

**“With a young spirit, we will be young forever”:**

**Exploring the links between tourism and ageing well in contemporary China**

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## **Abstract**

This research explores the entangled relationships between tourism, ageing and well-being in later life. We challenge the universal connotations of old age and “ageing well” and see their relationships with tourism as dynamic processes, in which older people are continuously producing different meanings and fulfilling personal quests over life courses. Using the contextualist and temporal lens, four scenarios of the evolving relationships between tourism and ageing well were identified from the lived experiences and travel histories of 48 Chinese senior travelers. The results demonstrate that how tourism affects ageing well are shaped by senior travellers’ early life and travel experiences, the personalised conceptions attached to tourism and well-being, which are indeed complex responses to their personal, social and cultural contexts. This research unveils vivid pictures of Chinese older adults’ leisure lives, and highlights the urgency to develop relevant tourism policies and marketing strategies to cater for their changing needs.

Keywords: senior tourists; ageing well; subjective well-being; contextualist; life course; contemporary China

## **1. Introduction**

There is a growing interest in examining the impacts of tourism on older people’s ageing and subjective well-being (Morgan et al., 2015; Ferrer et al., 2016; Nimrod & Rotem, 2012). Tourism scholars identified several significant themes and factors that contributed to people’s later-life well-being, including social participation, social inclusion, integration, self-acceptance, self-actualisation, self-enhancement, self-reflection, life-coherence, sense of purpose, creation of memories, reminiscence, extension of social worlds, and so on (Morgan et al., 2015; Sie et al., 2016; Marschall, 2014; Hung & Lu, 2016). These studies have given rise to several debates on ageing and well-being in later life. The first debate centers on the differences and advantages of using universalist and contextualist stance to understand well-being. Most studies that applied the “component approach” to identify and theorise constitutive components of well-being have contributed to the assessment and improvement of social progress towards national and individual well-being (Atkinson, 2013; Atkinson et al., 2016). This literature involves the universalist thinking that well-being can be measured by universal scales or measurements. The contextualist stance promotes the relational and situated account of well-being, assuming that one’s perceived valuable perspectives in life are dependent of the particularities of time and place (Norbakki & Schwanen, 2014). Indeed, the elderly is a heterogeneous group consisting of individuals with different life trajectories (Sedgley et al., 2011), whose perceptions of ageing and

subjective well-being may also be differing according to their personal experiences, social and cultural background (Stenner et al., 2011; Schwanen et al., 2012; Chan et al., 2020). In this sense, ageing can be understood as an embodied, emplaced and relational process, and what is “ageing well” will be rather personal and determined by people’s subjective experience, emotional encounters, individual or/and collective perceptions, meanings and values, which are shaped by one’s social and cultural background (Stenner et al., 2011; Holstein & Minkler, 2007; Hopkins & Pain, 2007). These “personalised accounts” of later-life experiences (Sedgley et al., 2011) may further shape the process of how tourism influences ageing.

The second debate concentrates on what timeframe we use to examine the impacts of tourism on well-being. The current tourism and ageing literature has largely relied on cross-sectional data, and even a few that used longitudinal data have tended to reduce time into a series of disconnected time points (for example, pre, during and after the trip), and collected (senior) tourists’ self-reported well-being level at these time points or within a particular time periods or intervals. This practice has placed (senior) tourists in their subjective “now”, assuming that smooth transitions occur between these time points. However, what we do and feel at present are embedded in our socio-historical past, as well as being projected into a socio-environmental future (Adam, 2008). What we can see regarding the links between tourism, ageing and well-being will probably depend on what type of temporal framework we adopt for observing. As Adam (2008) argued: “the implied past and future expand and contract as people move along their life course...whether we see cycles of repetition or change and linear succession is relative. It depends on our temporal framework of observation” (p.2). Seeing people’s lives as continuum and their conceptions of ageing well as relative and mobile may allow us to move beyond the staged chronologies and overcome the limitations of previous temporal frameworks with a much fluid view of time and meaning (Schwanen et al., 2012). As such, we aim to contribute to these global debates of ageing well by exploring the intertwined and irregular relationships between Chinese older people’s tourism practices, narratives of old age (*lao*), and “ageing well” (*laoyousuowei*, *laoyousuole*<sup>1</sup>) and such narratives interact with their personal past, present, and future over a much longer timeframe, their life course.

Situated in the context of contemporary China, this paper responds to the globally significant phenomenon of population ageing by challenging the universal connotations of old age and “ageing well” and its relationships with tourism. It is reported the population aged 65 or over in China reached 160.3 million in 2019, while this number is expected to rise to 365 million (26.1% of the Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese idiom “老有所为，老有所乐” indicates a general criteria of well-being in later life in the Chinese culture.

population) in 2050 (United Nations, 2020). Senior tourists in the age cohort of 61-70 were reported to become the major participants in tourism activities and nearly half of these tourists travelled overseas (Ctrip, 2016). This demonstrates an urgency to further investigate travel, health and well-being of the elderly in China (Gong et al., 2012). Thus, the present study sees ageing and its relationships with tourism and well-being as dynamic processes, in which people are continuously producing different meanings and fulfilling personal quests through interactions with time, place and mobility over their life courses (Holstein & Minkler, 2007; Li & Chan, 2020).

