

EXAMPLE ESSAY FOR TOPIC 2

NOTE: this essay includes literature in addition to our course material. That is not a requirement.

The structure however, is exemplary.

The assignment prefers to see a comparison of all 3 cultures. If there is not material for all 3 cultures regarding a topic of your choice, you may compare only 2 cultures.

ANTH 3002, ESSAY 2

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Introduction

Japan and China's elderly are increasingly facing tough problems as they live longer through times of rapid change. Japan and China's cultures are very different but in the throws and aftershocks of modernization they share an unfortunate common ground. In these times of transition, the elderly of China and Japan are being abused and replaced from what was once a position of respect to a seat on the back burner. The commonalities between China and Japan are interesting because, although there are other contributing factors to the problems of the elderly unique to each culture, there is one large source for these problems that both countries have in common. The undermining of filial piety is a big contributor towards the issues the elderly are confronted with that is common for both countries.

Filial Piety in China and Japan

Filial piety in East Asian cultures is the product of Confucian values and can be described as a virtue of loving and respecting one's parents and ancestors. Confucian values have existed in China since before Christ, Japan since around 200 A.D. and have heavily shaped the family social structure of these two distinct cultures. For both China and Japan, the notion of filial piety is the reverence one is expected to have for their elders, specifically their parents and ancestors. This reverence has been expressed in China and Japan as an obedience for the wishes of one's elders, and as was the case across much of Japan in the 16th century, a complete deference for the demands of the aged was a formalized relationship between the young and the old (White, 2002:163). In China, filial piety was upheld partly by a complex concept of indebtedness, *enqing*, towards one's parents which was to be repaid by caring for them in their old age (Yan,

2003:173). Traditionally in Japan it was entirely up to the family to care for the elderly (Shibusawa, T., Kodaka, M., Iwano, S., & Kaizu, K., 2005:203). Whenever an elder member was sick or needed care over extended periods of time it was the responsibility of the younger generation to provide this care. It was through the responsibility one felt towards their elderly that this care was carried out. The idea of love was secondary to the obligation one had under filial piety.

Elder Abuse in Japan

Japan's suicide rate among the elderly is one of the highest in the world (White, 2002:175) and is often times due to family problems. It can't be said precisely, but it isn't hard to imagine that the family problems are abuse and neglect. It has been found that several factors placing stress on family caregivers are making elders vulnerable to abuse (Shibusawa et al, 2005:205). There are cases of elderly being physically abused by alcoholic sons and neglected by caregivers that have stresses beyond what they can handle. Using outside help to assist in taking care of the elderly isn't direct abuse but the emotional toll it can take on the elderly is substantial.

Elder Abuse in China

In China, it was once the custom to live with your children and be supported by them when you were too old to support yourself. For many, it is no longer anticipated that their children will care for them in old age directly but still hold out hope for the emotional support (Cheng, S., & Alfred, C., 2006:P264). Although, it is still the expectation among some ageing Chinese people that their children will provide financial and physical support; however, their children are awash in the current demands of the economy. The sons are dealing with the stress of supporting their own children and their

spouses' parents that dealing with their own is just too much for them. Daughter-in-laws, expecting too much from their husbands' parents, are often cruel and emotionally-physically abusive to them (Yan, 2003:169). It is hard to say how much of this is just apathy towards her in-laws. Presumably, it is more than that as daughter-in-laws are in a way being forced to be bossy and demanding because if she is to take care of her own parents, submissiveness will get her and them no where (Yan, 2003:180). Her brothers are being reigned in by their wives parents so she must do the same to her husband at the expense of his parents, to ensure hers are taken care of.

There are numerous accounts of sons and wives kicking their parents out of the house after feeling as if the elderly were not contributing anything to the household. In one instance an elderly woman, who was facing hardship but would not be accepted into her son's house was forced to remarry, among the societal taboos against it. The cruelty of the son and his wife was so much that even in confronting shame on their household because of this frowned upon marriage; they still would not extend a hand to her which might prevent her from doing it. Instead, they forced her into a humiliating ritual, reminiscent of old practices, in which she had to leave her home and village at night, without saying goodbye to anyone (Yan, 2003:169).

