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## Pluralities of old age – A study based on online surveys in China and France

This chapter explores cultural perceptions of aging through online surveys conducted in 2022. It examines how old age is constructed and perceived differently in China and France, focusing on symbolic and material aspects of each culture. The surveys reveal that old age is associated with different activities, places, and societal roles in the two countries. Chinese elderly individuals are often seen engaging in social and physical activities like square dancing and tai chi in public spaces, reflecting their integration into community life. In contrast, French elderly are more associated with leisure, cultural consumption, and private activities. The study also highlights how gender influences perceptions of aging, with elderly women generally described more positively than men in terms of appearance and temperament, though they face more societal pressures. This comparative approach underscores the cultural nuances in defining and experiencing old age, illustrating the diverse social constructs that shape the elderly's role in society.

### I. Introduction

What does it mean to be old? This inquiry has captivated societies throughout history, inviting the insights of philosophers, physicians, sociologists, historians, and various other thinkers. The fields of gerontology and geriatrics, dedicated to studying the processes of aging, took shape as distinct disciplines in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. However, it's important to note that "old age" does not present itself as a straightforward, objective concept for examination by medical professionals or researchers; even the "rigorous" sciences have grappled with defining it precisely (Nshimrimana, 2003). As early as 1970, Simone de Beauvoir highlighted the arbitrary nature of old age. Nowadays, scholars widely concur that old age is a construct shaped by social and cultural factors. The state of being old fundamentally emerges from the amalgamation of a culture's symbolic systems (language, beliefs, myths, theories relating to life, existence, and death) and material aspects (such as the nature of productive forces, the abundance or scarcity of resources, technological progress, and more) (Nshimrimana, 2003)

With this understanding in mind, in 2022, we initiated the "Aging and Old Age: Discourse and Representation" project, aimed at exploring representations of elderly individuals and attitudes toward old age through discourse in diverse contexts, utilizing a multilingual corpus. An online

survey was conducted in the same year among speakers of six different languages. In this chapter, we present a comparative study of the results obtained in France and China.

France has a long tradition of research on aging, particularly in demographic and economic domains. The statistical category of “elderly”, defining the onset of old age at 60, was established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Bourdelaïs, 1993). Jacques Bertillon introduced the concept of population aging in an article dated 1895. He likened human societies to a forest, where the cuts made by the lumberjack allow the forest to continually regenerate. Conversely, if the lumberjack’s axe is removed, the forest will age and eventually wither away. However, the term gained prominence definitively after World War II, becoming a tool of propaganda and part of a broader discourse on France’s decline. The National Gerontology Foundation, established in 1967 shortly after the publication of the Laroque report on population aging, became a pivotal catalyst for gerontology research, and its research was dominated by medicine and biology (Ogg & Gorgeon, 2003). In China, a culture that traditionally venerates old age (de Beauvoir, 2020; Guo & Guinamard, 2023), the concept of population aging was introduced only in the 1980s when the first occurrences of 人口老龄化 *renkou laolinghua* ‘population aging’ appeared in the *People’s Daily*, along with the first scientific articles on the topic recorded by the CNKI database (X. Li, 1980). Since then, old age as a social phenomenon has become a significant societal concern, with aging progressing at an accelerated pace due to increased life expectancy and the one-child policy practiced between 1979 and 2015. The country does not appear to be well-prepared to cope with this new reality, both emotionally and in terms of infrastructure and governance (Attané, 2022). Hence, it is intriguing to compare the collective imaginaries of two countries with divergent trajectories regarding old age.

Our project’s distinctiveness also lies in its comparative approach. Although it is generally acknowledged that old age is a social and cultural construct, few intercultural studies have been conducted. One notable study, led by Löckenhoff’s team in the late 2000s (Löckenhoff et al., 2009), involved students from 26 different cultures sharing their perceptions of age-related changes in physical, cognitive, socio-emotional functioning, as well as their societal views on aging within their cultures. Their analyses revealed that intercultural variations in perceptions of aging were associated with cultural indicators of population aging, education levels, national character-related values, and stereotypes. Our approach aligns with this perspective but broadens the sample to encompass all age groups.

