

OLD AGE AND SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY:
INTELLECTUAL REFLECTIONS AND LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS
ACROSS CULTURES

by

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Old age is a subject in both intellectual thought and literary representations, but senior subjectivity is a topic that has not been adequately studied. To address this topic, this dissertation undertakes a comparative study of old age and senior subjectivity in Western and Eastern intellectual thought and literary works. Senior subjectivity is a notion that covers old people's self-awareness, social identity, and cultural conditioning by external factors including language, ideology, human relationships, and social assessments. This study consists of two endeavors. The first endeavor reviews and compares historical views of old age by thinkers, scholars, and artists including Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Goethe, and others in the West, and Shakyamuni, Confucius, Zhuangzi, and others in the East. The second endeavor analyzes various literary representations of old age in carefully chosen literary works from both Eastern and Western traditions. Both parts aim to uncover common and distinctive features in the conceptions and representations of senior subjectivity across cultures. In the West, views on old age are diversified and even conflicting, revealing Western people's ambivalence toward the last phase

of life. In China, however, the topic is much less controversial because of the integrated views of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism that tend to hold old age as a period of life which acquires wisdom through rich experiences and obtains peace of mind through self-cultivation. Throughout history, both Western and Chinese thoughts on senior subjectivity have inspired interesting representations in literature. In the West, two types of literary representations of senior subjectivity are generated: the miserable conditions of old age and the elderly's wish for rejuvenation. In Chinese literature, the elderly are usually described as possessing wisdom and authority which can either benefit or harm interpersonal and intergenerational relations. My research on intellectual thought and close reading of certain fictional works have uncovered these findings: (1) senior subjectivity is constructed by the interplay between the awakened elderly consciousness and the senior identity conceived by such external powers as language, culture, and ideology during old age; (2) the construction of senior subjectivity is a long, dynamic and fluid process, which is determined by the elderly person's encounters and challenges throughout life; (3) healthy senior subjectivity depends on a successful resolution of the conflicts between self-alienation and self-disalienation. The success or failure in achieving satisfactory subjectivity in old age is determined by whether or not a senior person is able to find peace and tranquility for the soul before reaching end of life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	vi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	x
INTRODUCTION.....	1
 PART I INTELLECTUAL THOUGHT ON OLD AGE AND SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY.....	8
CHAPTER 1 CONCEPTUAL ISSUES OF SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY.....	9
CHAPTER 2 A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY IN THE WEST.....	37
CHAPTER 3 A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY IN THE EAST.....	67
 PART II REPRESENTING SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY IN WESTERN FICTION.....	99
CHAPTER 4 NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY: A CASE STUDY OF FAULKNER'S <i>ABSALOM, ABSALOM!</i> AND OTHER LITERARY WORKS.....	100
CHAPTER 5 A MODERN VERSION OF GOETHE'S <i>FAUST</i> : SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY IN <i>THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA</i>	133
 PART III REPRESENTING SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY IN CHINESE FICTION.....	165
CHAPTER 6 SUBJUGATED BY FAMILY HIERARCHY: FEMALE SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY IN <i>A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS</i> AND <i>THE GOLDEN CANGUE</i>	166
CHAPTER 7 TRADITIONAL AND MODERN SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY IN CONFLICT AND HARMONY: A CASE STUDY OF LIN YUTANG'S <i>MOMENT IN</i> <i>PEKING</i> AND MO YAN'S <i>FROG</i>	196
CONCLUSION.....	232
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	238

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	253
CURRICULUM VITAE	

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA Absalom, Absalom!

OM The Old Man and the Sea

DR A Dream of Red Mansions

GC The Golden Cangue

MP Moment in Peking

F Frog

INTRODUCTION

Old age is a cross-cultural phenomenon for philosophical contemplation and also a cross-cultural topic for artistic representation. Aging is irreversible and unalterable. Everyone is expected to head for old age the moment he or she takes his or her first breath in the world. Despite all afflictions or ordeals, we generally strive for a longer and better life. But living longer does not necessarily mean living better, and old age does not mean golden age. On the contrary, many old people are just marginalized or abandoned by their families or society. Throughout human history, many thinkers and writers in different times and countries have developed their own ideas about the issue of old age. Such a history of ideas that reflect on the subject of old age and senior subjectivity constitute the major resources that I will explore in this dissertation.

Research Objectives and Tentative Thesis

Old age is a subject in both intellectual thought and literary representations, but senior subjectivity as a topic has not received adequate attention. In fact, it has only received cursory attention across cultures and there is, so far, no systematic study of this topic. To address this deficiency, this dissertation undertakes a comparative study of senior subjectivity in Western and Eastern intellectual thought and literary works. For this purpose, I will conduct historical, intellectual, and literary research into old age in the Eastern and Western traditions and inquire into how the elderly perceive and treat themselves, and how they are perceived and treated by others in intellectual and literary discourse.

Having stated the aim of my dissertation, it is necessary to construct a conceptual framework and delimit its scope. Subjectivization is the process of transforming the self into

subject and therefore self and subject are intrinsically intertwined but often conflicting. The self is the original and uncontaminated identity that a person possesses before being drawn into social construction. It embodies the free and unconstrained human nature. Human beings are social creatures, so the self is inevitably confronted with challenges. During one's socialization, due to all sorts of factors, the self tends to become an object of subjection so that the subject becomes more often than not a false self. Therefore, for a person who wants to reconstruct subjectivity in old age, the critical issue that he or she needs to solve is how to handle the relationship or achieve a desirable balance between self and subject. As an initial idea for systematic exploration, I venture to argue that a successful reconstruction of senior subjectivity is to lead the alienated subject back to the original self by removing negative effects and consequences of linguistic, social, and ideological subjectivization. A fulfilled old age is the one in which the self and the subject are integrated and fused into a healthy entity. On the other hand, if an old person cannot fill up the chasm between the unalienated self and the alienated self or subject, he or she is likely to fall into despair and regret.

A second idea is that the construction of senior subjectivity is a dynamic process. The fluidity of the construction lies in the connection and continuity between the elderly and the youth. As a result, the way that an old person interprets and understands the past and expects the future will affect the relationship between self and subject, and will propel or hinder the ongoing construction of senior subjectivity. In Western and Chinese traditions, thinkers who devoted themselves to the reflections on life and old age include Confucius, Zhuangzi, Plato, Aristotle, among others. They have produced numerous ideas and insights on old age that will be discussed in subsequent chapters. As a preliminary attempt at conceptualization, I would say that in the

Chinese tradition, people attach importance to collectivism, stressing the interaction of human individuals, nature, and society, and claiming the consistency between social construction and personal development. As a result, the self and the subject tend to converge and gradually form a unified personality of altruistic subjectivity. On the other hand, the Western tradition encourages individualism, giving rise to antagonistic relations among human individuals, nature, and society. Under these circumstances, the subject easily diverges from the self and it is harder to integrate both entities into a desirable identity in one's old age, with the result that old age is often viewed as a negative phase.

Nevertheless, I do not intend to overgeneralize old age in Western or Chinese philosophical, intellectual, or literary traditions. In fact, in both Chinese and Western literature and thought, we can find many variations that do not conform to the above norm. Throughout history, particularly in modern and contemporary times, Western and Chinese thought interact with each other to produce a variety of texts that combine the two. In this dissertation, I aim to explore the normative modes of constructing or reconstructing senior subjectivity by analyzing examples of canonical intellectual and literary texts. I will specifically explore these texts to shed light on how the elderly perceive themselves in the past, at present, and in the future, how they deal with the conflicts or inconsistencies between self-consciousness and others' opinions of them, and how they integrate the self and subject to reconstruct their subjectivity.

Scope of Research

Ancient and modern thinkers around the world have engaged in contemplating old age, but they have not yet adequately dealt with the topic of senior subjectivity, especially in its modern

sense. Literary works, on the other hand, have abundant descriptions of old people, so they can be taken as necessary materials for my inquiry. This research will mainly take psychoanalytical and Foucauldian perspectives of subjectivity as the starting point, compare views on old age and senior subjectivity in Eastern and Western traditions, and analyze canonical literary works that touch on the subjective consciousness of the elderly, with an aim of attaining a comprehensive and integrated account for old age and senior subjectivity.

This dissertation is composed of seven chapters grouped into three parts. Part I consists of three chapters and focuses on intellectual thoughts about old age and senior subjectivity in Eastern and Western traditions. Chapter One examines the conceptual issues of senior subjectivity explored by thinkers in the East and West. In this chapter, I will review such concepts as self, subject, and subjectivity in modern philosophy, psychology, and linguistics in the context of human history, society, culture, and ideology. Relevant discourses of Descartes, Freud, Lacan, Foucault, Erikson, Bodhidharma, Huineng, et al. will be examined and compared in order to form a conceptual foundation for my research. I will also probe into old age and senior subjectivity in conceptual terms so as to find a preliminary assumption for senior subjectivity that will serve as a guide for discussing the chapters to follow.

Chapter Two provides a historical account of senior subjectivity in the West. Since ancient Greece, Western philosophers have frequently contemplated issues regarding old people and old age. I will examine ideas of such thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Bacon, Schopenhauer, and Russell to reveal a general but clear clue to Western views on senior subjectivity. On the whole, Westerners have ambivalent views about old age, and the views are mostly negative. Meanwhile, I will glean images of old people in the works of dramatists or writers such as Sophocles,

Menander, Shakespeare, and Goethe to find how their aged characters fit into prevailing perceptions of the elderly in the West. This chapter is intended to provide a broad picture of senior subjectivity in Western culture, history, philosophy, politics, and literature.

In Chapter Three, I will examine historical discourses of senior subjectivity in the East, with a focus on China. Traditional Chinese thought is a fusion of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, in which the concerns of thinkers and scholars like Shakyamuni, Confucius, Mencius, Zhuangzi, Zhu Xi, Cheng Yi, and Lin Yutang regarding old age and senior subjectivity will be examined. Meanwhile, I will do a brief historical inquiry and literary study of the images of old people in the works of Sima Qian, Li Mi, Bai Juyi, and Bai Pu, as well as those in the Confucian classics such as *The Book of Rites* and *Classic of Filial Piety*. Through these examinations, I hope to reveal characteristic features of senior subjectivity in a Chinese context that is defined by both old people's self-cultivation and their family's ethical relations.

