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“OLDER GINGER IS SPICIER”: LIFE-VIEWS ON OLD AGE
AND AGING IN CHINESE PROVERBS

Abstract: While proverbial expressions have the commonality as the “salt” of human cultures around the world, this salt has many nuances in its flavor. Each of these flavors contains its local specialty, and together they make our life diverse and joyful. Those specialties are the verbal reflections of the fundamental beliefs and values in different cultures. In this regard, exploring Chinese proverbs in general, and proverbs about old age and aging in particular, helps understand the essence of Chinese culture. Such an understanding is urgent in an age of global communication, where stories of conflict also increasingly occupy our attention. With this conviction, the author first outlines the history of Chinese proverb collections and studies, then examines a specific proverb, and subsequently concludes by connecting and analyzing the Chinese proverbs about old age and aging and the four life-views that reveal the essence of Chinese culture, with the emphasis on the polytheist/inclusive belief system and its practical expressions in everyday life.

Keywords: paremiology, old age, aging, belief system, values, everyday life, Chinese proverb

1. Introduction

The primary goal of this essay is to explore the Chinese views of old age and aging through the proverb “older ginger is spicier,”¹ and to propose a theoretical framework for interpreting the connection between Chinese proverbs and the fundamental beliefs and values in Chinese culture. To do so, this essay first sketches the present state of proverb studies in China – mainly in the field of folklore studies. Secondly, it examines the traditional and contemporary concepts and proverbs about old age in Chinese history. Third, this essay focuses on the origin, transformation, and current circulation of the proverb in discussion. Finally, this essay argues that Chinese proverbs about old age express the four life-views which are rooted in the fundamental beliefs and values in Chinese

culture. This study is expected to shed light on Chinese cultural values in contemporary global and cross-cultural communication.

This essay is my first probe into the subject of Chinese proverbs, and it arises out of a commitment to understand Chinese culture from its roots, and especially in cross-cultural context. The central thought is that there is a dynamic force in the transmission of traditions containing two intertwining aspects of vitality and validity (Zhang 2009), and that there is a cultural mechanism of self-healing through the means of traditionalization and historicization (Zhang 2017). Further, these ideas are shown in the adaptation of local and imported folktales (Zhang 2014) and fairy tales (2019), as well as in the integration of disciplinary paradigms (Zhang 2018, 2020a, 2020b).

The motivation for this effort is four-fold: 1) comparative consideration of the evidence in Wolfgang Mieder's essay on "Age Is Just a Number";² 2) excitement of finishing translating and editing a collection (in Chinese) of the essays by Wolfgang Mieder;³ 3) a long standing interest in funeral rituals and *rites de passage*,⁴ and 4) personal reflection to the process of aging. The evidences used here are from collections in Chinese by Chinese scholars. In addition, this essay is expected to contribute to the studies of folklore and aging in general because it is "only recently have researchers begun to examine how folk traditions can play an important part in making one's senior years a positive experience and helped to change the prevailing negative view of aging" (Lockwood 2018: 95), and attention is given to "creative aging" from folkloristic perspective (Higgins 2018: 27).

As of now, the number of published studies of Chinese proverbs, in both Chinese and other languages, is small relative to studies of other folkloric genres.⁵ Given the nature of this essay and the length limit, I have decided to treat the subject of "the translations and studies of Chinese proverbs" in a separate article. In brief, here are significant stages in the study of Chinese proverbs in European languages:

a) the stage of philological works by the missionaries prior to the 1930s, which included a number of translations and studies (Wilkinson 1761; Davis 1822; Perny 1869; Moule 1874; Lister 1874-1875; Scarborough 1875; Dawson-Gröne 1911; Brace 1916; Van Oost 1918; Plopper 1926; Edwards 1926), and with some analytical studies (Smith 1902; Hart 1937);

b) the stage of limited works between the 1930s and 1980s (Chang 1957; Mateo 1971-1972; Eberhard 1967, 1985; Lee 1979, 1981; Ting 1972; Sun 1981; Hermann 1984; Kordas 1987), but with some academic probes from different disciplinary perspectives;

c) the stage of a surge of publications since 1990s, mostly in the forms of collections or dictionaries (e.g., Kordas 1990; Weng 1992; Yan 1995; Paczolay 1997; Lau 1995; Osterbrauck 1996; Wang 1996; Heng and Zheng 1998; Lin and Schalk 1998; Huang 1998; Clements 2001; Rohsenow 2001; Mah 2002; Rohsenow 2002; Herzberg and Herzberg 2012; Jiao and Stone 2014; Zhou 2016), but with some specific topical studies like proverbs about women (Zhang 1992), power (Park 1998), and face value (Yan 1995).

Those previous works have pried open the lid on a treasure trove of Chinese proverbs, even though there have not been enough theoretical studies to establish a “field” of paremiological studies of Chinese proverbs. Nevertheless, these translations have mesmerized anyone interested in proverbs, because “In no country does the proverb flourish more abundantly than in China,” as noted by a scholar of Chinese literature (Hart 1937: xix). Further, “Even more important, however, is their [Chinese proverbs’] value as exhibitions of Chinese modes of thought,” as a missionary in China observed (Smith 1902:6). Indeed, more than 7 million proverbs were collected all over China in the late 20th century, as further discussed below.

To establish a framework for this probe, I propose that the developmental history of Chinese proverbs be seen through four chronological stages,⁶ and that these four stages also represent the four major sources of Chinese proverbs, which I would call “four strands of Chinese proverbs.”⁷ Of course, it is impossible to treat these four stages/sources separately because most of the current proverbs have evolved through different stages and changed in form and/or meaning, with some even gaining opposite meanings of their early forms as “counter-proverbs,” or being twisted with different words to create different meanings for different purposes as “anti-proverbs,” as will be seen in our proverb here, “older ginger is spicier.”

Stage and Source One: Classical Period (before the 7th century).

While the Oracle Bone Inscriptions (fl. 1300 - 1000 BCE) contain some phrases that are related to the much later proverbial expressions, the overwhelming majority of contemporary Chinese proverbs are from written classics. It was also the time when writing styles were standardized and the technology of paper-making and printing became mature, and when different schools of cosmic, philosophical and religious thoughts took root, such as Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Legalism, or other schools. For example, more than 8,300 proverbs and proverbial expressions are identified from hundreds of classical works and documents during this period and the following pre-modern period (Wen 1989, first two volumes).

The most significant collectanea during this period include the following, to mention only a few. The *Book of Songs (Shi Jing)*, which is known to be edited by Confucius (551 – 479 BCE) contains some proverbs that are still used today. For example, these two proverbs from the chapter of Folksongs:

一日不见，如三秋(兮)	A day without seeing (him) is like three autumns!
投我以木桃，报之以琼瑶	When I am presented with a peach, I return a jade pendant.

This second expression was transformed into a more literary form in a different piece in the chapter of Greater Odes (to the Kingdom by the literati):

投我以桃，报之以李	Present me a peach, I return a plum. (He who gives me a peach shall be rewarded a plum from me.)
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As time went by, this form was further evolved into the unique proverbial expression in the fixed-idiom form of four-character (*chengyu*), as in this one:

投桃报李	Receive a peach, return a plum.
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Still further, more variants are developed from this metaphor, and they contain more ethical meaning than in the earlier songs of love:

人敬我一尺，我敬人一丈 滴水之恩当以涌泉相报	He who respects me once will be respected ten times (from me). A favor of a water drop is to be returned with a flowing spring.
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Some recent studies have paid attention to those classics as sources of proverbs (Wang 2015; Sun 2013; Huang 2015; Yue 2015; Xu 1984; Wang 2010). *Lun Heng* (by Wang Chong 27-97) and *Fengsu Tongyi* (by Ying Shao 153?-196) are two such classics (Liu 2009; Wang and Gong 2014). *Shui Jing Zhu* (*Commentary on the Water Classic*, by Li Daoyuan 466?-527) particularly recorded many regional customs and weather proverbs (Xu 2009).

