



# Perspectives on successful ageing: The views of Chinese older adults living in Australia on what it means to age well

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**Perspectives on successful ageing: The views of Chinese older adults living in Australia  
on what it means to age well**

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** High immigration has resulted in a culturally diverse aging population. This study aims to examine the meaning of successful aging among late-life immigrants aging in a new cultural environment.

**Methods:** Semi-structured interviews focused on the subjective experience of aging well were conducted with 11 Chinese older adults who had moved to Australia in later life. Interviews were conducted in participants' native language and analysed using thematic analysis.

**Results:** Eleven themes were identified. A collectivist cultural ideal relating to avoiding burden to children underpinned a number of themes, including the importance of good health and financial security. Preferences regarding retaining or relinquishing traditional cultural expectations of dependence on adult children varied between participants, suggesting some post-migration shift in values.

**Conclusions:** This study provides insights into the nuances of aging from a novel cultural perspective, and highlights the role of post-migration adaptation in cultural values.

**Key words:** Successful ageing, Immigrants/migration, Culture, Qualitative analysis: Thematic analysis

## **Introduction**

Many developed countries are experiencing growing cultural diversity in their ageing populations. In Australia, for example, immigrants constituted 25% of the population over the age of 65 in 1981, and 36% in 2011.<sup>1</sup> Among non-Western populations, people of Chinese ethnicity are one of the largest groups of overseas-born older adults in developed countries.<sup>1,2</sup> This cultural diversity poses various challenges to society in supporting the ageing population. Underpinning these challenges is the lack of understanding of what successful ageing means among older adults who have migrated to developed countries from non-Western cultures.

Rowe and Khan<sup>3,4</sup> proposed three criteria to characterise those ageing successfully: (1) absence of disability and disease, (2) maintenance of cognitive and physical functioning, and (3) active life engagement. Subsequent research on successful ageing has shifted towards a bio-psycho-social view incorporating the lay perspectives of older adults.<sup>5,6</sup> These literatures, however, have been predominantly guided by Western conceptualisations of successful ageing<sup>7</sup>, with systematic reviews highlighting an under-representation of Asian populations contributing to our theoretical understanding<sup>5,6,8</sup>.

## **Cultural variation in the meaning of successful ageing**

Cross-cultural research has typically contrasted cultural experiences between the two broad groups of Western (including Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand) and Asian countries (including Hong Kong, Japan, Mainland China, and South Korea).<sup>9</sup> Most Western countries are described as individualistic cultures, while most Asian countries are classified as collectivistic cultures.<sup>10</sup> Although countries within each broad cultural group may express values differently, collectivist cultures share a common emphasis on relationships with others, whilst individualistic cultures emphasise personal achievement and autonomy.<sup>11</sup> Chinese older adults' expectations and experience of filial piety,<sup>12</sup> and their family members' life satisfaction,<sup>13</sup> have been linked to their own wellbeing, illustrating how culturally-prescribed values may influence judgements of successful ageing.

Very few studies have focused on the experience of Chinese migrants. One interview-based study with older Chinese Americans reported a shift away from traditional perspectives towards greater emphasis on independence and individualism.<sup>14</sup> The only study with Chinese and Anglo Australians found similarities in both groups' views of successful ageing in terms of having good health and taking responsibility for health maintenance.<sup>15</sup> Chinese Australian participants also perceived the importance of financial security in supporting their independence,<sup>15</sup> indicating greater similarities with Western<sup>16,17</sup> than Asian participants.<sup>18,19</sup>

These previous immigration studies focused on English-speaking older adults who had resided in their countries of migration for over 20 years, and so were likely to be highly acculturated. As language has been recognised as an expression of culture, interviewing bilinguals in the English language may also elicit more Western-focussed narratives.<sup>20</sup> This study therefore aimed to examine the subjective meaning of successful ageing among Chinese late-life immigrants to Australia, as expressed in their preferred language.

