

Commentary

# Unmarried Daughters as Family Caregivers: Evolving Family Relationships, Gender Order, and Singlehood in Japan, by Jee Eunsook

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In the United States, where I read Jee Eunsook's "Unmarried Daughters as Family Caregivers: Evolving Family Relationships, Gender Order, and Singlehood in Japan," the COVID-19 pandemic churns on with no end in sight. My Facebook feed is filled with the "choices" faced by women with caregiving responsibilities. As I write, a fellow female anthropologist of Japan posts an article from the *Washington Post*, "Coronavirus child-care crisis will set women back a generation" (Modestino, July 29, 2020), written by a female professor who studies gender and the labor market. A linked article headline reads, "I had to choose being a mother': With no child care or summer camps, women are being edged out of the workforce" (Kitchener, May 22, 2020). I read Jee's article last night after my own three-year-old was in bed, and I write this response during a daytime work period (my husband and I alternate two-hour work shifts with childcare, an all-too-unusual equitable division of labor).

Jee's article is both timely and inspiring. Structured around thirteen "cases" of women attending the Tokyo "Musume Salon" for female caregivers of parents, Jee's polyvocal article illuminates the ways that unmarried women in contemporary Japan are disproportionately burdened

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with social expectations that they (rather than married daughters and daughters-in-law) care for ageing parents. Despite single women's structural and often financial marginality, this responsibility often entails the poignantly acute "choice" to abandon a career. Jee quotes one interlocutor's "desperate advice": Suzuki, a sixty-four-year-old unmarried woman, says, "For single women caring for their parents, the biggest problem is their future. ... For their future, they have to secure a pension that no one can take away from them. If they want that, they simply can't quit their job. If they quit, they're finished. When a single person gives care, their siblings thank them and say they feel bad, but when the parents die, that's it." The finality in Suzuki's statement evokes the end of a chain of giving and receiving (Mauss 1967). If daughters give care to their parents as a way to return the gift of care they themselves received, as many of Jee's interlocutors explained, when these parents die the social exchange relations terminate. There will be no one to care for these unmarried daughters who sacrifice *their own ability to care for themselves* by leaving their jobs. At the same time, as daughters care for altars and graves, "the death of a parent is not the end of the caregiving process," one that is often fraught with guilt and affective uncertainty. Jee writes, "In my view, the unmarried women at Musume Salon were experiencing conflict because they found it hard to think of caring for parents and working as a question of choice." Jee's article concludes by offering a glimpse of a solution that mitigates the necessity to choose: an emergent movement for familial caregivers to "come out," making themselves visible at work as caregivers who also have careers, and visible socially as caregivers who also have romantic relationships. These "*ohitori-sama*" caregivers reclaim the term, defining their social role in single units, "in terms of themselves"—as *ohitori*—rather than with the kinship and relational terms that position them vis-à-vis the care recipient. Jee shows that these latent movements work towards "the politicization of singlehood," a movement that "transcends the familist system." Untenable situations, in so many ways, produce rifts and cracks in a patriarchal system, allowing an otherwise to shine through.

At the same time, the coronavirus pandemic makes brutally clear the ways that social support is necessary for anyone—particularly women—to "have it all," to both care for others and themselves, which often inherently involves working. The "choice" of whether to work or to care is illuminated as a false choice only in the face of truly comprehensive social supports that

counterbalance patriarchal, capitalist, classist, and often racist structures. Jee's article shows the ways that intersectional identity categories—like “married” and “unmarried”—divide women and undermine solidarity efforts. Social policy, specifically the 2000 Japanese Long-term Care Insurance (LTCI) system, seems to have actually shifted caregiving responsibility from daughters-in-law (married, by definition) to unmarried daughters. Jee implies that as this burden has become more and more explicit, the Japanese government is returning to policies that place caregiving responsibilities on the extended family. My most central question reading Jee's article was the degree to which she understands the LTCI system to have *caused* the shifts in caregiving practices that she tracks. Who are the actors that “ earmark ” unmarried daughters “ as ideal candidates for looking after their parents, ” and how has the legal enforceability of caregiving responsibilities changed over time? Specifically, how do normative expectations about family intersect with state welfare policy and practice (Goldfarb 2016)? I wanted more information about how the LTCI system worked and more about the political discourse surrounding the system when it was created and as it aged.

Jee's work articulates with scholarship that highlights the ways relationships of care can incorporate forms of violence and harm (Han 2012) and, indeed, problematizes the ways that a feminist analysis may address a “ sacrifice of the daughter ” (Garcia 2010: 148). I would have loved to see more engagement with other secondary literature (for instance, Danely 2014) as well as deeper analysis of the notion of “ maternal instinct, ” as it seems to apply both to mothers and to caregiving daughters. As an anthropologist of Japanese welfare policy and a kinship scholar, I teach seminars on relationality to students at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Many of my undergraduates articulate the desire not to reproduce; others point out the dearth of kinship scholarship on people who do not have children. Jee explores the “ family life that is actually happening rather than focusing on marriages that never took place, ” an important intervention into kinship scholarship.

## References

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