

A Comparative Study between Malaysian Chinese Women and Japanese Women Aged 65-75 on Their Experience and View on Ageing

Jin Kuan Kok and Yuet Ngor Yap

Abstract—This is a comparative study between Malaysian Chinese women and Japanese women aged 65-75 on their experience of ageing, daily activities engaged and views about growing old. Semi-structure questions were designed and a total of 32 women, 16 from each country were recruited for this study. Grounded theory methods were used to analyse the data obtained. The findings show that both groups of women actively engaged in doing exercise to stay healthy and they continue to participate in activities and meaningful relationships with family members and friends. Japanese women continue to engage in aesthetic pursuits, cultural activities and community services while Malaysian Chinese women were found to be more family oriented and have adopted a more traditional servicing and nurturing role.

Index Terms—Ageing, Japanese women, Malaysian women.

I. INTRODUCTION

As the advancements in health care have resulted in an overall rise in the human life span, the life span development of human has been lengthened and it has caused a rapidly aging population in East Asia. It is estimated that there will be an explosion of 'grey' populations in East Asia and in Japan, which has a high total life expectancy, over 26 percents will be over 65 by 2025 [1].

Previous gerontology studies focused on health decline and dependency prior to death for late adulthood which was classified as "fourth age" [2], [3]. Later the concept of "successful aging" came about and since then the focus of old age studies focused on the emerging of "third age" [2], [3]. Neugaten [4] has advocated similar concept in that, this group of "third age" population was defined as "Young-Old" which is full of possibilities, rather than ill and frail, awaiting dying. It was found that "Young-Old" in the "third stage" has promising potential yet to be developed before disease, dementia or disability set in [5]. What kinds of possibilities that are available to this group of "Young-Old" and how do they view their growing old experience. What kinds of activities they engaged themselves during this stage of life? Will culture play a role in their perception and experience of growing old? Those are the questions we would like to find out. As Japan is a more affluent country, while Malaysia is still a developing country and there will be differences due to the different environments and the influences of culture.

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The authors are with the Department of Arts and Social Science, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Kampar Campus, Malaysia (e-mail: kokjk@utar.edu.my, yapyn@utar.edu.my).

There will be valuable insights drawn from learning from a more developed and advanced culture. Therefore this study was designed to compare Japanese women and Malaysian Chinese women on their views of growing old and their activities engaged.

There is a widely accepted belief that the ways we experience aging are influenced by our culture [6]. Culture provides a framework or belief for interpretation of life experience or life events perspectives. The attitudes towards aging differ among different societies, and are inseparable from their culture. Most of the studies of aging population relate to the impact on economy, health care concerns, levels of employment, income, education and health [7]. There were different types of comparative studies about the influence of culture on aging. Hilton and his associates [8] have focused on the ongoing conceptual debates of successful aging literature and its implications on different cultural context. They found that Japanese older people ranked the importance of successful aging somewhat differently from other cultural groups for instance "lifestyle" was ranked in the top 5 and "learn new things" as one of the lowest ranked characteristics. There are many other comparison studies which compared Japanese aging experience with the western counterparts such as Karasawa's study [9]. Karasawa studied the difference between women from Japan and the United States and they found that older Japanese women shown higher scores on "personal growth" compared to midlife adults, but opposite age pattern was found for the women from the United States. Karasawa's study also reports Japanese cultural influence has contributed to the aging experience which includes more benign meanings in their conceptualization. Malaysian women are similar to Japanese women in that they are all influenced by eastern culture. Both cultures may have some similarities due to the influence of Buddhist, Confucian and other oriental culture or belief systems; however, there would be difference due to different context. There is a lack of study in comparing these two groups of women. Therefore this study will be focusing on women and the ways culture influences their experience.