A qualitative research design was employed through life-history interviews of 48 Chinese senior tourists aged 60-80. By examining our participants' narratives on travel, ageing and well-being, we seek to extract salient meanings and perspectives of ageing and well-being associated with their significant life and travel experiences. Particular focus is placed on the temporal and contextual linkages between tourism and ageing by seeing through participants' life continuum and exploring how their prior experiences, important events, and feelings shape their current encounters and thinking (Bernardi et al., 2019). By doing so, we are able to embrace the complexity of time in the dynamic relationships between tourism, ageing and well-being in terms of their continuous and diverse interactions with individuals' social and cultural specificities (Norbakki & Schwanen, 2014).

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Towards the contextualist stance of ageing and well-being**

In their review, Nordbakke and Schwanen (2014) labelled two main stances of understanding well-being, namely the "universalist" and "contextualist" stances. Studies with a strong universalist stance see well-being as a singular and stable thing independent of time and place. This view assumes that a minimum of common conditions can be captured as valuable to all humans independent of the particularities of time and place. For example, Ryan and Deci's (2001) approach of subjective well-being tends to lean towards moderate-to-strong universalism, which has been widely used in many explicit measurement scales to assess well-being, such as Satisfaction of Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). The elements included in these well-being scales and frameworks are believed to be universal among different individuals (Atkinson et al., 2016). Another commonly used concept is eudaimonic well-being (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 2008), which firstly included six substantive dimensions of well-being, namely personal growth, autonomy, self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery and positive relationships with others. Nonetheless, these dimensions were also challenged by

other cross-cultural psychologists, who concerned that they may not be able to generalise to all of humanity (Nordbakke & Schwanen, 2014; Christopher, 1999).

In contrast to universalism, contextualism offers a different view to see well-being as rather a social process through which realities are enacted. Scholars who adopt this stance argue that well-being is not one or several variables that represent particular parts of one's experience, as individuals' heterogeneity as well as their interactions with time and place should be appreciated. For example, instead of seeing older people as a homogenous group with similar perceptions on what good life is, we shall see them as a diverse group consisting of heterogeneous individuals with different well-being conceptions, whose subjective experiences are dependent on personal, social and cultural specificities (Schwanen et al., 2012; Stenner et al., 2011). More researchers argued that idealised standards of healthy ageing or active ageing might lead to narrow and unrealistic expectations of what later life should be like (Holstein & Minkler, 2007), and people who do not live up to these standards but actually achieve better ageing process in their own paces might be devalued (Atkinson, 2013; Self et al., 2012). Thus, following this view, ageing can be understood as social and economic processes consisting of the elderly's lived experiences (Hopkins & Pain, 2007; Ziegler & Schwanen, 2011); and how the elderly relate to old age and well-being is indeed embodied, emplaced and relational, depending on person-specific objective characteristics (e.g. physical condition, skill, intelligence, family background, education, etc.) and/or subjective characteristics (e.g. attitudes, preferences, needs, etc.). All of these features are deeply rooted in the social and cultural environment he/she inhabits (e.g. policies, social norms, practices, gender roles, societal hierarchies, power relations, culture, etc.).

Nonetheless, contextuality concerns more than social and cultural specificities (Schwanen & Páez 2010). The temporal variability of the notions of ageing and well-being may also influence the impacts of travel on older people's lives. As Rapley (2003) argues, for a given person, the meaning of well-being changes from one point in time to another, as the relative importance of various aspects of a good life changes over people's life course. With time passes by, how people relate themselves to the notions of old age and "ageing well" are likely to change with the transformations undergoing in their personal lives (Stenner et al, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2001). To take into consideration the temporal perspective of tourism and ageing well linkage, perhaps Barbara Adam's work on timescapes could further illuminate our understanding. In a series of writings, her reading of time foregrounds the interdependency of an individual's past experiences, his/her current life circumstances and future life path, suggesting an urgent need to consider temporal variability in social science research and explore the deep roots of people's behavior hidden in their past experiences and future aspirations (Adam, 2008; 2013a; 2013b). Indeed, everything we do in our lives is not only embedded in a socio-historical

past, but also projects into a socio-environmental future. As such, encompassing the complexity of time in studies of tourism and ageing well can enable us to explore the rationale behind the meanings attached to tourism, ageing and well-being, help us interpret how the tourism-ageing well linkage is derived from older people's prior experiences, as the "shadows of the past" (Bernardi et al., 2019), and the futurescape – their hopes, plans and fears.