## **Method**

### **Research design**

In consideration of Chinese cultural norms, such as a tendency to withhold negative information and provide socially desirable information during group interviews,<sup>21</sup> individual semi-structured interviews were used to collect data.

### **Recruitment and participants**

This study was approved by the University of Melbourne Behavioural Sciences Ethics Committee. Inclusion criteria were (1) community dwelling adults of Chinese ethnicity, (2) who were aged between 60-85 years old, and (3), who had been living in Australia for between one and ten years. The third inclusion criterion was based on findings that recent immigrants might be experiencing the *honeymoon phase*, while those who have migrated for a long time might be in *effective function phase*.<sup>22</sup> Recruitment began in two Chinese older adults' community centres across Melbourne, Australia, where the centre managers advertised the study through posters and their newsletter, and was subsequently expanded through snowballing.

### **Procedure**

All participants provided informed consent, and were given the option to be interviewed in English or Mandarin. All participants opted for interviews in Mandarin, although English was used occasionally with bilingual participants. Interview questions focussed on the participants' subjective meaning of successful ageing. As the term *successful* has been criticised for implying failure<sup>23</sup> and its lack of cultural relevance to Chinese community,<sup>24</sup> the term *ageing well* was used in interviews (See Appendix).

### **Data analysis**

All interviews were audio recorded, then transcribed verbatim in Mandarin by the author/interviewer (JHCT), a proficient Mandarin-English bilingual, who was a female provisional psychologist. Non-verbal information (e.g. laughter, gestures etc.) was noted in the transcript to increase the richness of the data. The transcripts were translated into English by JHCT. Further details about the translation processes and researcher perspective are provided in the supplementary information.

Transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's<sup>25</sup> thematic approach. Researcher JHCT analysed the English transcripts into meaningful themes through an iterative process, and all authors critically reviewed and refined the emerging themes until a consensus was reached. Minimal new information emerged in the later interviews suggesting that, consistent with existing guidelines<sup>26</sup>, theoretical saturation had been reached.

## **Results**

### **Participants**

The final sample comprised 11 participants ( $M= 68.82$  years old,  $SD=5.12$  years), who were interviewed individually for 27-57 minutes ( $M = 43$  minutes). Their average length of

residence in Australia was 4.95 years ( $SD=2.81$  years) after moving from Malaysia ( $n=4$ ), Mainland China ( $n=5$ ) and Taiwan ( $n=2$ ). Eight participants immigrated to Australia for family reunion, whereas three had lived in Australia for a prolonged and continuous period through repeated family visitor visas.

## Themes

“Ageing comprises a lot of things. It is kaleidoscopic.” (F1/75)

Overall, participants expressed the view that ageing well is a multidimensional construct, as represented in the quote above. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed eleven themes representing the meaning of ageing well, which were structured across three levels (see Figure 1). Participants’ quotes (with gender and age) are used to illustrate these themes. Participants are numbered to distinguish participants with same age and gender. Text omitted from quotes is marked by [...] while additional explanatory information is marked by [ ].

Insert Figure 1 about here

## Individual level

**Theme 1: Health.** Having good health was consistently emphasised by almost all participants ( $n=10$ ). Three participants posited good health as the first and foremost aspect of ageing well. As F1/75 described, “Health is number one, the rest are zeros [...] If you don’t have health or the ‘one’, the following zeros would be meaningless.” Despite the importance of health, most participants acknowledged illness as a natural part of life: “Birth, ageing, illness and death are life stages that one must go through.” (F1/75)

Approximately half of the participants described the purpose of maintaining good health as minimising and delaying the care-giving burden to their children: “Taking care of yourself is a way to help your children.” (F5/66)

**Theme 2: Financial independence.** All except one participant stated the importance of financial independence, and emphasised the wish to minimise burden on their children. Financial independence was also indicated by two participants as necessary to facilitate access to health and nursing care. However, ultimately, financial success was not regarded as a sufficient condition for ageing well, as M4/74 quoted: “I don’t think the millionaires [...] are considered as successful.”

