



## **Older Adults as Discursively Constructed in Taiwanese Newspapers: A Critical Discourse Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

This paper uses critical discourse analysis to examine discursive representations of older people in Taiwanese newspapers. A total of 926 references to older people were sampled from 62 articles published in four Taiwanese newspapers from January to August 2013. The findings suggest that, older people were frequently allocated roles suggestive of dependency. Those portrayed in line with the positive golden age stereotype were more likely to be treated as identifiable individuals, via referential strategies including nomination, titulation, functionalization, and honorifics. People of very advanced ages, meanwhile, were often discussed in the contexts of problems or tragedies. On the whole, negative stereotypes of older people were dominant within the sample, and appeared to be treated as more newsworthy. The articles occasionally reported positive experiences of aging, but implied that, these were exceptional. The nature of older age and aging as discursively constructed in Taiwanese newspapers appears to be problematic for those seeking to build a less ageist society in Taiwan.

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## 1. Introduction

**A**ging and older age, as culturally constructed concepts in Western societies, have been associated with a range of potentially damaging phenomena including the denial of aging (Bultena & Powers, 1978), the rise of agelessness as the defining quality of successful aging (Andrews, 1999; Ekerdt, 1986; Laslett, 1989), and the unwatchability of older age (Woodward, 1991). The above notions commonly serve to disassociate the young and middle-aged from older age which is often regarded as a fixed status defined mainly by declining conditions in all aspects of life. One of the consequences of this dissociation is ageist discrimination (McHugh, 2003).

Although Taiwan is a country profoundly influenced by Confucianism, which stresses respect for older people as well as the obligation to take good care of one's parents (filial piety), negative attitudes towards the aged are still evident there. College students in Taiwan have been found to perceive older people negatively in terms of their physical and mental qualities as well as their social and family relationships (Chen, 2002; Hung, 1997; Lin, 1993). As reported by Lin (1993), Taiwanese college students generally considered older people to be lonely, stubborn, dependent, resistant to change, miserable, afraid of death, nagging, and difficult to approach, and as giving numerous orders that they expect will be obeyed.

Stereotypes of older people have been confirmed to exist at the level of cognitive perception among the general public (e.g., Hummert, 1990; Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994; Schmidt & Boland, 1986), and there is no lack of literature indicative of misrepresentations of older people in the media, whether in advertising (Lee, Carpenter, & Meyers, 2007; Miller, Leyell, & Mazachek, 2004) or in television programs (Rodwell, Davis, Dennison, Goldsmoth, & Whitehead, 1992). Such studies have been principally concerned with the consequences of reinforcing negative stereotypes of older people, including the growth of ageism in particular societies.

The newspaper press reaches a large audience

and shapes its perceptions about the world (O'Connell & Whelan, 1996; Williams & Dickinson, 1993). Newspaper articles are expected to express opinions, beliefs, and ideologies that are formed, selected, or reinforced under the influence of the political stance of the newspaper in question as much as by the editors' and news writers' mental and cultural resources. Journalists' worldviews and mental representations feed into the production of news articles in various ways: crucially, in their assessment of the newsworthiness of events, i.e., whether their imagined readers would be interested in reading about them (Richardson, 2007). The ground rules for selecting which news events to report, and the determination of newsworthiness, are also culturally specific and socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1976; Fowler, 1991).

The ways older people are discussed in newspapers can shed some light on mainstream societal attitudes towards older age and aging (Phelan, 2011). However, language (in newspapers as elsewhere) is articulated from a particular ideological position, and should not be considered as a clear window through which to view the world, but as a medium that structures it in particular ways (Fowler, 1991).

For these reasons, the present study targets the language used in Taiwanese newspapers to explore the discursive construction of older people and make inferences about the conceptualization of older age and aging in the Taiwanese case. Some prior studies (cf. Bonnesen & Burgess, 2004; Fealy, McNamara, Treacy, & Lyons, 2012; Gibb & Holroyd, 1996; Murphy, 2004; Weicht, 2013) have examined news discourse in various countries including the United States, Ireland, China, and Austria in an effort to understand mainstream ideologies about older people. They will be discussed in more detail in the following section, followed by a discussion of the drawbacks and the gaps that remain to be bridged by the current study.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Portrayals of Older People in Newspapers

There have been relatively few studies of how newspapers, as opposed to newer forms of media, represent or construct issues surrounding

older people, older age, and aging. One example was Gibb and Holroyd's (1996) study of Hong Kong newspapers, which identified several categories of older people as reported in relation to specific topics, such as healthcare services, accommodation, crimes, financial challenges, the pathos of aging (emphasizing loneliness and lack of attention), accidents, investment, voluntary services for the aged, good news about aging, elderly celebrities/ elites, reminiscences, and stories representing older people to be extraordinary. Taken as a whole, these news categories suggest that, vulnerability was the dominant characteristic ascribed to older people by Hong Kong newspapers, while positive news articles about them were often presented as exceptional cases.

