and exploitative working conditions that in fact compromise their capacity to care safely and properly for others (Ng, 2023). Taking FDWs’ perspectives necessarily elicit difficult but important conversations about the status quo of filial piety practice in the region and globally. For instance, what are the assumed connections between an adult child’s expression of filial piety, immigration policies for FDWs, and the quality of eldercare? How do FDWs’ lived experiences and stories unsettle these popular or mainstream views? In this vein, it is imperative for researchers to implicate diverse and dynamic approaches of filial piety ideology that do not overly prioritize host society constructs of care needs and wants. Comparative conversations about flexible and shifting perceptions of filial piety ethics nationally and beyond among different age groups can be a start. It is worth noting that complicating the cultural factors of filial piety in East Asia, especially in changing family dynamics in diverse Chinese populations (e.g., Li *et al.*, 2021; Yeh *et al.*, 2013), is a relatively less well-researched yet timely domain for population analysts to delve into.

3. What happens to eldercare when everyone is pre-occupied with child futures?

Related to the above, I propose that researchers of demographic patterns direct increased analytical energies toward the implications of child-centric norms in market society for eldercare outcomes. Sociological frameworks of education as care labor are of utmost salience in this

day and age of competitive childhood industries rooted in education and tuition practices for modern (middle-class) parenthood (Göransson *et al.*, 2022; Katz, 2018; Teo, 2023). In intergenerational circumstances of family care, which are the most widespread in urban East Asia, one can hardly ignore the possibility that collective pre-occupations over the future fate of younger generations may have ageist consequences (Ng, 2023). That is, although the nurturing of children involves immense affection and parental love, it is also the case that younger generations nowadays, whether they like it or not, end up exploiting senior cohorts in some way or another in these increasingly uncertain times (e.g., Tadaï *et al.*, 2023; Thang *et al.*, 2011 on grandparenting labor). I observed such dynamics first-hand in one Singapore household where I worked as a home tutor for a teenage boy; his maternal grandmother, as I understood from his mother during our interview, was put in charge of childcare during the day – cooking, cleaning, and washing up after him – while supervising an FDW who provides an extra pair of hands around the house.

I am not alone in pointing out that older women in particular bear the brunt of gendered expectations in the social pressure of ideal grandparenting where seniors prioritize their grandchildren’s development over their retirement comfort (e.g., Hung *et al.*, 2021; Thang *et al.*, 2011). We have a scenario where child-rearing means devoting unprecedented investments, economically and emotionally, on the part of all family members (Göransson *et al.*, 2022; Teo, 2023). Population studies tend to analyze family care in generic terms without disaggregating its various components or unpacking its nuances (Chung *et al.*, 2021; Peng, 2018). The drastically different nature of childcare and eldercare may be part of why people tend to see these as “unrelated to each other” or as “two completely separate things,” as my interviewees conveyed (Ng, 2023). Nonetheless, from a theoretical perspective for our understanding of care work, it seems important to contrast eldercare and childcare, among other possible comparisons, to expand mainstream definitions of social reproduction of a population – what it means to socially reproduce human beings. Indeed, following the pandemic, gerontological concerns are gaining popular traction in academic and policy debates as the world faces rapidly aging population woes (Chiu & Yen, 2024). But it is still the case that eldercare’s extremely devalued status vis-a-vis other types of care work and general chores is not often scrutinized (Ng, 2023). Mostly in urban East Asia, care for the elderly and children falls simultaneously on the sandwiched generation (working adult children and parents) and sometimes occurs under the same roof, yet it is typically approached in silos instead of dialectically (Ng, 2023). There is room for population studies to incorporate

feminist political economy perspectives of care in social reproduction concepts (e.g., Katz, 2018; Ng, 2023; Raghuram, 2012) that complicate the standard metrics of “value.”