## **2.2 Tourism, ageing and well-being**

A rapidly evolving literature began to explore the links between tourism, ageing and well-being by examining senior tourists' special needs, visiting experiences, and emotional encounters (Sedgley et al., 2011; Sie et al., 2016; Mitas et al., 2012). This literature has investigated the impacts of tourism in terms of promoting social engagement (e.g. social interactions, integration, inclusion, social networks and capital, filial piety, etc.), creating and recalling memories (e.g. reminiscence, nostalgia, etc.), renewing life meanings and purposes (sense of purposes, values of life, self-acceptance, sense of contribution, self-actualisation, life-coherence, self-enhancement, self-reflection, etc.), inspiring novelty (refreshment, learning, personal growth, cultural difference, education, etc.), and enhancing their health and amusement (fun, leisure, escape, relaxation, recovery, therapeutic, interest, humor, etc.) (e.g. Marschall, 2014; Sie et al., 2016; Morgan et al., 2015; Diekmann & McCabe, 2011). Tourism scholarship tends to adopt the universalist stance of well-being, assuming that well-being consists of explicit dimensions and components, which can be generalised across different social and cultural contexts (Huang & Tsai, 2003; Woo et al., 2016). Following this stance, senior tourists' level of subjective well-being was overly examined by measurements derived from healthy ageing or active ageing scales, with very few exceptions touched on particulars of time and place. For instance, Wang and colleagues (2018) attended to the significant influence of social and cultural context of the ageing Chinese society and identified several unique perspectives which were particularly important for Chinese senior tourists who travelled with their adult children, including expression of filial piety, family togetherness and relationship, under strong influence of Confucian values and continuity of family roles. Morgan et al.'s (2015) investigated the benefits of social tourism to economically disadvantaged older adults in UK, and paid special attention to individualised circumstances in examining the effects of tourism. Their study revealed that the benefits derived from social tourism trips were peculiar to these older adults' own circumstances, depending on their life trajectories, health, psychological and social-economic circumstances, social and family situations, etc. These studies are

among the limited amount of research that considered personal background and cultural contexts in exploring how later-life tourism may influence older adults' lives.

More importantly, studies that incorporate a longer timeframe in one's life to examine the dynamic effects of tourism on ageing or well-being are largely absent from the tourism literature. Indeed, how tourism affects ageing and well-being is contingent (Hopkins & Pains, 2007), as individuals are very likely to change their perceptions of "what is old" and "what constitutes ageing well" and attach different meanings to their trips over time. In this sense, a life-course perspective<sup>2</sup> privileges heterogeneity, fluidity, and continuity of one's life, perceptions, and behaviour (Bernardi et al., 2019; Sedgley et al., 2011). Rather than assuming older people's travel behaviour and outcomes as relatively stable over time, life-course perspective attends to individuals' life-course transitions, changes in travel behaviour or/and outcomes of travel over a longer timeframe. A notable example is Huber's (2019) study of 23 senior tourists' biographies, which examined the significance of "role transitions", "the loss of partners", "stressful situations and illness", "travel saturation" and "perception of age" on the dynamic relationship between tourism and well-being. In a similar manner, Li and Chan (2020) investigated Chinese diaspora tourists' life histories and unveiled the dynamic role of diaspora tourism in shaping migrants' subjective well-being over life-course. Although these studies have foregrounded the complexities of time in people's lives and travel, they were based on presumed life course transitions (e.g. role transition, loss of partners, illness) rather than let the participants highlight personally important transitions or events in life. Therefore, incorporating a temporal view will enable us to attend to the process of individual changes in how ageing and well-being are understood and imagined over time, through examining interlocking trajectories or pathways of older people across their life course (Schwanen et al., 2012; Wiles et al., 2012).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 The research design**

This study adopts interpretivism as its theoretical stance which portrays the world as comprising of socially constructed, complex and ever changing reality and attends to the nuance and variability of the studied phenomenon (Willis, Jost, & Nilakanta, 2007). Interpretive paradigm acknowledges the researchers' values and beliefs while looking for in-depth meanings and complex relationships from

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<sup>2</sup> We mainly adopt Elder and colleagues' thinking on life-course perspective here, which sees life course as human development (Elder, 1998; Elder & Johnson, 2003) and appropriates substantial content from the life-span developmental perspective. We also referred to Giele & Elder's (1998) and Bengtson et al. 's (2005) principles of life-course perspective.

the subjective experiences of individuals through a process of deep attentiveness and empathetic understanding (Williams, 2000; Thomas, 2003). Based upon this theoretical stance, an explorative research design was adopted using qualitative inquiry to uncover the different ways through which tourism shaped the meanings of life and ageing well over time. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit senior participants aged 60 or above with varied personal and geographical background. 48 Chinese older adults (aged 60-80; 28 female 20 male) participated in this study, who have had tourism experience domestically or abroad, and currently reside in nine provinces of China (see Appendix 1). Biography interviews lasting around two hours were conducted: 10 were face-to-face interviews; 38 were conducted through Chinese social media Wechat after the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. All interviews were recorded and transcribed into English. The interview questions were semi-structured, open-ended with the main purpose of opening up topics for participants' important life events, memorable tourism experiences across time, perceived impacts of travel, and feelings and reflections on meanings of well-being and ageing. Questions were tested before the main study with four Chinese senior tourists (aged 61-73), and revised into the final interview guide.