There are various classifications of different periods across life span development. According to Laslett [2], "First Age" refers to childhood dependency; "Second Age" is a period of independence where people are occupied with employment and family responsibilities; the "Third Age" refers to the period where people are freed from employment and family constraints" and the "Fourth Age" is a period in which people decline in health and become dependent again. In fact, Neugaten [4] has made contributions to our understanding of human development that she introduced the terms

‘young-old’ and ‘old-old’. Those aged 65-74 were defined as ‘young-old’, whereas those aged 75 and above were defined as ‘old-old’. Applying this definition, age 65 to 75 belongs to ‘young-old’ and their lives are still full of changes and possibilities. It is reported that aged women face more challenges as they are more likely to outlive their husbands. As well as having longer life expectancies than men, women traditionally take a more active role in nurturing children. There are, therefore, many challenges and adaptations to be dealt with when children leave home.

Japanese scholars such as 上野千鶴子 (Chizuko Ueno) [10] and Japanese essayist 曾野綾子 (Ayako Sono) [11] have written extensively on women aging issues. According to Ueno Chizuko [10] a renowned Japanese feminist sociologist, currently a Professor Emeritus at the University of Tokyo, “To get married or not, eventually everyone will become alone.” as she observed “55% of Japanese women of 65 and above are single, among them 46.1% have lost their spouse (bereavement), 3.5% have divorced, and 3.3% are unmarried. Meanwhile, single men are only at 17%. And 83% of Japanese women of 80 and above are alone”. Therefore every woman has to cope with single life in their old age.

Ueno [10] had analyzed the problems of aging women in Japanese society after the death of a spouse, divorce or living alone. She points out that under the impact of having fewer children (少子化), it is not a common phenomenon for two or three generations staying together in Japan. Ueno suggested that it is an obsession and fictional belief to stay with children when women grow old. She proposed that parents should not stay with their children to avoid unhappiness as they might be seen as “parasite” or a “trouble maker”. For Ueno, the concept of filial piety (孝順) is a traditional concept that should be discarded.

However, it was observed the Malaysian Chinese had inherited the traditional Confucian belief and practice. Many older people in Malaysia still stay with children or and Malaysian women aged 65 and above may be needed to look after their grandchildren while both parents work. It is considered a kind of blessing to enjoy longevity and have three or four generations living together.

II. METHODS

We have adopted a qualitative approach by designing a few semi-structured interview questions. Samples of questions were: What are the changes faced when you were over 65 year old; how do you feel about children left home (for those who are married with children)? What are your daily activities and why do you engage in those activities? If you were to use a few words to describe your experience of growing old, how would you describe it? Those questions served as general guidelines, and the research participants always narrated their stories in a free flow manner. This narrative approach, according Paul Ricoeur [12], is capable of generating meaningful insights from the participants. While sharing their views on growing old, the participants also did reminiscence and told their life story about some significant event happened in their lives. The difference between the two cultures that shape their perception and

experience of aging will be revealed.

We interviewed 16 Japanese (from Tokyo, Sendai, Katsunuma and Tsukuba city) and 16 Malaysian Chinese women (from Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Kampar and Johor Bahru, West Malaysia). The educational background of Japanese women were secondary schools and above, and the backgrounds of Malaysian Chinese women were from primary schools to postgraduate studies. It was difficult to find Japanese women aged 65 and above with primary education background (this shows that the Japanese education system was advanced even during the Second World War period). Both groups participant have diverse career background and different life experience, majority of their age is between 65 to 75 when we conducted the interview with them. This age group was chosen as it is the period defined by Wiggins [3] and many researchers as a period of freedoms from traditional responsibility or constraints to pursue self-fulfillment activities. All interviews were carried out at their home or at a place convenient for them. Each interview lasted between one to one and a half hours. All the interviews were audio-taped and were transcribed into verbatim. The analysis of text follows an adapted grounded theory [13] approach to investigate the common patterns from the research participants.