Proverbs related to agricultural production and weather, however, undoubtedly take the majority of the entire Chinese proverb repertoire, given that the history and culture of China are substantially based on agriculture. In the four most important agriculture books,⁸ there are numerous weather and agriculture related proverbs and proverbial expressions (Han 2015; Tian 2009).⁹ For example, in one of the four books, *Qi Min Yao Shu* of the sixth century, there are not only agriculture proverbs based on experience and wisdom, but these proverbs are also integrated into Confucian ethical values:

耕而不耨，不如作暴 耕锄不以水旱息功 顺天时，量地利，则用力少而成功多；任情返道，劳而无获。	Plowing without harrowing is worse than damaging. Plowing and hoeing, shining or raining. Following the celestial timing and measuring the earthly advantage, there is more success with less strength. Following emotional mood against the Way, hard work yields no harvest.
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Also from one of the key Confucian classics *Mencius* (by Mencius 372?-289 BCE) are these examples of integrating values into those sayings:

五谷者，种之美者也；
苟为不熟，不如稊稗。
夫仁亦在乎熟之而已矣。

It is wonderful to grow the five chief grains, but if they are not ripe, they are worse than other low-level grains. So is the virtue of humanism, its value lies in its maturity.

天时不如地利，地利不如人和。

Fortunate timing is not equal to advantageous location; advantageous location is not equal to humane harmony.

Regarding family life as a key venue for social and ethical education in China, there has been a long history of “Family Books” (*jia xun*) as a category of Chinese literature and moral teaching. For example, *The Family Book of the Yans (Yan Shi Jia Xun)* by Yan Zhi Tui (531-591) used many proverbs by quoting “the ancients say” or “the proverb goes” (Yan 2011). In his preface, he said similar “family books” have been many, but he still wanted to write one for his own family, even though it may seem to be repetitious of the old sayings, by saying:

屋下架屋，床上施床

Build a room under a roof; set a bed on top of a bed.

In talking about the importance of teaching young children to love learning and be ethical, he first quoted Confucius’s words:

少成若天性，习惯如自然

Teach the young the habit (of loving learning), their habit becomes natural.

and then quoted an ancient “proverb”:

教妇初来，教儿婴孩。

Teach a wife when she first enters the house, teach children when they are babies.

In punishing young children for their wrongdoing to make them remember the lesson, he said that bamboo sticks could be used to spank them, by saying:

父母威严而有慈，则子女畏慎而生孝矣 Strict and compassionate parents make children respectful with awe and filial.

This idea was later developed into:

慈威并济方得良子 Compassion and strictness together bring up a good son.

Today, these expressions are still common, with a more colloquial sentence structure:

严父出孝子 A strict father brings up a filial son.
棍棒底下出孝子 A filial son grows out of sticks.

To encourage learning, he quoted the proverbs from a story written four centuries earlier:

Duke Ping of the Jin State (fl. 6th c. BCE) once asked Shi Kuang, a sagely master of music, “I am 70 years old. I have a desire to learn, but I am afraid it is too late.”

“Why not hold a lamp?” replied Shi Kuang.

“How dare a minister make fun of his master?” said the Duke.

“As a blind man, how dare I make fun of my master? I have heard that ‘*To love learning at a young age is like the sunshine at sunrise. To love learning at mid-age is like the sunlight at noon. To love learning at old age is like walking at night with a lamp.*’ Walking at night with a lamp or without a lamp, which is better?”

“Good advice, indeed!” said the Duke.

Therefore, those three lines have become popular proverbs, along with these variants that are still commonly used:

幼而学者，如日出之光 Learning as a young child is like the light at sunrise.

老而学者，如秉烛夜行 Learning as an old man is like walking at night with a lamp.

Overall, the classics of this period are one of the four major sources of proverbs in Chinese. The collection, categorization,

and application of proverbs during this period are in line with the use of other forms of oral traditions (e.g., folksong, legends, myths, jokes) as ways of educating and reforming (*jiaohua* 教化) the folk with Confucian humanistic virtue (*ren* 仁) and observing the reactions of the folk to the rulings of the governments by “observing the fashions” (*guanfeng* 观风), “listening to the music being played” (*lingyi* 聆音), and “inspecting governance” (*chaili* 察理).

Stage and Source Two: Pre-modern Period (7th - 19th century)

The separation of this stage from the previous does not indicate any discontinuity of the proverbial tradition, but is solely done for the sake of emphasizing the widespread use of “folk literature” (*suwenxue* 俗文学) from the 7th century on, which is considered here as another major source of Chinese proverbs. This term is used to refer to the widespread of non-classical Chinese in writing as well as in forms (genres) beside the orthodox poetry and prose (Zheng 1938:1).¹⁰ This change is seen in the popular use of semi-classical grammar and vocabulary, written records of everyday and/or strange stories, which laid the foundation for the development of fiction writing in Chinese. Printing technology and social mobility were among the factors that should not be ignored. As a result, official and non-official written records during this period contained numerous proverbs and proverbial expressions.

Extensive Records of the Taiping Era (*Taiping Guangji* 太平广记) and *Imperial Reader or Readings of the Taiping Era* (*Taiping Yulan* 太平御览), both formed during the tenth century, collected nearly all literatures before the Song Dynasty (960-1279). The former contains the well-known tale of Chinese Cinderella, *Ye Xian* (ATU 510), first recorded in the ninth century.

The proverbs quoted in these two grand collections include:

一饮一啄,系之于分	A bite or a drink, all predetermined.
一鸡死,一鸡鸣	One chicken dies, another crows.
不救蚀者,出行遇雨 ¹¹	Not saving the eclipse will catch you in the rain.
君子不镜于水,而镜于人;	A man of virtue does not use the mirror of water, but the mirror of people.
镜于水见面之容,镜于人则知凶吉	The mirror of water reflects a face, the mirror of people tells fortune.

Besides such encyclopedic collectanea, there are also some specific collections of proverbs in this period containing proverbs from the classics and contemporary variants or new proverbs. They are representative of the development from classical literary idioms to folk sayings or proverbs popular then, and some are still used today:

女爱不敝席，男欢不敝轮	Women's love wears out before the mat is worn out, men's love wears out before the wooden wheel gets rotten out.
恭敬不如从命	A better respect from a guest is to submit to a host.
马异视力，人异视识	Strength distinguishes horses, experience tells apart people.
远亲不如近邻	Relatives afar are less beneficial than neighbors nearby.
忠言逆耳利于行，毒药苦口利于病	Loyal words are harsh to ear but good for behavior, strong drugs are bitter to mouth but good for health.
树怕剥皮，人怕伤心	Trees are afraid of skin-peeling; people are afraid of heart-hurting.
若要好，大作小	To do well, to do small. (To get a thing done well, one needs to lower his status or ignore one's status.)
远水不救近火	Water from faraway can't extinguish a fire nearby.
嫁鸡随鸡，嫁狗随狗	Marry a rooster, follow a rooster; marry a dog, follow a dog.
树高千丈，落叶归根	No matter how tall a tree is, its leaves fall to its roots.
衣要新好，人要旧好	New clothes are good, old spouse is good.
千里送鹅毛	Go a thousand miles to deliver a goose feather.

Zeng Guang Xian Wen (增广贤文) of the late 16th and the early 17th century contained nearly 1,000 proverbs. Unfortunately, there is no contextual information for each proverb in this

collection. But many of those proverbs are still used today, and many were translated into English (Perny 1869). Some examples include:

难合亦难分，易亲亦易散。	Hard to be friends, hard to be apart; easy to be together, easy to be apart.
狗不嫌家贫，儿不嫌母丑。	Dogs don't see their owners' poverty; sons don't see their mothers' ugliness.
枯木逢春犹再发，人无两度再少年。	Dried trees sprout when spring returns; people can't be young again.
平日不作亏心事，半夜敲门心不惊。	No wrong doings all the time, no fear at door knocks at night.

Gu Yao Yan (Ancient Proverbs 古谣谚) of the 19th century by Du Wen Lan (1815-1881) may be the most important collection and study of proverbs during this period. It is also the most frequently cited work in studying ancient Chinese proverbs. It contains a total of 3,300 proverbs and proverbial expressions (including ballads and rhymes) extracted from 860 ancient books with references (Du 1958). Some examples include:

钱无耳，可使鬼	Money can drive devils.
豹死留皮，人死留名	What is left behind by a leopard when it dies is its skin, what is left behind a man is his reputation.
端午晴干，农人喜欢	A dry day on the fifth of the fifth moon is a farmers' joy.
好事不出门，恶事行千里	Good things don't get out of the house, bad things travel a thousand miles.

While there are numerous proverbs recorded in many anthologies (Wen 1989), the attention from those collectors or even researchers was mostly on the text or the intertextuality of the proverbs (An 2008: 585), but rarely on the broad context of using the proverbs.