## II. The survey

To ensure the comparability of results, it was decided to prepare the questionnaires in different languages based on an original questionnaire in French. The objective is twofold: firstly, we aimed to capture representations of various categories of the elderly population and observe whether these representations might be influenced by the choice of designations. A previous survey conducted by the monthly magazine *Notre temps* ‘Our time’ in 2009 revealed that responses varied depending on the terms used. For instance, a “baby boomer” was considered to be around 56 years old, a “senior” around 61 years old, and a “veteran” around 68 years old. Additionally, the designation of individuals aged 50 and over is a sensitive issue. The same survey showed that in everyday life, *personnes âgées* ‘persons of old age’ is the most commonly used term (67%), followed by *retraités* ‘retirees’ (55%), and then *vieux* ‘old’ or *âgés* ‘aged’ (33% each). Consequently, in our survey, participants were asked if they used either of the adjectives *âgés* ‘aged’ and *vieilles* ‘old’, or both, and whether they considered these words to be synonyms for *retraités* ‘retired’. The question of cultural difference emerges at this point. Indeed, this distinction in French does not have an exact equivalent in Chinese. The word *vieux* is most often translated as 老 *lao* in Chinese. However, as shown by semantic analysis, *lao*, unlike *vieux*, is predominantly used in Chinese, both institutionally and in everyday language, without significant negative connotations (Guo & Guinamard, 2023). We had to choose 上了年纪 *shang le nianji* as an equivalent for *âgée*, a compromise far from ideal because, on one hand, this expression does not fulfill exactly the same grammatical functions as the French word, and on the other hand, it can be used cumulatively with *lao*, as in phrase 上了年纪的老人 *shang le nianji de laoren* ‘aged older adults’.

Secondly, representations are not always easy to grasp, often existing in our subconscious. To make them visible, we designed two types of questions. The first type involves explicit questions about the representations themselves: respondents are asked to provide words they associate with elderly individuals and to underline any potential differences between the elderly and the young. In the second type of question, the concept of old age is translated into perceptible signs of daily life: places, activities, early signs of aging, etc. These questions aim to sketch concrete and realistic images.

A total of 770 participants completed the questionnaire in French, with 389 responding to all questions. The Chinese questionnaire received 120 responses. The distribution channel of the

questionnaire seems to be an important cause of the few responses received in Chinese. Comparison in the following analyses will be based on percentage calculations.

Regarding the distribution of age groups among respondents, French-speaking participants ranged in age from 17 to 95 years, while the ages of Chinese-speaking respondents did not exceed 70 years<sup>1</sup>. In both countries, individuals in their twenties represent the largest age group, accounting for 30.4% of French respondent and 37% of Chinese respondents (Fig. 1). In terms of gender distribution, women make up the overwhelming majority: 77% among French respondents and 63% among Chinese respondents.

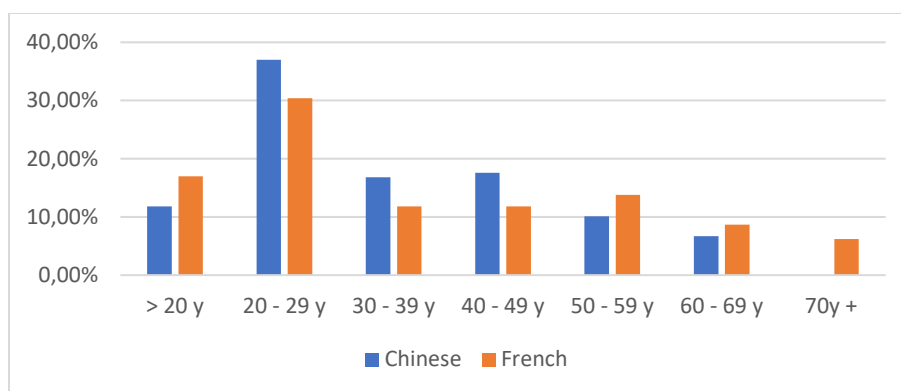


Figure 1: Respondents' age distribution

### III. Definitions of old age

The definition of old age is a subject of ongoing debate, with varying perspectives across different countries and age groups. The INSEE (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) in France and Chinese legislation define old age as beginning at 60 years, while the World Health Organization (WHO) sets it at 65. Some gerontologists even argue for a threshold of 75, while public opinions vary widely (Ennuyer, 2011). Early research by Neugarten, Moore and Lowe (Neugarten et al., 1965) in the United States found that Americans generally perceive old age to begin around 60 for women and 65 for men. Secombe and Ishii-Kuntz, analyzing nationally representative data from the U.S., discovered that men are typically considered old between 60 and 64 years, while women fall in to this category between 55 and 59 years

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<sup>1</sup> According to CINIC 2021 report, only 11.2% of older adults (aged 60 years and above) had access to the internet, and this figure was significantly lower than the number of younger adults (20.5%) aged 30 to 39 in the same period. (The 47th Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet. [http://www.cac.gov.cn/gzzt/ztl/z/cnic/A0920010802index\\_1.htm](http://www.cac.gov.cn/gzzt/ztl/z/cnic/A0920010802index_1.htm) Accessed September 22, 2023). In comparison, 90% of older adults aged 60 to 69 were internet users in France in 2022, and 55% of people aged 70 and older used internet. (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/410850/france-internet-usage-penetration-by-age/>, Accessed September 22, 2023)

(Seccombe & Ishii-Kuntz, 1991). A study conducted by the Prévoir Group in 2011 found that, on average, the French consider individuals to be old starting at 69 (Ennuyer, 2011).