Murphy's (2004) examination of national and local Irish newspapers found that, none included front-page stories about older people, while those mentioned in the national press tended to be celebrities. Ageist and sensationalist language was also evident, particularly in headlines and in the national tabloids. The word 'elderly' was extensively used in Irish newspapers and closely associated with healthcare issues or with older people's roles as victims. In sum, Murphy (2004) revealed that, the portrayals of older people in Irish newspapers were dominated by age-related weakness, vulnerability, feebleness, dependence, and incompetence.

A more recent Irish study, conducted by Fealy et al. (2012), investigated discourses of welfare provision for older people and reported five types of subject positions they might be assigned: "victims", "frail, infirm, and vulnerable", "radicalized citizens", the "deserving old" and the "undeserving old" (pp. 91-94). Fealy et al. (2012) argued that, broader terms, such as "the pensioners" and "the over-70s", were employed to obscure the age group's heterogeneity: homogenizing them via references to "health and infirmity, capabilities, social needs, dispositions and wishes, welfare dependency, and improbable radicalism" (p. 96). The study also noted that, older people's identities were at times constructed by reference to their offspring and/or the working population, thereby positioning them as unproductive.

Focusing on the specific phrase "senior moments" (Bonnesen & Burgess, 2004, p. 123) in American newspapers, Bonnesen and Burgess (2004) noted that, the usage was strongly associated with memory loss, evoking images of severe cognitive impairment and functional incompetence as consequences of aging. Given the popularity of this phrase across many American newspapers, it appeared to Bonnesen and Burgess (2004) that, negative stereotypes of older adults were socially accepted.

Weicht (2013) examined Austrian newspapers in an attempt to establish what subject positions were discursively constructed for the elderly in relation to the provision of care for them. Three such positions were identified, namely, "representative of the past", "passive victim", and "active member of society" (pp. 191-193). The first two portrayal types tended to ignore older people's future and potential, instead collectively constructing them as passive receivers of care and thereby reducing them to a set of malfunctions and vulnerabilities. The third subject position, emphasizing elderly people's mental and physical fitness, was also a negative one insofar as it conveyed a message that the elderly are expected to keep contributing to society as an inevitable part of a good life, and that those who fail to fulfill this expectation will be socially marginalized as useless burdens.

The above review of the relevant literature indicates that, negative attitudes towards older people and aging have been dominant in newspapers in many parts of the world. Cross-cultural studies of media (mainly advertising) representations of older people have suggested a degree of difference between Western and Eastern countries (Chen, 2011; Lee, Kim, & Han, 2006; Raman, Harwood, Weis, Anderson, & Miller, 2008). However, the existing literature has paid scant regard to how newspapers discursively represent older people in East Asia. This study therefore aims to fill this research gap by focusing on the cultural conceptualization of older age as realized discursively and linguistically in Taiwanese newspapers. Moreover, previous studies have tended to categorize newspaper portrayals of older people into several themes or subject positions based on the surface meanings of the news language (Fealy et al., 2012; Gibb &

Holroyd, 1996; Weicht, 2013); instead, the present study focuses on the potentially problematic ideological assumptions that are likely to be drawn upon by these news items' readers. Likewise, previous studies (e.g., Bonnesen & Burgess, 2004; Fealy et al., 2012; Weicht, 2013) sometimes limited their samples to articles on a specific news event (e.g., changes in the provision of social welfare for the elderly) or topic (e.g., senior moments). The present study's sample was not limited in this fashion, and included news articles on a wide range of topics, with the only requirement for inclusion being that older people were discussed.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design: Critical Discourse Analysis