Considering that some Chinese individuals might consider the topics of being old, ill or death as sensitive and encounter inarticulateness which might restrict their expressions (Verseghy, Atack, & Maher, 2020), we encouraged our participants to use pictures, videos and blogs to facilitate their thoughts and articulations, rather than push them to speak up private feelings regarding these topics. In doing so, 12 of our participants voluntarily shared their digital writings and photos in travel blogs or diaries in social media Meipian<sup>3</sup> or QQ Space (examples in Figure 1) during the interview. These writings served as rich and naturalistic data depicting the lived experiences and post-tourism reflections of these participants, illustrating their private feelings, emotions, affects, and deep reflections on personal relationships, intimacy, attitudes of life and ageing. The data was collected in an unobtrusive manner, and supplemented our inquiry by providing valuable and complementary material regarding the participants' undemonstrative feelings and thoughts (Murthy, 2008; Okun & Nimrod, 2020). Overall, this qualitative inquiry seeks to privilege the senior tourists' voices by raising consciousness to their personally significant experiences and encouraging them to reflect upon possible changes occurred over life courses. Significant time periods, life events and changes in their lives can be observed and complexities of links between tourism, ageing and well-being can be highlighted (Sedgley et al., 2011).

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<sup>3</sup> Meipian (美篇), is a popular website among Chinese middle-aged and older adults to share travel experiences in the forms of photos, videos and writings.





Figure 1. Digital writing examples of three participants (Feng, Tina, and Daniel)

### 3.2 Positionality and power dynamics in researching ageing well

The impacts of positionality and power dynamics have received insufficient attention in current tourism and ageing research. As Tarrant (2014) argues, people’s multifaceted identities and different power relations during investigations may influence the collection, evaluation and interpretation of data. It will be essential to acknowledge that the participants are our true collaborators and co-constructors of knowledge who will shape the research process together rather than just the objects of study. Thus, the authors carefully reflected on their positionality and undertook several measures to foster awareness of the researcher-participant power dynamics, in order to increase the level of their participation and mitigate the impacts of power imbalance throughout the research process (Herod, 1999).

First, during the initial phase of the research, an allyship was formed with a member from the senior community in Shenzhen who has been actively engaging in community activities since moving to the city. Meetings were arranged to discuss our research aims and plans in data collection, which tended to foster sensitivity about Chinese older adults’ articulation styles, concerns, taboos (Merriam et al., 2001). We adopted a more flexible and caring manner in designing interview guide, with the aim of empowering our participants in terms of expressing their personal views and feelings more freely and comfortably during unpacking personal processes of meaning negotiations.

Second, during the phase of data collection, we challenged the traditional power relations between the researcher and participant by considering the research as rather a dialogue and learning activity with our participants, which heavily relies on their insights into the fine-grained nuances of meaning of ageing, well-being and tourism (Sedgley et al., 2011). Thus, when we transcribed the narratives of each case, the participants' accounts were interpreted according to their perceived significance of events and experiences rather than in the chronological order.

Third, a review and verification phase via on-line sessions was staged to present the analysis results to the interviewees who were willing to review the patterns and themes generated and interpreted by the researchers. Interviewees' concerns were addressed by revisiting the data, revising and finalising the findings with four main patterns of changing narratives of tourism and well-being in later life.

### **3.3 Iterative data collection and analysis**

A large volume of data was generated from biography interviews and participants' digital writings. Thus, data analysis was conducted with the main purpose of identifying significant patterns behind each case and link these patterns across cases. In the initial phase of analysis, we created an archive for each case, consisting of their interview transcript and additional material (such as their writings, photos or videos). Then a visual biography was constructed with highlights from important life events, travel experiences and personal definitions of ageing and well-being, as well as perceived impacts of these experiences. In the second phase, different and preliminary agglomerations were identified, portraying specific relationships between tourism, personal perceptions about ageing, well-being and life. Special attention was also given to particular changes articulated by each case in terms of their travel, personal attitudes, and how tourism affects their lives differently. During this phase, initial patterns were generated by the leading author, with detailed descriptions of significant themes emerged from the analysis. The final phase was about modification and finalisation of patterns. The authors worked together, revisited all cases and their patterns, fully discussed the logic, coherence and accurateness of the classifications. Discrepancies of opinions between authors were justified, debated and reduced until agreement was achieved on the final patterns, themes and significant events presented in the result section.

Importantly, the researchers concurrently collected and analysed data through an iterative process until data saturation was reached. This process enables the researchers to involve significant concepts and issues emerged from earlier cases and explores these issues further in subsequent data collection and analysis. Saturation was considered when no additional meanings and narratives in terms of ageing,

well-being and dynamic impacts of tourism were yielded from both biography interview and digital writings (Sandelowski, 1995). In so doing, we were able to better explore the researched subject to ensure the emerging patterns are valid and robust (Hennink et al., 2017).

#### **4. Research findings**

This section presents four scenarios of participants' narratives identified from their articulations on later-life travel, ageing and well-being (Table 1), exhibiting how they were carrying different meanings of "ageing well", and the way through which they associated these meanings with their travel experiences. Importantly, the significant and relevant themes were identified from the participants' own narratives of early life experiences, prior travel and their evolved perceptions of ageing and well-being in later life. Selected quotes, writings and illustrations were provided with the discussions, showing that the impacts of travel on their life are much more complex than we assumed.