Stage and Source Three: Modern Period (20th century)

The pivotal change of the Chinese language (e.g., standardization of pronunciation, new grammar, new vocabulary, new fonts

and low cost of printing), and thus also of literature and arts, is the movement of promoting *baihua-wen* (*baihua* for folk or oral speech, *wen* for writing, i.e., writing literature as it is spoken in everyday life, rather than in traditional classical Chinese) in the early 20th century. This change was part of the New Culture Movement that revolutionized Chinese traditional beliefs and values and gave birth to modern folkloristics in China as well (Zhang 2018). As a result, this period also generated a large number of new proverbs and variants of traditional proverbs, being the third major source of Chinese proverbs. They are also vital in connecting the past and the present.

Baihuawen, in contrast to classical written style, was promoted to use folk or oral speech in writing as a new genre. Although “*baihuawen*” is often translated into “vernacular,” it was fundamentally about the reform of writing style, while spoken style had a much longer history of being “vernacular.” *Baihua* had been used to mean common speech in contrast to “official” and classical style, while *wen* referred to writing. In fact, *baihua* began from the Tang as seen in the non-orthodox writings (as a marker between the first and second stages discussed above). By the early 20th century, with massive publication of new literature, *baihua* (or *baihuawen*) had become standard in speaking and writing, and largely formed the current “common speech” (*putoghua*) or “Mandarin.”

This linguistic transformation is widely seen in the parallel use of the fixed idioms as proverbs and folk sayings. For example, the classical literary form of

孤掌难鸣	Single palm [is] difficult sounding
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was transformed into:

一个巴掌拍不响	One palm claps no sound; You can't clap with one palm. (cf., It takes two to tango.)
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Chinese paremiology can be seen to have begun in the early 20th century, with the publication of a few specific studies of proverbs (Guo 1925; Xue 1936; Yue 2019; Chen 2019: 28). However, most decades in the 20th century in China witnessed wars and social instability, and all academic activities entered a traumatic

period. It was in Taiwan where a prolific paremiologist Zhu Jie Fan (朱介凡1912 -2011) spent his lifetime and compiled an eleven-volume ethnographic collection of Chinese proverbs, containing 52,000 proverbs (Zhu 1989; Guo 1997).

China's economic reform in the late 20th century also positively influenced the development of Chinese folklore studies (Zhang 2018). At least two dozen dictionaries or collections were published in the last two decades of the 20th century (Chen 2019: 30). A six-volume collection of proverbs from Chinese classical literature included more than 20,000 entries (Wen 1989), and later a one-volume dictionary with 15,000 proverbs (Wen 2011). However, the sources of these works are limited only to the classics and well-known authored literature.

One important paremiological issue of this period is about the definition and "author/creator" of proverbs by various scholars. According to an authoritative linguist, *yanyu* (proverb) is seen as a typical type of *suyu* (popular/vernacular/non-literal saying) (Lü 1987: 1), and, along with *xiehouyu* (two-part proverbs) and *guan-yongyu* (fixed folk and proverbial phrases), is called *suyu* (Wen 2004:1). This view is widely accepted in linguistics, literature, and folkloristics. Similarly, in regard to the authorship of proverbs, the representative view in those academic fields is that "proverbs do not have clearly identified authors, and are created collectively by the folk" (Wen 2004: 9). In the most influential textbook of folkloristics, it emphasizes that "proverbs are collectively created by the folk" (Zhong 1998:310), so states the official website of China Folklore Society.¹² This view is in clear contrast to what has been argued since the 1930s by paremiologists such as Archer Taylor and Bartlett Whiting who argue that "proverbs are not created by the folk but rather by an individual" (Mieder 2014:28).

The unprecedented collectanea of proverbs in Chinese history is the *Grand Collection of Chinese Proverbs*, as part of the trilogy of the national project (i.e., folktale, ballad, and proverb, total of 298 volumes) directed by Zhou Yang (1984-2009). This proverb collection contains a total of 7,180,000 proverbs (Ma 1990-2009; Liu 2006).¹³ Naturally, there are some shortcomings in this project. One serious problem is that there is little contextual information about the users and the situations of using those proverbs (Chen 2019: 33), not to mention the origin or history of those

proverbs. Clearly, this remains to be a task for current and future paremiologists – indeed, this challenge is now being answered!

Stage and Source Four: Contemporary Period (21st century)

The problem of the previous text-centered collections of proverbs without contextual information is now dealt with by another ambitious national project, *Treasury of Chinese Folk Literature* (*Zhongguo minjian wenxue daxi*), launched in 2017 by the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles. It is expected to be completed in eight years with 1,000 volumes covering such genres of folk literature as ethnic myths, legends, tales, ballads, proverbs, epics, folk operas, and narrative and singing texts. This *Treasury* includes written and oral materials of the past century. The intention is to collect what was not included in the previous *Three Grand Collections*, with a guiding principle of “improving text with annotated context” by collecting information about the time and region of the use, meaning in use, along with related images, to comprehensive contexts (Chen 2019: 34, quoting Deming An’s words).

Obviously, the *Treasury of Chinese Folk Literature* is an effort of “looking backward” by reviewing the past. For example, a review of the studies in the past 40 years specifically on ancient proverbs lists dozens of publications on the topic (Zhao 2009:122, Ma and Zhao 2019). Another review on proverb studies in the past 70 years reveals that a disciplinary framework for “paremiological studies” is taking shape (Li 2001:30), as well as that of “history of Chinese proverbs” (Fu 2018:117).

Two characteristics of proverb studies in this period can be generalized here: in academic sense, the shaping of paremiology based on folk literature and folklore studies. In a practical sense, the wide use of counter-proverbs and anti-proverbs as well as new proverbs, along with those standard or traditional ones, by means of media technology of computer and Internet. This latter aspect also constitutes the fourth sources of Chinese proverb repertoire. In this regard, the dramatic social and economic changes in the past four decades or so in China can be seen through the similarly drastic change in proverbs.

The use of anti-proverbs in Chinese proverbs is uniquely popular and fashionable because of its linguistic characteristics, that is, a higher percentage of homophonous (and/or tonal) words in

Chinese than in any other languages. For this reason, a large number of symbols in Chinese culture are related to the homophones. For example, apples (*ping-guo*) are used as gifts to mean “peace” (*ping-an*) due to the sound-meaning connection of *ping*). Such uses of anti-proverbs are getting even more popular in commercial advertisements and media reports through the platform of Internet:

一鸣惊人 <i>yi ming jing ren</i> ming = bird singing	To amaze the world with a single sound (act, feat). (Or, To become famous overnight.)
一明惊人 <i>yi ming jing ren</i> ming = clear; bright	To surprise people (oneself) with a clear vision. (Anti-proverb: An advertisement of a medical product of eye-drop.)
随心所欲 <i>sui xin suo yu</i> yu = to desire	To follow your heart as you desire. (A Confucius saying about being at seventy.)
随心所浴 <i>sui xi suo yu</i> yu = to shower	To follow your heart to shower. (Anti-proverb: An advertisement of a shower equipment.)

Ironically, such anti-proverbs are often seen as “abusing” or “misusing” traditional proverbs. There have been times when the governments tried to ban the use of such fixed idioms or proverbs. But the uselessness of those official rules proves that anti-proverbs have their vitality because they are a dynamic part of the language.

As the world began the year of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic changed the world in many ways. Such a historical event is certainly most instinctively reflected in the use of anti-proverbs or fixed-idioms, not only in everyday life,¹⁴ but also in official uses,¹⁵ for example:

义不容辞 <i>Yi bu rong ci</i> yi = righteousness	Justice can't tolerate one's dismissal of duty.
疫不容辞 <i>Yi bu rong ci</i> yi = pandemic; epidemic	Anti-proverb: Pandemic won't let itself be ignored.
仁至义尽 <i>Ren zhi yi jin</i> yi = righteousness	Humanism arrives, righteousness/justice is fully served/fulfilled.
仁至疫尽 <i>Ren zhi yi jin</i> yi = pandemic; epidemic	Anti-proverb: Humanism arrives, pandemic completely disappears.

In addition, there are also some other characteristics of the use of “new” proverbs in the recent decades: the adoption of foreign proverbs through loan translation; even by the national spokesmen, government newspapers and TV. For example, from the most important newspaper/news media in China, there are uses of the proverb “One picture worth a thousand words” (一图胜千言)¹⁶ with an exotic taste. However, the proverb in English has been traced to its origin in the 1910s (Mieder 1989:6, 1990:208), and studies show it to be from a Chinese proverb, “Hearing something a hundred times isn't better than seeing it once” (百闻不如一见) (Stevenson 1949:2611). This circle of “new” proverbs is another feature of the third and fourth stages/sources.