Zabihi, Ghadiri, and Rasekh (2015, p. 105) have argued that, "media can be a good representation of dominant ideologies in society. The analysis of such discourse can shed light on the mental and social structures of people in society", and advocated the use of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to identify the ideologies underlying media language. The current study follows this suggestion, and regards the examined news discourses as consequences of a recontextualizing process in which the news writers, under certain social and cultural constraints, transform the knowledge they have about older people into news stories (Bernstein, 1990, as cited in van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 3). As such, language serves to shape society, but is also shaped by it (Machin & Mayr, 2012). This argument naturally raises concerns about the ideological communication embedded in the examined news texts. Ideologies, according to Fairclough and Wodak (1997), are capable of reproducing unequal relations of power, even relations of dominance and exploitation, by representing and constructing society in certain ways. As activated or implied in news texts, ideologies arguably could naturalize, normalize, or legitimate misrepresentations of older people, and perhaps ageism itself, if their readers lacked critical awareness of how such texts might work ideologically to shape their perceptions or attitudes. In other words, news articles have the potential to manipulate readers, and to create

particular types of consensus that favor the interests of those in power (van Dijk, 1998). These views on the roles of language are commonly shared by advocates of CDA, including Fairclough (2001), Wodak (1989), van Dijk (1998), and van Leeuwen (2008). Given the present study's commitment to decoding of the ideologies about older people and ageing as reinforced or reproduced in news discourses, CDA was employed.

The current research employs a comprehensive CDA framework that was introduced by van Leeuwen (2008) for the study of discursive representations of social actors in media discourses. Here, it is utilized to explore the ideological effects or meaning-constructions of aging on the basis of linguistic/discursive features. The following sections summarize a number of specific linguistic clues and representational devices that the present study examined.

#### 3.2. Data Collection and Sampling

Newspaper articles containing at least one explicit reference to older people were collected from the four most widely read Taiwanese newspapers, namely, *United Daily News*, *Liberty Times*, *China Times*, and *Apple Daily*, each of which was sequentially targeted for sampling between January 2013 and August 2013. The order in which the four newspapers were sampled was determined randomly, as were the article-collection days within each paper's two target months (see Table 1). Alongside any explicit references to people's ages as being 65 or above, keywords used to locate such articles included 老 (old), 老人 (older people), 老農 (older farmer), 老婦 (older woman), 老翁 (older man), 老伯 (older uncle), 長輩/長者 (senior citizen), 阿公/爺爺/祖父 (grandfather), 阿嬤/奶奶/祖母 (grandmother), 銀髮族 (the silver-haired population), and 退休者 (the retired).

Table 1 shows the sampling months, the sampled newspaper for that month, the quantity of news articles obtained (total N=62), and the number of references to older people to be analyzed (N=926).

**Table 1.***Numbers of News Articles about and References to Older People, by Newspaper*

Newspaper	<i>United Daily</i> (29/1/2013)	<i>Liberty Times</i> (11/2/2013)	<i>China Times</i> (19/3/2013)	<i>Apple Daily</i> (7/4/2013)
News articles	10	3	8	2
References to older people	119	16	95	10
Newspaper	<i>United Daily</i> (25/5/2013)	<i>Liberty Times</i> (28/6/2013)	<i>China Times</i> (13/7/2013)	<i>Apple Daily</i> (21/8/2013)
News articles	8	13	12	6
References to older people	149	243	210	84

### 3.3. Data Analysis

#### 3.3.1. Role Allocation

My investigation of role allocation focuses on the roles older people are depicted as playing in relation to certain actions (verbal processes). According to van Leeuwen (2008), the purpose of exploring this area is to reveal the selections of roles, their associated social contexts, and the reasons why preferences in role allocations exist. It is also worthwhile to consider the ideological effects of this process, by asking whose interests are served by the identified role-allocation choices and what purposes are achieved. The verbal processes with which older people in different roles are associated in news articles could provide important information regarding what actions they are stereotypically perceived as performing (or being subjected to).

Two types of allocations were examined in this study: activation and passivation. Activation refers to instances when an older person is portrayed as an active agent in relation to a verbal process. Passivation refers to those cases in which older people are represented as being on the receiving ends of or merely undergoing some externally actuated process. Role allocation could shed some light on news writers' mental stereotypes of older people, which arguably influence the production of news articles about them.

#### 3.3.2. Referential Strategies

Referential strategies in newspapers can be important means of representing social actors ideologically (see Clark, 1992; Fealy et al., 2012; Zeynep, 2007). Richardson (2007) has argued

that, the ways in which social actors are named in news articles impact on how they are viewed by readers who simultaneously process a number of identities, roles, and characteristics to make meanings based on the newspaper's portrayals. From a CDA viewpoint, the choices made about the naming of social actors in news articles can serve many different psychological, social and/or political purposes (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001).