4. Parting thoughts

I do not elaborate in detail on the social and cultural policy context of family planning and care labor migration in Singapore and Taiwan in East Asia, which I do elsewhere (Ng, 2022; 2023). Still, it is important to note that both populations, although increasingly expressing and showing pluralistic beliefs and values, by and large adhere to a preference for live-in (at-home) care. Recent Pew Research Center’s findings suggest that Taiwan is “one of the most religiously diverse places in the world, second only to Singapore” (Miner, 2024). Slightly above one-quarter of Singaporeans (26%) and Taiwanese (28%), adults identify as Buddhist, reflecting a Chinese majority and Chinese dominant population, respectively (Miner, 2023; 2024). Crucially, this practice of filial piety has less to do with religious composition or any reported affiliation with Confucian beliefs but rather the historically marketized trajectory of eldercare management (Chung *et al.*, 2021; Peng, 2018). Namely, the policy decision to integrate family planning with labor migration to boost national income triggered an irreversible transition for the social role of FDWs: from economic strategy to welfare pillar (Chiu & Yen, 2024; Peng, 2018; Rozario & Hong, 2019; Teo, 2023). As population and social welfare analysts note, this move was most intense in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan compared to Japan and South Korea where publicly managed LTC facilities have stronger foundations (Yeh, 2022).

The unfolding trends of child-centric care organizations (e.g., competitive parenting culture in Göransson *et al.*, 2022; Katz, 2018; Teo, 2023) coexisting with emerging ageism in social life locally (e.g., Maulod & Lu, 2019; Ng, 2023) and internationally (e.g., Herron *et al.*, 2021) must be observed in each localized context. People’s gravitation to child-centric futures in allocating care arrangements is not intrinsic to Confucian cultural teachings or any given social framework, but rather a broader phenomenon arising from modernity as a global social problem. In closing, I reiterate the urgency for population researchers as well as interested social welfare policy analysts more broadly – especially those who study eldercare and migrant care work – to complicate the cultural factors (often treated as “variables”) of filial piety in East Asia as well as consider wider trends of child-centric bias in care organization. Although my contributions are grounded in a qualitative training background, I do not wish to imply any hierarchy or ranking of methodological approaches and

methods used. Age relations, intergenerational dynamics, and eldercare issues encompass a wide swathe of social actors and institutions that must be understood from macro to micro scales. For instance, social processes that reproduce ageist attitudes and care relations are observed in numerous settings ranging from formal skills training courses (e.g., Maulod & Lu, 2020) to informal, privatized domains of family interactions or grounded storytelling (Mehta & Leng, 2017; Munkejord *et al.*, 2021). This perspective article is of the view that while the widespread prevalence of FDWs in family planning and care labor migration policy may be particularly acute in East Asia, beyond institutional debates of welfare policy across East and West, social phenomena of ageism tied to child-centric productivity is a common problem in modernity that analysts could devote more research attention to (Katz, 2018; Teo, 2023). Ultimately, I see this brief contribution as participating in ongoing efforts to advocate for equitable and just care outcomes for people of all ages.

Acknowledgments

None.

Funding

None.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

This is a single-authored article.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The data used in this paper are part of the author’s doctoral research project, “Eldercare’s devaluation in the developmental state enterprise: Singapore and Taiwan.” It has passed the University of Victoria’s Human Research Ethics Board approval and certification process (ethics protocol number 20 – 0518). With regard to human subjects, the fieldwork involved recording semi-structured interviews with both written and verbal consent for usage in academic publications. Consent forms were provided to and approved by the ethics committee before the quoted interviews.

Consent for publication

Participant consented on the publication of their data.

Availability of data

The data used in the study can be found in the author’s doctoral dissertation, which was defended on June 10,

2024, and available to the public through the University of Victoria Faculty of Graduate Studies records: <https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/items/03d569ac-0cea-4020-b7db-d7e3462f6bc7>.