Contemporary proverb studies in China have continued those conventional topics: a) proverbs studies as a field (An 2008; Wen 2000; Xu and Li 2016); b) proverbs of weather (Wang 2018) and agriculture (Li 2016); c) proverbs in classics (Zhao 2009; Ma and Zhao 2019; An 2017); d) compiling collections/dictionaries from different textual sources (Wen 1989; Wen 2002; Zheng and Jiang 2008, Wen 2011); e) proverbs of certain philosophical or religious ideas (Liu 2004; Li 2005).





In addition, new topics are being studied: a) the attitudes toward females in ancient proverbs (Zhang 1992; Geng 2005; Wang 2006); b) proverbs of the minority groups in China (Li 1995) like Kazakh (Yuan 2013), Mongolian (Mei 2018), Tujia (Lei 2006), Tibetan (Zhaxihuadan 2011), Uygur (Fu and Chen 2014); c) proverbs in Chinese dialects (Zhang 2012; Hu 2015); d) proverbs in teaching Chinese as a foreign language (Shen 2011; Wang 2012); e) proverbs of occupations like medicine (Luo and Lin 2008), handcrafts (Pang 2017) and martial arts (Peng 1988; Cui 2008); f) proverbs used by contemporary political leaders like Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping (Feng 2001; Li 2015).

Unfortunately, there has been an effort to establish a “paremiological minimum” (Mieder 1992), which, by means of statistical investigation and survey, highlights the most frequently used 300 proverbs as the basis of paremiological studies. Clearly, the academic attention to current new proverbs and proverbial phrases is insufficient, because the change and the emergence of new proverbs and proverbial phrases are not just linguistic or sociological issues, but also related to the fundamental beliefs and values in Chinese culture. For example, traditional expressions such as,



“More sons, more happiness” (多子多福), “Raise sons to prepare for old age” (养儿防老), and “Marry a rooster, follow a rooster; marry a dog, follow a dog” (嫁鸡随鸡, 嫁狗随狗) are being replaced by the current ones: “Get engaged with the white-haired” (白发相亲, older parents as matchmaker for their mid-aged child), and “Twilight love” (黄昏恋, older widows or widowers get re-married). Some “new” expressions in the 20th century are already outdated and in the twenty-first century replaced by “new” ones. For example, words for “senior/nursing homes” (老人院; 养老院; 敬老院) have become everyday words.

II. Concepts and Proverbs of Old Age and Aging

Semantically, the word “old” (*lao* 老) in the Oracle Bone Inscriptions (fl. 1300 - 1000 BCE) is depicted as a (humped) man with a cane, as shown in the images below. According to a number of records in the early classics, this word referred to the age of 70 and above. But, there were also different definitions: “old man” (*laonan* 老男) meant men above 60 years old, “old women” (*laonu* 老女) meant women above 50 years old.¹⁷

Oracle Bone Inscriptions (3,300 years ago)	Cleric handwriting (2,000 years ago)	Standard writing (1,000 year ago)	Current handwriting/print (same as 1,000 year ago)
			

The evolution of the character “old” in Chinese writing shows its image/writing has become more and more abstract and symbolic, but the connotation remains little changed. Similarly, the character “spicy” (*xin* 辛; *la* 辣) has also gone through such a process:

Oracle Bone In- scriptions (3,300 years ago)	Cleric handwrit- ing (2,000 years ago)	Standard writing (1,000 year ago)	Current hand- writing/print (same as 1,000 year ago)
			辛 (xīn; 辣 (là)

While longevity (long life, *shou* 寿) is a key term in Chinese, it was further defined to mean “high *shou* for one hundred and twenty, mid-*shou* for one hundred, low *shou* for eighty.” Today, the character *shou* is a must at all birthday celebrations (e.g., in writings, decorations for gifts or food/cake) for those who are above the age of 60 (although it is not rare to use the word to refer to those who are 50 and above).

What has been most popular and influential in terms of proverbial expressions of age may well be Confucius own self-reflection (in *The Analects* 2.4), which is still commonly used today:

“At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the decrees of heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ *for the reception of truth*. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right” (Legge 1861: 10-11).

Given that Confucian ideas have been dominant in Chinese thoughts and values, and that Confucius is believed to have died as the age of 73, and his most important follower Mencius (372-289 BCE) died as the age of 84, this saying is more popular in everyday life:

七十三,八十四, 阎王不
叫自己去 At seventy-three or eighty-four,
even if the King of Hell does not
summon, a man will go himself.

(七十三,八十四, 阎王不
叫自己死) (At seventy-three or eighty-four,
even if the King of Hell does not
summon, a man will die himself.)

Obviously, the meaning of “old” or “longevity” has transformed over time. For example, the proverb “Three/four generations under one roof” (三世同堂; 四世同堂) was a marker of “a complete and happy life” (*shou*). But it has changed along with the change of family structure or kinship relations in modern China, not to mention the impact of the one-child (now two children) per-family policy in the past four decades. In fact, the traditional sense of old age is being replaced by the modern legal concepts, including the concept of “retirement” (though the majority of Chinese population is still in rural areas).¹⁸ Thus, the new concept of “aging” (*laolinhua* 老龄化) has also become an everyday term.

Here is a brief outline of some of the proverbs relating to specific age, even though “age is just a number.”

Fifty as Old

When Yan Zhi Tui in the 6th century quoted the following ancient proverb, he continued by saying that “since I am now more than sixty, I have no concerns of any kind about my life”:

五十不为夭 Fifty is not an early death.
(Death at fifty years old is not an
early death.)

This mention of the proverb seems to be the earliest written record, but it also reflected a typical concept during those centuries, as in these two uses:

The famous Tang poet Wang Wei (701-761) wrote in his fifties:

老年惟好静 Quietness is a peculiar favor in my
old age.

Bai Ju Yi (772-846), another famous Tang poet, used at least twice in his poems, even before he reached his fifties:

五十不为夭，吾今欠数年 Fifty is not early death, and I have a few years to go.

Of course, Confucius's saying of "at fifty knowing the mandate of fate/heavens" is still influential. In rural areas, the fiftieth birthday celebration as *shou* with a village-wide feast for a man (within family for a woman) is still common.

Sixty as Old

The importance of "sixty" as old, or even as a completion of a life, originated from the naturalistic cosmic view or philosophy. From this early cosmic view there developed the ancient numerological system for calendric or chronological purpose. In this system, the combination of two sets of units (e.g., ten celestial stems and twelve earthly stems) makes a total of "60," which is then a complete cycle, and it repeats in the same combination. Within this system derived the 12 Chinese "zodiacs," still essential to the Chinese everyday life. Therefore, 60-year-old is seen as a completion of the *rites of passage* for human life. This notion was historically related to Daoist and Buddhist concepts of staged transformation of life. Today, this notion is seen in the most popular celebration of "old age" or "*shou*" in China (and Japan, Korea).

Currently, many local and traditional concepts of "old age" have gradually adapted to their national laws which, in turn, are influenced by the international conventions set by the UN, drawing a line of 65-year-old for counting the population of "aging."¹⁹ With this line, as of 2014, China's "old aged" group took 15.5% (e.g., 212 million) of its total population, the highest percentage among all countries in the world, and by 2040, it is estimated that the percentage of the group of 65 and above will increase to 30%. The establishment of the China National Committee on Aging shows the seriousness of this situation in China. This problem is also clearly shown in everyday proverbial expressions, challenging traditional notions in both positive and negative senses.

The terms like "*huajia*" (花甲, grey-haired at 60), "*ershun*" (耳顺, ear-in-tune at 60, in Confucian sense), and "*huanli*" (还历, restart the cycle of the calendar) are metaphorical uses for this age, while these proverbs are common:

五十岁不交钱, 六十岁
不交言
六十不赴宴, 七十不留
宿

Don't deal with money at fifty,
don't talk too much at sixty.
Don't attend banquets at sixty, don't
sleepover at seventy.

六十岁学吹打, 心有余力
不足

To learn to play trumpet or drum at
sixty, sufficient desire with insuffi-
cient strength.

Seventy as Old

人过七十古来稀

People over seventy are very few
since ancient times.

人生稀有七十余, 多少
风光不同局

There are only a few who live be-
yond 70, customs and times are ever
changing. (Trans. by Dawson-
Gröne 1911:37).

七十不留步,
八十不留饭,
九十不留坐。

At seventy, don't keep him for a
visit; at eighty, don't keep for a
meal; at ninety, don't keep him for a
sit.

In the Confucian *Book of Rites*, there is a saying referring to age and status: "One can carry a cane at home at fifty, in the village at sixty, in the capital city at seventy, in the imperial court at eighty."