**Theme 3: Sense of autonomy.** The importance of independence was implied through the necessity of good health and financial self-sufficiency. Additionally, more than half of the participants referred directly to the importance of autonomy.: “Not wanting to be a burden to others. The ability to live on my own is most important.” (M2/69). Some discussed their reliance on others in daily activities. F7/72 exemplified: “I have to ask my son to make a doctor’s appointment via phone. Because they don’t have a Mandarin-speaking receptionist.”

Whilst variations in preferences for autonomy were noted, only one participant, F2/75, expressed a wish to be dependent on others in old age: “We, the old people, hope for [...] having someone to depend on when we are old.”

**Theme 4: Attainment of personal desires.** Three participants identified the attainment of personal desire as an important aspect of ageing well, as illustrated by M1/62’s quotes: “Ageing well

[means to] have the ability to fulfil your desires. To me, this is really compelling.” Another participant described those older adults with minimal desires and limited ability to fulfil their desires as average and living ordinarily: “Not ageing well? [Sighed][...] These are people who have lesser desires towards their life and live ordinarily. Just passing the days.” (F5/66).

In contrast, four participants reported a preference for minimal desires in old age and talked about their pursuit of simplicity. This view was clearly presented in M3/71’s interview: “To me, [ageing well] [...] is leading an ordinary life without surprises or special arrangement.”

**Theme 5: Active engagement.** Ten participants described active engagement as essential to ageing well. These activities included ongoing learning, exercise, music, travelling, playing chess, reading and volunteering.

“One should always have something to do, regardless of age. This is called having something to rely on [literal translation: an anchorage], having something to do.” (F3/60)

**Theme 6: Positive attitude towards ageing.** Eight participants asserted the significance of positive attitude in ageing well. Three of them described having a young state of mind. As F6/66 stated, “Although my face is full of wrinkles, I still think that my frame of mind should be happy.”

Participants also emphasised acceptance by asserting a realistic attitude and openly acknowledging the deterioration in old age and the shortness of life. As M3/71 said, “The past has become the past tense. You should enjoy your current moment and the future.”

Another participant, M4/74, viewed having a positive attitude towards ageing as the fundamental condition for ageing well: “I think if you have a good attitude, the rest of the aspects will be normal”.

**Theme 7: Positive mood.** All participants acknowledged the unequivocal role of mood in ageing well. They described a search for happiness in a late-life that is free from worries, pressures, restriction or burden.

More than half ( $n=7$ ) of the participants highlighted the bi-directional relationships between mood and various aspects of ageing well. The impact of these experiences on mood is illustrated in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

## Social level

**Theme 8: Social connectedness.** In the immigration context, eight participants expressed the significance of social connectedness. As F2/75 described, among older adults who have communication difficulties, the community club might be the sole platform of interaction: “Because we have language barrier here. There isn’t any place where we could interact with others.”

**Theme 9: Family Relationships.** Family emerged as a major theme in this sample ( $n=11$ ), focusing on children, grandchildren and partner. In particular, two participants directly asserted that ageing well requires consideration of wellness beyond the individual, including the family and extended family name for speaker M2/69: “To age well, people in your family will need to be well too. If you are well, but your family members are unwell, then you will not be as happy. You will worry, for example, if some of your children are unwell, you will worry.”

**Relationship with children.** All participants mentioned their relationship with their children when considering the meaning of ageing well. They frequently referred to the notion of filial piety, although to varying degrees. On the one hand, these older adults appeared to retain the traditional expectation for their children to provide financial and physical caregiving when such needs arise. This was exemplified in two ways: First, F2/75 and F3/60 specified their expectation for their children to care for them. F3/60 explained that clear communication and commitment from her children regarding future living and care arrangement had alleviated her concerns in late-life. Second, the absence of reciprocal care from the younger generation was frequently quoted as examples of not ageing well by other participants. In particular, two participants alluded to the concept of ‘repayment’ while recounting circumstances in which the younger generation had not returned the gratitude towards their parents: “Children abandoned you. [...] Not having someone to look after you when you are old, will you say this is pity, or not pity? It is then considered as not [ageing] well.” (F1/75)