The results of the current survey align with previous statistics: the age range of 60 to 70 garnered the most consensus. However, this apparent consensus masks nuanced perspectives influenced by sociological factors, including culture, age and gender, as well as the terminology used to describe this demographic group.

The following table (Table 1) presents the minimum age at which respondents in each country consider a person to be “aged” or “old”. Notably, the perception of old age increases with the age of the respondents in both China and France. This phenomenon can be attributed to the relativity of age perception. For those under 25, 50 years represents double their own age and, therefore, seems distant. However, for someone aged 50, their perspective may differ due to a longer life experience (Amyot, 2016). This trend also reflects an emotional significance associated with old age – a desire to delay its onset and maintain a youthful perspective.

	China (老 <i>lao</i> )	China (上了年纪 <i>shang le nianji</i> )	France (âgé)	France (vieille)
Age >25 ans	52,04	62,57	64,06	64,32
25 ≤ age < 50 ans	54,29	59,73	68,06	69,26
50 ≤ age < 75 ans	66	64,67	72,21	75,77
75 ≤ age			73,23	71,66
Women	59,02	62,88	68,71	67
Men	52,69	60,32	60	70

Table 1: Perception of Old Age by Age, Gender, and Culture

Comparing the perception of old age between the two countries, it becomes evident that, at all age groups, French respondents tend to place the threshold of old age at a later stage than their Chinese counterparts. Social norms significantly contribute to this difference. Chinese culture traditionally values old age more than French culture (Guo & Guinamard, 2023). Expressions such as 家有一老，如有一宝 *jia you yi lao, ru you yi bao* in Chinese, which roughly translates to “Having an elderly at home is like having a treasure”, do not have a direct equivalent in

French. Another possible explanation for this gap is the retirement age. In China, retirement age is currently set at 50, 55 or 60, depending on gender and profession, a policy established in the 1950s when the average life expectancy was only around 40 years. In contrast, the French government recently raised the retirement age to 64. This difference influences perceptions of old age, as retirement marks a significant shift in social status and level of participation in collective life.

Furthermore, career-related milestones may influence age perception. In China, the age of 35 is a critical point in one's career, often making it challenging to advance beyond this age without achieving a certain level of responsibility. In France, a similar milestone is typically around 55 when a worker is labeled as a "senior".

The terms used to describe old age can also influence perceptions. In France, the term *vieux* 'old' has become somewhat of a taboo. An anecdote shared by Amyot (2016) illustrates this point: during a training session for professionals working in geriatric institutions, a trainer included the word *vieux* in their vocabulary. The response was swift, with the training organization facing pressure to remove the professional from the teaching team. Therefore, in our survey, respondents were asked to specify the ages at which they consider someone to be *agée* / 老 *lao* and *vieille*<sup>2</sup> / 上了年纪 *shang le nianji*. For French respondents under 25, there is no significant difference, but older respondents tend to set a later age for *vieille*. Among Chinese respondents, the average age for being 老 *lao* is generally younger than for 上了年纪 *shang le nianji*. This gap can be as wide as 10 years in the under 25 age group. Interestingly, responses to subsequent questions about the characteristics of being old and aged showed minimal differences, both among the French and Chinese respondents. This suggests that perceptions are driven more by emotional factors than objective or biological criteria.

In both countries, women tend to place the threshold for old age higher than men. Studies have shown that women face greater societal pressure regarding old age, particularly concerning physical appearance (Åberg et al., 2020; Narayan, 2008). It raises the question of whether women, in response to this pressure, unconsciously push the age of old age further.

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<sup>2</sup> The feminine form of the word *vieux*, *vieille* however, has an even more negative connotation than its masculine equivalent (Guo & Guinamard, 2023).

#### IV. Typical activities associated with elderly individuals

Responses to the question regarding with elderly individuals reveal significant disparities between the two countries concerning the places attributed to this age group. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the most frequently mentioned activities by respondents.

