



# Unfinalisability and the authorship of life – Narratives of young-old women from Taiwan



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates and presents the narratives of Taiwanese women who have reached the young-old stage. The narrative interview method was used for data collection from 12 Taiwanese women. After analysing the recurring themes emerging from the women's life histories, it is found that the meanings of these Taiwanese women's narratives could not be finalised according to traditional Confucian norms. These women rebelled, resisted, and resumed authorship to make changes to their lives in a patriarchal society. The women were reflexive, and had constant struggles. The findings also reveal a prominent characteristic of Taiwanese culture that emphasises relationships. The women were able to pursue their dreams to involve themselves in self-care, leisure, aesthetic activities, and classes for their personal growth and pleasure.

## Introduction

### *Young-old women in Taiwan*

Taiwan is moving on from an “aging” society to an “aged” society. According to the definition of the United Nations, a society is “aging” when 7% of its population are 65 or above; and a society is defined as “aged” if 14% or more of its population are senior citizens, aged 65 or older. As of November 2015, 12.5% of the Taiwanese population were 65 or above. Taiwan would become an “aged” society by 2018 and a “hyper-aged” society by 2025 (as it is projected that 20% of its population will be 65 or over by then) with low birth rates and longer life expectancy; Taiwan is quickly catching up with Japan and Switzerland. Average life expectancy in Taiwan is now 79.8 (Ministry of the Interior, R.O.C., 2016): the same level as in Germany and Britain, higher than in the US, China, Malaysia, and many other South-East Asian countries (CNA; Ministry of Interior, R.O.C., 2013). Women who normally outlive men, are expected to do so by an average of 6 years. The life expectancy is 76 for men and 83 for women (Taipei Time, 2013). The retirement age in Taiwan is 60 (Ministry of Labour, R.O.C., 2016), however, teachers retire as early as at the age of 50 or 55, which means after retirement, women teachers are expected to live another three decades.

Young-olds is a life stage in women after they have raised one generation, for those who have married, and for most, when they may have freed themselves from some formal responsibilities in the society.

The definition of young-olds does not follow an arbitrary age range, but follows the period after retirement and before illness set in (Kok & Yap, 2014, 2015). We have used the life incidence “retirement” as a distinguishing threshold for young-olds instead of chopping up the life cycle in a mandatory way. Many authors (Baltes & Smith, 2003; Neugarten, 1996) hold that “young-olds” have potential to be explored and suggested that this is a stage to maximise their untapped resources to optimise their development. Other studies suggest that “third age” as a period during which dreams and leisure will be pursued as women are freed from work and constraints from family (Wiggins, Higgs, Hyde, & Blane, 2004). Young-olds are chosen for this study because women on average have more than 20 years to live after retirement in Taiwan. Young-olds is a stage before old-olds, which much literature has described as a dependent age either being physically impaired, experiencing cognitive deterioration, or being psychologically depressed. Young-olds is a stage described as “empty nest”, when children leave home. It could be the first time that most women have time for themselves after completing some important life tasks expected of them, such as launching their children into the adult working world, or completing an official vocation. Thus, this life stage is a time for performing life reviews and reflection.

All cultures have their own views of aging and perspectives on maximising human development. Culture provides a frame of reference for individuals to make sense of their life experience (Geertz, 1973; Gubrium, 2001; Karasawa et al., 2011). Individual life histories from a

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Western culture may reflect competitiveness or self-reliance narratives. This is reflected in the Western theories about aging, which are dominated by the concepts of “successful aging” and focuses on individual life success. According to Rowe and Kahn, the three important dimensions are, (1) low probability of disease; (2) high cognitive and physical functional capacity and (3) active engagement with life. While Taiwanese culture emphasises “aging well” (Chen, 2015), Chen’s study reveals Taiwanese old people’s perspective of successful aging is being healthy, having no financial worries, maintaining connection with family and friends, contributing to society and a good death.

Many authors see the importance of adding older people’s subjective aging experience to enrich this theoretical construct, to include more cultural diversity (Torres, 2006). Research findings from the East yield different insights (Hsu, 2007) from Western aging theories emphasising competence and self-reliance, values that are more consistent with the Western culture. Oriental culture focuses on interdependence and the relational aspect. Therefore, Chen calls for rethinking existing literature in both gerontology and women’s studies to include older people’s subjective experiences in aging studies, especially from different cultures, rather than use an existing concept to understand them (Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009).