References

- Chew, S.Y. (2022). Loneliness experience among cognitively-intact elderly nursing home residents in Singapore-an exploratory mixed methods study. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, 98:104572.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.archger.2021.104572>
- Chiu, H.C., & Yen, C.M. (2024). Live-in migrant care workers as part of the long-term care workforce in Taiwan, Singapore, and Austria: Implications for home-based dementia care. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, 1-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2024.2415175>
- Chung, W.Y., Yeung, W.J.J., & Drobnič, S. (2021). Family policies and care regimes in Asia. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 30(4):371-384.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12512>
- Göransson, K., Kang, Y., & Kim, Y. (2022). Navigating conflicting desires: Parenting practices and the meaning of educational work in urban East Asia. *Ethnography and Education*, 17(2):160-178.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2022.2042708>
- Herron, R., Kelly, C., & Aubrecht, K. (2021). A conversation about ageism: Time to deinstitutionalize long-term care? *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 90(2):183-206.
<https://doi.org/10.3138/utq.90.2.09>
- Hung, S.L., Fung, K.K., & Lau, A.S.M. (2021). Grandparenting in Chinese skipped-generation families: Cultural specificity of meanings and coping. *Journal of Family Studies*, 27(2):196-214.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2018.1526703>
- Katz, C. (2018). The angel of geography: Superman, Tiger Mother, aspiration management, and the child as waste. *Progress in Human Geography*, 42(5):723-740.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132517708844>
- Li, W.W., Singh, S., & Keerthigha, C. (2021). A cross-cultural study of filial piety and palliative care knowledge: Moderating effect of culture and universality of filial piety. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12:787724.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.787724>
- Maulod, A., & Lu, S.Y. (2020). "I'm slowly ageing but I still have my value": Challenging ageism and empowering older persons through lifelong learning in Singapore. *Educational Gerontology*, 46(10):628-641.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03601277.2020.1796280>
- Mehta, K.K., & Leng, T.L. (2017). Experiences of formal and informal caregivers of older persons in Singapore. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 32(3):373-385.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10823-017-9329-1>
- Miner, W. (2023). Singapore, Religious Diversity and Tolerance Go Hand in Hand. Pew Research Center. Available from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/06/in-singapore-religious-diversity-and-tolerance-go-hand-in-hand> [Last accessed on 2025 Mar 16].
- Miner, W. (2024). 4 Facts about Religion and Diversity in Taiwan. Pew Research Center. Available from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/29/4-facts-about-religion-and-diversity-in-taiwan> [Last accessed on 2025 Mar 16].
- Munkejord, M.C., Ness, T.M., & Silan, W. (2021). 'We are all interdependent'. A study of relationships between migrant live-in carers and employers in Taiwan. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*, 8:1-11.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/23333936211043504>
- Ng, L. (2022). Forgotten and invisible laborers: Domestic workers in Singapore and Taiwan. *Human Rights in the Global South*, 1(2):79-94.
<https://doi.org/10.56784/hrgs.v1i2.14>
- Ng, L.Y.L. (2023). Choosing whom to care for: Children versus elderly. *Journal of Aging & Social Change*, 13(1):125-149.
<https://doi.org/10.18848/2576-5310/CGP/v13i01/125-149>
- Ortiga, Y.Y., Wee, K., & Yeoh, B.S. (2021). Connecting care chains and care diamonds: The elderly care skills regime in Singapore. *Global Networks*, 21(2):434-454.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12281>
- Peng, I. (2018). Shaping and reshaping care and migration in East and Southeast Asia. *Critical Sociology*, 44(7-8):1117-1132.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920518758878>
- Raghuram, P. (2012). Global care, local configurations-challenges to conceptualizations of care. *Global Networks*, 12(2):155-174.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2012.00345.x>
- Rozario, P.A., & Hong, S.I. (2019). Foreign domestic workers and eldercare in Singapore: Who hires them? *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, 31(3):197-210.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2019.1578605>
- Tadai, M.E., Straughan, P.T., Cheong, G., Yi, R.N.W., & Er, T.Y. (2023). The effects of SES, social support, and resilience on older adults' well-being during COVID-19: Evidence from Singapore. *Urban Governance*, 3(1):14-21.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ugj.2023.02.002>
- Teo, Y. (2023). Education as care labor: Expanding our lens on the work-life balance problem. *Current Sociology*, 71(7):1312-1329.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/001139212111072577>

- Thang, L.L., Mehta, K., Usui, T., & Tsuruwaka, M. (2011). Being a good grandparent: Roles and expectations in intergenerational relationships in Japan and Singapore. *Marriage & Family Review*, 47(8):548-570.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2011.619303>
- Wang, Q., Xiao, X., Zhang, J., Jiang, D., Wilson, A., Qian, B., & Yang, Q. (2023). The experiences of East Asian dementia caregivers in filial culture: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14:1173755.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1173755>
- Xue, D.M., Bai, Q., & Bian, Y. (2022). How working-age population education and health of older people shape the burden of population aging: A comparative study of Macau, Hong Kong, and Singapore. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10:1031229.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.1031229>
- Yeh, K.H., Yi, C.C., Tsao, W.C., & Wan, P.S. (2013). Filial piety in contemporary Chinese societies: A comparative study of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. *International Sociology*, 28(3):277-296.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580913484345>
- Yeh, M.J. (2022). Developmental trajectories of health and long-term care systems: The transitions of solidarity in four Asian countries. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, 103:104785.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.archger.2022.104785>