III. FINDINGS

The themes emerged from the data analysis of interview scripts are as follows:

TABLE I: SIMILARITIES BETWEEN JAPANESE AND MALAYSIAN C WOMEN

Experience of Loss	I lost my health, my youth, my vitality, I lost my husband, my son, I became tired easily, Concentration reduced.	‘I lost my teeth, lost my youth, lost my agility; my young age innocence, my dark hair and many more...’ ‘I become tired easily’ ‘I often have knee pain’
Strategies Employed in Coping with Loss	‘Sleep and food management is important. To have enough sleep and not to force myself in doing things’ ‘Focusing on preventive medicine(預防醫學)for few years , going for medication often’ I like Yosakoi	‘I changed my pace of doing house work’(she just had knee operation) ‘I do my work slowly now and in between to remind myself to rest’ ‘I am mindful of what to eat’ ‘I eat healthily so that I maintain myself in a healthy condition’
Actively Involved in Doing Exercises	‘I walk a lot’ ‘I go to gym for muscle training’ ‘I swim three times per week to reduce stress’ ‘I go for hiking, climbing the mountain’	‘Everyday, I walk at least half an hour and I get to chat with my neighbours who do exercise with me together’(Mcase) ‘I do Tai chi and dance Cha Cha everyday’
Spirituality	‘I found My life is just started’ ‘Today is the continuation of yesterday’ ‘What is meant by having a good life: to be healthy’ ‘I treasure every “today” that I have because being alive is a gift from God’	‘I feel that getting old, getting sick and eventually everyone will die, it is very natural’ ‘my son died and I didn’t have a good life, may be this is my fate’ ‘My religion gives me hope and strength’
Traditional Values	‘Living for others, family members and students’ ‘I/m proud of Japanese	‘I live harmoniously with my son and daughter-in-law’

	culture like Tea ceremony, Kabuki and Gagaku. To pass down life itself. For me, the meaning of life is passing down Japanese traditions'	'I still cook and take care of my grandchildren so that my son and daughter-in-law can work; I just wish to see my family members healthy and happy'
Experience of Gain	'I find meaning in the field of education. Live for others: family members and students' 'To consecrate and to live the love of God is the meaning of my life'	'I feel that I have gain wisdom in dealing with interpersonal conflicts and solve problems in live' 'I have grown more experienced and more accepting towards many things in my life

TABLE II: DIFFERENCE BETWEEN JAPANESE AND MALAYSIAN CHINESE WOMEN

Social Environmental Differences	Nearly all Japanese women live on pension, including National Pension, Employee Pension, and National Annuity. Most households in Japan are a member of their Neighborhood Association (町内会 chonaiikai or 自治会 jichikai)	Most Malaysian Chinese women do not have pension as they were not government servants. There are not many community services available.
Cultural Differences	Do not wish to stay with children 'Do not want to cause any inconveniences to others' (他人に迷惑をかけないように, tannin ni meiwaku wo kakenai youni) Independent and autonomous (any quotation)?.	Most Malaysian Chinese women are family oriented. Many women are dependent. 'family comes first'
Staying or Not Staying with children	"Never cause trouble to others, even to family members" 'The housing situation in Japan is still very poor, especially in Tokyo'.	Most Malaysian Chinese women from rural areas stayed with their children and take care of grand-children. For those living in cities, do not mind occasionally help care for grand-children.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. Similarities

The findings show that both groups of women experienced loss. They lost youthful outlook, beautiful complexion and energy as they have become frail and weak. Some of them experienced bereavement of losing husband, own children that have made them vulnerable. They gain in personal growth, wisdom and maturity, and have become more acceptances towards life. The acceptance of life included to the unexpected life incidence, to live for others, be more flexible in dealing with life challenges.