Part II consists of two chapters. Each of them is concerned with representations of old age and senior subjectivity in literary works carefully chosen from the Western tradition. In Chapter Four, I will focus on Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) while associating it with the large context of traditional Western literary leitmotif that describes old age negatively. Sutpen's miserable end exemplifies an unsuccessful reconstruction of subjectivity in old age that is largely due to his encounters throughout life, particularly his childhood experiences. In the process of aging, Sutpen is greatly affected by issues of race and land, and his self-identity is thus gradually but simultaneously formed and alienated. My analysis will center on the narrative construction of Sutpen's senior subjectivity, and demonstrate how the notion of constructing senior subjectivity is complicated by different and conflicting accounts of him by various character-narrators.

In Chapter Five, I will examine Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) by relating it to the leitmotif of rejuvenation in Western literary works. Due to the negative view on old age, many old people in literature are created with the wish to return to youth or maintain youthful vigor as long as possible. In Hemingway's novel, the protagonist is confronted with the challenges of old age and he strives to overcome them by resorting to his youthful ambitions. His struggle with the huge marlin and the sharks can be interpreted as an adventure of rediscovering the self. In the process of rediscovery, Santiago has to deal with ethical dilemmas that he never encountered before old age. In this sense, the ordeal and the eventual inner contentment in the narrative make the old man a modern Faust who successfully reconstructs his senior subjectivity.

Part III is composed of the two last chapters. Chapter Six is a study of female senior subjectivity in *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Cao Xueqin 1791) and *The Golden Cangue* (Zhang Ailing 1943), two Chinese works that highlight the power of old women in traditional extended Chinese families. The strict family hierarchy is a result of the Confucian thought that stresses proper relations among family members. Both the positive and negative sides of family hierarchy are represented in the two works with the characterization of two old women—respectively Jia Mu and Qiqiao. Their senior subjectivity is built on patriarchy, but as a result of different life experiences in hierarchical families, they display different attitudes toward the self and surrounding people and things. I will explain why Jia Mu's senior subjectivity is constructive while Qiqiao's is not.

Chapter Seven examines the collision between and integration of traditional and modern modes of senior subjectivity in two Chinese novels: *Moment in Peking* (1939) by Lin Yu-tang and *Frog* (2009) by the Chinese Noble laureate Mo Yan. In *Moment in Peking*, the author

deliberately creates old people who involve themselves in Buddhist or Taoist life styles and believe such styles are the best for their self-cultivation and contribution to families. Their senior subjectivity is constructed on traditional Chinese thoughts that ensure their joyful and tranquil old age. By contrast, the author of *Frog* formulates a storyline in which the female protagonist Gugu builds her youthful subjectivity on the modern philosophy of struggling or fighting, while in old age, she resorts to the traditional Chinese ideology to realize self-redemption and reconstruct subjectivity. Both novels reveal how traditional thoughts still play important roles in modern times.

In the Conclusion, I will review the previous chapters, and summarize the similarities and differences between the Western and Eastern traditions in the areas of constructing senior subjectivity. With a critical review of my primary thesis, I intend to offer new insights based on the analyses presented in the individual chapters. Finally, I will draw my conclusions. Senior subjectivity is an important topic insufficiently explored in existing scholarship. With this study, I hope to provide a comprehensive account of old age and senior subjectivity based on the Western and Eastern intellectual thought and literary representations.

PART I

INTELLECTUAL THOUGHT ON OLD AGE AND SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY

CHAPTER ONE

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES OF SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY

This chapter will examine the conceptual issues of senior subjectivity as they are explored by philosophers and thinkers in the East and the West. The focus of the chapter may be reduced to two related questions: What is old age? How is it perceived and conceived in conceptual terms? A systematic inquiry of two questions will serve as the conceptual ground for my research. To figure out what an old person is, it is necessary to probe into the notion of senior subjectivity, which in fact defines both old age and elderly people's self-identity. Senior subjectivity, however, is a concept much less explored, in comparison with the philosophical exploration of human subjectivity in general. In the following sections, I will examine it in terms of four related questions: What is meant by "senior"? What is subjectivity? What is senior subjectivity? How can this term be meaningfully explored in intellectual reflections and literary representations?

What Is Meant by "Senior"?

In order to deal with the issue of senior subjectivity, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by the terms of "senior," "old," or "old age." Old age turns out to be a much more complex concept than it appears. People have various terms to refer to someone who is old: old, elderly, aged, aging, senior citizen, senior, golden ager, senescent, older adult, older person, and so on.¹ Besides, scholars have found that it is never an easy job to define what an old person is. Kalish attempts to define it in several different approaches, but eventually has to admit that all of

¹ Richard A. Kalish, *Late Adulthood: Perspectives on Human Development*, 2nd edition (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Pub. Co., 1982), 10.

them are problematic and thus unsatisfactory.² Steven M. Albert and Maria G. Cattell classify aging by biology, chronology, and culture. By taking all the elements into consideration, they elude the efforts of giving a unanimous and comprehensive definition, but rather stress the variability of aging in every means, including varied understanding of how and when people are old in different societies and cultures.³ In short, it seems easy to identify old age or senior people by using common sense; but to find an appropriate definition for them is difficult.

In fact, although there were old people who could survive more than eighty and even one hundred years in ancient societies, old age as a socially constructed category has only a short history. Human beings have lived on earth for countless centuries, but the term “senescence” only found its place in the English vocabulary as a distinct phase of human existence about one hundred years ago, i.e., at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴ Old age as a luxury appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and not until the mid twentieth century could people on average begin to expect at least 10 years in retirement with adequate income.⁵ Due to rising life expectancy and declining birth rates, the twentieth century witnessed aging societies in

² Kalish, *Late Adulthood*, 8-10. For example, old can be defined in chronological terms: people become old from 65; physical changes: changes in posture, gait, facial features, hair color, etc.; organic changes: forgetfulness, slower reaction time, altered sleeping patterns, etc.; ideas, concepts, and reactions to others: stereotypes that old people are conservative and resistant to social change, etc.; social roles: a person is retired or becomes a grandparent; self-report: when someone says that he or she is old; and so on.

³ Steven M. Albert and Maria G Cattell, *Old Age in Global Perspective: Cross-cultural and Cross-national Views* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1994), 11-15.

⁴ Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.

⁵ Christine L. Fry, “The Social Construction of Age and the Experience of Aging in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *New Dynamics in Old Age: Individual, Environmental, and Societal Perspectives*, ed. Hans-Werner Wahl et al. (Amityville, N.Y.: Baywood Pub, 2007), 21.

many countries. At present, “population aging is taking place in nearly all the countries of the world.”⁶ As a result, old age as a phenomenon has become an issue closely related to individuals, families, and societies, advancing all the way through the twentieth century into the twenty-first century.

The elderly are generally understood as a kind of people who become feeble both physically and mentally. In the film *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles 1941), old Bernstein (Everett Sloane) says, “Old age. It’s the only disease...that you don’t look forward to being cured of.” This opinion seems rather pessimistic, for it sees no future in old age; although, one has to admit, it sounds reasonable to some degree. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Sports Science & Medicine*, old age is defined as “[t]he final stage in the life course of an individual...usually associated with declining faculties, both mental and physical, and a reduction in social commitments (including sport participation).”⁷ This biological definition seems to imply that old people are painfully facing the destiny of irreversibly approaching the end of life and, at that moment, they will be deprived of everything they possess. The elderly normally undergo a series of fundamental changes in their lives, such as poorer mental and physical health, less income, worse living environments, fewer social relations, and greater dependency on other’s assistance. Worst of all, older adults are invariably descending from the crest of life to the valley until the day they reluctantly say farewell to the world and return to dust. So from the very beginning, the

⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *Executive Summary of World Population Ageing 2013* (New York: United Nations Publication, ST/ESA/SER.A/348, 2013), xii.

⁷ Michael Kent, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Sports Science & Medicine*, 3rd edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), accessed June 19, 2017, <http://www.oxfordreference.com.libproxy.utdallas.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780198568506.001.0001/acref-9780198568506-e-4834?rskey=AfVySX&result=4834>.

thought of old age gives all mortals a rather dark and bleak feeling, whether they are already old or not. As a result, old age is often deemed as something of a taboo about which people usually do not talk or even think about. But some scholars believe such a stereotypical attitude toward old age is the age prejudice that hinders research on aging.⁸ Since modern times, old age has actually become an important part of life that should not be neglected. Older people have every right to enjoy a colorful life and should not be marginalized.

In all likelihood, physical problems and changing environments cause mental afflictions to the old. One of the biggest frustrations that the aged may suffer is a feeling of helplessness and aimlessness. Getting old is a double blow. For one thing, it means older people have to step back from a wider and often more interesting social circle where they used to enjoy themselves with others and strive for dreams and wealth. For another, it reveals the undesirable prospect that they are approaching the end of life when everything they have cherished will be gone. As a result, the elderly are badly in need of new life plans and meaningful goals. Such reorientation is essential but often ignored, causing trouble in their adaptation to old age. Older people with better adaptability will be more able to pursue a new start and expect to bask in a more enjoyable life experience. Many writers discern the plight and reveal in their literary works how the aged struggle to regain a meaningful life before it ends. The theme of rediscovery and reorientation in regards to human old age is prevalent in novels, poems, plays, and other forms of literary works, which I will discuss in subsequent chapters.

⁸ Todd D. Nelson, ed., *Preface to Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice against Older Persons* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), ix.

Sometimes it is difficult for the aged to face the fact that functions of their body and brain are deteriorating with age. Health problems are one of the major concerns of people in their later years; however, a satisfactory life is not only ensured by a healthy body, but partly results from a proper awareness of their present situation and its relationship with the past and the future. Whether the situation is awful or not, the aged have to accept it as it is. In other words, one has to take the declining physical conditions as natural and unavoidable. This is one of the secrets of a happy late life. If the elderly are unwilling to accept the reality of senescence and are always attempting unpractically to stay young or return to their youth, their minds will be trapped in turmoil and their lives might end in tragedy. Many literary narratives tell stories of old people with such a mindset.

Another big challenge that the aged have to confront is their relationship with others, including spouses, siblings, children, grandchildren, colleagues, friends, and neighbors. First of all, the elderly may need to mend the relations that were not successful in the past, particularly intergenerational ones. Sometimes the old may realize that compromise is necessary to keep a good relationship with people they love. In addition, whether they are willing or not, the elderly must adjust themselves to present relationships. Senior citizens can hardly live without a satisfactory environment built on stable and favorable relations. The aged are a group of courageous people directly facing the biggest challenge in life—death, and they might need more concern from those younger and healthier. Rebuilding relations with others is so important that those who fail to do so might lead a miserable and distressed late life. Such a theme is also widespread in literature.