On the other hand, half of the participants described a strong disinclination to rely on their children when their health deteriorated. They stated a preference to be financially self-reliant ( $n=7$ ), with three of them expressing a wish to avoid causing burden to their children. This shift from the traditional perspective is well-summarised by the following quote:

“The tradition in China is to raise children for one’s old age [literal translation: to raise children with the aim to guard against troubles in one’s late life.][...] But you cannot rely fully on your children. What if you rely [fully] on your children, but your children have their work, their family, and their career?” (F1/75)

Three participants also noted the increased generation gap, which one participant speculated on as resulting from the children’s exposure to Western culture.



**Relationship with grandchildren.** Four participants noted the role of grandchildren in ageing well. Their views fell on a continuum with their grandchildren either being a source of joy or pressure. Although participants experienced the pleasure of grandparenthood, they recognised over-involvement with caregiving of grandchildren as a hindrance to ageing well.

“When the grandson smiles, grandma will be overjoyed.” (F3/60)

“A lot of them are here to take care of the grandchildren. They said, “Ohhh, it is so tiring, so tiring.” (F5/66)

**Relationship with partner.** About half of participants ( $n=6$ ) identified their partner as their main social support. Three of them affirmed the difficulties ageing without a life partner, while the other three recognised the social support offered by their partners whilst ageing abroad.

“If I am in China, when I am free, I can speak to other older adults or do something together. But I can’t do these here. I can’t speak to others because they can’t understand me, and I can’t understand them. I can only speak to my partner.” (F7/72)

## **Societal level**

**Theme 10: Social security and government support.** Six participants outlined the various roles of government and society in supporting successful ageing. “It [the Government] is supporting such activities for the older adult. It is supporting ageing well among the older adults” (F1/75)

Specific examples of government and societal support that participants mentioned included: revising policy to sustain community centres, providing healthcare and welfare support, ensuring residential care homes are well run, providing basic living needs such as food and accommodation, providing learning opportunities and activities to assist in post-migration assimilation and regulating social security funds and pensions.

“Those who have good financial condition can spend some money to get help. Those who have less financial ability will receive free hearing aid” (F2/75).

**Theme 11: Location of ageing.** Many participants ( $n=9$ ) affirmed the importance of the location for retirement.

“If they are at their country of origin, due to the familiarity towards the environment, they will feel at ease and have freedom. But, if they are here, and they can’t speak English, it will be tougher for them, and they will feel lonely.” (F6/66)

All study participants had decided on the location of ageing based on where their children reside. Many issues associated with the location of ageing were mentioned during the interviews including the perception of safety, food safety, air quality, the ease of transportation and communication, as illustrated in these quotes:

“If they are at their country of origin, due to the familiarity towards the environment, they will feel at ease and have freedom. But, if they are here, and they can’t speak English, it will be tougher for them, and they will feel lonely.” (F6/66)

“Unlike here, the things that we eat, use and drink in China could be poisonous”. (F2/75)

“Here, the air is good; there is a lot of greenery without much haze. In our country, the air is filled with ashes, smokes and car exhaust gases all day. How can people live longer there?” (F2/75)

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to explore lay perspectives of successful ageing among Chinese immigrants who have migrated to a Western country in older adulthood. Thematic analyses revealed that participants construed successful ageing as a multidimensional construct better described as ‘ageing well’, reflecting the importance of individual and social experiences, and the broader societal context.

Like older adults from Western cultures, these study participants placed an emphasis on health in their perspective on ageing well. However, their responses illustrate different underlying meanings of health in old age. Similar to findings in a native Taiwanese sample,<sup>19</sup> this study found that the inability to maintain independence, and thus the perceived burden to their children, would be more concerning to the Chinese older participants than having an illness *per se*. Likewise, mirroring findings from a native Chinese sample in Hong Kong,<sup>18</sup> participants in this study prioritised financial self-sufficiency to ensure access to healthcare and independence, mostly with an intention to minimise burden to their children. Hence, this study confirms that health and financial independence themes among these Chinese samples share a common underlying motivation, suggesting that minimising the caregiving burden to their children is a strong motivational factor for ageing well.