Their choices of daily activities reflected values that were important to them. Most of them actively engaged in doing exercises to keep themselves healthy. They emphasized on the importance of health as this is a way to make longevity meaningful. They also creatively employed various

strategies such as food and sleep management; actively involved in family relationships and friendship; keep their lives going in meaningful ways to cope with the loss by changing their pace and flexibly used different ways to cope with the changes. Most of them spend more than one hour doing exercises daily: Japanese women would follow the according to "Radio calisthenics" (ラジオ体操, Radio taiso), and take care of my vegetables and garden'; 'I go to supermarket by cycling rather than by car' whereas the Malaysian women will do Tai Chi, Cha Cha dance or play Mah Jong. 'My strategy is keep moving and keep working, otherwise the machine will stop' Japanese women use traditional preventive medicine(予防醫學)for few years 'going for medication often';I like Yosakoi (traditional Japanese dance) and busy for dancing activities. I am interested to know the young people trends and try to keep mentally young'; 'My second son passed away when he was 20 plus, I accept whatever happens in life due to religion';I do "Jikyojutsu 自疆術", a way of breathing exercise to maintain health' Therefore it was found that the strategies employed were related to the resource from the culture.

Both groups of women maintained active and healthy lifestyle through meaningful engagements of activities. The quality of the social contact people described by the participants gave them strengths and hope, and seemed to ameliorate the negative impacts of unfortunate illness or events happened in their lives. Both groups of women live their lives as time passes by ("today is the continuity of yesterday"). There was a strong sense of acceptance, perseverance and resilience demonstrated.

B. Differences

There were some differences found due to the different cultural context such as Japanese women would include going to gym regularly as it is common activity in Japan. Going to gym is less common for Malaysian women. Both groups emphasized on the quality of relationship with family members and social network, however, the difference was Malaysian women were more family oriented but Japanese women focused more on community services and cultural activities such as learning Tea ceremony, Pottery Arts craft, Japanese Painting (日本畫), English flute, Japanese traditional Dance , embroidery and Knitting Patch and so forth.

Japanese women in our samples demonstrated more independence and self reliance and they view growing old as a positive experience. The new found freedom after children left home enable them to develop aesthetic interests, learn new skills and contribute to the community cultural activities. Whereas Malaysian Chinese women were more family oriented. For most of the Malaysian women, they continue to play a nurturing role in the family by scarifying their needs to provide cares for their grandchildren; their daily activities were scheduled around the grandchildren and family activities.

Malaysian women tend to be more accepting in their role in the family by scarifying own needs to support husband, children, and grand-children. More than half of our Malaysian research participants expressed their wish to stay with or stay near their children while all Japanese women

expressed their wishes of not to stay with their children so as not to “cause trouble” or “burden” them. Malaysian women were more family oriented, and were not so active in cultural activities probably due to the larger environment as there are not many community service centres available in different towns or cities in Malaysia. Moreover, as a multicultural society, the commonly identified cultural activities for Chinese women are limited.

Due to the changes of our society, extended family structure is diminishing and the size of children becomes smaller, the concept of filial piety was found to be illusive or difficult to implement [14]. Lai described it as “the unforgiving Confucian culture” [15]. The obligation of filial piety was found to be adding “burden” to the adult children [15]. Older people in Asia-Pacific, including that of Malaysia are vulnerable due to lack of an effective public care system for elder [16]. May be this is the reason why most Malaysian women still harbor hope to rely on their children to care for them when they get old.

In the following, one example from both countries will be given as illustration:

Japanese Mdm.Y.S. (Aged 77) from Tokyo, who felt her eye pressure increased with blur vision and knee pain, she still insist to learn and play English flute for over 30 years. “When I was 50, I was shocked because I realized that I was half of a century old and it will be more than half of my life. And now I just take it naturally. I swim once a week, walk in the mountain regularly to stay healthy.” She stays in Daikanyama (代官山) district in Tokyo, where there are a lot of slopes. Due to knee pain, for her to walk up the slope is challenging. But she keeps walking. “Facing the physiological changes, I feel this is the effect of aging.” As a traditional house wife, she was born before the Second World War and she spent her childhood in war. She has 3 sons, two of them have married and stayed separately, but living with her youngest son(41, single) who is specialized in drawing comics but his income is not sufficient, so he still relying on the parents. Her husband already 82, suffering from asthma one-year ago. Therefore, she has to help her son, look after her husband, and yet she still maintaining her personal space and hopeful in life. She likes English flute, participate in various Recital, often attends orchestra and enjoys doing needle works as hobbies. She is still very joyful although her husband is unwell, and her youngest son doesn't have a stable job. “I do not know what will happen tomorrow, but by faith I think it's a blessing to be in the caring of God.” She is a faithful Christian and her life is deeply influence by religion.