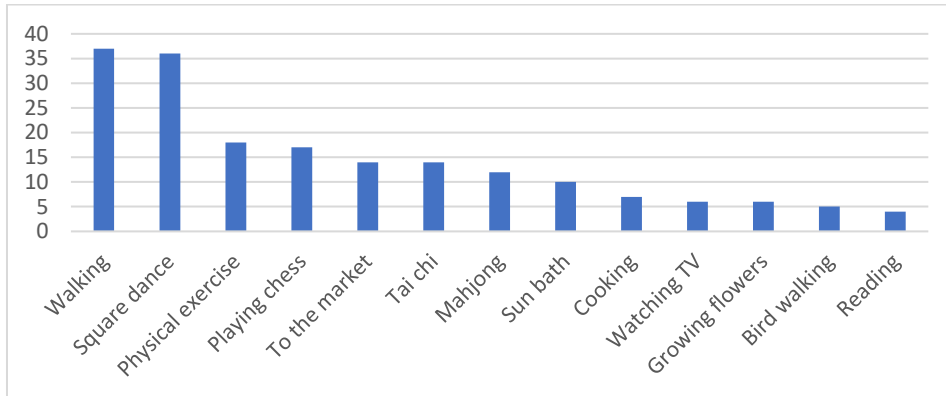


Figure 2: Activities associated with elderly people in China

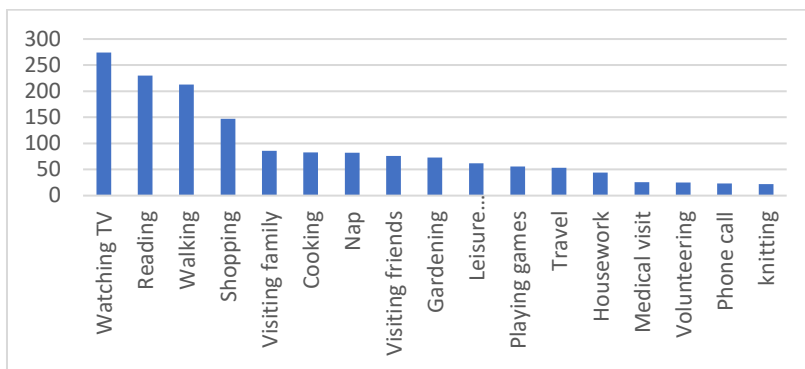


Figure 3: Activities associated with elderly people in France

In China, traditional culture activities play a prominent role in the lives of elderly individuals. Activities such as square dance (unique to Chinese culture), play chess, tai chi and mahjong are deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric and frequently take place in public spaces like parks or community centers. These activities serve as opportunities for socialization, exercise and intellectual engagement. The prominence of these group activities underscores the value placed on social connections and community engagement among Chinese seniors.

Conversely, in France, the elderly appear to prioritize personal leisure and relaxation. Activities such as napping, engaging in leisure activities and playing games suggest a more leisurely lifestyle, characterized by moments of self-indulgence. Nevertheless, a continued focus on social interaction is evident through activities like visiting family and visiting friends, highlighting the importance of maintaining community relationships. Additionally, the presence of activities such as volunteering indicates that many elderly individuals in France



remain active contributors to society, albeit through different avenues. Notably, the involvement of elderly individuals is crucial for the development of associations in France, with 27% of volunteers falling in the 65 to 74 age range and 25% aged 75 and above, as reported in a 2022 study by France Bénévolat<sup>3</sup>. In contrast, civic participation of this nature remains limited in China (Lin, 2017).

A noteworthy commonality is the significance of homemaking. In both societies, elderly individuals engage in activities associated with daily life at home, such as cooking, gardening and housework, underscoring their continued vital roles within their households and contributing to family well-being. It is worth noting that in China, even as the number of traditional “three-generations under the same roof” households decreases, largely due to increased professional mobility, it is not uncommon for young retirees to either care for their very young grandchildren or their elderly parents.

Chinese elderly individuals distinctly prioritize physical activities, with five activities in this category (walking, dancing, physical exercises, tai chi and bird walking) being among the most frequently mentioned. Li’s survey in 2016 corroborates this preference, revealing that 61% of rural elderly Chinese engage in daily medium to high-intensity physical activities, a percentage that rises to 83% among urban elderly residents (F. Li, 2016). Conversely, elderly individuals in France appear to lead more sedentary lives, with only three physical activities identified with travel included. This observation aligns with a study by Pierre et al. (2022), indicating that elderly individuals in France spend an average of 5 and a half hours per day engaged in sedentary activities, including 5 hours and 4 minutes in front of screens.

Another notable distinction between the two cultures is the importance attributed to reading. Reading ranks high on the list for French respondents but appears toward the bottom for Chinese respondents. This divergence likely stems from variation in education levels in the two countries. Statistics from INSEE in 2019 reveal that two-third of individuals aged 55 to 64 in France hold a bachelor’s degree or higher<sup>4</sup>. In contrast, China largely eradicated illiteracy among young and middle-aged individuals only by the end of 2000, following a decade of concerted efforts (Xie, 2003).

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.jeveuxaider.gouv.fr/engagement/actualite/lengagement-associatif-des-seniors-une-source-optimisme/> accessed the 17<sup>th</sup> September 2023.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4797586?sommaire=4928952>, accessed the 17<sup>th</sup> September 2023.