The well-being of offspring is an integral aspect of ageing well for Chinese older adults. Some participants went so far as to say that ageing well is unattainable without the well-being of their children, their family and their extended family. These themes are consistent with earlier findings noting the importance of children’s well-being to Asian older adults living in their country of origin.<sup>18,19,27</sup> Interestingly, they also recognised some tension in caring for their children, given the increased generation gap with their children who are socialised into Western cultures, and the demands associated with caring for grandchildren.

Consistent with previous studies with Chinese participants in Hong Kong and Taiwan,<sup>18,19</sup> the traditional value of filial piety also emerged as an important aspect of ageing well for participants in the current study. However, these Chinese participants’ references to filial piety suggest a gradual shift in its significance. That is, unlike previous findings indicating a greater emphasis on independence in studies with highly acculturated English-speaking Chinese older immigrants,<sup>14,15</sup> the current study found a tension between the preferences

regarding retaining or relinquishing traditional cultural expectations of multigenerational living and dependence on adult children.

Although most Chinese elders did not wish to rely on their children, and explicitly stated this when discussing their desire to remain healthy, financially independent and autonomous, they appeared to retain the traditional expectations for their children to provide financial and physical care when such needs arise. Herein lies a paradox of delaying reliance on children and yet expecting children to fulfil the virtue of filial piety. A related paradoxical pattern is the tension between independence and dependence. Participants discussed how the immigration context posed challenges in language and transport, and in turn posed a barrier to autonomy. Some late-life immigrants emphasised independence and expressed an inclination to relinquish traditional value of filial piety, however they encountered difficulties with practical issues in everyday life to achieve independence.

Societal factors relating to the location of ageing, social security and governmental support were also important to participants in this study. This study contributes to the understanding of ageing well among immigrants by demonstrating the importance of societal factors, as previous studies exploring the meaning of successful ageing using Asian immigrant samples have not incorporated societal level themes.<sup>14,15,28</sup> Taken together, our findings suggest that, for these Asian migrant participants, successful ageing is more complex than originally conceptualised by Rowe and Kahn<sup>3</sup> and perhaps better captured by the term “ageing well”.

### **Strengths, limitation and future research**

In contrast to previous work with Chinese populations, which mostly neither clearly stated the interview language nor mentioned the translation process, or used English during the interview, this study is unique in using Mandarin as the interview language.

There are three main limitations to this study. Firstly, while the aim of qualitative research is not to provide generalisable findings, it should be noted that results from this study may not apply to the wider immigrant population, as the sample is confined to a small sample size from a particular geographical region and ethnic group. Future research could consider expanding the scope of lay perspective studies with other immigrant populations and those who have migrated for reasons other than family reunion.

Secondly, this study used the duration of migration to estimate the participants’ level of acculturation. Future studies could include acculturation measures to determine the participants’ cultural identity. A third limitation of this study is that, as has been reported in previous research with immigrant populations,<sup>29</sup> some difficulties were experienced in gaining trust with the participants. One participant expressed concerns about information being relayed to authorities, while another felt uncomfortable about sharing examples of not ageing well. Future studies should consider spending longer duration on trust building, and address beliefs that discourage research participation.

## **Conclusion**

This study elicited the viewpoints of Chinese late-life immigrants on the meaning of successful ageing, revealing the inter-relationships between individual, personal and social factors that contribute to ageing well, and made three significant related contributions. First, this study showed that participants' perspectives on successful ageing emphasised the importance of contributions from individual, social, and societal levels to support ageing and the post-immigration adjustment process. Secondly, this study provides a deeper appreciation of the themes related to successful ageing among Chinese older adults. It shows that themes commonly reported by older adults of all cultures, such as health, may have underlying culturally-specific meanings, such as avoiding being burden to others. Some themes particularly relevant to Chinese populations, including relationships with family were also identified. Finally, this study identified the paradoxical tensions in some aspects of successful ageing (expectations of family relationships and sense of autonomy) experienced by Chinese immigrants living in a Western country. Taken together, these findings show that culturally-sensitive approaches are required to ensure people from all cultural backgrounds are well supported as they age and adjust to a new cultural environment.