Also in everyday life, the expression of "white happiness" (*baixi*) is used for a death of old age, in contrast to "red happiness" (*hongxi*) of a wedding. The common use of "someone is 'old'" (*laole*) in certain context is also a euphemism of "death." Of course, the "old age" has meant different things throughout history, especially the life expectancy of the Chinese, along with the world population has increased dramatically in the past century.²⁰ In Old China, 70 could be indeed "rare" a century ago, but the average life expectancy in China is now above 70.

Clearly, views and attitudes toward old age and aging are changing in all cultures. For example, in contemporary American society, as shown in the proverb "age is just a number," the belief that "staying young" is important with "denial of the natural aging process" seems to be prevalent (Mieder 2020), meanwhile the mentality of "youth-centered" culture remains strong (Bronner 2016). In contrast, however, even though "immortality" is an

important part of Chinese thought, Chinese proverbs show a mentality and practice of “staying old” or having a “white happiness” as the auspicious ending of this life and a good beginning of the next. Contrary to the pessimistic view in “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” the Chinese “Older ginger is spicier” praises the wisdom of the aged and encourages the young to long for the respect and power at the golden age.

III. Text and Context of the Proverb “Older Ginger is Spicier”

With the contexts drawn above, this section focuses on the origin and context of our proverb, “older ginger is spicier,” in order to prepare for the following discussion about how the Chinese cultural roots are reflected in proverbs about old age and aging.

1) The origin of the proverb

The earliest written record of this proverb, according to various dictionaries (Zhu 1985:560; Song and Duanmu 2001:365), is from the official history book of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), *The History of Song (Song Shi)*, written and revised during 1343-1345, with a story as such (Tuo 1985): The well-known minister Yan Dun Fu (1120?-1191?) was an upright official. He was once bribed by the most notorious corrupted prime minister in Chinese history, Qin Hui (1090-1155), to support an agreement forced by the invading northern state, but Yan blatantly rejected it by saying that “I am never to be involved in any conspiracy to destroy my country, not to mention that I have the nature of ginger and cinnamon, the older the spicier.”

Thereafter, the expression carried the virtuous meaning of being “direct,” “straight-forward,” “loyal and righteous,” and became a proverb:

姜桂之性，到老愈辣 (Jiāng guì zhī xìng, dào lǎo yù là)
The nature of ginger and cinnamon, the older the spicier.

The description of the “spiciness” as the nature of ginger and cinnamon can be traced to the Han Dynasty (221 BCE- 220):

夫薑桂因地而生，不因地而辛 Ginger and cinnamon grow in various soil, but their spiciness does not change because of different soils.

夫薑桂同地，辛在本性 Ginger and cinnamon grow from the same place, and have their common nature.

Perhaps two reasons can be drawn to explain why the version used by Yan has been considered as the earliest written proverb, and cited the most in proverb collections. One is that Yan's version revealed a metaphorical context, i.e., his integrity and personality being intolerant of the corrupted deed; the other is the fact that he was facing the most notorious traitor in Chinese history. Clearly, this origin also shows the vitality of this proverb, that is, its underlined ethical values in a metaphorical expression.

2) *The transformation and variants of the proverb*

The transformation of this proverb can be seen in three forms or stages. The first is the simplified sentence with only one part of the original two-part proverb, or a condensed simple sentence. This is consistent with the format of the fixed idiom (*chengyu*), that is, using four characters, and is also in consistent with the two-part idiom (*xiehouyu*), that is, using only one part so that the reader/listener is expected to understand the hidden meaning. For example:

姜桂之性 The nature of ginger and cinnamon.
(Liu 2000:528)

The second is to directly describe or compare a person to the old ginger, a change from literary to vernacular/oral usage:

姜是老的辣 Old ginger is spicy (or spicier).
(It is the old ginger that is spicy)
(Dong 2005:156).

The third transformation is by adding the adverb “*hai*” (还, or *jiu* 就, *also, still, indeed*) so that it brings a rhetorical effect by saying:

姜还是老的辣 Indeed, the older ginger is spicier
(or, nevertheless, the older ginger is still spicier) (Hu and Fu 2006:83).

This usage implies the speaker admits that he/she is not as “spicy” as he/she thought since now there is an older/wiser person in front of him/her. In other words, context is required to determine the meaning, as proverbs often are “double-bladed.”

Thus, over those centuries, the “idea of [its] traditionality” of this proverb, as “the single, and the most crucial, element that empowers proverbs” (Ben-Amos 1995: 20), is affirmed. Thereafter, other variants are also created:

姜桂之性，到老愈辛	The nature of ginger and cinnamon, it grows older and spicier.
姜桂之性，老而愈辣	The nature of ginger and cinnamon, older it gets spicier it is.
薑茶易地味不甘，姜桂到老性愈辣	Ji-herb and tu-vegie (are bitter and) don't get sweet in different places; ginger and cinnamon get spicier as they get older.
薑桂之性，至老不移	The nature of ginger and cinnamon, no change as they get old.

3) Contemporary uses of the proverb: continuity and renovation

In the recent comprehensive collection of folk sayings with 100,000 entries, including 13,000 categorized as “proverb” (*yanyu*), the variants of our proverb are listed here (Wen 2004: 421). Note how “cinnamon” is gradually dropped from modern uses:

姜桂之性，愈老愈辣	The nature of ginger and cinnamon, the older the spicier (<i>la</i>).
姜桂之性，愈老愈辛	The nature of ginger and cinnamon, the older the spicier (<i>xin</i>).
姜还是老的辣	Older ginger is spicier. (Older ginger is indeed spicier.)
姜老姜辣，蔗老蔗甜	Old ginger is spicier; old sugar cane is sweeter.
姜老辣味大，人老经验多	Old ginger tastes spicier, older people have more experiences.
姜老味辣，人老胆豪	Old ginger tastes spicier, older people have more guts.
姜是老的辣，醋是陈的酸	Old ginger is spicier, older vinegar is sourer.

姜了老的辣，沟葱白儿长	Old ginger is spicier, scallions in ditches have longer white stems.
姜是老的辣，酒是陈的香，辣椒还是老的红	Old ginger is spicier, older liquor has better aroma, red peppers have to be older.
姜是老的辣，梅子嫩的酸，夕阳也晒人	Old ginger is spicier, younger plums are sour, twilight can also be scorching.
姜是老来辣，茶是后来酹	Old ginger is spicier, longer sit tea tastes bitter.
姜越老越辣，藕越老越粉	Old ginger is spicier, older lotus roots are squishier.
姜在地里长，土里要干爽	Ginger grows in soil, the soil should be dryer.

Among these current variants, there are probably the most frequently used:

姜是老的辣	Old ginger is spicier. (Old ginger is spicy.)
姜还是老的辣	Older ginger is spicier. (The old ginger is indeed spicier.) ²¹
姜是越老越辣	The older the ginger, the spicier it is. (The older the ginger is, the spicier it gets.)

The variants about sugar cane, vinegar, wine, pepper, or scallion clearly show the local modes of production and lifestyle. They further prove the proverbiality of our proverb here, showing its versatility in adapting to different regional, dialectic, and occupational contexts. It also shows that a proverb's vitality lies in its adaptation to a new social environment. Here are some rather modern variants, and even in counter-proverb or anti-proverb sense:

姜是老的辣；葱是嫩的香	Old ginger is spicier, younger scallions are tastier.
姜是老的辣；辣椒可是小的辣	Old ginger is spicier, but smaller pepper is spicier.
姜是老的辣；腕是老的大	Old ginger is spicier, older celebrities are cooler.

姜是老的辣; 情是旧的好
(老婆还是原装的好) Older ginger is spicier, older love is better.
(Older ginger is spicier, first wife is better.)

Other variants do not use the “ginger” part, but clearly show the “old age” and “aging” related connotations (more examples in the following section):

老将出马，一个顶俩	When an old general mounts a horse, one is for two. (An experienced hand can get twice as much done.)
初生牛犊不怕虎 老汉不提当年勇	Calves have no fear of the tiger. Good old man does not brag about his youth.
人老不值钱， 拖累讨人嫌 门神老了不捉鬼 长江后浪推前浪， 一代更比一代强	Old men are worth nothing, but burdensome and annoying. Old door gods catch devils no more. The latter wave of the Yangtze River pushes the former wave, each generation grows stronger.
长江后浪推前浪， 前浪把后浪推到沙滩上	The latter wave of the Yangtze River pushes the former wave, the latter wave pushes the former wave onto sand beach.