Malaysian Mrs Tan: Mrs Tan who was married with 3 grown up children (obtained secondary education, worked but resigned become a housewife after having children). Currently a grandmother (grandchildren, aged 5 and 2). Husband is working as a consultant. All family members (8) stay together. She mentioned “her children never leave home and she needs to scarify for the family. It is the traditional Chinese value for married women”. Although her elder son has married, but if they were to move to their house at Puchong (another town in Kuala Lumpur), it will be very difficult for the young family to cope with the traffic jam in the morning, payments for domestic maid and sending the

young grandson to nursery, plus the 2 year old granddaughter to nanny's house. She also wishes to help her elder son and daughter in-law to save up. The way of her reasoning was: “If they save up, it will be for the benefits of our grandchildren so that my grandchildren will have a better future””. She volunteered to babysit the little boy when her daughter-in-law gave birth to her first boy and now the boy is 5 and he is very hyper and energetic and it is very tiring for her to run after him. Only recently due to her kneels' operation and she stopped babysitting the little granddaughter, but she still helps sending and fetching her grandson to nursery school. Although she considered herself has reached her “golden age” stage of life (she described this stage should be carefree to travel around and it is the last stage of life but she still takes on traditional nurturing role of women) but she still thinks that “the needs of family come first’.

From the above two examples, both women exhibited traditional caring and nurturing characteristic by continuously provide services to family members even at older stage of lives. The Malaysian case seems to establish less boundary and space (stayed together with own grown-up children and continue to serve full- time taking care of her grandchildren); however, the Japanese women, while taking care of her unwell husband and supporting her grown-up son, she maintained her personal space and hobbies. She continued to play English flute, do needle works, participate in various Recital, and even attend orchestra. Both women continue to serve the family in meaning ways. Both are hopeful, Japanese women pursued self growth but the Malaysian woman devoted to the welfare of her family members.

V. CONCLUSION

Both women in both cultures shared some similarities in experiencing loss and gain while they age. They shared some similar women quality in nurturing and scarifying characters. The greatest difference found was Malaysian women were more family oriented while the Japanese women were independent, autonomous, self-reliance, continue to pursue personal goals and interests and contributing to the cultural activities at the community.

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Jin Kuan Kok was born in Malaysia. She received BA in Chinese Literature from National Taiwan University, master degree in education (guidance and counselling), Durham University, England, UK, doctorate degree in education, Durham University, England, UK.

She has extensive counselling experience working with young people and family. Her present professional occupation is an assistant professor, Department of

Psychology and Counselling, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Dr. Kok is a registered counsellor of Singapore association for counsellor (SAC) and also SAC certified supervisor for counsellor. She is specialized in using a qualitative research methodology approach under constructivist and interpretative mode, to research into areas of social science.



Yap Yuet Ngor was born in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She received BA (Journalism) from National Chengchi University, Taiwan, and master of International Affairs (Japan Studies), University of Tsukuba. Then she completed PhD program with a PhD. degree, Graduate School of Library, Information and Media Studies, University of Tsukuba, Japan. She has been indulging in the field of translation of more than 280 Japanese novels

published in Hong Kong. In 2007, under the sponsorship of the Japan Foundation Fellowship, Ms.Yap attended the Graduate School of Chinese Literature at the University of Tokyo as a visiting scholar. She is currently teaching Japanese as a foreign language in UTAR.