## **Practice Impact Statement**

Late-life immigrants encounter many issues in adjusting to life in a new country. In the case of those from a Chinese culture, these may include wishing to avoid being a burden to others. It is essential to provide social facilities, such as community centres, and ensure support for practical issues, such as language learning and transport, are provided.

## **Policy Impact Statement**

Some themes relating to successful ageing commonly reported by older adults of all cultures, such as health, may have underlying culturally-specific meanings. Culturally-sensitive approaches are required to ensure people from all cultural backgrounds are well supported as they age and adjust to a new cultural environment. This needs to be considered in planning support services.

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**Table****1**

Quotes illustrating the relationships between mood and other aspects of successful ageing

Examples of quotes

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**Mood and health**

“I think mood can take up more than 50 per cent of one’s health. So when you are in a good mood, actually it will be easier to maintain your health.” (F4/67)

**Mood and active engagement**

“Actually I have seen some older adults that looked very sad and worried every day. And they isolate themselves, and not having interaction with others at outside.” (F4/67)

**Mood and social connectedness**

“So to reduce those feelings [fear of another friend of similar age dying], perhaps it is considered as a type of fear, I will make as many friends as possible, and join more activities.” (F6/66)

**Mood and family relationships**

“Of course, firstly, the kids have grown up and that they will leave you to have their own life. [...] Some people even lost their life partner, and spend the life alone. At those times one will definitely feel lonely and empty. Feel alone. The feelings of loneliness are always stronger than when I was in my country.” (F4/67)

**Mood and attitude**

“So, attitude can be distinguished by observing whether the person is happy or not. If you are happy, your attitude is good.” (M4/74)