The subjective experiences of older Taiwanese women were found to be different from their Western counterparts. For example, according to Rowe and Kahn’s model (1997), being “healthy” is the main component of successful aging, but Chen (2015) found that other experiences would affect the perceptions of being healthy and aging well, such as “purpose of life”. Chen’s study concludes that participation in life benefits women and is an important factor in “successful aging” (or aging well). Taiwanese women considered themselves as aging well although they were living with various medical conditions. The social participations of Taiwanese women were well researched and the findings include leisure activities, contacts with friends and family members, and participation in volunteer work (Huang & Yang, 2013). Social participation was significantly associated with young-old women’s quality of life. What has motivated these women’s social participation and what meaning can be drawn from their social participation? Li, Lin, Fetzer, and Chen (2014) highlighted the importance of the relational aspect in motivating the elder women in their community involvement because of the support and energy they need. This is a holistic development of women in their young-old age as they build bonds with other women in the community after retirement. As Taiwanese women retire at 55 (or even younger for secondary school teachers), we recruited research participants aged 55 and above for this study to explore their life history to find out how they make sense of their lives.

The sharing of life history provides a platform for young-olds to review their lives. Individual stories are always inextricably integrated with the wider context in which they embed. We have decided to use the life-history approach for data collection to draw out young-old women’s stories, their personal values, emotional life, and cultural importance (Sarbin, 1995).

### *Life history approach*

Life history narratives reveal not only personal but also social cultural narratives, as it shows how the society and culture in which we are embedded have a role in constructing our lived experience. Different cultural contexts will contribute to the way women experience and express their narratives. McAdam (2008) holds that the personal/individual self is storied when people integrate their lives in stories and stories are told in social relationships. There are relational and cultural elements inextricably integrated in life stories because social cultural perspectives shape them. When a life story is told, participants draw on their memory and meaning-making system. Memory is not something that we can retrieve by pressing a button for a playback session of the past. It requires some interpretative perspectives from the storyteller

that tie the past to the here and now, even into the projected future. By employing a life history approach, we aim to draw out the personal life narratives of participants expressed either chronologically, or perhaps organised according to the meanings assigned by participants that reflect the core values or shared experience of their cultural context.

### *Interpretative framework*

Taiwan is a collectivistic society in which traditional Confucian culture and family kinship ties are strong. Confucian society is a patriarchal system. It prescribes roles and functions for each member of society in a hierarchy that serves political and economic stability. The role of women has been defined by a male-dominant society. Even the Chinese character for “woman” (婦) has the shape of a broom in it. Written Chinese does not follow a phonological structure; instead most ancient Chinese characters were formed using the symbolic shape of objects. The written language shows that women were named after a broom – domestication and subjugation of women by design. In this male-dominated society, does it mean the values and identity of women are defined by males and finalised by the existing cultural codes?

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the meaning of language cannot be finalised by sentences alone (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986, Bakhtin & Medvedev, 1985). He rejects the traditional syntactic structural approach in linguistics that mechanically uses depersonalised coding for analysis. He holds that the meanings of language cannot be fully encompassed by using systematic analysis of each element in a sentence; rather they should be understood in a specific context. This context is the dynamic relation with others. His classic statement frequently coded by many authors is “A context can never be finalised” (1986). The context of a speaker in communication or the scholarship of literature has to be extended to its total context, even to the entire culture (Ponzio, 2008).

This unfinalisability concept has opened the doors for the foundation of the subsequent post-structuralism theory. Julia Kristeva (Kristeva & Baer, 1981) introduced Bakhtin’s theory to the Western academic world. Bakhtin rejects the foundation set by Ferdinand De Saussure, who holds that the meaning of language was found in a chess box (structure). Hundeide (1993) has followed Kristeva’s concept of inter-subjectivity who asserts that infant can be described as having a “pre-conceptual, pre-representational, inborn stage of dialogicity” that form a seemingly imitative capacity to communicate within a shared culture of its primary caregiver. Thus language is “pre-given”. Before we know who we are, we are given this “mother language”. There is always a component of relationship when a language is used. Therefore language is more than constitution of self, as it becomes the way we understand our world and our identity. Kristeva views identity development from the perspective of inter-subjectivity, believing that the self is developed in relationship with others.

Neither I nor others (including the larger context in which we embedded) can define or finalise “who we are” as a person. Will the meanings of life, the identity of Taiwanese women, then be defined and finalised by the culture they embedded? Will the narratives of Taiwanese women follow the overall cultural structure? Can the meanings drawn from their life experience be finalised?

Using Bakhtin’s unfinalisability as an interpretative mode, both the researchers were aware that the “text” (life history) given by the participants, can neither be finalised by a Confucian patriarchy structure in which they embedded; nor by the “prior text” (dominant historical or public narrative structure). Therefore, while analysing the meaning-making process of Taiwanese women’s life narratives, we also investigate what kinds of personal struggles, resistance or rejection of dominant narratives, and what kind of dominant cultural narrative are being revealed.

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