To capture the referential strategies used for describing older people in Taiwanese newspapers, a number of representational devices were taken into consideration. For instance, it can be useful to observe whether older people are described as individuals (individualized) or as a part of a larger group (collectivized). If older people are individualized, they are likely to be given names (nomination), sometimes with titles (titulation), through which readers may feel closer to them. In other words, whether senior citizens are given proper names and/or honorifics helps us to ascertain whether they are presented with a unique identity, or categorized as a part of a group of nameless news-story actors who only fulfill "passing, functional roles and do not become points of identification" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 40).

References to older people in the data were also examined for whether they were specific (specification), rather than genericized (genericization, treating reported older people as a class). Rather than individualizing older people in their articles, journalists could depict them as parts of a group, sharing common and homogeneous features or characteristics. Such assimilation can be achieved via referential



features such as mass nouns, quantification with statistics, or nouns denoting groups.

The discursive construction of older people in Taiwanese newspapers was also analyzed in terms of whether they were represented as sharing functions with others (functionalization), or in terms of their identities (identification). Functionalization is evident when social actors are represented in terms of an activity they are involved with. Identification refers to cases in which older people are defined in terms of what they are, often by classifying them in terms of a limited range of social factors such as age, gender, or occupation. Lastly, relational identification can shed some light on whether older people tend to be described in terms of certain relationships with others.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Role Allocation

The analysis of role allocation of older people in terms of activation indicated that they were more likely to be activated in relation to material verb processes such as 多重用藥 (take multiple kinds of medicine), 失智 (lose intelligence), 走失 (get lost), 摔傷 (fall and get hurt), 暈倒 (lose consciousness), 發病 (get sick), 死亡 (die), 拄著拐杖 (use a walking stick), and 自殺 (commit suicide). As agents of the above-mentioned verb processes, older people were arguably represented as being in decline in terms of both health and physical strength, and as if this decline was their own fault.

With regard to passivation, the sampled articles were most likely to represent older people in relation to particular verb processes including 捐贈 (donate), 贊助 (sponsor), 提供保障 (offer security), 補助 (subsidize), 擔心 (worry), 咬傷 (bite), 撞 (hit), 砍 (kill), 免費招待 (treat for free), 幫助 (help), 照顧 (take care of), 安置收容所 (assign shelters), 檢測 (examine), and 洪水沖走 (wash away in a flood). In parallel to what could be inferred from the activation data mentioned above, older people portrayed as on the receiving ends of verbs in Taiwanese news articles also appeared to be negatively categorized: as a vulnerable or dependent group comprising receivers of charity, medical care or public services, and the targets

of catastrophic events ranging from natural disasters to assault and murder. The net ideological effect of this is to reinforce negative stereotypes or ageist assumptions about older people by depicting them as victims or in need of help.

### 4.2. Older People Genericized and Classified

The discussion so far has suggested the prevalence of stigmatization of the older population in Taiwanese newspapers. However, if one examines the referential choice of genericizing and classifying the aged as a group, the stigmatizing effects are perhaps even greater. Taking Excerpts 1 through 4 as examples, older people in the sampled news articles were treated as goals for the material processes of donating (materials), delivering (food), monitoring (health conditions), and making arrangements (for safety). They were commonly referred to as 老人, 'older people' (in Excerpts 1, 2, and 3), and 銀髮族 (the silver-haired population). Such referential selections position older people as collectivized and genericized receivers of charity, social services, and medical care. This could trigger the homogenization of older adults into a group that shares the negative attributes of physical weakness, social disadvantage, and financial vulnerability. Homogenization – being treated as members of a community, rather than as individuals – is a form of negative ageism, and through the selection of associated verb processes in Taiwanese newspapers, the conceptualization of older people as burdens to society might be naturalized.

#### Excerpt 1

... 捐贈 ... 物資給 ... 獨居老人 ...  
donate ... materials ... to older people living  
alone (*United Daily*)

#### Excerpt 2

... 送熱雞湯給老人 ... 多送老人一份炒麵 ...  
delivered hot chicken soup to older people ...  
delivered one extra set of fried noodles to older  
people... (*United Daily*)

#### Excerpt 3

成大醫院 ... 為銀髮族健康把關 The  
Cheng-Kung University Hospital ... monitors  
the health of the silver-haired population (*China  
Times*)

*Excerpt 4*

獨居老人及低窪區安養中心等優先撤離至收容所安置 Elderly people living alone and older people in nursing homes located in lower-altitude areas were the first to be evacuated to shelters for safety. (*China Times*)