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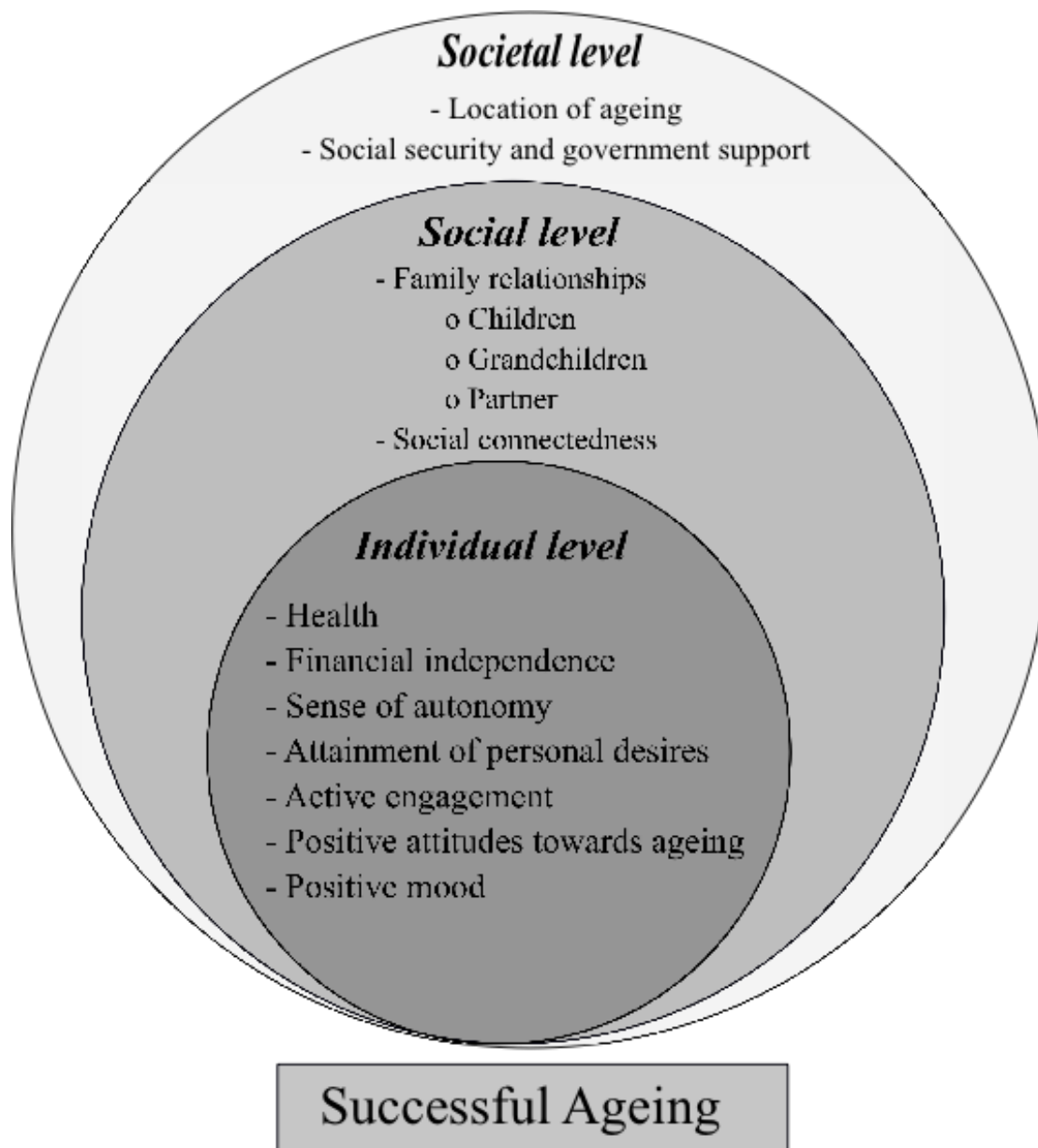


Figure 1. Emerging themes on successful ageing summarised across three levels.



Supplementary materials

### **Interview Questions**

The main interview questions were:

1. What does aging mean to you?
2. What do you think it means to age well?
3. What do you think it means to not age well?
4. Would you consider yourself as someone who has aged well? Why?
5. How has your immigration experience influenced or not influenced your meaning of aging well?
6. What would be the essential aspects of aging well for you?

Throughout the interview, prompt questions (e.g. Can you think of an example of someone who has aged well?) and follow-up question (e.g. repeating the participants' words) were used to enrich and clarify the conversation.

### **Translation methods**

Non-verbal information (e.g. laughter, gestures etc.) was noted in the transcript to increase the richness of the data. The transcripts were subsequently translated into English by JHCT. Another proficient Mandarin-English bilingual external to the research team translated a random sample (10%) of the sentences from each transcript, which was subsequently compared to the researcher's copy. The process did not reveal any conceptual differences between the translations. Some discrepancies in phrasing and tenses were identified and discussed until a consensus was reached. Terms without linguistic equivalence in English were also discussed between JHCT and the co-authors to minimise the loss of meaning in translation. In such cases (e.g. the phrase *BangShouBangJiao*), both the literal translation (e.g. Hands are tied, Legs are tied) and the conceptual translation (e.g. bound by fetters) were included in the transcripts.

### **Owning our perspectives**

With a theoretical orientation of critical realism (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we acknowledge that the lens of this study is influenced by the cultural backgrounds of the research team. In particular, the researcher who conducted the interviews and led the analysis (JHCT) is a female South East Asian of Chinese ethnicity who migrated to Australia one year before the interviews were conducted, thereby sharing similarity with the participants in terms of being brought up in a collectivist culture, and also adapting to a new cultural environment. Cultural balance to the interpretation of the data came from researchers CB and LJEB, who are both from Western cultures.