The aged are a group of people who share universal challenges, but some may also have their own unique issues due to various cultural, social, and individual elements. Just as it is difficult to define the term *old* because of its diverse denotations and connotations, some of the aged may be plunged into troubles that others do not encounter. An old woman in China may face difficulties that an old man in America has never imagined. Each senior can be a case from which we can discover challenges.

To begin with, senior citizens may have disparate attitudes toward life. Their attitudes have been shaped by their different past experiences in different environments. The aged from different social, cultural, political, and economic backgrounds may have diversified life trajectories, each affecting the formation of their life philosophy, which in turn affects choices in the final part of their lives. Old age is actually a long period that can last more than 30 years, and the proportion of persons aged 80 years or beyond is increasing over time.⁹ People at different stages of old age may display different mental and physical characteristics. Their desires and fears also differ at different stages. They may have different challenges in different periods of old age. What is more, sexual and racial differences are sometimes the factors that underlie and account for differences of the aged. For example, a senior man and a senior woman, or an aged white person and an aged black person, may have different understandings of life due to their distinctive backgrounds of gender and race. If we only take the aged as a whole, their diverse individual needs and interests may be ignored. In fact the aged differ from one another due to

⁹ According to *World Population Ageing 2013* (p. 31), the proportion of persons aged 80 years or over within the older population increased from 7 percent in 1950 to 14 per cent in 2013, and this proportion of “oldest-old” within older persons is expected to reach 19 per cent in 2050 and 28 per cent in 2100.

various factors, all of which should be taken into consideration when we ponder over their identity.

In conclusion, old age is not just a biological concept, but a cultural one, which leads to its complexity. It is a period of life filled with challenges. A common challenge is that all seniors have to adapt themselves to the new situation of old age; sometimes, however, an old individual has to deal with life sufferings that others do not share or understand. Those who are still young may not understand the meaning of getting old, and it is difficult for them to imagine challenges that the aged may confront. As Kalish puts it, “[t]he dilemma of the elderly is that the weeks, months, and years zoom by at an accelerating pace, with only death at the end, while at the same time the minutes and hours can drag by when filled with nothing.”¹⁰ In their later years, the aged have to choose new life goals to avoid such idleness. Besides, they need to adjust their self-conception to face the declining mental and physical health, and maintain relations with everyone and everything around them. Meanwhile, we should keep in mind that the aged are different from one another due to a variety of factors, which means each has different problems to deal with. Such problems can be discerned in all manner of intellectual and literary works throughout human history.

What Is Subjectivity?

Etymologically, the term “subject”—as well as its derivatives “subjective” and “subjectivity”—has gone through a series of changes. These terms have been used to refer to objects or notions in non-human, natural or physical world, linguistic field, and human body and

¹⁰ Kalish, *Late Adulthood*, 66.

mind. According to *A Hegel Dictionary*, “In the sixteenth century (das) Subjekt was borrowed from the Latin subjectum (the past participle of subicere, ‘to throw under’) [to German] in the sense of the ‘subject, theme’ of a sentence.” After that, the connotations of the term and its philosophical uses were gradually enriched over time, the whole process of which can be concluded as follows:

1. The subject, substratum or bearer of states and activities. In this sense, it is not clearly distinct from SUBSTANCE.
2. The grammatical or logical subject of a sentence, PROPOSITION or JUDGMENT, the bearer of predicates.
3. The subject or bearer of psychological states and processes, the human subject or I.
4. The cognitive subject, in contrast to the object of cognition.
5. The acting subject, the performer of actions and activities, especially, in Hegel, the moral subject.¹¹

When the word *subject* is used for human beings, it has three meanings in the aspects of psychology, cognition, and behavior, which indicates that the human subject is endowed with the capacity of not only self-control and self-awareness, but also understanding and changing the world. In other words, the human subject can think and act at will, so it is independent and dominating. “The use of ‘subject’ and Subjekt in senses 3-5 began in the late seventeenth century, under the impact of Descartes.”¹² In the *Oxford Dictionary of English* the word subject has multiple meanings; the one that is most related to the present topic, and most appropriate to Descartes’s idea is “a thinking or feeling entity; the conscious mind; the ego, especially as opposed to anything external to the mind.”¹³

¹¹ M. J. Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), 280.

¹² *Ibid.*, 281.

¹³ Angus Stevenson, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), online, accessed May 31, 2017,

In contemporary theories, the word “subject” is different from the word “self” in that the former is more associated with social and cultural factors. To be more specific, “the subject is always linked to something outside of it—an idea or principle or the society of other subjects.”¹⁴ Subjectivity is the condition of being a subject which is supposed to be able to possess experiences, feelings, beliefs, perspectives, desires, and power. In fact, subjectivity is anything but a simple notion, because “it plays various and sometimes ambiguous roles in epistemology, in contemporary Continental philosophy, and in cognitive science.”¹⁵ At the same time, “[t]he notion of subjectivity is also used, particularly in multicultural contexts, to underscore the importance of perspective, the fact that everyone sees the world from his or her (or its) individual vantage-point, defined in part by nature, by culture, and by individual experience.”¹⁶

Before I probe into the idea of senior subjectivity, it is necessary to inspect the genealogy of theories of subjectivity. Western thinkers have brought various interpretations to the meanings of human beings as “I,” “self,” “ego,” or “subject.” The notion of subjectivity becomes one of the central philosophical concepts when Plato discusses the immortal soul. The concern of human subjectivity in modern times starts from René Descartes (1596–1650), who announces “cogito ergo sum” (I think, therefore I am), an assertion that offers a new answer to the long

http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0824190?rskey=3cYcQf&result=89081.

¹⁴ Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (St Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 3.

¹⁵ Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), online, accessed May 31, 2017, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199264797.001.0001/acref-9780199264797-e-2440?rskey=OSyWSE&result=2435>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

pondered and perplexing question—“Who am I?” There are two principles in Descartes: “Firstly, the image of the self as the ground of all knowledge and experience of the world (before I am anything, I am I) and secondly, the self as defined by the rational faculties it can use to order the world (I make sense).”¹⁷ It affirms the dualistic interpretation of the Self or “I” as both subjective and objective: the subjective “I” can inspect the objective world, including the self. Descartes’s thesis inspires many Western thinkers in later generations, such as Rousseau, Kant, Emerson, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, to name only a few. These philosophers attempt to discover the truth of human subject in different ways and with distinct and even controversial assertions. At first, although thinkers such as Descartes, Rousseau, and Kant give different accounts of subjectivity, they generally believe that there is a consistent and reliable subject somewhere in the world or in the mind.¹⁸

In the second half of the 19th century, several intellectual heavyweights in the Western history of ideas published their most significant monographs: *On the Origin of Species* (Charles R. Darwin 1859), *Capital* (Vol. 1) (Karl Marx 1867), and *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Sigmund Freud 1899). These great works fundamentally changed human views about themselves and their relations with the interior and exterior world of mind. The confidence of supreme and rational beings built up since Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment was faced with challenges. Philosophers, including Nietzsche and Heidegger, reject the notion of a rational and consistent subject; instead, they affirm the unreliable and unstable nature of subject. It gives

¹⁷ Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 15.

¹⁸ According to Mansfield, philosophers had defined subjectivity in terms of reason (Descartes), human spirit (Rousseau) or the simple act of perception (Kant). See Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 22-3.

the study of human subjectivity new perspectives, and more scholars, such as Freud and Foucault, probe into new realms of subjectivity and explore new factors that can shape human subjectivity. In general, such subversive new perspectives about human subjectivity stress its inconsistency rather than consistency, dependence rather than independence, compliance rather than initiative, passiveness rather than activeness, and irrationality rather than rationality. In short, subjectivity in the contemporary context is more deemed to be subject to various exterior factors than able to dominate them.

I think two research paradigms of human subjectivity are well worth mentioning: the Freudian and Foucauldian. As a founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) digs into a new realm of the human mind with his arguments on the unconscious. His conception of the mind contrasts with Descartes's in many ways. To Freud, the unconscious plays an important and even decisive role in the behavior and mental activities of a subject. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the subject is supposed to be "composed" of two major components: the unconscious and the preconscious/conscious. Censorship is supposed to function to determine what ideas can emerge from the unconscious and travel up to the conscious level. Freud is "at pains to circumvent the censorship of the preconscious, to lift the bar of repression."¹⁹ He emphasizes that libido—or the instinctual driving force—dominates the subject's development from infancy to maturity. The subject is shaped by the consequence of a range of unconscious conflicts and traumatic experiences.²⁰ In the article "The Ego and the Id" (1923), Freud casts a new light on

¹⁹ Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 132.

²⁰ Kim Atkins, ed., *Self and Subjectivity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 196.

the notion of the subject. He builds a structural model that is composed of id, ego and super-ego and holds that the subject is modeled by the collisions and negotiations among the three components.²¹ In this structure, “Oedipal values play a much more central role” and id, ego, and super-ego “coexist in a somewhat uneasy alliance with the categories ‘unconscious’ and ‘preconscious’ in the final conceptualization of the subject.”²² Thus, Freud offers a constructive description of the human mind that, due to the presence of the unconscious is mysterious and difficult to grasp.

Freud maintains that the rational mind of a subject is unreliable because it is to a large extent influenced by the unknown unconscious, while the latter is further influenced by a myriad of incidents and relations, both external and internal to the mind. Freud does not use subjectivity as a concept in his theories, but his studies focus on humans and their subjective mind. To him, a subject is impacted by his or her childhood experiences and memories repressed into the unconscious. Hence, we can say that the Freudian subjectivity contains the following meanings: first, human subjectivity is constructed after birth during the interaction with one’s surroundings, especially with one’s parents and siblings; second, the unconscious is a crucial component of human subjectivity, which often conceals one’s intentions such as patricide and incest that are often considered unrealistic, unethical, and/or unacceptable in a well-organized moral and hierarchical society; third, the subjectivity based on such unconscious is usually considered irrational and detrimental, but it is possible for one to reconstruct it with assistance from the

²¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 636, 644.

²² Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, 132-3.

external world. Unfortunately, many people are unaware of problems in the subjective mind or unable to handle them and therefore they are caught in them throughout their entire lives.