### 4.3. Relational Identification and Family-Centered Subject Positions

Older people in the sampled news articles were occasionally represented as being related to others: as someone's grandmother (Excerpt 9), father (Excerpt 8), mother (Excerpt 12), grandfather (Excerpts 5, 6 and 7), husband (Excerpt 10), wife (Excerpt 10), daughter-in-law (Excerpt 11) and mother-in-law (Excerpt 11). Despite their apparent variety, these relational references indicated that older people mentioned in Taiwanese newspapers were generally portrayed as operating within social networks limited to family. There were no references to other kinds of social relationships, such as being employers, employees, or friends, implying that close links to family occupy central positions of people's later lives.

*Excerpt 5*

發生...重大車禍 ... 蔡家阿公跟兩歲孫女二死 A severe car accident occurred ... Grandpa Tsai and his two-year-old granddaughter died. (*Liberty Times*)

*Excerpt 6*

施建章表示：阿公在五位兄弟排行老大 Jian-Zhang Shi indicated that grandpa had five brothers and he was the eldest. (*Liberty Times*)

*Excerpt 7*

魚池鄉長陳錦倫的祖父陳天宋五日仙逝，享年百歲 Yu-Chi Township chief, Jin-Lun Chen's grandfather, Tien-Song Chen passed away peacefully as if being erected into a holy being in heaven on the fifth at the age of one hundred. (*China Times*)

*Excerpt 8*

陳天宋育有五子，長子陳火能為地方廟務及宗教領袖。 Tien-Song Chen had five sons. His eldest son, Huo-Neng, is an executive director of a local temple and a religious leader. (*China Times*)

*Excerpt 9*

雅雯的阿嬤傷痛地說，雅雯很懂事。 Ya-Wen's grandmother said sadly that she was a good girl. (*Apple Daily*)

*Excerpt 10*

82歲白姓老翁在田裡暈倒；不滿80歲妻子沒叫救護車。 An 82-year-old man, Bai, fell unconscious on the farm; he was dissatisfied with his 80-year-old wife because she had not called the ambulance for him. (*United Daily*)

*Excerpt 11*

六十三歲林月蘭... 其婆婆罹癌後生活無法自理。 63-year-old Yue-Lan Lin... Her mother-in-law could not take care of herself after she got cancer. (*China Times*)

*Excerpt 12*

淹死的老婦張彭靜妹 ... 的女兒聞噩耗趕到溪邊。 An older woman, Jing-Mei Zhang-Peng, drowned ... her daughter heard the bad news and came to the riverside. (*Apple Daily*)

### 4.4. Age Identification

#### 4.4.1. Older Age as Legitimizing Physical Decline

As mentioned above, some news articles included clear indicators of the reported persons' chronological ages. This type of referential strategy can be described as information-oriented. For instance, in Excerpt 13, people aged over 65 were mentioned as a group eligible for a new social-welfare policy, while a more specifically defined older age range (between 70 and 75) was used to refer to another group of older people who had a greater likelihood of benefiting from the same policy. In other words, ages were reported as information necessary to the readers' understanding of criteria for the new governmental welfare service, without which information, the core news value of the news article might be nullified.

*Excerpt 13*

65歲以上無繼承人的長者 ... 都可提出申請 ... 但較可能入選的老人，約在七十至七十五歲間。 Senior citizens who are aged 65 years old and over, without heirs ... are eligible to apply ... but older people aged between 70 and 75 are more likely to be selected. (*Daily News*)

However, it is also clear that age disclosure was sometimes used to frame or contextualize the subsequent elaboration of reported accidents and ailments as being age-marked. For example, in Excerpts 14 through 16, below, the individualized older people in the news articles are described in terms of their chronological ages, which are very advanced, i.e., above 90. Moreover, the sampled news stories about older people's accidents and ailments were not found to include specific mentions of people aged between 60 and 70, raising the question of why Taiwanese newspapers did not choose to report on the 'young-old' in this context. One explanation might be that the 'old-old' are stereotypically perceived as the group most likely to experience ailments, feebleness, and death.