By now, “older ginger is spicier” has become ever more popular and diverse, though the original political and ethical implication is often outweighed by the practical and experiential implication. All of these changes also revealed the changed history, language, and family and social values, particularly, attitudes about old age and aging.

Here are a few examples of using this proverb in certain social and political contexts, but there are numerous uses by the common people in everyday life as well as in literature. Here is a report in the most important newspaper in China, *People's Daily*, which reprinted a story from another influential newspaper, *China Youth Daily*, about a village head who used the senior villagers to solve one problem, among others:

“It was close to the Spring Festival in 2015. There were two brothers quarreled hard on the issue of splitting household property and their neighbors could not easy ease or remedy the situation no matter what. They then went to the village head who had an idea. He gather a few older people who had good reputation in the village because he thought the brothers would at least care about their “face” (*mianzi*). They went to the brothers and began to chat. “The older ginger is indeed spicier.” Soon the two brothers felt ashamed and guilty of themselves, and compromised to each other. The problem was solved.”²²

Interestingly, the book, *Conversations with Clint: Paul Nelson's Lost Interviews with Clint Eastwood, 1979-1983* (Kevin Avery, 2011), due to the fact that Clint Eastwood is seen as a great master in the film world, is translated into 姜就是老的辣 (*The Older Ginger is Indeed Spicier*) (2015).

Also, during the regional election in Taiwan in November 2013, the former “vice-president” Lü Xiulian was one of the two front runners. She was criticized to be too old to hold that office, but she responded, “Older ginger is spicier.”²³

IV. Four Life-views Reflected in Chinese Proverbs

As “older ginger is spicier” has transformed into the status of a traditional or standard proverb, its proverbiality of duality and agility became more obvious. It can be positive to praise one’s wisdom and prudence as one is getting older (though the idea of moral integrity in the original context has been changed); it can also be negative to indicate one’s cunning and scheming. As seen in the above examples, being old at a certain age meant specific respect and treatment from family and society in ancient China. Today, the changing meaning of the number of ages has blurred the specific social behavior, but those proverbs still reflect fundamental beliefs and values of Chinese culture. I argue that the following four life-views are well reflected in old-age related proverbs.

The term “life-view” (*rensheng guan*, or view of life²⁴) is a more or less a direct translation from the Chinese expression. It is really about the views or attitude toward how to live a life. It is not related to the religious “pro-life” view, nor to the concept of “value of life” used in economics, social and political sciences. This “life-view” is not equivalent to the ethical concept of value

(values) for human actions, though it is heavily influenced by Confucian ethics. Therefore, I use “life-view” to indicate the difference between this practical philosophy of “living a life” (生活 *shenghuo*; 过日子 *guorizi*) in Chinese culture and the concepts used in folkloristic studies such as “worldview,” “folk idea,” and “folk fallacy” (Dundes 1971²⁵; Bronner 2007), and to echo the idea from Dundes about studying “human thought, rather than follow a natural history model of the collection and classification of items somehow devoided from contemporary life,” as Bronner (2007: 179) interpreted.

1) *Entering the world (rushì 入世)*

This concept embodies these beliefs and values in Chinese culture: a) the immortality of the soul (*linghun bumie* 灵魂不灭), as practiced in ancestral reverence/worship; b) the belief in seeking harmony within maintaining differences in personal life and interpersonal communication (*heer butong* 和而不同), as practiced in the concepts of yin-yang and five-elements; c) the ethics and practice of following local customs (*ruxiang suisu* 入乡随俗), as practiced in being inclusive of different lifestyles and adaptive to new environment in everyday life. This concept emphasizes Confucian values that a person should strive to enter and service the society as a useful member by studying the classics, passing the exams, and holding offices in the government. It encourages a person, especially a young man regardless of family background, to study diligently and be optimistic toward life and reality, and promotes the idea that education is the only ladder to elevate one’s familial and social status. These examples are clearly positive toward old age and aging:

活到老, 学到老	Live to an old age, learn to an old age.
活到老学到老, 一生一世学不了	Live long and learn on, much to learn in one life. (cf. Life is short, art is long.)
蚂蚁爬树不怕高, 有心学习不怕老	Ants are not afraid of high trees, the will to learn is not afraid of old age.
不怕人老, 就怕心老	Old age is not fearful, old heart-mind is fearful.

树老果不多，人老心不老 人怕老心，树怕老根	Old trees yield less fruit, old people have young hearts. People are afraid of getting old at heart, trees are afraid of getting old at roots.
人老志不衰	People get old, but ambition doesn't weaken.
人穷莫泄气，人老莫丧志	Poverty should not deprive ambition, old age should not deprive aspiration.
世无老而不学之理	There is no reason in the world for the old aged not to learn.
年龄长一岁，责任重一分 明珠尽出老蚌	One year added to age, one added share of duty. Bright pearls are all from old oysters.
人老智多，树老根多 (树老根多，人老话多)	Old people are wiser, old trees have more roots. (Old trees have more roots, old people have more words.) ²⁶
姜老辣味大，人老经验多； 酒陈味香，人老识深	Older ginger is spicier, old people are more experienced; aged wine is aromatic, aged man is sagacious.

Of course, there are twisted ones with dubious meanings, as counter-proverbs or anti-proverbs:

有志不在年高，无志空活百岁	With ambition, one can be young, without ambition, one hundred years is empty.
后生可畏 小人手多，老人口多	The later born is awesome. Little people have too many hands, old people have too many mouths.
狗老咬人痛，人老还击狠	Old dog's bite hurts more, old man's revenge hits harder.
人老无能，神老无灵	Old people are incapable, old spirits are ineffective.
冷铁难打，老竹难弯	Cold iron is hard to strike, old bamboo is hard to bend.

树老生虫，人老无用	Old trees get bugs, old people have no use.
人老珠黄不值钱	Old people are like yellowed plants, they are worthless.
老而不死是为贼	Living old without virtue is harmful. ²⁷

Overall, thinking about the experience of “entering the world” is essential to the Chinese because it provides an opportunity to emphasize education and love of learning as a path not only to improve individual status, but also to maintain a harmonious family and society. This explains the continuity of the state-wide examination system that has continued more than a thousand years till today.

2) *Exiting the world (chushi 出世)*

Since seeking immortality is essential to Daoist practice, beliefs and customs related to seeking an elixir conferring immortality has been an important part. This concept expresses a Daoist notion that “non-action” (*wuwei*) is the way of living a life being an element in the universe, and also related to a Buddhist idea of separating from the human world of desires. Since seeking immortality is essential to Daoist practice, beliefs and customs related to seeking elixir has been an important part of Chinese medicine or early alchemy, and many ways of exercises, not to mention folk-life in general. This life-view complements the *rushi*-view when one fails to be successful to “enter the world” so that one can retreat to the mountains away from the worldly world as a transition. It is largely based on the fundamental belief in the unity of humans and nature (*tianren heyi* 天人合一), as practiced in housing, diet, festivals, arts, and other areas. Proverbs of this lifeview are sometimes seen as cynical or transcendental:

少而寡欲颜常好，老不求官梦亦闲	Less desire at a young age makes you look healthy, no desire for office at old age makes your dream relaxing.
告老还乡	Announce old age so as to return to home village.

百年随时过，万事转头空	A hundred years slip in a blink, ten thousand things disappear when you turn your head.
老年惟好静，万事不关心	Quietness is a peculiar favor in my old age, ten thousand things are out of my concern.
人不可不知有生之乐，亦不可不怀虚生之忧	One must know the pleasure of life, but must not forget the concern about doing nothing in life.
人生知足何时足，到老偷闲且是闲	There is no contented life if one is not contented in life, a leisure taken at old age is a leisure indeed.

3) *The next world (laishi 来世)*

This view expresses that hoping for a better future or better life for the descendants is the way to overcome current hardship, and that everything unpleasant or undesirable now will change to be pleasant and desirable in the next life or in the next world. This view has close connection to the Buddhist view, as well as the Daoist original thought. But Confucian practical ethics is also integrated into this idea, as in connecting *fengshui* burial to the prosperity of ethics in a family. Today, this idea is also seen in these expressions/phenomena: “little emperor” (小皇帝 meaning the central role of a child in a family in contemporary kernel families); “little sun” (小太阳 same meaning as the above); “expect a son to become a dragon” (望子成龙); “expect a daughter to become a phoenix” (望女成凤).

This can be seen as a step further of the “exiting the world.” It is related to the belief in the immortality of the soul and the transformation of life. Therefore, many such proverbs are related to death, so as to psychologically prepare people for their old age and aging, not necessarily a negative view.