In his theory of the subject, Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) expounds that the psychosexual development of one's self-perception is under the influence of the interaction between the unconscious and the environment in different realms: the real order, the imaginary order, and the symbolic order. According to Lacan, a baby less than 6 months old cannot distinguish its own self from its parents or its surroundings, which is a period that is closest to the pure materiality of existence, or to "the Real" in Lacan's term. Between sixth months and 18th months, the young child obtains a kind of identification with his own image, which Lacan calls the "Ideal-ego," a primordial recognition of the self. This is a pre-verbal period that is named the mirror stage during which the child develops into the imaginary order. Lacan maintains that such an ideal-ego is not the true self. Between 18th months and the 4th year, with the acquisition of language, a child starts to involve itself more with the external world and to understand the self in relation to the other. This is the symbolic order.²³ But in the process, the child is experiencing self-alienation and going further away from the real order. In each of the realms, the subject will experience a major challenge such as the acquisition of language and the adventures of the Oedipal, in which they may suffer some kind of self-loss or lack.²⁴

²³ Lacan's three orders are actually not so simple in terms of periodization. For example, the real order may be earlier; and symbolic order may be earlier too. It is said as soon as the baby is caught in the web of language at the time of birth, he is already in the symbolic order.

²⁴ Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, 151.

One of Lacan's most influential ideas is that the unconscious is structured like a language.²⁵ According to him, the subject is the discourse of the other: "At the outset, subjectivity has no relation to the real, but rather to a syntax which is engendered by the signifying mark there."²⁶ The subject, then, is in a state of contradiction. "It sees itself as unified and whole, as autonomous and complete, but this very imaginary identity subverts that wholeness."²⁷ Lacan thus rejects Descartes's "I think, therefore I am," and asserts that "I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking."²⁸ In this way Lacan denies the conception that the subject has a solid foundation on the logical mind, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Freud, Lacan, and many other psychoanalytical scholars have attained groundbreaking achievements in the research of human subjectivity. According to Mansfield, "psychoanalysis is the key school of thought which attempts to explain the truth of the subject, how our interior life is structured, how it has been formed, and how it can explain both uniquely individual traits (for example, nervous habits and sexual tastes) and vastly public ones (for example, the politics of gender and culture)."²⁹ Although all the psychoanalytical studies are based on the premise of splitting the subject into conscious and unconscious and legitimizing the importance of unconscious in the process of molding the human subject, psychoanalysis is a school of thought

²⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 736.

²⁶ Lacan, *Ecrits*, 38.

²⁷ Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 43.

²⁸ Lacan, *Ecrits*, 430.

²⁹ Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 9.

that has constantly gone through transmission and transformation with various opinions and intense debates. One typical example is Lacan, who makes a great leap forward by denying or rejecting a self that is stable enough to be able to access the truth. In this sense, Lacan is deemed as a post-structural psychoanalyst who believes that the subject is constructed unconsciously by social environments under the influence of language, which makes his view different from the Freudian view of the subject but to some degree similar to the Foucauldian one.

In addition to the school of psychoanalysis, Michel Foucault (1926-1984), a renowned thinker with insightful views about power, also contributes to the understanding of human subjectivity. In 1982, just about two years before his death, Foucault published the article “The Subject and Power,” in which he announces that “the goal of my work during the last twenty years...has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects.”³⁰ In his late years, Foucault is pondering over the fundamental issue of the relationship between the subject and the truth. Instead of relying on the famous Delphic prescription of *knowing yourself* to explore the question of the subject (which stands for two questions: the knowledge of the subject and the subject’s knowledge of him- or herself), Foucault selects a notion that has not been emphasized by the historiography of Western philosophy: the *care of self*.³¹ Foucault examines self-care and self-cultivation in Western tradition, and considers it a most important issue of understanding the truth of the

³⁰ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Theory*, vol. 8, no. 4 (Summer 1982), 777.

³¹ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2-3.

subject. Foucault believes that the human subject is constructed by external factors, such as the culture into which it is born, so he focuses on the way a human turns into a subject. For example, he chooses “the domain of sexuality—how men have learned to recognize themselves as subjects of ‘sexuality.’”³²

Obviously, Foucault studies the issue of the subject from the perspective of its relationship with power. When Foucault starts to explore the essence of power, he does not simply follow the existing expositions or dominant paradigms made by intellectual thoughts such as Marxism and structuralism. Power was previously viewed as something that is possessed by certain individuals or groups of individuals, but the nature of Foucauldian power is more empirical and anti-ideological. Previous thoughts usually expound the issue of power by means of a kind of totalization, such as connecting its essence to economy or stressing the decisive impact of economy on power. In Foucault’s eyes, however, such totalizing accounts are too simplistic and arbitrary. He believes that power, at least in its modern sense, is essentially individualized, diversified, fragmented, and indeterminate. To begin with, Foucault believes power is social relations rather than concrete materials such as commodity or property. Such relations are always in a fluid and cyclical process. Second, Foucault believes that power is an interweaving network that is not unidirectional but interactional. Power is omnipresent. Third, power is decentralized and therefore “subjectless.”³³ For Foucault, subjectivity is a historically and culturally specific

³² Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 778.

³³ Robert M. Strozier, *Foucault, Subjectivity, and Identity: Historical Constructions of Subject and Self* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 52.

way of conceptualizing the self,³⁴ so he advocates the death of the subject and attempts to “break down the subject.”³⁵ Therefore, he proposes that humans should “promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.”³⁶ In *The History of Sexuality* (Vol. One), Foucault analyzes the relationship between subjectivity and power. He claims that the subject is produced through power rather than being outside of or antecedent to power relations. One of the ways that power produces subjects is through the process of confession; “[t]he truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power.”³⁷

Foucault’s concepts of power, subjectification, and resistance are integral to his theoretical project. As is mentioned above, power in Foucault’s eyes is “the multiplicity of force relations,” and power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective.³⁸ Based on this observation, Foucault further points out that “where there is power, there is resistance, and...this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”³⁹ Power and resistance are internally connected to each other, or they are two sides of one thing. Kevin Heller points out that “power and resistance are no more than two different names Foucault gives to the same capacity—the capacity to create

³⁴ Margaret A. McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 62.

³⁵ Strozier, *Foucault, Subjectivity, and Identity*, 66.

³⁶ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 785.

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 59.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 92, 94.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

social change.... Power and resistance are, for Foucault, ontologically correlative terms.”⁴⁰ Power and resistance are correlative and interactive, the relations of which are not identical with that between unidirectional repression and resistance. Foucault’s understanding of power-relations usually leaves critics with a totally passive subject, a non-agent unable to resist oppressive political, cultural, economic and other impositions, but I think resistance can at least leave an intentional subject a glimmer of hope to escape power relations and reconstruct his or her subjectivity in an active way, although such an attempt of reconstruction is often in vain.

So far, I have dealt with the theme of subjectivity grounded on Western thought, but in Eastern traditions, especially in China, the topic of subject and subjectivity is conceptually explored from a different perspective with different ideas. In Zen Buddhism, a Buddhist school that grows and matures in China by integrating Indian Buddhism and Chinese traditional thought, subject and subjectivity are conceived differently than in Western thought.⁴¹ Ancient Chinese philosophers generally agree that humans are an integral and inseparable part of nature, which makes it easier for them to understand the deconstruction and decentralization of human subjects. One of the theoretical achievements of Zen Buddhism is the notion of *no-self*. Buddhism denies the existence of an enduring “self” and substitutes with the concept of *anatman*, or “no-self.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Kevin Jon Heller, “Power, Subjectification and Resistance in Foucault,” *Substance*, vol. 25, no. 1 Issue 79 (1996), 99.

⁴¹ Zen Buddhism is certainly a religion, but it can also be considered as a school of philosophy. In this paper, I intend to focus on its philosophical exploration of the concepts of subject and subjectivity, as well as its dialogue with Western thoughts, such as psychoanalysis.

⁴² Masao Abe, *Zen and Comparative Studies*, ed. Steven Heine (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 149.

Zen holds that the original mind of human beings is the utmost source of everything. It is at one with the world. Zen emphasizes cutting off oneself from all the mundane attachments and returning to the original mind of human beings. According to Zen, human beings are generally deluded and misled by worldly matters and desires so that they have long lost their true nature, or true self. The purpose of Zen Buddhism is thus to help them regain the original mind. Zen masters propose from various aspects that the true self should be the absolute mind that is detached from anything, any thought, and even the mind itself to avoid duality. In the thought of Zen, the true self is no-self, which denies the existence of an enduring and unchanging soul or self.⁴³ The true self is beyond the subject-object dichotomy, and in order to awaken the true self, the conscious-self or the ego-self must be broken through.⁴⁴

Zen is said to have been transmitted from India to China by Bodhidharma (cir. 483-540) at the end of the fifth century. According to Bodhidharma, the Dharma “is the truth that all natures are pure. By this truth, all appearances are empty. Defilement and attachment, subject and object don’t exist.”⁴⁵ In other words, the common nature of everything is their emptiness, and such emptiness eliminates the distinction between subject and object, thereby leading to the unique understanding of subjectivity in Zen. In the “Bloodstream Sermon,” Bodhidharma stresses that the nature of a Buddha’s mind is “basically empty, neither pure nor impure, free of cause and

⁴³ Ibid., 68.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 69-70.

⁴⁵ Bodhidharma, “Outline of Practice,” in *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma*, trans. Red Pine (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989), 7.

effect.”⁴⁶ But people are so deluded that they cannot see their own mind or true nature. The same account of the essence of mind is given by Huineng (638-713), the Sixth Patriarch, in *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. Huineng insists that the Buddha nature dwells in one’s own mind, which is closely related to, but out of the phenomenal world. As a result, one can only look into one’s mind to achieve enlightenment. This “mind” is the origin of everything. To understand the original mind is to see into one’s own original nature, which is also the Buddha nature, the true reality.⁴⁷ As a result, the subjectivity in Zen is no-self that is characterized by a trinity of Buddha nature, the original mind, and emptiness.

