

Socioemotional Aging in Chinese Societies

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Abstract

Chinese societies have been expected to be the most rapidly aging regions in the world. In this paper, we briefly review the empirical work on age difference in personality, social relationships, emotional experience and cognition across Chinese societies, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China. By comparing to Western findings, the universal (e.g. social preferences) and culture-specific aspects (e.g. negativity effect) of aging in Chinese societies will be highlighted. This has implications for older adult care-giving practices and aging research across disciplines.

Keyword: aging, social relationships, emotions, cognition.

Chinese societies, including Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, now have been the most seriously aging regions in the world (Cheng, Chan et al. 2008). By 2050, the size of older adults will increase by 243% across four Chinese societies, which is 130% higher than the world average rate (Fung and Cheng in press). To cope with such an opportunity and also challenge, it is important to figure out the characteristics of Chinese aging population. According to theories both on culture (Mesquita 2003) and aging (Park, Nisbett et al. 1999; Carstensen 2006), people tended to adjust their behaviors and psychological characteristics according to what their cultural value or cultural meaning system they embodied in. With the profound influence of Confucian traditions, Chinese aging population has its unique characteristics. In this paper, we first briefly introduced the

theory that reveals the universal aging processes across cultures, and then reviewed similar and unique characteristics of regulatory strategies among Chinese older adults.

Socioemotional selectivity theory: Discovering universal socioemotional aging processes

Socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen 2006) posits that when people get older, they tend to perceive time as limited and thus shift life goals from instrumental goals to emotional meaningful goals. This has been confirmed by aging literature across cultures. In a Western sample, younger and older adults were asked to choose whom they want to spend time with if they have 30 minutes free time and results indicated that older adults selected to spend time with family members, but not newly met acquaintances and the author of book they read (Fredrickson and Carstensen 1990). This suggests older adults' preference toward emotional closeness or meaningfulness. With similar methodology, older adults from Chinese societies (Hong Kong, Mainland China, and Taiwan) were more likely to select emotionally close partners (e.g. family members) to spend time with compared with other relationship partners (Fung, Carstensen et al. 1999). The above age effect eliminated after manipulating time perspective. That is, regardless of age and ethnicities, when time perspective was manipulated as limited, individuals tended to show more preference toward emotionally close partners (Fung, Carstensen et al. 1999; Lang and Carstensen 2002; Fung and Carstensen 2004).

More importantly, findings in emotion experience suggest that older adults across cultures indeed achieved emotion meaningful goals they pursue. Literatures on emotions found that older adults indeed report less negative emotions than did younger counterparts. Western literature showed that even facing cognitive and biological loss, older adults reported less negative emotions, if not more positive emotions, than did younger counterparts (Mroczek and Kolarz 1998; Carstensen, Pasupathi et al. 2000; Tsai, Levenson et al. 2000; Charles, Reynolds et al. 2001). Similar pattern of age-related change in emotion was also found in a Mainland Chinese sample: age was found to be negatively

associated with negative emotions, but non-significantly associated with positive emotions (Shi, Wang et al. 2009).

Even though the goal shift and emotion outcomes are universal across cultures, older adults were found to use different regulatory strategies to optimize emotion experience and achieve emotion meaningful goals. The culture-specific regulatory strategies among older adults mainly include two types: relationship regulation and emotion regulation.

Culture-specific relationship regulation in late adulthood

The above shift of motivation has led to great change in social relationship. This was first supported by studies on social network characteristics. Across German, African and European American samples, the number of emotionally close social partners, who were important and close, remained unchanged with age, but that of peripheral partners, who were important but not that close, was negatively associated with age (Fung, Carstensen et al. 2001). However, different pattern of age related social network characteristics was revealed in Chinese sample using the same method. In a Hong Kong Chinese sample, age was found to be positively associated with the number of emotionally close social partners, but negatively associated with the number of peripheral partners, and such effect was more salient among individuals with higher interdependent self-construal (Yeung, Fung et al. 2008). When examining the specific components of social network, age was found to be positively related to the number of family members, but negatively related to the number of acquaintances among Hong Kong Chinese; however, the opposite pattern was found among Germany counterparts (Fung, Stoeber et al. 2008). Taking together, these findings suggest that older adults across cultures tend to more interaction with emotionally close social partners relative to peripheral partners, but such tendency was more salient among Chinese older adults, particularly when the partners were family members.

In addition, age effect was also found on specific relationship regulation strategies and their consequences. Studies on social exchange found that with age increasing, the discrepancy between

given and received support decreased and the unequal exchange predicted reduced well-being only among older adults (Keyes 2002). However, opposite findings were found in Chinese sample. That is, negative exchange in relationship was found to predict relationship closeness over time among Hong Kong Chinese (Fung, Yeung et al. 2009). This is probably because Chinese individuals, particularly more traditional older adults, value relationship harmony more and thus tended to cope with negative exchange constructively. Similar findings were indeed found in studies on forgiveness and anger responses. Our findings found that Hong Kong Chinese older adults tended to adopt less destructive response to anger-eliciting events (You and Fung in press). Findings from a study on forgiveness also showed that older adults were more likely to forgive the offenders, particularly when they were close to the offenders (Cheng and Yim 2008). Notably, in our recent study (You and Fung in press), we surprising revealed a different pattern of anger response among Mainland Chinese. That is, Mainland Chinese older adults were more likely to report destructive anger responses toward family members, but not toward other. This might be because two Chinese societies are in the different progress of modernization. Among Mainland Chinese who emphasize hierarchy and filial piety more than Hong Kong Chinese (Yang 1988), older adults may directly show destructive anger responses to restore the hierarchy within the family.

Culture-specific emotion regulation in late adulthood

In addition to relationship regulation, older adults tended to use different emotion processing strategies to achieve emotion meaningful goals. This mainly reflected in attention preference and emotional memory. In Western literatures, positivity effect of attention and memory was well documented: compared to younger adults, older adults tended to look toward and remember positive information more than negative emotions (Isaacowitz, Wadlinger et al. 2006; Isaacowitz, Wadlinger et al. 2006). However, such effect was not found in Hong Kong Chinese sample. Instead, findings from attention preferences showed that older Hong Kong Chinese tended to look away from both positive and negative information and such effect was more salient among older adults with higher

interdependent self-construal (Fung, Lu et al. 2008; Fung, Issacowitz et al. 2010). Similar negative inhabitation effect was also found in older adults' memory (Fung, Issacowitz et al. 2010). Finally, prior literature also showed that psychosocial factors have unequal importance for older adults' emotional well-being across cultures. For instance, in Western cultures, self-esteem have been consistently found to be important for individuals' well-being (Kwan, Bond et al. 1997). However, among Hong Kong older adults, emotional supports, particularly those from family members, were more beneficial to older adults' life satisfaction, relative to negative social interactions (Li and Liang 2007; Yeung and Fung 2007).

Conclusions

To conclude, aging in Chinese societies is a great challenge and opportunity for us. With the profound impacts of Confucian traditions, Chinese aging processes have its own characteristics while sharing the universal mechanism with aging in Western cultures. In the further effort to promote Chinese older adults' well-being and life quality, aging researchers across disciplines should take cultural impacts and Chinese older adults' unique aging characteristics into consideration.

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