The disclosure of people's very advanced ages tended to be followed almost immediately by descriptions of the suffering they experienced due to factors including their own mistakes (誤闖鐵道, 'crossed the railroad mistakenly', Excerpt 15) or their miscellaneous negative attributes (e.g., 口齒不清, 'mumbled and couldn't express himself clearly', Excerpt 14; 精神恍惚, 'absent-minded', Excerpt 15; 年邁, 'senile', Excerpt 15; 老化, 'aging', Excerpt 16). The deployment of advanced age as a narrative precursor to these negative attributes could trigger a process of age-based categorization. In the process of reading such news articles, readers would be encouraged to draw upon pre-existing ideological assumptions, such as the severely impaired stereotype found in Hummert et al.'s (1994) study. The above excerpts suggest that the use of older-age disclosure in Taiwanese newspapers sometimes occurs in age-stigmatizing contexts. The ascription of negative attributes to older people – especially those who were very elderly – was implicitly naturalized by the inclusion of advanced-age information.

#### Excerpt 14

九十八歲的孫姓老翁，在文山區興隆市場裡摔傷 ... 口齒不清 A 98-year-old man, Sun, fell and was injured in Xin-Long market in Wen-Shang district ... mumbled and couldn't express himself clearly[.] (*China Times*)

#### Excerpt 15

九十歲劉姓失智老翁疑誤闖鐵道 ... 四肢骨折、頭蓋骨破裂當場死亡 ... 年邁失智 ... 精神恍惚 ... 撞飛數十米當場死亡。A 90-year-old man, Liu, with dementia, was suspected to have crossed the railroad mistakenly .... [His] arms, legs and skull were all broken and [he] died immediately .... Senile and had dementia ... absent-minded ... was struck and fell down meters away, dead. (*China Times*)

#### Excerpt 16

孟爺爺 .... 九十二歲因老化，腎臟萎縮，腎功能退化，一周洗腎三次 Grandpa Meng .... 92 years old and due to aging, he suffered from kidney atrophy and malfunction of the kidney. He has to undergo kidney dialysis three times a week[.] (*Liberty Times*)

#### 4.4.2. Advanced-Age Disclosure and Counter-Stereotypical Portrayals

The above discussion of age disclosure in Taiwanese newspapers suggests a rather overt association between advanced age and various problems. In the following excerpts, age disclosure – though again of very advanced ages – seems to work in a rather different way, albeit still revealing implicitly negative conceptualizations of aging.

#### Excerpt 17

陳天宋百齡仍耳聰目明 Tien-Song Chen was 100 years old but still had good hearing and eyesight[.] (*China Times*)

#### Excerpt 18

七賢社區隊的王桂阿嬤，身手靈活，讓評審大讚「完全看不出她高齡 88 歲」。Wang-Gui, grandma from Qi-Xian district, is so physically fit that in the opinion of the judges [of the contest] “she does not show her age as advanced as 88 years old at all”. (*United Daily*)

#### Excerpt 19

百歲人瑞孟逸華 ... 仍像一條龍 ... 年紀大腦筋卻非常清楚 100-year-old super centenarian, Yi-Hua Meng ... is as active and strong as a dragon ... is very elderly but has a very clear mind[.] (*Liberty Times*)

#### Excerpt 20

高齡 90 歲的阿嬤守田滿在女子 100 公尺競賽



飆出 23 秒 80 的成績，險些打破 23 秒 18 世界紀錄。A 90-year-old grandma, Shou-Tien Man, raced 100 meters in a competition for women, with a time of 23.8 seconds, almost breaking the world's record of 23.18 seconds. (*Apple Daily*)

In the preceding four excerpts, older people were reported as models of successful ageing in a praiseful tone (身手靈活, “physically fit”, in Excerpt 15; 像一條龍, ‘as active and strong as a dragon’, in Excerpt 19; 腦筋非常清楚, ‘clear mind’, in Excerpt 19; 飆百米險破世界紀錄, ‘races a hundred meters, almost breaking the world-record’, in Excerpt 26) and positioned as exemplars of agelessness (完全看不出年齡, ‘does not show her age’, in Excerpt 18). It is argued here that the age disclosures in these excerpts could work to frame the reported news events as age-relevant, and more importantly, to portray particular older individuals’ exceptional qualities as counter-stereotypical.

