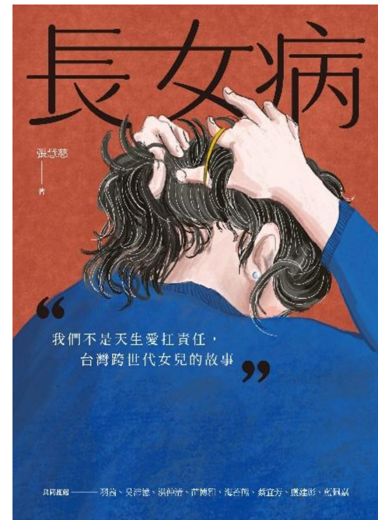
ELDEST DAUGHTER SYNDROME
長女病：我們不是天生愛扛責任，台灣跨世代女兒的故事

Why do eldest daughters in traditional Chinese societies* always *carry the heaviest burden? Author Chang Hui-Tzu trains a macro sociological lens on a cross-generational family tale to dissect the foundations of societal mores and structures and hold out hope of curing Asia's "eldest daughter syndrome" and promoting self-realization.

"A responsible, hardworking daughter is the best long-term care insurance program." According to the findings of a Stanford University research project, daughters are inclined to altruistically look after their parents in old age. *Eldest Daughter Syndrome* author Chang Hui-Tzu highlights that, in traditional Asian families, the eldest daughter wears multiple hats as housework helper, second mother to her siblings, and primary caregiver to her elderly parents. This phenomenon is rooted in Confucian rules on family hierarchy and reinforced by stereotypes that pigeonhole females as instinctive caregivers. More than an occasional occurrence, eldest daughter syndrome is a direct reflection of paternalism and entrenched societal structures.

Chang's sociological analysis approach, backed by in-depth field research and interviews, fleshes out a picture of the fate shared by generations of eldest daughters from all social strata. They are universally tasked with lightening the load of their parents and helping care for their siblings. In lower-class families, they are often sent off to work at a young age to help pay for their siblings' educations. As an adult, minimal schooling limits options in work and often leads to a life that mirrors that of her parents. As parents grow elderly and frail, their care too falls naturally onto eldest daughters' shoulders. In diagnosing



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the underlying social issues, Chang suggests solutions to overturn the norms of family hierarchy and male chauvinism and rectify outdated family structures to relieve overburdened eldest daughters and help them realize “I deserve to be taken care of as well.”

More than speaking out for overburdened eldest daughters, *Eldest Daughter Syndrome* lifts the veil on the familial roles of women and encourages all to consider how the status quo has created a syndrome that continues to overburden and underprivilege women at home, in the workplace, and beyond.

Chang Hui-Tzu 張慧慈

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ELDEST DAUGHTER SYNDROME

By Chang Hui-Tzu
Translated by Marianne Yeh

Author’s Preface: Just Because She’s the Eldest Daughter, She Can’t Be Herself?

For our parents’ generation, *Oshin* was a wildly popular television drama with a story that touched the hearts of countless viewers. It portrayed the resilience and quiet sorrow of women in traditional Japanese families and resonated deeply with the experiences of many Asian women.

One of the most memorable characters in the show was Oshin’s eldest sister. From a young age, she had worked at a textile mill, devoting her entire earnings to supporting her household. While at work, she contracted tuberculosis from a roommate due to the grueling labor and lack of private sleeping quarters. The illness became so severe that she had to be sent home.

Because she was a woman, and because tuberculosis in pre-war Japan was essentially a death sentence, she was driven to live alone in a dilapidated woodshed. She loved her family deeply. Knowing her days were numbered, she encouraged her younger sister to have the courage to pursue her own life. Yet, she treaded carefully in her own love life. The family still depended on her wages, and she told herself that once her younger siblings were grown, she would finally be free to pursue her own love. But in the end, her hope was laid to rest forever, alongside her misfortune.

My mother and I both loved *Oshin*. No matter how many times it was re-run, we would find ourselves stopping on that channel and quietly watching to the end. We both felt Oshin’s life mirrored our own. Even though my mother and I are more than twenty years apart in age, we share so many of the same experiences.

My mother was the firstborn in her family, as I was in mine. As eldest daughters, we had much the same kind of childhood.

At home, we bore the heaviest expectations – as role models to our younger siblings, and as the first ones called upon whenever the family needed help. Whether a problem was financial or emotional, the eldest daughter was always expected to bear the load.

As eldest daughters, we were taught to understand our parents’ hard work, to help keep the house tidy and clean, and to make sure things ran smoothly when they were away earning a living. We were to look after our younger brothers and sisters, set a good example, and, when necessary, act as stand-in parent. We were still children ourselves, yet we were expected to excel, be considerate of our parents, and manage the household.