Filial Piety Undermined

Because there is no longer an imperial family in Japan to serve as an example of the ideal family (White, 2002:211), the concept of filial piety is left without a model and there are few laws or institutional programs to provide one. Even through an attempt to save the concept of filial piety by the creation of the Respect for the Elderly Day, filial piety has been underwritten to mean preserving the state of the nation by caring for the

elderly instead of caring for the elderly through respect (White, 2002:187). Going even further is to say that it is merely an accommodation for the elderly to care for them and not an embodiment of “Confucian filial piety” as White (2002:26) suggests. The new filial piety is now defined as an effort to preserve the very “respect for the aged” culture it is actually replacing. Though it would be unethical to have it any other way, the various programs that are springing up to assist in taking care of the elderly in Japan, are giving alternatives to unfilial or just simply unable families. It would be more ideal, in addressing the concerns of the elderly, to provide incentives and financial opportunities for families to support their elderly themselves, but this isn’t as practical or popular as enlisting outside assistance.

Globalization of Japan’s consumer market is causing the youth to be materialistic and more centered on their own place in society rather than their responsibility to others. With all the emphasis on personal gain and the possession of ‘trendy’ commodities, the Japanese youth are over indulged and materialistic and are rather apathetic towards what the elderly have to say and the critical issues that they face (White, 2002:168). These elements of the economy are influencing the youth and through their actions, are promoting the undermining of filial piety. This is important to note early on now, as in the future, when a quarter of Japan’s population is over sixty-five (White, 2002:169) the unfilial youth of today will be the unfilial heads of household in the future and will exacerbate the problems already inherent in a reversing population pyramid (White, 2002:156).

There is a new market now for targeting Japan’s growing number of people over sixty-five (White, 2002:167). It is instilling an idea of retired people as dependent

consumers spending their accumulated wealth for recreation and life-fulfillment opportunities. While it is certainly true for some, for many it isn't and the Japanese media only portrays those lifestyles which are no longer in need of filial piety, the dependent and wealthy elders. This depiction masks the more common truth that the elderly in Japan are not living a life up to the standards of their generation. Both Chinese and Japanese elderly are dealing with economic hardships but the market economy is more to blame for the elderly in China because between the times of collectivization and after decollectivization had occurred, the elderly hadn't accumulated much of anything and thus hadn't much of anything to give to their marrying sons. This position crippled whatever former superiority they might have had left and afforded them little security then and now as they inch closer to their final years (Yan, 2003:188-189).

Conclusion

There are numerous reasons that the elderly are facing the problems they are. Many of them are analogous to a rite of passage for their generation into the modern socioeconomic system and one might assume that after the first "post-modern" generation becomes the elderly, they will have long adapted to the new social structures. This could be but stands to be unlikely in Japan unless somehow the older population will have enough support from a dwindling population of young ones. Unlikely still in China as the issues of the elder population start disappearing behind what might become a youth culture in the years to come. This is all highly speculative, but they are issues that should be looked at seriously. Through understanding that the undermining of filial piety is a common root cause for the problems both countries face, these issues and potential solutions can be understood more clearly.

References

(note: Additional literature, not mandatory)

Cheng, S., & Alfred, C. (2006). Filial Piety and Psychological Well-Being in Well Older Chinese. *The Journals of Gerontology*, 61B, P262-P269.

Shibusawa, T., Kodaka, M., Iwano, S., & Kaizu, K. (2005). Interventions for Elder Abuse and Neglect with Frail Elders in Japan. *Brief Treatment & Crisis Intervention*, 5(2), 203-211.

(note: Course material: use of these sources is mandatory)

White, M. I. (2002). *Perfectly Japanese: Making Families in an Era of Upheaval*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Yan, Y. (2003). *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family change in a Chinese Village 1949-1999*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.