On the surface, Excerpt 17’s phrase ‘百歲仍耳聰目明’ (‘100 years old but still had good hearing and eyesight’) sounds like a compliment, given that good hearing and eyesight are positive attributes. However, it is argued that a taken-for-granted assumption as triggered in the adverb 仍 (‘but still’) is problematic in nature: in that, normally, the same positive attributes are not believed to be applicable to persons of such an advanced age. Therefore, aging is still implicitly associated with deterioration in health, and it is only by bearing this in mind that readers can comprehend why the represented older people are extraordinary and why the news event is worth reporting. The same presumption about older age can also be discerned in Excerpt 19’s depiction of the ‘super centenarian’ who is very elderly (年紀大) but (卻) has a clear mind (腦筋清楚); and the woman in Excerpt 18 who is 88 but looks younger (完全看不出她高齡 88 歲). Similarly, a surprised tone can be discerned in Excerpt 20, which highlights an elderly woman’s age to contextualize her almost breaking a world’s record (險破世界紀錄) and her fast racing (飆) as counter-stereotypical. The news value of these articles relies on the commonly shared stereotypes of normal aging as a process leading to poor health and the decline of physical strength; and older people whose qualities or deeds represent contrasts to normal or stereotypical aging seem to be

considered worth reporting for this reason alone.

#### 4.5. Nomination

Nomination of older people in the sampled Taiwanese newspapers took two main forms. One was the reporting of full names, sometimes with honorifics or titles to specify additional functional roles. The other was the presentation of older people’s family names only, sometimes accompanied by classification (especially in terms of age).

Excerpts 17 through 24 illustrate news representations of older people who were considered worthy of full-name nomination by Taiwanese news writers. As previously discussed, the older people in Excerpts 17 through 20 were represented as being exceptionally fit, given their advanced ages. The following excerpts (21 through 24) similarly suggested positive attributes, such as engaging in voluntary work (Excerpt 21), being mentally active (Excerpt 22), being expert in a professional area (Excerpt 23), and being virtuous (Excerpt 24). Full-name nomination in Taiwanese newspapers seems to work to mark elderly people as exemplars of successful aging. In addition to the reporting of their full names, some such persons were individualized via the strategy of honorification, that is, expressions used to show respect. For instance, in Excerpt 23, Kun-Yiang Li is described as the ‘Father’ of pear-growing in a town, as part of being depicted as a successful farmer. Some of the fully nominated older individuals were also functionalized through the use of references such as 志工, ‘voluntary worker’ in Excerpt 21, 學員, ‘learner’ in Excerpt 22, and 果農, ‘fruit farmer’ in Excerpt 23. The activities suggested via this functionalization endowed the reported individuals with additional, overtly positive qualities for readers to infer. The news writers’ decisions to fully nominate these older people in association with their functional roles could work ideologically, by connoting the existence of a socially sanctioned norm that older people in Taiwan should strive to prove their individuality through performing such functions.

##### *Excerpt 21*

志工柯玉英阿嬤....像個快樂小女孩，如數家珍每一種魚。Voluntary worker Ko Yu Ying,

grandma .... acts like a happy girl, introducing each kind of fish fondly. (*United Daily*)

*Excerpt 22*

大專院校廣開樂齡學習班，....年紀最大的是八十七歲黃萬貴，妻子余暖也是同窗，一起結業。Colleges promote senior learning widely .... The eldest learners are Huang Wan-Gui, aged 87, and Yu-Nuan, his wife as well as classmate, who will graduate together. (*Liberty Times*)

*Excerpt 23*

「上將梨之父」李坤養 .... 三星果園由他獨撐大。The Father of Shang-Jiang pears, Kun-Yiang Li .... manages the San-Xing orchard all by himself. (*Liberty Times*)

*Excerpt 24*

林月蘭，十五年來...照顧罹癌的八十多歲婆婆，榮獲今年全國孝行獎。Lin Yue-Lan has been taking care of her more than 80 year old mother-in-law for 15 years. She was awarded the prize for best practitioner of filial piety nationwide. (*China Times*)

As mentioned above, some nominations of older adults in the sampled news articles were limited to surnames, a strategy that arguably depicts these individuals as less unique. Moreover, the observed surname nomination was frequently accompanied by the referential strategy of older-age classification markers, such as 翁 or 老翁, meaning old man (e.g., 孫姓老翁, 'old man Sun' in Excerpt 14; 劉姓老翁, 'old man Liu' in Excerpt 15). Even though these older men were individualized to a certain extent, they could not be fully recognized in the absence of their full names. However, they were marked as members of a social group determined by older age and as sharing an older-age identity with other older men, as activated by the 'old man' tag. Interestingly, the referential strategy that combined surname nomination and older-age classification was usually observed in news scenarios portraying older people as victims of accidents (摔傷, 'fell and was injured', in Excerpt 14; 誤闖鐵道...撞飛...死亡, 'crossed the railroad mistakenly ... was struck ... dead' in Excerpt 15) or feebleness (口齒不清, 'mumbled and couldn't express himself clearly' in Excerpt 14; 失智, 'had dementia' in Excerpt 15). The age-classification marker might invite the reader to infer that the reported experiences