In addition to reading, leisure activities associated with elderly individuals in France also encompass cinema and travel, activities notably absent from the responses of Chinese respondents. This divergence reflects significant cultural and socio-economic distinctions. In China, cinema visits and travel are more closely associated with younger individuals and are considered “modern” activities introduced from the West following economic reforms in the 1980s. Moreover, these activities require a certain level of financial means. In contrast, elderly individuals in France have had the opportunity to benefit from the “Trente Glorieuses”, a period of economic prosperity, affording them greater purchasing power compared to younger generations currently facing economic challenges.

Consequently, through an examination of the activities associated with elderly individuals, we discern two subtly distinct images of this demographic group in the two countries. Chinese elderly individuals project a more active and integrated image within the communal life, whereas their French counterparts appear to lead more individualized lives with their societal inclusion often occurs through active participation in associations.

V. Places

Respondents were asked to list three places that they associate with elderly individuals. We find the most recurring answers in Figures 4 and 5.

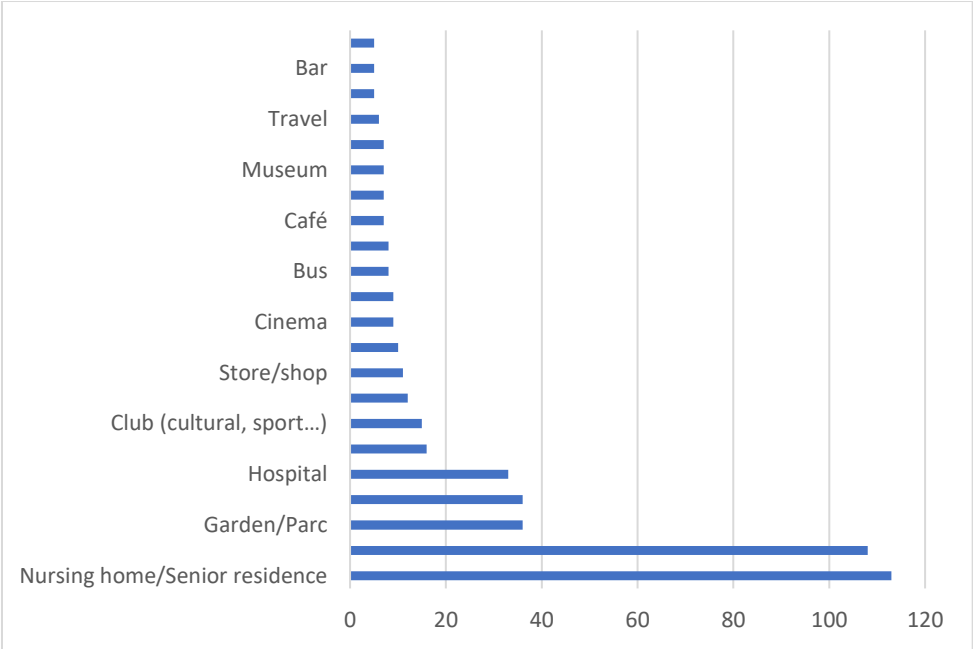


Figure 4: Places associated with elderly individuals in France

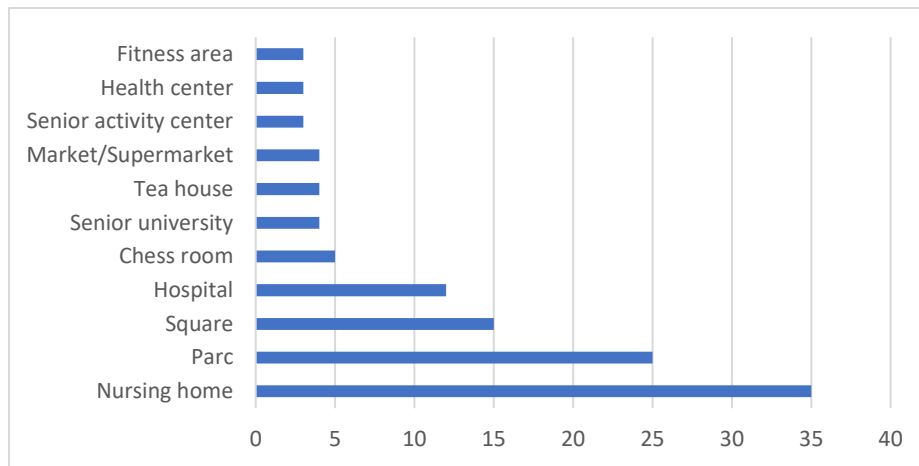


Figure 5: Places associated with elderly individuals in China

In both France and China, “Retirement homes” (medicalized or not) topped the list. However, it’s important to note that the proportion of elderly individuals actually residing in these specific facilities is relatively low. In China, in concerns only less than 3% of the elderly population<sup>5</sup>, while in France, approximately 10% of people aged 75 and older either frequent or reside in these facilities (Drees, 2022). It’s essential to acknowledge a potential linguistic bias in the choice of responses, as the terms *maison de retraite* or 养老院 *yanglao yuan* (retirement home) easily associate such places with the elderly, even though this might not necessarily reflect reality. Nevertheless, this association projects an image of elderly individuals as somewhat “exiled” from society.