Insert Table 1 about here

##### **4.1 Journey of family-role transitions and life-meaning renewal**

A number of participants exhibited limited experiences of traveling in early years of their lives. They were restrained to travel due to work, family duties, financial difficulties, policy limitations, etc. Many only started to travel more frequently after their work or family situation changed recently. A few claimed that they travelled to compensate for their hard work and hardship during earlier life.

Feng (70, female) barely travelled for leisure purposes before retirement and her past travel were limited to taking her students to fieldwork. After retirement, she and her husband moved in to live with her daughter with a main role of supporting her daughter's family by looking after her granddaughter. Two years ago, her role changed and she felt lost when moving out of her daughter's home:

*My grandchild is older and I don't need to live with them [my daughter's family] anymore. I have more time and space for myself. In our Chinese culture, women should always focus on their family and supporting their children's family. But when we turn to fifty or older, our children have all grown up and they have their own family. We retire and suddenly find that we are not the 'centre' of the family any longer. Our children may not need us as much as they did before... I feel a little lost.*

Then she started to seek new meanings of life. Two things become more important to her life now, travelling and photography, which helped her cope with life changes. She explained how she gained her new life purposes during planning and travelling:

*I have a list of places I want to go before I turn 80: the Four Buddhist Sacred Land, the Five Chinese Garden Parks, the Seven Chinese Ancient Towns, the Three Mountains and Five Hills, the Four Ancient Civilisations. I strictly follow my plan. For instance, I spent two months travelling to all Chinese Ancient Towns last year and composed a travel book with selected photographs I took. There is only one Ancient country, Greece, that I have not been to and I plan to visit next year. My biggest ambition is to accomplish this list before I am too old to travel... But you cannot just travel and forget. You have to make preparation before you go and write down your feelings afterwards. You have a general ideal of the place you visit, and after travelling, when you organise your photographs, I will also search more information and add to the description of my photos, such as what famous people had been living there before, which dynasty it was, what these famous people wrote about the place, etc. Doing this makes me feel less lonely. We can pick up the feeling that life is happy and fulfilling again.*

Feng's case represents similar situation shared by many participants. Her narratives indicate a significant transition of family roles in contemporary Chinese families, where older adults have to "retire" from their previous role of caring for the whole family due to unforeseeable changes in family structure and their children's changing needs. Under such transition, Feng and her peers are exposed to a range of psychological and emotional challenges in their later life. To these individuals, tourism becomes their path for gradually realising their desire to identify new goals in later life, and tailor their needs, plans and activities around these goals. In this sense, travelling becomes one of the paths to facilitate their later life to be more fulfilling and happy.

Moreover, her narratives also reveal a typical interpretation of ageing and well-being in later life among Chinese older adults, which combines both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives. On the one hand, their understanding of ageing well is mainly about finding a new life goal, and achieving self-actualisation through goal attainment; while on the other, their goal is to collect hedonic experiences. They associate their new life goals with an urgency to travel and accomplish plans step by step. How she saw old and well-being is critical in this process, as she determined a particular age of "too old to travel" when she believed she should not travel again by then and the need becomes travel "as much as possible" before it is too late.

## 4.2 Journey towards collective experience of affective intimacy, vitality and charismatic group image

This scenario represents the senior tourists who have different extents of travel experience in their earlier life and have been travelling within China or abroad over their life course. To these individuals, their definitions of ageing and well-being have transferred gradually to a collective sense along with their ageing process, in which collectivism, collective experience of hedonia, affective intimacy and harmony with their significant others became essential for increasing their subjective well-being. Several participants expressed that, through later-life travel, they have changed the original ways of communicating feelings and strengthening affective bonds with their significant others, e.g. their *laoban*<sup>4</sup>, *jiemei/guimi*<sup>5</sup>. Rather than extending social networks, their journey was more about improving the quality of their relationships. By relating what they encountered in “the outside world” to the inner layer of their feelings and affect, they were able to open up to more changes in the meanings of different types of relationships to their life. For instance, Yu (63, female) travelled frequently after joining a senior model team based in Shenzhen. Her group organised group tours and senior model activities for its members every year. She compared her early travel experience with a recent trip with her group:

*In the 1990s, I took my son to visit a number of prestigious American universities. At that time, the primary thing was to guide my son to find his ambition. Everything was about helping him obtain a great vision and be enlightening by our visitation, which will be beneficial for his life... My trips nowadays are different... During one of our cruise tours, we presented a qipao<sup>6</sup> show to other tourists in the cruise. We held a seminar to discuss Chinese understanding of beauty, women, and body image afterwards. We feel we can affect the others by presenting the Chinese spirit of beauty and showing them that even though we are over 60 years old and some of us are already grandmas, we can still live a young and happy life... People should not be afraid of growing old. We shall have a young spirit, a younger state of mind, so that we can maintain our vitality and women's charisma; we can be young forever.*

In Yu's articulations, “what is old” depends on how people think and behave, which cannot be simply determined by age any more. The definition of ageing well is also considered differently. Her belief is that a young spirit and younger state of mind are more critical for maintaining vitality and charisma in

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<sup>4</sup> Laoban is a Chinese term meaning spouses or partners in later life, which has been frequently mentioned by our participants during interviews.

<sup>5</sup> Jiemei/guimi becomes a very popular term in the contemporary Chinese culture, meaning women's best friends.