are older-age relevant or implicitly justified by the state of being older.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Newspapers can be powerful tools for forming consensus of opinions and attitudes, and are therefore capable of setting public agendas. This study has therefore focused on news articles about older people in order to uncover their ideological shaping of aging and older age: specifically, by identifying the newspapers' role allocation of older people in relation to various verbal processes and a number of referential strategies, i.e., nomination, functionalization, age identification/disclosure, relational identification, and categorization. The discursive contexts in which the various referential strategies were employed were also discussed.

As discursively constructed in the newspapers' role-allocation schemes, an older person's subject position was most likely to be a *receiver of social resources* such as charity, medical services, or social welfare. The aged were also portrayed as being responsible for their own physical decline, as well as fatal accidents and other tragedies, given their positioning as active agents of actions with negative connotations. Such allocations were often accompanied by the use of age-related categorization. The findings appear to be consistent with those of previous studies (Bonnesen & Burgess, 2004; Fealy et al., 2012; Gibb & Holroyd, 1996; Murphy, 2004; Weicht, 2013), insofar as the dominant characteristics ascribed to older people in newspapers tend to be suggestive of vulnerability, dependence, incompetence, and/or the passive receipt of care. However, it should be noted that, the present research was not limited to specific topics, such as provision of health- or social care for the elderly, which could have been a source of bias in previous studies, and its findings may therefore be considered more reliable evidence of derogatory representations of older people.

Other forms of ageism manifested in Taiwanese news articles were rather more subtle, as they were realized through decoding the ideological assumptions taken for granted in the referential mechanism of nomination and relational identification. The findings showed that, older

people in Taiwanese newspapers were only infrequently treated as unique individuals with their full names clearly revealed to the readers, and that where there were instances of full-name nominations of older people, these individuals were usually portrayed as socially active, physically fit, or younger-looking than others. In some cases, nominated older individuals were functionalized according to activities they were involved in, including volunteering, farming, or learning. The use of nomination only when referring to older people with positive qualities is consistent with the golden ager stereotype (Hummert et al., 1994), and seems to imply that older people earn, or come to deserve, individuality only if they are different from what their society stereotypically expects them to be like. In other words, their being exceptional is what justifies the news value of the coverage about them. The same concern was raised in Gibb and Holroyd's (1996) study of Hong Kong newspapers, which often presented cases of positive aging as exceptional.

While the abovementioned findings show a degree of consistency with previously cited studies, other findings of the present research have no direct parallels in the prior literature. For example, in terms of age disclosure, explicit references to older people's ages were only observed when they were very elderly, and usually in the contexts of accidents and health problems. Hence, specific older-age indicators may function to frame the reported accidents and deteriorating health as age-marked. Older-age disclosure was also evident in news articles addressing longevity, which was discursively represented as socio-culturally endorsed. Ironically, even in those news stories dealing with overtly positive aging experiences, older age was implicitly denied or rejected, in favor of a celebration of agelessness.

Another previously unexamined feature of my sample was that family relationships were the dominant sources of relational identification chosen by news writers to represent older people who were very likely to be identified as grandparents. The observed relational identifications imply that, Taiwanese newspapers draw on very limited cultural sources when constructing the social roles or functions available for older people to take on.

As a long-term result of this, the general public might develop a perception that older people's major social networks, or even their lives in general, can (or should) be circumscribed by the boundary of the family.

Taken as a whole, the present study's findings raise serious concerns about the perpetuation of ageism in Taiwanese news discourse. Despite there being a degree of diversity (both positive and negative) in the themes of the sampled news articles about older people, the newspapers' underlying ideological stance towards aging and older age appeared to be consistent. Since middle-aged and older people in Taiwan are the main newspaper users (Hsiao, 2006), Taiwanese news writers should be more aware that their dominant discursive construction of older people could shape readers' attitudes in the direction of othering aging and older age. To the extent that Taiwanese newspapers consider stories about negative aging more newsworthy than those about positive aging, the long-term ideological effects could be profoundly damaging to any current or future attempt to set a mainstream social agenda of building an older-age friendly society in Taiwan.

One of the limitations of this research is that, it did not take into account visual semiotic resources, such as the integration of words and images in the construction of meanings of aging and older age. Future research should incorporate critical exploration of such multimodal characterization (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

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