今天脱下衣和袜，不知明天穿不穿	When you take off pants and socks today, you don't know if you will put them on tomorrow.
人老无用，物老出古，禽兽老了成精	People age and become useless, things age and become antiquities, beasts and birds age and become sprites.

长江一去无回浪， The river waves never go backward,
人老何曾再少年 people can never be young again.

The following common expressions about old age and death show different Chinese beliefs and values. For example, these often indicate traditional Confucian values:

老了	(Someone) ... is old.	去世	(Someone) ... left the world.
走了	... gone.	谢世	... bid farewell to the world.
作古了	... became ancient.	百年(之后)	... (reached; after) a hundred years.
入土了	... entered the earth.	落叶归根	... fallen leaf returning to the roots.

These have the Daoist implication that death is a transformation to immortality:

升天	(Someone) ... ascended to the sky.	仙去	... left to become immortal.
登仙	... climbed mountain peak (to be an immortal)	仙逝	... died to become immortal.

These have obvious Buddhist influences that the “west” is where Buddha/nirvana is:

西去了	(Someone) ... went to the West.	驾鹤西归 (去)	... returned (left for) the West on the crane.
上西天了	... went to the West Sky.	见阎王了	... went to meet the King of Yama.

There is also this expression for death among those who are the communist party members or people in government offices:

去见马克思 To go to meet with Marx.

4) Passaging the world (*dushi* 渡世)

This life-view reflects one of the fundamental belief and values in Chinese culture by seeking auspiciousness and avoiding

inauspiciousness (*quji bixiong* 趋吉避凶), as seen in the practice of fortunetelling. On the surface, it may seem to be fatalistic or cynical view about life, but, essentially, it is a positive and active belief and behavior to live a meaningful life in this world, often by such expressions as, “seek good luck” (求好运), “seek life of good fortune” (求福命) or “cumulate good deeds/virtue” (积善积德).

Daoist view of life echoes this, emphasizing that one’s life is but one of the myriad things in the universe, and thus one’s deeds should be in accordance with the movement of nature, but not to be against it. By not doing anything (to change what the universe is), or non-action (*wuwei*), one fulfils the meaning of life by doing everything (a life is supposed to do). In practical life, one seeks “long life” or “immortality” by retreating from the worldly affairs, but maintaining harmonious relations with the universe and leaving it as one once entered. Similarly, Buddhist ideas also took root in this system of fundamental beliefs and values in Chinese culture, because the essential goal of practicing Buddhism is to help the passage of all lives from this world to the other world, widely used as *pudu zhongsheng* (普渡众生) in Chinese (in which *du* means to transit/passage).

In fact, as shown in the model of *rites de passage* (van Gennep 1909), old age and death are one of the three stages of the life cycle that all human beings go through from “separation” to “margin” and then to “aggregation” (departing the world of the living and entering the world of the dead). Thus, one’s life from birth to death is a long marginal transition (Zhang 2012).

Clearly, this *dushi* life-view is related, at various degrees, to the *rushi*, *chushi*, and *laishi* views. When living a life becomes too harsh, people would believe that life is to pass through a stage and pave way to *laishi* for the good of their next generations. This view is sometimes negatively expressed as dilly-dallying the world (*hunshi* 混世), as shown in the proverb:

好死不如赖活着	A good death is not as good as making a shameless living.
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But, the counter-proverbs for this are:

雁过留声，人过 留名	Wild geese leave their sounds as they fly over, people leave their names as they pass by.
积善积德，必有 余庆	Cumulate goodness and virtues, there must be more to celebration in the future.

Since life is good but short, there have developed various ways to prolong or better this life. All kinds of “art” or “technique” (术 *shu*) of fortunetelling have thrived as ways of seeking auspiciousness and avoid inauspiciousness (*quji bixiong*). In addition, the *dushi* life-view also reflects the other fundamental beliefs and values in Chinese culture: following local customs (*ruxiang suisu* 入乡随俗) as a practice of the Confucian idea of seeking harmony within maintaining differences (*heer butong* 和而不同). After all, Confucian ethics is a practical philosophy about living a life in this world, as seen in these proverbs (particularly about dealing with aging, old age, and death):

家有一老，黄金活宝	An old person in a family is the golden living treasure.
牛老角硬，人老艺精	Older bulls have harder horns, older people have finer skills.
不听老人言，吃亏(苦) 在眼前	If one does not listen to the old aged, one will eat losses (bitterness) before his eyes.
树老半心空，人老事事 通	Old trees are half-hollowed, old people know everything.
老马识途	Old horses know their roads.
吃过的盐比吃吃过的饭 都多， 走过的桥比你走过的路 都多	(The old man) has eaten more salt than the food you have eaten; walked over more bridges than the road you have taken.

In “passing the world,” cultivating body-mind (*yangsheng* 养生) is an ancient idea mostly influenced by the Daoist concept of seeking immortality. Chinese medicine, martial arts, and even diet systems are all related to this concept. As one can see in any neighborhood in China, there are old people --- of course, there are always young people as well --- doing all kinds of exercise such as *taiji* and modern dances. Naturally, there are thousands of

proverbs and proverbial expressions about cultivating life/health (Peng 1988).

能动能静，所以长命 动则体壮，练则寿长	Combine action and inaction, one gets a long life. Action makes the body strong, exercise makes life long.
饭后百步走，能活九十九	Walking a hundred steps after a meal makes you live ninety-nine years old.
一日三笑，人生难老	Three laughs a day, one's life won't be old.
一日三恼，不老也老	Three exasperations a day, one gets old before old.
遇事不恼，长生不老	Not to be irritated by anything, you will never be old.
笑一笑十年少	Laugh often, you are ten years younger.
笑口常开，青春常在	Frequent laughing keeps you young forever.
老来忙，寿命长	Keep busy as you age, your life will be long.
今年笋子来年竹，少 壮体强老来福	This year's bamboo sprouts will be bamboo next year, strong body at a young age brings happiness at old age.
千斤难买老来瘦	You can't buy slimness in old age with a thousand gold.
山中易找千年树，人 中难找百年翁	It is easy to find a tree of a thousand years old in the mountain, but it is hard to find a man of a hundred years among humans.
蚂蚁爬树不怕高，有 心锻炼不怕老。	Ants are not afraid of the height of trees, exercise is not to be limited by old age.
人老不以筋骨为能	Old people can't show off muscles.
筋长一寸，寿长十年	An inch longer in tendon, ten years longer in longevity.
生命在于运动	Life lies in movement (exercise).

Recognizing aging and identifying others who are old, whether people or animals or trees, are the most humorous way for old people to adapt to reality, and to prepare themselves for the next steps. Proverbs are thus best in drawing the analogies to comfort the aging people:

人老猫腰，树老焦梢

Old people have cat's backs, old trees have dried tops.

树老根多，人老话多

Old trees have more roots, old people have more words.

马老腿慢，人老嘴慢

Old horses have slow legs, old people have slow mouths.

人老先从腿上多

People first age from legs.

树怕空，人怕松

Trees are afraid of being hollow, people are afraid of getting loose.

In fact, the “passing the world” is more about dealing with social life than family life. Even those who are tired of social life would find ways to keep happy family life as a way to have good fortune or auspiciousness (*fu* 福, or *xingfu* 幸福) so that old age would not be miserable. One proverbial expression is *tianlun zhile* (the destined happiness of enjoying family love and joy with children/grandchildren around 天伦之乐), reflecting the Confucian values of family:

老婆孩子热炕头

(*tianlun zhile* for men) on a warm bed with wife and children around

患病需要好医生，

A sickness needs a good doctor to cure, old age needs a good old partner.

年迈需要好老伴

不怕年老，就怕躺倒

Old age is not scary, laying down is alarming.

树老怕空心，人老怕冷清

Old trees are afraid of being hollow, old people are afraid of being lonely.

人老疼孩儿，猫老嚼孩儿

Old people dote their children, old cats eat their kittens.

要求子孝，先敬爹娘

To have filial sons, to respect your parents first.

敬老得富，敬田有谷

Respect the old you get rich, respect the field you get grains.

V. Conclusion

To argue that the fundamental beliefs and values in a culture are often expressed through proverbs, this essay proposes an interpretive framework to connect proverbs to the fundamental beliefs and values in Chinese culture by: 1) drawing a broad picture of the history of collecting, using, and studying proverbs in China as a way to enforcing core Chinese values, and a brief history of translating Chinese proverbs; 2) contextualizing the meaning of being old in Chinese culture and history; 3) investigating the origin and development of the proverb “older ginger is spicier”; 4) examining proverbs about old age and aging from four life-views.