<sup>6</sup> Qipao, also called Chipau or Cheongsam, is a traditional costume for Chinese women.

later life, which should become a more important criterion of ageing well among older adults in China. Travelling with her *jiemei* has affirmed the effectiveness of such belief, which facilitated them to present a younger age identity and a charismatic collective image representing the Chinese older women to the outside world.

In the interview, Tina (66 years old, female) further emphasised the importance of affective intimacy and harmony in quality relationships. She recalled how an incident happened during their trip to Greece affected her relationships with “*laoban*”:

*When we walked along the Red Beach, I accidentally slipped and nearly fell off the cliff. It happened so fast and my husband rushed to me like an arrow and hold me immediately. He rushed down so quickly that he lost his balance and fell down by my side. It was very scary. If we fell one inch further, we would both fell off the cliff. My husband said to me: ‘if something happened to you, I don’t want to live either.’ Indeed, it is not the first time he says this to me... In the past, you felt shameful for exposing your emotions too directly. You should always be implicit and reserved to express your love. I have been married to husband for forty years. There are happiness and bitterness, but we never expressed our affection. He never says ‘I love you’.*

In Tina’s travel blog, she reflected upon this experience and wrote about how later-life travel affected their life and thinking. The Chinese ideology, culture and values were thought to have affected her generation in terms of communicating feelings and love. Experiences during travelling have facilitated subtle changes in expressing and communicating affect and feelings, which was seen as a particularly important element of collective well-being in Tina’s life. She wrote:

*Our generation is largely affected by the Chinese ideology and values formed across 5000 years. What we have experienced since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 supported a more veiled manner of bonding and expressing affection, especially between ‘*laoban*’. Our trips and these incidents make us change, and we realise this and begin to recognise the importance of communicating feelings and affection with each other. After the incident [When he saved me on that cliff], I think a lot. There is a saying in Chinese: ‘*shaonianfuqi, laolaiban*<sup>7</sup>. How we maintain our emotional bonding with our *laoban* is indeed the most important component in our later life.*

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<sup>7</sup> “*shaonianfuqi, laolaiban*” (少年夫妻老来伴) is a Chinese saying, meaning the partner you grow old with is the most important and real life partner for your whole life.

### 4.3 Therapeutic sojourning for mental and physical well-being

A number of participants emphasised the therapeutic role of their later-life travel and how their sojourning changed their views on health and regimen over time. These individuals have travelled for business or leisure before and are holding clear age identity. They had clear understanding that they were getting older, and what valued the most in their current life would be their health and a healthy life style. Their travel has helped them obtained better physical and mental well-being by increasing their physical activity and transforming their original immobile life style. An old couple Lucy and Wang, shared with us in separate interviews, that they had gradually developed a sojourning life style over 15 years, spending two to three months currently travelling around and residing in small villages in different provinces of China. Lucy (70, female) said:

*I started to travel around after my retirement in 2006. At the beginning, I spent 3 months living in a small town near Haikou. After my husband retired, we began to travel from the Northeast to the southern or western part of China every year... The strangest thing is my rheumatic pain in my feet was alleviated...perhaps because we were inspired by Southern people's social practices of regimen. Their diet is very light, and they like to cook soup with Chinese medicine, like dryer ginger and pepper... these ingredients are very popular but expensive. They either grind them to powder or use them to do a hot foot bath... We were neither familiar with these traditional practices of regimen, nor pay attention to our health. But with more travelling, I have gained much awareness and absorbed a lot of knowledge regarding health and regimen. We are more willing to invest for our health now because we know that the first important thing in our life is health.*

Wang (71, male) elaborated how his sojourning experiences changed his thinking and helped him be less anxious:

*I took things too seriously and cared too much about other people's words. You are easily getting too anxious about things if you have a narrow sight or worry too much... When you go out to see the world, you meet different types of people with different views and mindsets, some of which are ahead of time. You start to realise that your thinking is so old fashioned and behind the time. This makes me more open-minded and know when I should relax and put less weight into unimportant things... We are older now, and our thoughts and mind need more time to rest and settle.*

Both Lucy and Wang had some travel experience before retirement, while their later-life travel style is so different and has significantly affected their life and thinking. They both realised that they became older now and started to renegotiate the meanings of ageing and well-being in 15 years of travelling and sojourning. During this process, their travel becomes therapeutic for settling their mind and determining what aspects of well-being value more and what things deserve more time in their lives.