Hospital is also mentioned as a place frequented by elderly individuals, indicating the common perception that advanced age is often associated with fragile health.

Other places mentioned in the responses largely echo the previous question. French elderly individuals frequently visit cultural venues such as cinemas, theaters, museums and concert halls. Places related to physical well-being, such as spas, and leisure tourism activities like cruises, are also associated with the elderly. These responses collectively paint a profile of French elderly individuals as consumers of cultural and tourist products.

In contrast, Chinese elderly individuals are often seen in open public spaces such as parks and squares, where they are visible and interact with people of various age groups. Unlike their French counterparts, they visit fewer places associated with consumption. This reflects the traditional representation of financially dependent elderly individuals, supported by their

<sup>5</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan (2006 – 2010) introduced the concept of “9073” for the first time, which indicates that 90% of Chinese elderly individuals are taken care of at home, 7% receive community-level assistance in day care centers and other facilities, and only 3% reside in nursing homes.

children, as reflected in common expressions like 养儿防老 *yang'er fanglao* ‘raising children to prevent one’s old age’ or in legislation that mandates the duty to support elderly family members (赡养 *shanyang*).

Interestingly, the “university of the third age” ranks high among Chinese respondents but is absent among French respondents. It’s worth noting that this educational structure first appeared in France in the 1970s. China opened its first university of the third age in 1983, and since then, elder education in China has become the world’s largest system. Unlike in France, where training often takes the form of lectures, Chinese universities of the third age offer courses in painting, calligraphy, singing and more – activities that are often provided by clubs or Culture and Youth Centers (MJC) in France. Additionally, with the retirement age in China being relatively young (between 50 and 60), there is a strong demand for cultural education.

Therefore, the association of places with elderly individuals reveals significant cultural and social differences between France and China. These associations contribute to the image of elderly people as either active consumers of cultural and leisure products or individuals integrated into public life, depending on the country.

## VI. First signs of aging

What are the first signs of old age and aging? In response to this question, the answers provided by respondents from both China and France generally converge. As we can observe from word clouds generated from the responses, changes in physical appearance are the most frequently mentioned signs (Figures 6 and 7). In both China and France, respondents notice the emergence of wrinkles, graying or thinning hair. However, there are certain expressions that reflect the specific cultural context of each country.

In France, weight gain is considered a characteristic of aging, aligning with the relatively passive image (sedentary activities) that the French associate with elderly individuals. In contrast, in Chinese responses, occurrences of terms like 驼背 *tuobei* ‘hunched back’, 掉牙 *diaoya* ‘tooth loss’, or 老年斑 *laonian ban* ‘age spots’ are notable. The mention of teeth loss is particularly interesting, as Chinese culture places special importance on dental health in age-related considerations. The Chinese word 齿 *chi* ‘teeth’ is metonymically used to refer to age in expressions like 马齿徒增 *machi tuzeng* ‘years of my life accumulate in vain’. Additionally, 齿 *chi* is the semantic element in the Chinese character 龄 *ling* ‘age’.



Figure 6: word cloud for signs of aging in Chinese



Figure 7: word cloud for signs of aging in French

The mentioned physical changes also encompass difficulty in mobility, decreased physical strength, fatigue, reduced sensory capacities (hearing and vision loss) and general health issues.

For most of the respondents in the two countries, aging might also be perceived from cognitive and emotional changes. It is linked to a perception of being out of sync with society or not fully understanding it. Some respondents consider irritability or a reduced sense of curiosity as an indicator of aging.

It is noteworthy that these descriptions are predominantly framed with negations or words indicating reduction: in French, *perte/perdre* ‘loss/lose’ (177 occurrences), *ne ... plus* ‘no longer’ (174 occurrences), *moins/moindre* ‘less/lesser’ (78 occurrences), *manquer* ‘to lack’ (38 occurrences), *diminution* ‘diminishment’ (35 occurrences), *degradation* ‘decrease’ (14 occurrences), *déclin* ‘decline’ (11 occurrences), etc., and in Chinese, 下降 *xiajiang* ‘decrease’, 变差 *biancha* ‘worsen’, 不再 *buzai* ‘no longer’, 变弱 *bianruo* ‘weaken’, 受限 *shouxian* ‘restricted’, etc. Thus, old age is perceived through the lens of deficits. This perspective has previously been highlighted by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Coming of Age*, where she contrasts the transition from adolescence to adulthood, where individuals gain capacity and rights, with aging, which results solely in loss (de Beauvoir, 2020).

