



An alternative discourse of productive aging: A self-restrained approach in older Chinese people in Hong Kong



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ABSTRACT

While Western discourses regarding productive aging emphasize individuals' contributions to economic productivity, the Confucian cultural heritage of the Chinese community may provide an alternative perspective. This qualitative study explores interpretations of what constitutes productive aging, based on a series of in-depth interviews with older Chinese people in Hong Kong. It shows that some of these individuals adopted a passive and indirect interpretation of productive aging, distinct from that found in Western countries. The Confucianism-based, collectivist, normative order underpinning Hong Kong society disposed these older people to adopting a self-restrained attitude with the aim of avoiding becoming a burden to others, especially family members. Such a tendency toward self-restraint or avoidance also encompassed a compromise between ideals and reality, with the older people opting to compromise their expectations of the younger generation as a whole, their adult children in particular, in terms of respect and reciprocity.

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Introduction

With most advanced economies facing an aging population, the focus of both academic investigation and social policy is turning to the increasing number of elders. Concepts such as healthy aging, active aging, successful aging, and, more recently, productive aging have been proposed in order to lend a positive tone to the analysis of issues related to older people. The popularity of the concept of productive aging mirrors the imminent challenge created by the prospect of older people consuming increasing amounts of social resources in terms of pensions, health and long-term care services, and related public services. The concept of productive aging originates

from developed Western countries and has recently received academic interest in China, given China's large and looming aging population. Hong Kong, a Chinese community characterized as a city where "East meets West" and a former British colony, is now a Special Administrative Region of China. It would be interesting to explore the ways in which older Hong Kong Chinese people interpret this concept; the results of this exploration may shed light on the ways in which the Chinese community could prepare to face the challenges of an aging population.

A qualitative approach is adopted in this work; a group of older people in Hong Kong were interviewed. The main finding of this study is that while Western discourse sees aging as a way of making a proactive contribution that can usually be monetarized, the Chinese cultural interpretation of productive aging among these Hong Kong older people was characterized by an emphasis on indirect and intangible contributions. Older Chinese people in Hong Kong have adopted self-restraint in their roles vis-à-vis the family, the community, and the society,

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with the aim of avoiding being a burden. They also spoke of the need to compromise in order to resolve the tension between expecting allegiance and respect from their children or society at large, and accepting the practical constraints that their adult children face in offering such reciprocation. Such self-restraint as found among older Hong Kong Chinese is grounded upon older Chinese people's normative framework of collectivism, which is distinct from the individualism underpinning Western discourses.

Divergent discourses of productive aging

The concept of productive aging was first coined by Robert Butler at the Salzburg Conference to overcome the increasingly overwhelming concern over elderly dependency and the social burden brought about by an aging population (Bass & Caro, 2001). Later, Bass and Caro's (2001) seminal work provided a conceptual model that incorporates the various pertinent variables related to productive aging. In their model, culture is one of the crucial factors shaping role expectations and influencing participation in productive activities. There is a need to formulate culturally relevant theoretical frameworks in understanding productive aging, which delineates the relationship between cultural values and ideas and/or experiences of aging (Torres, 1999). The following sections explore the possible divergences between interpretations of Western and Chinese discourses.

Western interpretations of productive aging

Many studies on productive aging have been conducted in the USA with the goal of overcoming increasing concern about elder dependency and the social burden of an aging population. Researchers have defined productive aging as "any activity by an older individual that produces goods or services, whether paid or not, or develops the capacity to produce them" (Bass & Caro, 2001, p. 39). This definition was later articulated as "working, formal and informal volunteering, and caregiving", or activities that can be assigned dollar values (Morrow-Howell & Wang, 2013). Such a change attempts to redefine older people, from indispensable liabilities to potentially productive forces, with the possibility of positive outcomes such as "offsetting the fiscal strains of a larger older population, contributing to the betterment of families and civil society, and maintaining the health and economic well-being of older adults" (Gonzales, Matz-Costa, & Morrow-Howell, 2015, p. 253). Productive aging has been embraced in Canada (Dosman, Fast, Chapman, & Keating, 2006), Europe (Hank & Erlinghagen, 2010; Van der Meer, 2006), and Australia (Warburton & McLaughlin, 2005). These studies converge with findings from the USA in regard to the way in which older people continue participating in paid, domestic, and community work after they formally retire from the labor force, and the way in which these activities are economically productive.

However, this concept is criticized as imposing negative judgements on a group of people who are productive, such as housewives, who stay at home earning no money, and minorities and frail elderly people, who have less ability to earn a decent salary (Moody, 2001; Martinson & Halpern, 2011). Dillaway and Byrnes (2009) explored the sociopolitical root of the theory of productive aging, criticized its political motivation

of reducing governmental spending, and encouraged critically examining the limited paradigm proposed by the theory.

In a nutshell, Western discourse has an individualistic and pragmatic, if not utilitarian, flavor that heralds proactivity on the part of the older person. One is encouraged to take an active approach in doing something with economic or tangible value to oneself or others. The motif of encouraging productivity among older people was criticized as risking ignoring the diverse pursuit of the elderly and marginalizing those who have little productivity or choose not to engage in productivity. As discussed below, the Chinese discourse may provide a different, if not directly contradictory, version of this ideology.

The Chinese approach to productive aging

Autonomy, individualism, youthfulness, busyness, and consumption are ideal values heralded in Western society (Rozanova, 2010), while in Chinese communities, the focus is on Confucianism, collectivism, familism, and filial piety, with interdependence between younger and older generations highly valued (Liang & Luo, 2012). The economic values embraced in the Western interpretation of productive aging appear to be incongruent with Chinese culture. The Chinese normative framework can be broadly conceived as a collectivist orientation, in contrast to Western individualism. Filial piety is the fundamental moral value in Chinese societies (Lai, 2010). It obligates people to respect and support senior family members, to produce offspring to ensure the continuity of the family lineage, and to generally conduct oneself in a way that brings honor and not disgrace to the family name (Ho, 1994). On the other hand, filial piety may be one of the barriers preventing older people from working to an advanced age (Chiu & Ngan, 1999). To enjoy filial treatment from their offspring, older people should stop working when they reach a certain age. If an older adult works beyond the common retirement age, his or her children may be labeled as "unfilial" or be seen as unable to provide their parents with a secure existence in the final stages of their life, bringing disgrace to the family. In order to avoid this, older people stop working and let their children take care of their finances. This might also account for older Chinese people's general reluctance to prolong their working lives and thus explain negative attitudes toward work as a manifestation of productive aging in China.

In traditional Chinese society, older people obtained social prestige by accumulating irreplaceable life experiences that could be handed down to younger generations (Chow, 1983). They could share their wisdom and knowledge with their offspring in order to perpetuate their lineage and preserve collective solidarity. Traditional Chinese norms place a great deal of value on co-residence among the different generations, and three-generation extended families where the grandparents can take care of their grandchildren are regarded as a symbol of blessing and fortune. Caregiving toward the younger generations by the older in terms of grandparenting, and in the reverse direction, to uphold filial piety is embraced as a form of intergenerational transfer and reciprocation (Ng, Phillips, & Lee, 2002).

Chinese scholars Peng and Fei (2013) claimed that the theory of productive aging is consistent with the culture, history, policy, and daily practice of contemporary mainland China. They defined productive aging as, "under the premise

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