#### **4.4 Journey of arduousness towards spiritual well-being and eudaimonia**

This group of tourists displayed a unique scenario of paying effort to obtaining arduous experiences during their travel. They described to us the hardship they experienced in travel and how successfully coping with such arduousness helped them to achieve eudaimonic and spiritual well-being. Oliver (68, male) was a voluntary guide and photographer based in Guangdong. He has visited Ālǐ Dìqū (in Tibet) for 20 times since 1994 and brought a thousand people to Tibet in the past 26 years. He was very proud of sharing his experiences of “suffering” in conducting repetitive travel to Tibet:

*Every time [when] I travel to Tibet, I have to endure acute mountain sickness (AMS). I suffer from fever, bleeding nose, and headache. They [travel companion] told me ‘you could die of pneumonia if you don’t take it seriously’. I said to them ‘it will be my honor to die in Tibet.’ Tibet has dreadful natural environment, but we cannot lose our bravery and toughness to that. We should not stop our journey... Even though I am old, I still prefer to bring people to such depopulated zones to enjoy the beautiful views and experience the tough natural environment there.*

Oliver further narrated how his journey posed significant impacts on his own life meanings:

*When you travel to Tibet, you will be greatly affected by the local Tibetan’s pure and strong spirit. You will be impressed by how they live, study and work in 5000-metre altitude environment. When you see the people and views there, your impetuous heart and mind become more peaceful. You see through the vanity of this world. I think this may be the reason why I keep going back. I cannot get myself out of its beautiful memories and views.*

Oliver also connected his journey to his early life experiences during the Cultural Revolution, as well as his thinking about ageing well:

*I was born and raised in a military family. My parents’ family education was military style, which was very strict. They had a very strong faith in CCP [Chinese Communist Party] that*



*they must strictly follow its leadership. But the Cultural Revolution was a great shock to them. I was sent to the countryside (shangshanxiang<sup>8</sup>) to work. Life had never been so harsh...I have tasted all the bitterness in life during then; the difficult time we encountered today can't surpass the suffering [in the past]... Maybe I am too old to feel any pains. My journey makes me feel serene, and we shall not be preoccupied by personal gains or losses any more.*

Oliver's narratives reveal that inner-peace and pure spirit are what he was seeking in his travel practices. He accepted the fact of ageing, and ascribed the effects of his travel on well-being to the way how he saw pains and suffering which were actually fostered over his early life experiences.

## **5. Discussions and conclusion**

This study has sought to explore the heterogeneous narratives on how older people relate tourism to their life, ageing and well-being. Four types of scenarios identified from 48 participants' articulations uncover the rich and complex linkages between tourism, ageing and well-being, exhibiting vivid images of Chinese older adults' leisure lives. Adopting the contextualist and temporal lens to explore these linkages, we see ageing and its interactions with tourism and well-being as entwined and dynamic processes, in which people are continuously producing relational assemblages through interactions with time, place and mobility (Hopkins & Pains, 2007; Schwanen et al., 2012; Atkinson, 2013). We draw this paper to a conclusion by discussing conceptual and practical implications, and some promising avenues for future tourism and ageing research.

### **5.1 Reconceptualising the linkages between tourism and ageing well**

Our findings add to the existing body of tourism and ageing literature by reconceptualising the linkages between tourism and ageing well as relational, embodied and dynamic, which are highly dependent on older adults' personal past, life trajectory, views, values, needs, choices, life paces, and individual differences in meanings attached to tourism, ageing and well-being. We problematised the universal meanings of ageing well that were applied in most tourism studies and contexts, and destabilised the process of how older adults in China (re)produce intricate associations between travel and ageing well over their life course. It is further revealed that, especially when people grow older and have richer life

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<sup>8</sup> A movement known as "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside" (上山下乡) in the late 1960s, which sent urban youth to mountainous areas or farming villages to learn from workers and farmers there. In total, 17 million youth were sent to rural areas as a result of the movement.

experience, they tend to assign different levels of importance to different domains/perspectives of well-being, and in some cases, the importance of some aspects can overrule other aspects through continuous negotiations of life meanings and purposes (Holstein & Minkler, 2007; Stenner et al., 2011; Wiles et al., 2012). This is well exhibited through our participants' illustrations of changing impacts of tourism over their life courses, which are profoundly associated with their personalised ways of age identity construction and reconceptualisation of "what is old", "what is young", "how should older people think and behave", and "what should be most included in people's later life". To some individuals, travel to have collective experiences are more important than other aspects of ageing well. Travel activities that help them foster a young spirit, build a charismatic group image, and gain harmony and affective intimacy towards a higher level of collective well-being become an integral part of their energetic and happy later life. Whilst some others consider eudaimonia as the main personal path towards well-being, either through obtaining spiritual peacefulness, environment mastery, or life-long learning to renew their life meanings and goals during their travel. As such, we cannot make simple generalisations on how tourism affects well-being in later life without a clear understanding of the individual's own perceptions of what is old, what comprises ageing well, and what matters the most in their later life (Norbakki & Schwanen, 2014; Li & Chan, 2020).

More importantly, our findings further suggest that the linkages between tourism and well-being in later life are also shaped by how Chinese older adults relate their travel to the concepts of "*lao*" (old), "*ku*" (suffering) and "*le*" (happiness and well-being), which are deeply grounded in the broad social and cultural context, as well as how their individuality confronts collective values or/and social norms under such social and cultural complexity. This finding advances several theoretical frameworks (e.g. Norbakki and Schwanen's framework on mobility and well-being) in contextualism, ageing and well-being by providing a decolonised context and case study. In most cases, the social and cultural changes a person has been experiencing over his/her life course in terms of social policies, social norms, practices, gender roles, societal hierarchies, power relations, etc. are greatly affecting his/her individuality with respect to values and attitudes towards life meanings and well-being, and consequently influence the effect of tourism on their lives. For example, our study observed a group of people who had experienced adversity in earlier life during China's different social movements between the 1960s and 1970s. These individuals may either continue to value the role of "*ku*" in their lives, seeing their capability of coping with hardship as sources of well-being as coherence from their earlier life experiences; or pursue hedonia as a major life purpose to reward their earlier sacrifice for family and work, taking their capability of collecting as much hedonic experience as possible to form a main part of well-being in later life. No matter which scenario they are living with, the context of