There are a few French responses that deserve attention, such as “voter à droite, voire extreme droite” (voting to the right, even extreme right). In France, right-wing ideas are often associated with conservatism. This is also a way of perceiving old age as resistance to sharing and novelty.

Thus, both Chinese and French respondents converge on recognizing physical, cognitive and emotional changes as signs of aging. However, cultural and language-specific nuances exist, reflected by the specific terms and concepts used to describe these signs. Notably, the perception of old age as a period of decline and deficit is prevalent in both cultures, with a focus on what is lost or reduced than gained.

## VII. Gender

Numerous studies have previously explored the phenomenon of gender-based disparities in perceptions of aging and old age. Surveys conducted among Canadian students have consistently revealed that female subjects tend to receive more negative evaluations in comparison to their male counterparts in the context of aging (Lagacé, 2015; Teuscher & Teuscher, 2007). Whereas Chetna Narayan's research has indicated that undergraduate students held a more favorable attitude toward elderly individuals, with a more positive evaluation of older women as opposed to older men (Narayan, 2008). However, this likely reflects gender-related stereotypes, as demonstrated by the work of S. S. Canetto and her colleagues. Their inquiry into the perceptions of young adults and their elderly relatives found that gender-biased aging stereotypes were more pronounced than those related to age per se, with older women receiving higher ratings for education and older men for intellectual competence and autonomy (Canetto et al., 1995). This observation aligns with the findings from our previous survey among young urban Chinese adults, where women received more favorable comments, primarily concerning personality and a willingness to make sacrifices (Zhang et al., 2023).

In this current study, when asked, "Do you view men and women in the same way regarding old age and aging?" an overwhelming majority (80%) of Chinese respondents refrained from offering a definitive stance, while 43.2% of French respondents abstained from expressing a viewpoint (Fig. 8). Among French respondents, 36% asserted an egalitarian perspective, compared to 20.8% who made distinctions. In contrast, among Chinese respondents, those answering negatively (11.8%) slightly outnumbered those answering affirmatively (9.2%). This notable contrast between the two cultural groups might likely be attributed to the value placed on gender equality in French society, as underscored by several responses like "I do, but others don't." The high percentage of individuals choosing to remain neutral may, in part, reflect an inherent tension between providing an honest response and adhering to societal correctness.

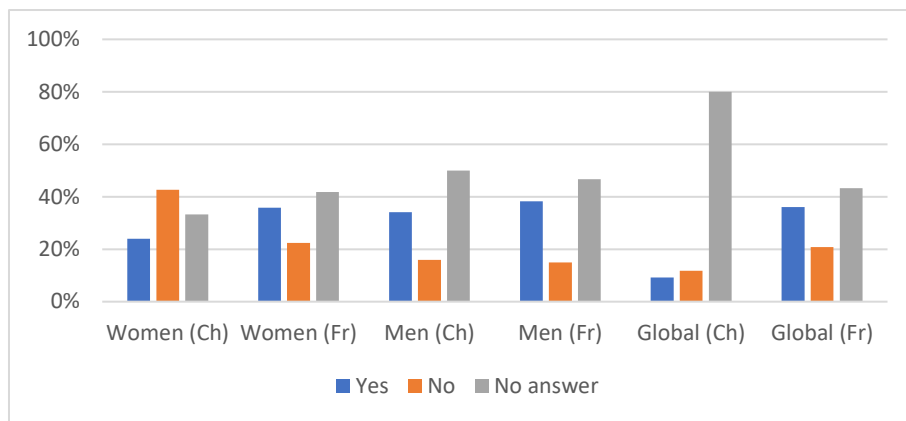


Figure 6: Do you view men and women in the same way regarding old age and aging?

A deeper examination within each gender group reveals a comparable distribution of opinions among men in both countries: a greater proportion espouses an egalitarian viewpoint than those who endorse gender differentiation. Conversely, there is a higher prevalence of women who make distinctions between the two genders concerning aging. This trend is particularly pronounced among Chinese women, surpassing the prevalence of the other two response categories.

However, the statistics alone do not elucidate which gender is more favorably regarded. Subsequent questions invite respondents to provide their perspectives. Among French respondents, a significant proportion believe that women age better, while a nearly equivalent number of respondents hold the opposite view. Yet, in all responses referencing “society” (25 occurrences), women tend to be at a disadvantage, facing harsher judgements and receiving less appreciation, among other disparities. According to Chinese respondents, aging devalues women to a greater extent, primarily due to physical appearance changes, while it enhances men, making them appear more mature.