Both Zen and psychoanalysis probe into the subjective mind, but they are different in many respects. According to Magid, “Zen offers us a perspective that is fundamentally nondualistic, anti-essentialist, and anti-transcendent,” whereas Western philosophy, including psychoanalytic therapy and theory, has become used to drawing dualistic pictures of self and other, self and world, body and mind, inner and outer.⁴⁸ Dualism can cause a series of painful feelings of alienation from nature, social life, and subjectivity. In the Buddhist perspective, major psychological problems originate from our attachment to the image of the self as fixed and independent; while in the psychoanalytical perspective, “self” is generally seen as a central organizer of every human being, from which our identity and its accompanying “otherness”

⁴⁶ Bodhidharma, “Bloodstream Sermon,” in *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma*. trans. Red Pine (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989), 17.

⁴⁷ Huineng, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, ed. and trans. Philip Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 137.

⁴⁸ Barry Magid, *Ordinary Mind: Exploring the Common Ground of Zen and Psychoanalysis* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 70, 82.

emerge.⁴⁹ However, Moncayo argues that the Lacanian perspective is more compatible with Buddhism, because both hold that the “true subject is no-ego,” namely, “the true subject requires the symbolic death or deconstruction of imaginary ego-identifications and representations.”⁵⁰ Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective posits that the ideal ego and the ego-ideal are imaginary constructions or mental formations, while the true self is composed of the emptiness of self, or in Lacanian terms, the subject of the Real.⁵¹ In this sense, the Lacanian concept of true self is the same as no-self, and the ego is a defense against the true self or no-self.

The philosophical exploration of subjectivity has been going on for thousands of years. It is Descartes who first realized the importance of human beings as rational, reliable, and dominant subjects. From the 19th century, Western philosophy started to doubt human rationality, arguing from various perspectives that human subjectivity is not naturally possessed before birth but socially constructed after birth. Hence, many thinkers, particularly Freud, Foucault and their followers, believe human subjectivity is shaped and determined by a variety of interior and exterior elements. Some even believe that the true self can only be attained through the separation from language and detachment from everything in the world that falsely defines us.

⁴⁹ Adeline Van Waning, “A Mindful Self and beyond,” in *Awakening and Insight: Zen Buddhism and Psychotherapy*, eds. Young-Eisendrath, Polly, and Shoji Muramoto (New York: Taylor & Francis Inc., 2002), 93-4.

⁵⁰ Raul Moncayo, *The Signifier Pointing at the Moon: Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism* (London: Karnac, 2012), xvi-xix.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

What is Senior Subjectivity?

In my opinion, senior subjectivity is a notion that covers old people's self-awareness, social identity, and cultural conditioning by external factors including language, ideology, human relationships, and social assessments. In general, subjectivity is a social construction of self, and senior subjectivity is influenced by both one's experiences before old age and new encounters during old age. All the aforementioned reorientations and adaptations of the elderly will determine whether the reconstruction of senior subjectivity is successful or not.

Although a realm of significance, senior subjectivity has not aroused much interest among thinkers in the 20th century and is still under-theorized. Psychoanalytical and Foucauldian theories generally focus on the construction of subject and the interior and exterior elements that affect such construction, but they mostly ignore the study of seniors. Maybe it is because people usually hold that the construction of subjectivity has been completed before one enters old age and there will not be noticeable changes after that, or that senior subjectivity is not as important as that of babies, children, adolescents, or young adults. Nowadays, however, old age is substantially prolonged. If we take the sixty years as the threshold of old age, many people will live quite a long time after that, sometimes for a period as long as a third of one's entire life. In this case, old age can be divided into several stages: the earlier stage, the middle stage, and the later stage. Each one has its own distinct features and problems. As a result, senior subjectivity is undergoing continuous development. The process is also impacted by various internal and external elements. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the issue of senior subjectivity on the basis of previous studies of human subjectivity and of old age.

Different from most of other psychoanalytical theories that focus on children's psychological development, Erik Erikson (1902-1994) extends his view to the entire span of human life, including old age or, in his own terms, "late adulthood." In his book *Childhood and Society*, Erikson proposes the division of a series of stages throughout one's life, the last one being what he labels "the late adulthood" spanning from 55 or 65 years old to the time of death.⁵² He maintains that each stage has "its ascendance, meets its crisis, and finds its lasting solution...towards the end of the [stage]."⁵³ In other words, there is a core conflict or psychosocial identity crisis at each stage. A successful solution to the core issue will reinforce one's identity and have positive influence on the following stages, while a failure at one stage will hinder the normal development thereafter. In the last stage, when people look back on their lives with happiness and contentment, feeling that they have fulfilled themselves, they will have achieved "ego integrity"; otherwise, they will fall into despair and fear their approaching death.⁵⁴

Erikson greatly broadens the horizon of theories of personality and identity crisis. His stages of psychosocial development stem from Freud's view of "neurotic conflict,"⁵⁵ but he stresses the importance of interaction between one's ego and the environment, and also claims that each one of the eight stages of human life has its own critical factors that can determine

⁵² Generally speaking, there are eight stages according to Erikson: infancy (birth to 18 months), early childhood (18 months to 3 years), childhood (3 to 5 years), school age (6 to 12 years), adolescence (12 to 18 years), young adulthood (18 to 35 years), middle adulthood (35 to 55 or 65 years), and late adulthood (55 or 65 years to death). See Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950), 219-34.

⁵³ Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), 95.

⁵⁴ Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950), 231-3.

⁵⁵ Erikson, *Identity*, 91.

whether one can go through the stage successfully.⁵⁶ Erikson bases this process on “epigenetic principle”—“anything that grows has a ground plan, and that out of this ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole”.⁵⁷ This enlightens us to the fact that various factors simultaneously or successively influence our entire life, and infantile or childhood experience is just a section of them.

Erikson’s theory of life stages is valuable to the study of senior subjectivity in at least two ways. First, it indicates that old age is closely related to and influenced by preceding stages, and that whether the elderly are happy or not is determined by their experiences during all those stages. Life is a continuous stream that cannot be severed. What one did yesterday would affect one’s present situation and mental state, and one’s present choices will affect one’s destiny and mental state in the future. Old age does not come out of nothing, so the elderly have to shoulder all the burdens of their past. Second, his theory illuminates the view that late adulthood is also an evolving phase that is equally important to other stages. Old age is definitely a significant component and the key to a perfect lifetime, rather than the so-called “garbage time.” If people make mistakes at other stages, they still have opportunities to mend them in the following stages, but if they fail during old age, there will be no second chance. As a result, I believe Erikson’s insightful view is one of the solid theoretical premises upon which a sound conception of old age and senior subjectivity can be developed.

⁵⁶ Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 219-34.

⁵⁷ Erikson, *Identity*, 92.

In addition to Erikson's view that indicates the significance of one's entire life for senior subjectivity, we need to find more about how to construct it as well as the principles of such construction. One's subjectivity is shaped by one's experiences in certain historical, social, cultural, psychological, and ideological environments, in which language plays a critical role. Émile Benveniste, the French structural linguist and semiotician, elaborates on the relations between language and subjectivity. In his article "Subjectivity in Language," Benveniste defines subjectivity as "the capacity of the speaker to posit himself [or herself] as a subject."⁵⁸ He argues that the foundation of subjectivity is "determined by the linguistic status of 'person'" because ego is the one who says ego.⁵⁹ In terms of the dialectic and dynamic relations between language and subject, Benveniste points out that "language is possible only because each speaker sets himself [or herself] up as a subject by referring to himself [or herself] as I in his [or her] discourse."⁶⁰ Thus he illuminates how a subject is generated in language.

In addition, there are many more perspectives on the function of language in constructing subjectivity that deserve our attention and study, including Freudian, Lacanian, Foucauldian, and Althusserian conceptualizations of subjectivity. Psychoanalytical approaches attach importance to the unconscious while Foucault and Althusser give priority to power and ideology regarding the formation of one's subjectivity. Each of these perspectives holds language as playing an important role in molding the human subject, albeit in different ways.

⁵⁸ Émile Benveniste, "Subjectivity in Language," in *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. M.E. Meek (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami press, 1971), 224.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 225.

According to Freud, the unconscious is correlated with language, especially those abnormal or unnatural expressions. For example, he examines slips of the tongue, holding that they are not simple and meaningless mistakes, but rather offer valuable clues to uncover and understand the subject's unconscious mind.⁶¹ In addition to his well-known claim that the unconscious is structured like language, Lacan brings up the notion of floating signifiers.⁶² When we describe or define a person in language, the form of this description or definition is a signifier, but its signified is not final and will become another signifier that needs further explanation. Therefore, the nature of the subject founded on language, whether it is at the conscious or the unconscious level, is hard to identify and interpret.

Foucault maintains the idea that the subject is produced by discourse.⁶³ In *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, he argues that subjectivity is always constructed by discourses around sexuality. Such discourses are even more intensified in the 20th century when more “sexual perversions,” such as child sexuality and homosexuality, are disclosed to the public. Althusser believes interpellation is an important concept in regards to the notion of ideology, claiming that “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects.”⁶⁴ According to Althusser, an individual's identity is constructed when he or she is hailed by a representative of social authority, such as the

⁶¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), 71.

⁶² Jacques Lacan, “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Vincent Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), 1169-1181.

⁶³ McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 59.

⁶⁴ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 170.

police, and answers the call voluntarily. He argues that “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject.”⁶⁵ In other words, “ideology...‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects” by the operation of “interpellation or hailing.”⁶⁶ Judith Butler is indebted to Althusser, Foucault, and even Lacan when articulating that individuals are continuously subjugated by gender identities. Drawing on Foucault’s theory, she argues that “subjection is a kind of power that not only unilaterally acts on a given individual as a form of domination, but also activates or forms the subject.”⁶⁷ In Butler’s eyes, subjectivization is a complicated process that can cause opposite consequences simultaneously: the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection.⁶⁸ All these perspectives have made it clear that the subject is modeled on the basis of one’s unconscious mind as interior factors and social and ideological power as exterior factors. Besides, such construction relies heavily on language. An individual is plunged into a network of all these factors and described by them. In the process, the self becomes the subject. The older one grows, the farther away that person is from the original self due to all sorts of encounters in the world. In this sense, the formation of the subject is simultaneously the alienation of the self.

The same is true of senior subjectivity. Under the influence of language as well as diverse internal and external factors, the formation of senior subjectivity is also the alienation of the true

⁶⁵ Louis Althusser, “On Ideology,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 1356.

⁶⁶ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 174.