their earlier and present life cannot be overlooked, as these experiences greatly affect the rationale of their travelling and how they derive meanings and sense of well-being from tourism in later life. As such, this work calls for more sensitivity for not making generalisations from western values and ideal standards to senior tourists of other ethnic groups and cultures (Nordbakke & Schwanen, 2014; Sedgley et al., 2011).

Further, being inspired by studies used life-course perspective, we go further to let older adults speak up and highlight important life transitions or life events important to them rather than based on pre-assumed life-course transitions (e.g. role transition, loss of partners, illness). The findings suggest that the impacts of tourism on older adults' lives and well-being are rather continuous depending on how the elderly interacts with their time and place, and individuality confronts the changes of their social and cultural environment. Some people reported to experience significant transitions in societal or family roles in later life. They chose work or/and caring duties over their own needs in early life stages, and now they had to/want to change their original family roles, lifestyles or some of traditional family-centered values due to their ageing process. Travelling under the new roles becomes extremely important for these individuals (Hsu, 2007; Hung et al., 2010). Their changes also echo with the transitions undergoing in the contemporary Chinese society in terms of social structure, cultural values regarding kinship, individualism and collectivism, which we can observe more clearly from individuals' life courses.

## **5.2 Practical implications**

This research advances our understanding about the rationale of senior tourists' evolving needs, quests and cravings, their fluid and relational perceptions towards travel, ageing, and well-being. Results presented in this article convey a dynamic view to policy-makers, tourism practitioners and scholars for analysing older adults' complex travel behaviours, preferences, attitudes, with the aim of developing more age-friendly products, services and marketing strategies to better cater for their needs. Additionally, this work calls for more research on the development of ageing-friendly destinations (Page et al., 2015), as age-sensitive environments and management measures will be prominent in the coming decades in various tourism sub-sectors for enhancing senior tourists' visiting experiences and well-being.

Moreover, the results also challenge the previous assumptions on travel of senior tourists, revealing that increasing number of Chinese older adults are actually embracing the changes brought by internet and technologies in their lives and unprecedentedly taking social media as an important way to record

and reflect on their travel experiences and memories. Many demonstrated the preference to travel with their interest groups to pursue a better social and collective well-being, in spite of the rising importance of family togetherness and tours in their lives (Wang et al., 2018). More importantly, the impacts of COVID-19 on senior tourists' travel could be long-term and significant. Their travel intention, planning and behaviour, and how they would cope with the concerns and fears raised by the pandemic deserve further investigations (Zheng et al., 2021). All of these issues and changing interpretations about travel and ageing open up new avenues for future critical analysis of older people's travel experiences and well-being.

Further, this research shows more refined picture of how older adults' lives are like in contemporary China, and what outreach leisure activities the local community and travel organisations could develop in the future to help them achieve a better sense of well-being. The implications of this project deems to be long-term, whilst short-term impacts could be realised through a range of activities for disseminating the results. Due to the Covid-19, virtual meetings will be arranged with volunteers from the local elderly community to spread our results through lively and interactive dialogues. The main purpose is to truly deliver the results to the community we worked with and stimulate their interests, guide their future leisure activities, and increase their later-life well-being. By doing so, we will be able to empower the older adults to articulate, share, and reflect upon the meaningful things in their lives (Sedgley et al., 2011).

### **5.3 Concluding remarks**

We conclude by acknowledging the limitations of this research and proposing future research agenda in tourism and ageing well. We note that the findings of this research are derived from the case of China. The findings mainly reveal the travel and leisure lives of Chinese older adults. Thus, we do not tend to generalise our findings to other geographical locations and contexts, or claim that these patterns represent the whole Chinese elderly population. Future research can adopt the novel lens proposed in this study to explore other cultures and contexts, and whether and how different individual characteristics interacting with familial and regional cultures shapes older adults' interpretations of travel, old age, ageing well. Future studies can also extend the current focus to conduct more systematic research on multiple temporal dimensions and processes (e.g. temporality and temporal modalities) (Adam, 2013a; 2013b). This may further unveil the connection between time, space and tourism by exploring more deeply how these structural features interact with each other and shape the contextualised meanings of ageing and well-being (Schwanen et al., 2012). Another promising avenue

is to explore the links between tourism and ageing well by looking closer into senior tourists' affect, emotions, coping, habitual practices in their travel experience. This may help to further highlight the consequences of senior tourism experience. More attention should be paid to vulnerable individuals in developing countries who are not capable of travelling as frequently as the participants of this study, due to personal health or economic issues, caring duties or other major challenges in life. Travelling may still help them alleviate life stress and better cope with challenges in their ageing process. Such effects may not be exclusively related to the travel frequency but indeed the quality of their travel experience.

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