This trend is further underscored by the descriptive language respondents employ to characterize elderly men and women. In Chinese, terms related to physical appearance are more frequently associated with women (e.g., 白发 *baifa* ‘while hair’, 皱纹 *zhouwen* ‘wrinkle’, 容颜 *rongyan* ‘appearance’, 牙齿 *yachi* ‘teeth’, 人老珠黄 *renlao zhuhuang* ‘getting old like a worn-out pearl becoming yellow’, 年老色衰 *nianlao seshuai* ‘old and decrepit’, 老来俏 *lao lai qiao* ‘mutton dressed as lamb’) than with men (e.g., 白发 *baifa* ‘while hair’, 老态龙钟 *laotai longzhong* ‘decrepit and senile’, 皱纹 *zhouwen* ‘wrinkle’, 秃 *tu* ‘bald’). Elderly women are described as 和蔼 *he'ai* ‘amiable’, 慈祥 *cixiang* ‘kind’, 温和 *wenhe* ‘gentle’, 宽容 *kuanrong*



‘tolerant’, 亲切 *qinqie* ‘gracious’, 贤惠 *xianhui* ‘virtuous’, whereas elderly men are characterized as 严厉 *yanli* ‘strict’, 倔强 *juejiang* ‘stubborn’, 古怪 *guguai* ‘weird’, 古板 *buban* ‘old-fashioned’, 木讷 *mune* ‘dull’, 沉默 *chenmo* ‘silent’, 消沉 *xiaochen* ‘depressed’, 邋里邋遢 *lali lata* ‘disheveled’. Terms related to intellectual capacity predominantly pertain to men: 博学多才 *boxue duocai* ‘erudite’, 睿智 *ruizhi* ‘wise’, 儒雅 *ruya* ‘elegant’. These descriptors align closely with the roles traditionally assigned to women and men within Confucian culture, which include expectations of obedience and sacrifice for women (Deng 2019), and a dominant role for men that may involve neglecting their appearance.

Similarly, among the French responses, words such as *ride* ‘wrinkles’ and *cheveux* ‘hair’ feature prominently for both men and women. The words *sage* ‘wise’ and *sagesse* ‘wisdom’ are applied equitably to both genders, though *experiences* ‘experiences’ is more frequently associated with men. Loneliness and fatigue are common attributes ascribed to both elderly men and women according to French respondents. Among the adjectives distinguishing the two genders, *fragile* ‘fragile’ and *active* ‘active’ are applied to women, while *grincheux* ‘grumpy’ is used for men. As a result, gender representations are less stereotypical in the collective consciousness of France. Elderly women enjoy a more positive image, particularly regarding participation in public life. The image of an active older woman aligns perfectly with the findings of a survey conducted by the Injep (National Institute for Youth and Popular Education). It revealed that in 2021 nearly one-third of volunteers in various associations are aged 65 and older, with 52% being women.<sup>6</sup>

## VIII. Conclusion

In his memoirs, published in 1954, General de Gaulle famously declared, “La vieillesse est un naufrage” (Old age is a shipwreck), adding, “For us, to make things even worse, Marshal Pétain’s old age would become synonymous with the shipwreck of France”. Simone de Beauvoir later attributed this expression to Chateaubriand, even though he never actually used it (de Beauvoir, 2020). This metaphor appears to encapsulate the prevailing representation of old age in France. In contrast, common expressions in China often extol old age through images of old horses recognizing their path (老马识途 *laoma shitu*) or old horses, though resting in the stable, still longing to run thousands of miles (老骥伏枥，志在千里 *laoji fuli, zhi zai qianli*). However, others expressions also acknowledge the physical decline and loss of agility (老迈龙

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<sup>6</sup> [https://injep.fr/tableau\\_bord/les-chiffres-cles-de-la-vie-associative-2023-benevolat/](https://injep.fr/tableau_bord/les-chiffres-cles-de-la-vie-associative-2023-benevolat/) (09/06/2023).



钟 *laomai longzhong*). While language crystallize deep-seated perceptions, more nuances and dynamic analyses are necessary to avoid stereotypes and promote a genuinely inclusive society.

We have translated perceptions of old age into specific questions, allowing us to paint a vivid picture of elderly individuals. Through emblematic aspects such as places and activities, we have observed the roles China and France assign to their seniors. Overall, elderly Chinese individuals seem to be better integrated into society, with greater visibility and interaction with other age groups. In contrast, elderly French individuals tend to have more purchasing power, which they often use for leisure activities.

The issue of gender sensitivity is delicate. To encourage candid responses, we asked respondents to list words associated with elderly men and women. The responses appear to favor women, describing them as gentler and more graceful in both languages. However, existing studies and some responses from our survey have highlighted that women face greater societal pressure regarding old age. Is this an injunction, representing an ideal image of an elderly woman? Moreover, as previously noted, positive aspects often related to temperament rather than competence, suggestion that stereotypes about women do not evolve with age.

The overall convergence of responses does not obscure the cultural and individual diversity in perception of the final stage of life. Some associate it with freedom, while others perceive it as a period of loneliness. To deepen our analyses, conducting focus group interviews could be an interesting avenue to explore in the future.

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