⁶⁷ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 84.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

self. To the elderly, a successful reconstruction of senior subjectivity is the returning to the true self by breaking away from the factors that negatively affect the senior individuals. In other words, in order to construct a true senior subjectivity, an old person needs to get rid of the fake subject, uncover the real subject, and return to the true self. Since language can be used as a tool for social and ideological construction of subjectivity, the fake subject or the false self is in language, whereas the real subject or the true self is mostly beyond language. However, we need to interpret both sides by means of language to figure out the truth. I believe this is the fundamental principle and the pivotal point to analyze the construction of senior subjectivity.

Concluding Remarks

Western and Eastern thinkers, especially those since modern times, have developed a diversity of theories on the concepts of self, subject, and subjectivity, which provide abundant resources for my inquiry into senior subjectivity. Basically, one's subjectivity is determined by a series of external and internal factors that are often closely interwoven with one another. As a result, the construction of subjectivity is a dynamic and complex process. In order to have a deeper understanding of senior subjectivity, we can also resort to such perspectives as Erikson's conceptualization of life stages and the diverse theoretical explorations on the relations between language and subjectivity. On the whole, this chapter provides a foundation for my further exploration of people's different strategies and views of treating old age and constructing senior subjectivity in various intellectual reflections and literary works.

CHAPTER TWO

A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY IN THE WEST

The topic of old age has enchanted numerous thinkers from antiquity till present. Even though senior subjectivity is not a major theme in most philosophical reflections, a myriad of treatises and essays can be found interspersed with diverse ideas about old age. To do research on subjectivity and old age, it is practically impossible to ignore these intellectual thoughts. Obviously, over the long history of human civilization, different nations in different historic eras and geographic locations have developed their own interpretations of life and old age. Among them, two of the most representative schools of thought are those of the East and West. Western tradition originated in ancient Greece and Rome, which has thrived for thousands of years and left influence on the present environments of Europe and America. Eastern tradition, on the other hand, was represented by Indian and Chinese thoughts starting from over two thousand years ago. This chapter focuses on historical accounts of old age and senior subjectivity in the West by means of a detailed analysis of relevant intellectual thought and a general introduction to corresponding literary representations.

Negative Views on Senior Subjectivity

Ancient Greece, one of the origins of Western civilization, formed a foundation of Western culture that has long shaped the world view of Western people at least since the fifth century BCE. What would be the view on old age in such a civilization? Georges Minois observes, “For a people searching for human perfection, beauty and the achievement of full human potential, old age could be classified among the divine curses. Decrepitude, which

shrivels heroes, seemed worse than death, which guarantees the grandeur of destiny.”¹ This statement indicates that Western people traditionally and generally have a negative attitude toward old age; they would rather die than lead a life of decrepitude and sadness. In the times when Greek mythology starts to appear, “old age was always considered a curse.”² As a result, the Olympians in the mythology hate old age, so much so that readers are often impressed by the legends of the heroic young who rebel against and even kill the tyrannical old. *Homer's Epics*, a major source of Western culture and literature from ancient Greek, centers on young heroes and neglects the old. Senior subjectivity in the West is basically founded on such a mood that takes the old as the bad or the useless.

The tragic destiny of the old is also embodied in the tales of Oedipus, a trilogy of Hellenic plays composed by Sophocles.³ The legendary tragedy is about a Greek king named Oedipus. According to a prophecy, Oedipus is destined to kill his father and marry his mother. When he grows up, he accidentally fulfills the prophecy, which is against his will. After learning the truth years later, he blinds himself and goes into exile. Finally, he dies alone at old age. In my opinion, the tragedy of the elderly in the story of Oedipus is represented in two aspects. First, in *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus's father, King Laius, who is old compared to young Oedipus, is destined to be killed by his own son. Second, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the blinded Oedipus leads a sorrowful life till old age, and in the end he dies without revealing to his children the site of his tomb. The first

¹ Georges Minois, *History of Old Age: from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 43.

² Ibid., 44.

³ See Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 1984).

story establishes a leitmotif of family tension and patricide, while the latter a theme of old people's atonement for the blunders they made at an early age. Both of them are repeatedly emulated by later literary works in over two millennia. The stories reveal ancient Greeks' negative views on old age and old people, suggesting that the elderly are powerless and even useless in both family and career. When writing *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles was already in his eighties. He might have identified himself with the protagonist he created, because Colonus, the place where old Oedipus chooses to end his life, was Sophocles's homeland. At that time, aging and death were considered curses on human beings, as Sophocles argues via the speech of Oedipus, "only gods can never age, the gods can never die. All else in the world almighty Time obliterates, crushes all to nothing."⁴ In ancient Greece, human beings were inferior to gods, and old humans were inferior to young ones.

The negative feelings about old people are best shown in Aristotle's analysis of the character of the old in his masterpiece on the art of persuasion, *On Rhetoric*, although he does not intend to focus on the issue of old age. Aristotle (384-322 BCE) holds a rather negative opinion about the personalities of the elderly. He believes that the elderly are opposite to the young who are active, pleasure-loving, impulsive, optimistic and full of hope in life. In his eyes, old people basically stand for things that are doubtful, cynical, suspicious, distrustful, small-minded, stingy, cowardly, fearful, self-centered, shameless, hopeless, weak, querulous, etc.⁵

⁴ Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, 322.

⁵ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, 2nd edition, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 151-2.

Almost none of the characteristics of the old that constitutes their subjectivity is positive. To Aristotle, old people are not born with these characteristics, and at least they are not like this when they are young. It is all kinds of earlier setbacks in the past life that cause their passive attitudes toward everything they encounter at old age. Aristotle realizes that senior subjectivity is strongly affected by one's life experiences before old age. Old people are distrustful because of their experiences that are usually frustrating and disappointing. As is concluded by Aristotle, "having lived for many years and having been more often deceived and having made more mistakes themselves, and since most things turn out badly, they assert nothing with certainty and all things with less assurance than is needed."⁶ Such a feeling of uncertainty, as well as the fact that they are old and weak, compels the elderly to become self-centered and ignore others' benefits. According to Aristotle, "they are more fond of themselves than is right."⁷ As a result, he naturally comes to the conclusion that the old are filled with various moral defects and they are the worst group of people among all human beings. This overgeneralization of old age is obviously one-sided and untenable, but given the social environment and reality of ancient Greece that generally biased old age, Aristotle's opinion is justified. Besides, his view on senior subjectivity would further influence later generations in the West, which I will discuss later.

Aristotle's treatise concentrates on the persuasive function of rhetoric, but at the same time, his opinion on old age can be discerned from the stress on the emotional and psychological aspects of different age groups of human beings. He initiated a "scientific" and systematic way to study humans and their personalities for the purpose of persuading them with a careful choice of

⁶ Ibid., 151.

⁷ Ibid.

words that are in accordance with their respective character traits. The treatise is divided into three books, the second one of which discusses in detail the three means of persuasion that an orator must rely on: those grounded in the character or credibility of the speaker (ethos), in the emotions and psychology of the audience (pathos), and in patterns of reasoning or logic (logos). Aristotle believes both ethos and pathos can affect judgment. Specifically, he examines the effect of ethos and pathos on an audience because a speaker needs to exhibit these modes of persuasion before that audience. How can an orator suit the speech to the character of the old? Or how should a speaker deal with the old since they are considered to be a group of people who are distrustful, cynical, and small-minded and whose past is long and future short? Aristotle points out in his work that “all people receive favorably speeches spoken in their own character and by persons like themselves,” so, in order to persuade the old, the speaker should begin with the same ideas and feelings that the old have.⁸ Thus Aristotle associates verbal language with old people’s characters. This could be Aristotle’s original view that senior subjectivity can be described and even influenced by language. The propaganda will be most successful if it goes with personalities of the old. For example, in Aristotle’s eyes, the old do not act on a basis of desire but rather act for profit, so the speaker would be more persuasive to the old if the speaker could let them see the profits of following or agreeing with the speech.

So far we have learned a theory that touches on the perception of old people and senior subjectivity, as well as its causes and effects, proposed by Aristotle over two thousand years ago. Aristotle, based on the tradition of ancient Greece, not only explores the quality of the old and considers it as basically negative, but also informs us of how to persuade or deal with the old

⁸ Ibid., 152.

with speech. Aristotle's contribution to the study of the old is that he tries to analyze human nature objectively by comparing the old with other groups of human beings, classifying them by age and meanwhile taking birth, power, wealth, and fortune into account. In other words, he compares the old with those who are young and those who are middle aged, rather than compare human beings with gods or goddesses in Greek mythology or describe humans in the backdrop of mythology. By this means, Aristotle establishes the basic idea that one's senior subjectivity is not congenital, but is constructed in the society throughout one's life.

On the other hand, Aristotle is obviously influenced by the negative attitude toward old age in ancient Greece. Thus, his exploration of the character of the old is partial, incomplete, and even untrue. Aristotle does not notice the fluidity and diversity of the characters of the elderly, but rather relies on the stereotypical Hellenic views to judge different groups of people, such as youth, middle age, and old age. The stereotype of old age in ancient Greece can also be seen in the comedies of Greek dramatist Menander (c. 342/41 – c. 290 BCE). According to Kennedy, “the central character [who is named Knemon] in Menander's *Dyskolos* (*The Grouch*) (317 BCE) has some of the traits described here by Aristotle.”⁹ Knemon is an irascible old misanthrope who has lived a solitary life for a long time, because he believes that everyone is concerned with nothing but their own profit and therefore there is no true friendship. With this belief, he becomes stubborn and selfish, and outrageously interferes in his daughter's marriage. Although Knemon learns his lesson at the end of the play, he is such a protagonist that best represents

⁹ Ibid., 151. For the plot of the play, see Shawn O'Bryhim and George Fredric Franko, *Greek and Roman Comedy: Translations and Interpretations of Four Representative Plays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 90-95.

Aristotle's concept of old people and becomes a prototype of the bad old father for later literary works.