That was my life, and the life of many women I know.

Being the Eldest Daughter Is Exhausting; Not a Day to Call Your Own

One of my aunts was the eldest daughter. When she was hospitalized after a car accident, the doctors discovered she had pancreatic cancer. Within six short months, she was gone. In her thirty-some years of life, she had never dated, never married. She had started working in a textile factory at a young age, helped her parents raise her younger siblings, and, later, "volunteered" to stay home as a live-in caretaker for her parents.

Worried that the family line could die out, she adopted her younger sister's child, whom her sister could not afford to raise, as her godson. In doing so, she not only cared for her parents and nephew by taking on the caretaking role so often assigned to daughters, but in recognizing her nephew as a godson, gave symbolic "birth" to the family's anointed heir. From that moment on, she even took on the duties typically assigned in traditional societies to sons, such as covering household expenses, representing her parents at weddings and funerals, and managing affairs large and small during the New Year and other festivals. For as long as I can remember, my aunt nearly never left Beigang.

Before passing away, she made a trip to Taipei, as if to bid farewell to all her relatives and friends. She told us how hard it had been to be the eldest daughter and that not a single day had ever belonged to her. If she had the chance in another life, she said, she would want nothing more than to let everything go and finally live for herself.

I once asked her why she was especially fond of my second sister. She said she envied her freedom and carefree spirit; it was the kind of life she had always dreamed of. She urged me, also the eldest daughter, to think more for myself.

"Tzu," she said, "being the eldest is always harder. But don't end up like me, still tied down at home even after my younger brothers and sisters have grown. Go out into the world; see more, experience more. You're such a good student; when you grow older, you'll understand what I mean. Do you hear me? Think more about yourself."

Hearing her say this made me wonder: was my aunt unable to be herself simply because she was the eldest daughter? And what about me? A generation later, do eldest daughters still carry the same burdens of social expectation?

I thought about it and felt the answer was probably "yes". My aunt and I were both born into working-class families. We both had fathers who valued sons over daughters, and we both were the eldest. That was why she didn't want me to follow in her footsteps – to sacrifice my life entirely for the sake of family.

Looking at her face wasted to skin and bone by cancer, I felt a flicker of fear. Fear that, one day, I might end up just like her.

It was not long after that my aunt passed away.

Can Eldest Daughters Ever Truly Be Themselves?

I kept my aunt's words close to heart and studied hard. For children from the working class, education is the least costly way to change one's fate. As long as I made it to college, I could find an office job after graduation. With a stable income, I wouldn't necessarily have to follow the traditional path of marriage and childbearing, and I would have the confidence to pursue more in life.

Later, I fulfilled my wish and got into a good university. There, I encountered sociology and, as I learned about concepts like class, social structure, and gender, I came to feel the situations faced by my aunt and my mother were the result not solely of our lower-class origins but also of our status as women. Yet I still wondered, was it really only because of that?

When I was about to start my junior year, I was chatting with a few close friends and suddenly realized that, out of the eight of us, only one was not an eldest daughter. That was when one friend said, "No wonder you've always been a little different from us; you're more true to yourself."

I often wonder why my mother, my aunt, my eldest-daughter friends, and I all feel we are "less able to be ourselves." When I talk to these friends about our roles in our families, words like sacrifice, obedience, and "the best helper our parents ever had" often come up. We come from families of different social classes, yet we are all eldest daughters. Interestingly, as we grew up, each of us forged a different path in life and developed different relationships with our families.

Eldest Daughter Syndrome Is Not Innate; It's Shaped by Society

Exploring these and related questions was my reason for writing this book. Through this process, I've observed eldest daughters from different generations and social classes. I found that, across generations, eldest daughters have consistently been assigned the role of caregiver and been expected to be obedient, dependable, and well-behaved. This role, or what we might call a label, has followed them beyond their families of origin, extending into school, the workplace, their own marriages and families, and even the care given to aging parents.

This book also explores the experiences of women who are not their family's oldest sibling. In families where the eldest daughter is unable to fulfill the role society expects of her, another more suitable daughter is often forced to step in and take her place. Their behavior patterns end up mirroring closely the same expectations and assumptions put upon eldest daughters. In this way, the book reveals the crucial roles women have played in the family from the past up to the present, showing how, even today, these responsibilities, and especially the burden of caregiving, still fall on women, which is a pressing reality that our rapidly aging society must now confront.

Through stories of different women, this book reveals the contours of society's vision of the family and how those expectations spill over into workplace, household, caregiving, and other environments. It examines why society depends on these roles, and how women can, despite the constraints, find ways to break through the status quo and forge paths of their own.