This essay is also intended to present some problems in the construction of paremiology in China, and in the translation of Chinese proverbs from different life-views. It thus is expected to draw attention by interested students and scholars to further the studies on Chinese proverbs in global context. After all, “Chinese proverbs are literally in the mouth of everyone, from the Emperor upon his throne to the woman grinding at the mill” (Smith 1902:7). This observation remains true: “Those who have not examined the proverbial sayings of the Chinese are surprised at the richness of the language in this respect” (Smith 1902:i). What is significantly different from the Western culture, however, is the veneration of age and great respect for elderly persons in Chinese culture. Thus, Chinese proverbs are a treasure trove waiting to be further opened, especially as the role of Chinese proverbs is increasingly significant in today’s global communication. Subsequently, knowing more about the views toward old age and aging in the old Chinese culture will surely help our own self-cultivation of body-mind-heart (*xin 心*) as we are all, at different speed, aging.

Notes

¹ The translations of the proverbs in this essay are quoted with references, otherwise they are my attempts to better express the cultural implication and context.

² See, Mieder (2020). Unfortunately the meeting was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020.

³ I have recently completed the labor of love of compiling a collection of 21 essays by Wolfgang Mieder in Chinese translation (forthcoming in China).

⁴ My dissertation was based on funeral rituals in a Chinese American community, and I translated *Les Rites de Passage* (van Gennep 1909) into Chinese (2010) and published a study of the model in English (Zhang 2012).

⁵ As shown in the major databases in Chinese (www.cnki.net; www.cqvip.com) and in English (e.g., JSTOR, ProQuest, ProjectMuse, MLA International Bibliography) by searching the keywords, “Chinese proverbs,” “proverbs of Chinese,” or “proverbs in Chinese.”

⁶ For the sake of paremiological studies, I use the term “history of Chinese proverb” without following the conventional divisions in the fields of Chinese history (Bai 1980) and Chinese literature (Yuan 2005) in China and outside China (Ebrey 2010; De Bary and Lufrano 1999; De Bary and Bloom 1999). My consideration is fundamentally consistent with An’s (2008) consideration, that is, Pre-Qin (prior to the 3rd c. BCE); Qin to Tang Dynasty (3rd c. BCE–10th c.), and Song to Qing Dynasties (10th c.–20th c.), but he did not include the 20th century.

⁷ This may be of interest to compare with the four major sources of common European proverbs: Classical, Biblical, Medieval Latin, and cross-Atlantic along with the rise of modern proverbs (Mieder 2014: 32).

⁸ They are, *Fan Sheng Zhi Shu* (by Fan Sheng Zhi fl. 33-7 BCE), *Qi Min Yao Shu* (by Jia Si Xie fl. 533-544), *Nong Shu* (by Wang Zhen 1271-1368), and *Nong Zheng Quan Shu* (by Xu Guang Qi 1562-1633).

⁹ It is interesting to relate this point to one definition of proverb which emphasizes metaphor in a proverb (Dundes 1984). The metaphorical meaning of a proverb is also determined by the context of using it (Mieder 1996, 2006). An example of this point is how Wolfgang Mieder peels through the origin and use of “No Tickee, No washee: Subtleties of a Proverbial Slur” (Mieder 1996) by emphasizing the context of using a proverb, rather than looking at the text only. See also, Mieder’s further analysis of Dundes’s definition (Mieder 2006).

¹⁰ The Chinese term *suwenxue* is also translated as “vernacular literature.” In Chinese context, the concept was first about the non-official language (e.g. non-literary spoken style in grammar and vocabulary), as discussed here. But later it also implied the genre/form and content what was not orthodoxy. In Chinese, *su* is often interchangeably used as a noun and an adjective as in “folk” literature, “vulgar” or “customs,” without the implication as it has in European history.

¹¹ This proverb also shows the custom that has continued today: people would bang the gangs or pots when there is a sun eclipse, believing that it would scare away the dog that is biting the sun. Thus, the translation can be: He who does not bang the gang to save the eclipsed sun will encounter rain when going out.

¹² See, China Folklore Network, CFN: <https://www.chinesefolklore.org.cn/web/index.php?NewsID=2427>. Accessed: May 13, 2020.

¹³ This number is the total from 30 provincial volumes. Clearly, there are regional variants and even repetitions in this calculation. There is now separate calculation of “standard” proverbs and their counter-proverbs and anti-proverbs.

¹⁴ See, 关于这次疫情的谚语 防控抗击疫情的谚语 关于疫情的顺口溜 (<https://www.fangjial.com/yanyu/26925.html>). There also numerous proverbial expression and images in Internet, and via the popular social media of “WeChat” in the Chinese language. Accessed May 20, 2020.

¹⁵ See, 仁至疫尽、疫不容辞: 上海司法局推出依法战“疫”成语新编 (https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_5893673). Accessed May 20, 2020.

¹⁶ See, 一图胜千言: 世界各地海浪攫人心灵的美 <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1120/c107182-29656718.html>. 其他翻译有, 一图值千言。See also, 长江日报: 一图胜千言 当惊江城殊 by 杨京, August 13, 2018: <http://opinion.people.com.cn/GB/n1/2018/0813/c1003-30223962.html>. Accessed May 20, 2020.

¹⁷ For example, *Book of Guan* 《管子·海王》, formed during 5th c. BCE – 3rd c. BCE. It was only in recent years that China changed its legal retirement age for women from 50 to 55, and men from 55 to 60, with the except for certain occupations to extend a few more years (e.g., full professors in universities can retire at 65, but professors with lower ranks must retire at the age of 60).

¹⁸ The legal age for retirement in China since 1978) was: 50 for female physical workers; 55 for female non-physical workers; 60 for males. The new law since 2015 revised it and planned to gradually extend the age to 65 all males and females by 2045.

¹⁹ See, in the UN document, “World Population Aging 2019: Highlights”: “Globally, the share of the population aged 65 years or over increased from 6 per cent in 1990 to 9 per cent in 2019. That proportion is projected to rise further to 16 per cent by 2050, so that one in six people in the world will be aged 65 years or over” (p. 1). ([https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/aging/World PopulationAging2019-Highlights.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/aging/World%20PopulationAging2019-Highlights.pdf)). Previously, 60 was used to define the old age population.

²⁰ The life expectancy of human beings from mid-1500 to 1900 was under 50 years, but thereafter, the world average is over 70 years by the early 21st century. See details in, Our World In Data (<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/life-expectancy?year=2015>); UN’s Population Division (<https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>)

²¹ Given the above contexts and discussion, I choose to use this translation, though other translations may be more appropriate in certain contexts.

²² See, 罗松: 为贫瘠的贾角村注入“活水” (ccn.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0815/c366510-28636607.html), August 15, 2016. Accessed May 20, 2020.

²³ See, 吕秀莲新文宣走仕女风 改强悍作风变“温柔” (tw.people.com.cn/n/2013/1125/c14657-23646182.html), November 25, 2013. Accessed May 20, 2020.

²⁴ One example of using this term and studying it from a philosophical perspective is the book, *The Chinese View of Life*, by Thomé H. Fang (1956), who examined this view in a systematic interpretation regarding how it was effective in the shaping of Chinese culture, and how it was different from other views of life in the Western philosophies.

²⁵ Alan Dundes defined “folk ideas” to be “traditional notions that a group of people have about the nature of man, of the world, and of man’s life in the world” and thought that “other terms” could be “more appropriate than ‘folk ideas’,” but his point was to emphasize “the task of identifying the various underlying assumptions held by members of a given culture” (1971:95, 96). The effort here to identify

“life-views” in Chinese culture can be seen as a step toward that direction, without using the unclear terms like “worldview” or “thought.”

²⁶ These counter proverbs demonstrate the ambiguity of proverbs, in which “old trees have more roots” can be supportive of “old people are wiser” with “roots” symbolizing wits in the first proverb, whereas “more roots” can also be illustrative of “more words” to mean that old people are talkative or wordy in the second proverb.

²⁷ This line is from the *Analects* (*Lun Yu*, 论语·宪问). The context of this usage is in this story: “Yuan Rang was squatting on his heels, and so waited the approach of the Master, who said to him, ‘In youth not humble as befits a junior; in manhood, doing nothing worthy of being handed down; and living on to old age -- this is to be a pest.’ With this he hit him on the shank with his staff.” This translation is from Legge (1861:156-157).

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