About 2000 years after Aristotle, a philosopher in England named Francis Bacon (1561-1626) devoted himself to writing essays about life experiences, including an analysis of the character of the old. Analogous to Aristotle, Bacon compared youth and old age and tried to discover their different personalities. In one of his essays—*Of Youth and Age*, Bacon pointed out both strong and weak points of the young and the old. According to Bacon, “Young men are fitter to invent than to judge; fitter for execution than for counsel; and fitter for new projects than for settled business;” on the other hand, “men of age object too much, consult too long, adventure too little, repent too soon, and seldom drive business home to the full period, but content themselves with a mediocrity of success.”¹⁰ In Bacon's eyes, young people are generally active, passionate, and fond of new challenges in life, but they may become too aggressive and suffer from failure due to the lack of sensible judgment. The old, however, tend to go to the other extreme. They have better understanding of the world and better judgment about life, but they also have a passive and conservative attitude, which hinders them from obtaining greater achievements. Therefore, Bacon claims that “it is good to compound employments of both,” and he offers three reasons: “that will be good for the present, because the virtues of either age may correct the defects of both; and good for succession, that young men may be learners, while men in age are actors; and, lastly, good for extern accidents, because authority followeth old men, and

¹⁰ Francis Bacon, *Essays of Francis Bacon*, ed. Mary Augusta Scott (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 194-5.

favour and popularity youth.”¹¹ Bacon’s proposal looks like a good solution to character defects of both youth and seniors. If we look at the issue from the aspect of the elderly, Bacon might have suggested that the old should learn from the young to perfect their personalities, or cooperate with the young to get the best out of both of them.

But it is still doubtful whether his suggestion is workable, because the old live in different physical and mental conditions and environments from those of the young, so their mentalities are different. Just as Bacon himself admits, “for the moral part, perhaps youth will have the pre-eminence, as age hath for the politic.... [A]ge doth profit rather in the powers of understanding, than in the virtues of the will and affections.”¹² This statement reveals that Bacon believes the old and the young are in two different or even opposite realms, so it would be difficult for them to respect or cooperate with each other. The statement also suggests that the young are morally better than the old, but this view is also debatable. Bacon dissects the connection between the young and the old. He fails to see that every old person grows from the young age and explain what has caused the deterioration of a senior subject. Although he notices good traits of the elderly, his negative view is biased. At least it fails to provide the whole picture of old age.

Bacon lives in the era of European Renaissance that praises highly the ancient Greek and Roman culture and art. As a philosopher, author, and orator who writes and reads Latin fluently, Bacon has acquaintance with those great names in antiquity. He enumerates some of them as examples in this essay, such as Julius Caesar, Septimius Severus, Augustus Caesar, Hermogenes,

¹¹ Ibid., 195.

¹² Ibid.

Tully, and Scipio Africanus.¹³ It is evident that Bacon's thought is a part of Western tradition coming down from ancient Greece. We can safely say that he is also familiar with Aristotle, and the latter might have influenced him to some extent. Like Aristotle, Bacon is determined to establish a profound and comprehensive scientific system, but their ways of reasoning are fundamentally different. Aristotle uses deductive reasoning to reach his conclusion, while Bacon applies the approach of inductive reasoning. In other words, Aristotle goes from generalization to specific instances, but Bacon, well-known for being the father of empiricism, proceeds in the opposite direction. Such contrasting principles of research render either of them different conclusions about senior subjectivity. Aristotle bases his discussion on the stereotype of the elderly that is widespread in his times, while Bacon relies more on his personal inductive observation. It might be one of the reasons that the former concentrates on the negative aspect of the characters of the elderly, and the latter discovers both advantages and disadvantages of old age in a more objective way. But, just as I mentioned earlier, Aristotle realizes the connections between the young and the old and between speech and senior subjects, whereas Bacon seems to have paid less attention to such connections.

Despite Bacon's application of the inductive principle, however, both Bacon and Aristotle tend to generalize their impressions of the elderly and fail to uncover the actual subjective mind of the elderly in different situations. Therefore, their accounts are unable to encompass the

¹³ Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE), Roman politician and general; Septimius Severus (145-211), Roman emperor from 193 to 211; Augustus Caesar (63 BCE-14 CE), founder of the Roman Principate and the first Roman emperor from 27 BCE to 14 CE; Hermogenes, Greek rhetorician in the first century; Tully, or Cicero (106-43 BCE), Roman politician and lawyer; Scipio Africanus (236-183 BCE), Roman general and consul.

concrete and diverse characters that the elderly possess and the environments that they have to encounter. The scientific method that both thinkers stressed suits the physical world much better than human society. The physical world is governed by natural laws with predictable strict rules, while human society is based on human relations and human minds filled with various changeable and unpredictable desires and emotions. In this sense, literature can be an important supplement to philosophy in examining subjective human minds. Bacon's contemporary, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), a great English playwright, created many images of old age. In a short poem that is attributed to him, old age and youth are compared and contrasted:

Crabbed age and youth cannot live together:
Youth is full of pleasance, age is full of care;
Youth like summer morn, age like winter weather;
Youth like summer brave, age like winter bare.
Youth is full of sport, age's breath is short;
Youth is nimble, age is lame;
Youth is hot and bold, age is weak and cold;
Youth is wild, and age is tame.
Age, I do abhor thee; youth, I do adore thee;
O, my Love, my Love is young!
Age, I do defy thee: O, sweet shepherd, hie thee!
For methinks thou stay'st too long.¹⁴

The author of the poem, whether it is Shakespeare or not, obviously favors youth much more than old age. He or she uses a series of adjectives with positive meanings to describe youth, while negative words are all applied to old age. This poem, although written nearly twenty centuries after Aristotle, is very close to, if not identical with, Aristotle's opinion on the

¹⁴ Thomas R. Cole and Mary G Winkler, eds., *The Oxford Book of Aging: Reflections on the Journey of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 120. The poem was first published in 1599 in an anthology entitled *The Passionate Pilgrim*, in which 20 poems were collected and published by William Jaggard and attributed to "W. Shakespeare" on the title page. But only five of them are considered authentically Shakespearean.

contrasting characteristics of the old and the young. It reflects and strengthens the Western view on senior subjectivity in the 16th century.

Among the characters of old people described by Shakespeare, King Lear is the most successful and impressive one. In the play, Shakespeare shows his audience an old man with flawed character. King Lear is a monarch, but he is also a father and an old man. When he decides to retire in order to enjoy the rest of his life, he chooses to divide his land and kingdom among his daughters. But he is so credulous that he fails to see through or understand his daughters—he embraces two elder ones who lie to him and disowns the youngest one who is honest to him. G. B. Harrison writes astutely, “The tragedy of Lear is that he brings his suffering on his own head by a grievous stupidity [and] understands neither himself nor his daughters...Lear’s fault is a fault of the mind, a mind unwarrantably, because selfishly, foolish.”¹⁵

The tragedy of the old king is caused by many factors, but the most fundamental one is his personality that is worsened by decrepitude. Derek Traversi argues that “old age has weakened his capacity for self-control.”¹⁶ This opinion can be illustrated from the dialogue between Goneril and Regan, two of King Lear’s daughters:

Goneril: You see how full of changes his age is; the observation we have made of it hath not been little: he always loved our sister most; and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.

Regan: ‘Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.

Goneril: The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash; then, must we look to receive from his age, not alone the imperfections of long-engrafted condition,

¹⁵ G. B. Harrison, ed., *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 1138.

¹⁶ Derek Traversi, *An Approach to Shakespeare*, vol. 2, 3rd edition (London: Hollis & Carter, 1968), 143.

but, therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them.¹⁷

Both daughters agree that the character of their rash father has been deteriorating with age. He sinks into a kind of chaotic mental state without a clear understanding of the true well-being at old age. For example, King Lear confuses the kingship of a nation with the affection among family members, mistakenly believing he can make a deal between the two. When he decides to give his land to his daughters in exchange for their announcement of how deeply and sincerely they love him, he is virtually forcing his daughters to lie and deceive him. It is the king and father himself who triggers his daughters' subsequent maltreatment of him. To make matters worse, the credulous king favors liars and harms the honest daughter without realizing or admitting to his own errors. Therefore, his senior subjectivity is constructed on top of a series of misconceptions and delusions, which cause his madness in the end.

Through vivid characterization, Shakespeare reveals to his readers that it is King Lear's own personality that causes his tragedy. King Lear's personality reminds people of Aristotle and Bacon's negative opinions on the character of old age. It also fits into the negative opinion about old age in over two thousand years of Western tradition, in which the old and young have frequently engaged in irreconcilable conflicts. As a literary work, *King Lear* vividly describes the view about old age by embedding it in a tragic story that represents the conflicts in family bonds and social power. The story strengthens the long-existing theme of miserable old fathers or useless old kings who are usually tyrannical or delirious and are supposed to be killed or expelled by their own children.

¹⁷ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, act one, scene one, ed. Horace Howard Furness (New York: Dover Publications, 1963), 12.

The negative view on the aged in the Western tradition also results in the production of a widespread legend about the fountain of youth which has been represented repeatedly in various forms, both visual and verbal. According to this legend, there exists a mysterious fountain which is believed to be able to restore youth to anyone who drinks its water or bathes in it.¹⁸ One of the fascinating tales about the water of youth is Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1804-1864) short story *Doctor Heidegger's Experiment*. In the story, four old people enjoy momentary youth after taking the water of the fountain, from which readers can see a striking contrast between the ecstasy of regaining youth and the despair of becoming old again. The enthusiasm for the fountain of youth is an imaginative representation of Western people's longing for youth and rejecting old age. In China, people seek longevity, and some are even obsessed with alchemy in order to find and produce a medication to keep youthful vigor. However, longevity in China does not necessarily mean staying young, but rather means living a wise and happy old life as long as possible. This is one of the major differences between Chinese and Western notions of happy old age.

Positive Views on Senior Subjectivity

So far, we have got an impression that Western tradition, whether in intellectual thoughts or literary representations, tends to stress the negative aspect of senior subjectivity and the conflicts and confrontations between the old and the young. But we cannot take it for granted that Western philosophers and litterateurs all simply believe being old means being obsolete. On

¹⁸ Modern versions of such tales are often connected with the adventures of European explorers in the New World of Caribbean area. See, for example, Frederik Paludan-Müller (1809-1876), *The Fountain of Youth*, translated from Danish by Humphry William Freeland (1814-1892) (London; Philadelphia: MacMillan and Co.; J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1867), 173.

the contrary, some of them ponder over the benefits and positivity of becoming old. One of the most influential treatises of philosophy from antiquity is *The Republic* written by Plato (427-347 BCE) in around 380 BCE, in which the topic of old age is touched on by Socrates. Plato allegedly records his master's views, but those views supposedly to some extent belong to his own. The opinions presented in the conversation are groundbreaking and it is worthwhile to discuss them at length.