In the final chapter of this book, I attempt to offer solutions for dismantling the seemingly unshakable, rigid role hierarchies created by family birth order and inequality. I hope readers will be able to recognize their own roles within these dynamics and, in doing so, support both themselves and others who feel similarly trapped so that change becomes possible.

I hope that my mother, my aunt, myself, and women like me will one day understand that being the eldest daughter is not a curse, but a privilege of being the first among siblings to discover and enjoy the world.

CHAPTER 1: You're the Eldest Sister, So You Must Set a Good Example

When my sister and I were little, we went to the same preschool. Every morning, the teacher would walk from the school and pick up each child at their home. At seven o'clock sharp, my mother would wake me. I brushed my teeth, washed my face, packed my schoolbag myself, then had breakfast in the living room. By about 7:40, my mother would walk me downstairs to wait for the teacher.

But the teacher could only ever take me with her because my younger sister always overslept, leaving my mother to drive her to school later on the scooter. Whenever I'd ask Mom to take me to school on her scooter too, she always dismissed me, saying I was being unreasonable.

Even now, I still bring this up with her, complaining that she was strict with me but lenient with my siblings. Her answer has never changed: "You're the eldest sister. You have to set a good example."

Just saying "You're the eldest sister" seemed to make whatever came after justified by default.

I was born in 1988 in New Taipei City. My father was a construction worker and my mother worked first as a hairdresser and then later on in an electronics factory. I was the first child, followed by three younger siblings – a sister two years younger, then a brother and another sister, respectively five and six years younger than me.

Both my father and grandfather valued sons over daughters, so I understood from a young age that women had a lower standing in our family. All resources were distributed around the men. As daughters, we were constantly reminded early on of our responsibility to help care for our brother and even support him after we'd grown up. After he got married and had children or went off to pursue his own endeavors, it didn't matter. We sisters were expected to help. Just as my father's sisters did for him, this was the path already set for us.

And, as the eldest daughter, even more was expected of me.

I had to set a good example, learn more life skills, and understand my parents' hardships. In daily life, this meant being obedient, caring for my siblings when my parents were at work, doing household chores, and preparing meals so the younger ones could live normally. When my parents returned, tired from work, I had to "read the room", serve tea, and absorb their stress and complaints. This was the eldest daughter's responsibility. Because our parents worked so hard

outside the home, the eldest daughter had to "act as a mother", so they could feel at ease. That was the purpose of my existence.

I had to study hard, learn to do housework, and take my siblings out to play. Even the slightest mistake could lead to punishment: sometimes a few lashes with the water hose, or being forced to hold a painful half-squat position, bending my knees as if sitting on an invisible chair until my legs gave out. My siblings, though, got only a quick scolding before they were allowed to run off to play or rest.

In my memory, my parents' faces were invariably either angry or weary. Every day, I had to gauge what kind of day they'd had, whether work had gone badly. Yet in front of my siblings, they were mostly cheerful. My father, who usually spoke harshly to me, would often smile at my younger sisters and ask if they'd been good and, immediately afterward, turn to me and ask why I hadn't washed his teacup today.

As a child, I didn't understand why. I knew only that, if I wanted to survive in this family, I had to work harder to please my father and the other male elders or risk losing my place here altogether. Later, I noticed my eldest aunt and my mother also had this ingrained habit of wanting to please others. Among my friends, classmates, and colleagues who were also eldest daughters, the pattern was the same. They would go out of their way to meet whatever was asked of them. I couldn't help but wonder why.

1 The Social Significance of the Eldest Daughter

As the firstborn girl in a family, the eldest daughter holds special significance.

Even in families that favor sons over daughters, not all women are given the responsibility of caring for the household and sharing the parents' burdens (including emotional burdens). These responsibilities almost always fall to the eldest daughter, especially among working-class and farming families.

In traditional agricultural societies, the labor-intensive nature of farming makes men more important to the labor pool, leaving women more often tasked with caring for the home. Although women also contribute as supplementary farm labor, helping planting rice seedlings, growing vegetables, and raising chickens and ducks, the core agricultural labor force is male-dominated, and the additional tasks women take on during busy farming seasons, while necessary, are often considered of lesser merit.

As societies industrialize, men tend to take work in heavy industries requiring physical strength, while women are employed in light industries such as textiles and assembly work. In generations past, daughters born earlier in the birth order to farming and working-class families were often sent into the labor market to earn additional household income, while other women in the family took over their farming chores and domestic responsibilities.

Many of the eldest daughters who enter the factories give most of their earnings back to their families, not only to support the men in the household, but really to lift up all the children,

enabling them to receive a better education. However, by the time the family's financial burden eases, these eldest daughters, often with limited education, have fewer choices in employment and marriage, making it more likely they will replicate in their own household the same family dynamics they grew up with.

For the eldest daughters of working-class families, self-identity is formed by their upbringing and centered on the prioritization of the interests of the family above all else. Within this framework, regardless of marital status or educational attainment, they seek ways to provide support to the household and help their younger siblings live better lives.

In many blue-collar families, eldest daughters have less schooling than their other siblings and start working at an earlier age. Many discussions of this topic emphasize that, once women achieve financial independence, they are better able to defend their own rights. Yet under the shadow of a patriarchal system that values sons over daughters, these women's economic power has often been used primarily to fill the family's financial gaps. As anthropologist Lydia Kung's fieldwork in Taiwan shows, "Leaving home to work does not necessarily bring single women workers independence or autonomy. They still face pressures of marriage and filial duty, and much of their wages go toward meeting the financial needs of their parents and brothers."[1]

A Married Daughter Must Please Both Sides

The plight of eldest daughters is also a product of patriarchal order. Studies of the working class have shown that children are often treated as extensions of family property. In traditional households, a woman's role before marriage includes caring for her younger siblings, managing household chores, and earning a wage to supplement the family income until the day she is married off. Whether or not she is able to marry thus also became a measure of her value. From what I have observed, many eldest daughters enter the labor force at an early age, usually in physically demanding jobs and in environments populated almost entirely by women, with few men around. Compared with their sisters in other birth-order positions, eldest daughters therefore have far less opportunity to meet partners through romantic choice. They lack both the environment and the time.

As Yow-Hwey Hu notes in *Three Generations Under One Roof: Myths and Traps*, in traditional Chinese families, the relationship between parents and daughters is temporary and tenuous, with married daughters considered "someone else's."[2] A similar observation can be found in the poetry of Pai Chü-i, a celebrated Tang dynasty poet known for his plain yet poignant verses on social realities and everyday life. One poem reads:

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[1] Kung, L. (1976). Factory work and women in Taiwan: Changes in Self-Image and Status. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 2(1), 35-58.

[2] Hu, Yow-Hwey (1995). *Three Generations Under One Roof: Myths and Traps.* Taipei: Chü-liu Publishing.

“Bowing farewell to her parents as the sun slants low, With a red handkerchief, she wipes her tears, adorned in bridal flowers. Born and raised here, yet today she leaves as a guest; Only by following her husband does she begin to have a home.”[3]

This poem captures how, once a woman marries, her role in her birth family shifts from being a daughter to that of an outsider and guest. From that day forward, her husband’s home is considered her true home.

Because a married daughter resides in her birth family only as a guest, she must please both sides – winning favor with her husband’s family to secure her place there, while keeping good standing with her birth family to maintain a “birth home” (*hou t’ou ts’u* in Taiwanese Hokkien). This way, she is not looked down upon, and she signals to her in-laws that she still has a strong family behind her.

As Taiwanese society developed, women attained higher levels of education, which began to unsettle traditional family assumptions and practices. In her study *A Married Daughter, Like Water Poured Out???*[4], Pei-chieh Tsai analyzes the changing status and responsibilities of women in Taiwan. She cites research showing that urban women with at least a middle-level education and employed in a professional position “often devoted their earnings to supporting the household, helping their siblings continue their studies, and even financing their brothers’ business ventures, both before and after marriage.”[5] This confirms that even after gaining financial independence or formally leaving their families of origin, many women still contribute money back home or step in whenever their birth families need help, paving a path of return for themselves. Their hope is that, in the event of mistreatment by their husbands’ households or when considering divorce, their own families will stand by them and offer support and shelter. Such financial contributions thus function like a kind of protective talisman, albeit not a failsafe guarantee of security. What I have observed more often is that when the eldest daughter failed to provide such assistance, she would face resentment and neglect from her family of origin.

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[3] Cheng, A-tsai. (1984). A study of the Tun-huang manuscript *Lady Tsui’s Instructions to Her Daughter*. *Chung Hsing Journal of Law and Commerce*, 19, 321–334.

[4] Tsai, Pei-chieh. (2001). *A Married Daughter, Like Water Poured Out??? Graduate Institute of Sociology, Nanhua University Online Electronic Journal*, 15. Retrieved from https://www.nhu.edu.tw/~society/e-j/15/15-4.htm

[5] Tsui Elaine Yi-Lan (1987) Are Married Daughters ‘Spilled Water’?: A Study of Working Women in Urban Taiwan. Taipei: Women Research Program.