In the book's dialogue, Socrates aims to elucidate the meaning of justice and whether the just humans are happier than the unjust ones in various situations and places. Before he comes to the core issue about justice, however, Socrates strategically starts with the feelings of becoming old. Such a discussion might be one of the earliest human contemplations on aging, old age, and senior subjectivity. Socrates brings forward the question to his old-aged friend Cephalus: Is it a hard time of life to be at the threshold of old age? Cephalus admits that many elderly hold a negative attitude toward old age:

[M]ost of the members of our group lament, longing for the pleasures of youth and reminiscing about sex, about drinking bouts and feasts and all that goes with things of that sort; they take it hard as though they were deprived of something very important and had then lived well but are now not even alive. Some also bewail the abuse that old age receives from relatives, and in this key they sing a refrain about all the evils old age has caused them.¹⁹

This mindset is exactly what ancient Greeks typically had. But Cephalus himself holds an opposite opinion, arguing that old age can be considered as one of the best periods of life. For instance, he believes "old age brings great peace and freedom from such things" as sexual

¹⁹ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, 2nd edition, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 5.

desires.²⁰ According to Cephalus, it is the character of human beings, not old age, that causes feelings of discontentment or suffering: “If they are orderly and content with themselves, even old age is only moderately troublesome; if they are not, then both age, Socrates, and youth alike turn out to be hard for that sort.”²¹ This opinion is important in that Plato realizes that old age, although frequently considered to be opposite to youth or other periods of human life, is not necessarily worse than younger years. Old age is an integral part of one’s entire life, and the essence of one’s senior subjectivity is connected to that of one’s youthful subjectivity. They are both affected by various factors.

Socrates challenges Cephalus’s view by saying that it could be wealth rather than character that determines his contentment with his late life. Cephalus does not rule out the usefulness of money, but he maintains that the possession of money is most worthwhile “not for any man, but for the decent and orderly one,” because “money contributes a great deal to not cheating or lying to any man against one’s will, and, moreover, to not departing for that other place frightened because one owes some sacrifices to a god or money to a human being.”²² Cephalus holds that both factors—money and character—should be taken into consideration, just as he says, “the decent man would not bear old age with poverty very easily, nor would the one who is not a decent sort ever be content with himself even if he were wealthy.”²³ It means that wealth can help an old person of noble character lead an easier life, but will not be very helpful to an

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 7.

²³ Ibid., 6.

immoral old person for a satisfying later life. Money can make a good person better, but cannot make a bad person good. By the same token, a virtuous old person can live a better life with money, but an evil old person cannot mentally or morally benefit from wealth. With this statement, Plato explicitly points out that wealth cannot guarantee a happy late life, and therefore it is not a determining factor behind senior subjectivity. Many old people, however, cannot realize it, making many mistakes in dealing with challenges at old age by being attached to wealth.

At this point, Cephalus and Socrates agree on the significance of a virtuous life to everyone, including the elderly. Cephalus holds that when a person is old and has a stronger feeling of his or her approaching death, the person will be worried about anything unjust he or she has done to others, and if the person “is conscious in himself of no unjust deed, sweet and good hope is ever beside him—a nurse of his old age.”²⁴ With these words, Plato tries to convince his readers that the secret of happy old age is to be just and virtuous. After this, they start to debate over the definition of justice. To put it another way, Plato uses the words of Cephalus to stress that leading a life of justice plays an important role in the welfare of the elderly, and wealth is only beneficial to those who devote themselves to virtuous deeds. A satisfactory and proper senior subjectivity is based on virtuous life and justice.

Ironically, old Socrates, a mentor who had devoted himself to propagating social justice in his life, was accused of doing unjust things, such as disbelieving in the gods in which the city believed and corrupting the youth, and finally sentenced to death. It gives us a lesson that mere social justice and personal virtues cannot ensure a happy ending of the old. However, Socrates

²⁴ Ibid.

and Plato inspired many thinkers in subsequent generations, among whom one of the most prominent and influential who expounded the meaning of old age was Cicero.

Cicero (106-43 BCE) was a Roman politician and lawyer, who served as consul in 63 BC. Ancient Rome was also an era when the old were largely marginalized and invisible, although a small number of seniors in the Roman Republic enjoyed great privilege and power in the Senate to govern the country. After the senatorial period, the condition of old men in the Roman Empire experienced a setback: “They lost their familial and political power, which had given them a reason for carrying on, and were left alone with their pains, their ugliness and frailty. Henceforth nothing would distract them from their misfortunes. Left to themselves, old men became the very incarnation of suffering.”²⁵ In the Roman world, the situation of old women was even worse: “old women were neglected and despised, and treated very harshly on account of their physical ugliness.”²⁶

However, at the age of 62, Cicero published his outstanding work *On Old Age*, in which he aims at advocating a virtuous and easy life for the elderly who have usually been expected to live in despair engendered by suffering and solitude. Similar to Plato’s *The Republic*, this article holds a positive attitude toward old people. Cicero fabricates a dialogue between Cato and his friends expatiating on the topic of old age, which also resembles *The Republic* in narrative structure. In the essay, Cicero examines the validity of four conventional conceptions in regards to the infelicity of old age: “it incapacitates a man for acting in the affairs of the world,” “it

²⁵ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 89.

²⁶ Ibid., 83.

produces great infirmities of body,” “it disqualifies him for the enjoyment of the sensual gratifications,” and “it brings him within the immediate verge of death.”²⁷ The four arguments represent four major problems that an old person has to encounter: increasingly less social life, weaker body, fewer desires, and closer to death. These are the brutal reality of old age and the reasons why people hate to get old.

With abundant examples and eloquent remarks, Cicero illuminates that the four conceptions are not necessarily correct. Firstly, while he admits that the aged are disqualified for the work that requires the vivacity of youth, Cicero argues that the elderly can play an important role in the great affairs of the world that need less physical strength but more life experiences and wise decisions, like the contribution of a helmsman who “sits quietly at the helm and directs its motions.”²⁸ Secondly, although old age impairs strength, according to Cicero, “there is, indeed, a species of calm and composed elocution extremely graceful and perfectly well adapted to advanced years, and I have frequently observed an eloquent old man captivate the attention of his audience by the charms of this soft and milder tone of delivery.”²⁹ Thirdly, it is true that old age deprives people of sensual gratifications, but Cicero maintains that it also delivers the aged “from those snares which allure youth into some of the worst vices to which that age is addicted.”³⁰ Fourthly, Cicero holds that old age should not become a state of much anxiety and disquietude due to the near approach of death, because an old person who can see through the

²⁷ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Essays on Old Age and Friendship*, trans. William Melmoth (publisher unknown, 1820), 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

essence of life will never inspire a fear for death. According to Cicero, “[Death] is an event either utterly to be disregarded, if it extinguishes the soul’s existence, or much to be wished, if it conveys her to some region where she shall continue to exist for ever.”³¹

The four arguments that Cicero uses to refute the misconceptions about old age shows an idealized consideration of senior subjectivity. His treatise on human old age “is based, in great part, on what old age may be, rather than on what it generally is.”³² Ostensibly, Cicero’s essay *On Old Age* is analogous to the discourse on old age in Plato’s *The Republic*. They both touch upon what an ideal old age should be like and what are important factors that determine the well-being of the elderly. They explain in their own ways how an old person can face death with a happy and calm mindset. They even have the entirely identical opinion about the loss of sensual or erotic desires at old age, arguing that it is a good thing for the elderly who can enjoy more real spiritual freedom without such desires. This is the moral aspect of senior subjectivity that they both stress. As is clarified in Cicero’s essay:

[I]f we consider [old age] as delivering us from the tyranny of lust and ambition, from the angry and contentious passions, from every inordinate and irrational desire, in a word, as teaching us to retire within ourselves, and look for happiness in our own bosoms; if to these moral benefits naturally resulting from length of days be added that sweet food of the mind which is gathered in the fields of science, I know not any season of life that is passed more agreeably than the learned leisure of a virtuous old age.³³

Cicero also sees the connection between one’s old age and prior life experiences, especially in terms of morality: “We are here told, and with truth, that it is often the follies and sins of early

³¹ Ibid., 66.

³² Andrew P. Peabody, Introduction to *Cicero De Senectute (On Old Age)*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by Andrew P. Peabody (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1887), x.

³³ Cicero, *Essays on Old Age and Friendship*, 48.

life that embitter the declining years.”³⁴ He believes that wrongdoings in their youth will affect one’s mental state in old age. The problems of old people might originate in their younger years.

Certainly, Cicero would embrace Plato’s (or Socrates’s) opinion on old age, but the two works are written for different purposes. As is shown above, *The Republic* stresses social justice, taking the morals of the elderly as one of the most important reasons for a happy life in later years and one important contribution to justice in the society. Simply put, Plato did not focus on old age, but used the discussion to lead to other arguments. However, *On Old Age* takes the mental and physical states of the old as its main concern. Cicero probes more into the subjectivity of the old by maintaining that they can still make accomplishments in tasks that are suitable to them. His aim is to illuminate that old age is a period no less satisfactory than all the other periods that a person can experience, whereby advocating a positive and affirmative view on senior subjectivity.

Integrated Views on Senior Subjectivity

Both Plato and Cicero emphasize the influence of moral factors on the felicity of the old, but they merely focus on the idealized image of the old that is hardly applicable to the majority when they picture a felicitous later life. They do not examine old people’s true mental states and actual needs, nor have they offered sufficient guidance to live a moral old life. Aristotle and Bacon, on the other hand, take old age as an analytical physical object. Plato’s and Cicero’s conception are ideal and in a humanistic way, whereas Aristotle’s and Bacon’s thoughts are practical and in a scientific way. They touch more or less on senior subjectivity, but seldom

³⁴ Peabody, Introduction to *Cicero De Senectute (On Old Age)*, x.

intend to step into it. In the nineteenth century, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), a renowned German philosopher, elaborates on the different periods of human life, including old age. His statements reveal efforts to go deeper into the subjective mind of the elderly.

Schopenhauer refers to old age in one of his essays “On the Different Periods of Life” by examining old age in the large context of a person’s entire life. The essay contains the traces of both Plato’s and Aristotle’s thoughts. On the one hand, Schopenhauer expounds the difference between young and old age; on the other hand, he discusses the development of subjective feelings in the process of one’s aging. For example, he alleges that young people tend to regard a particular thing or object as its whole class or family, but when they grow older and learn more about the complexity of the world, such a feeling constantly decreases.³⁵ Schopenhauer thus proceeds from objective observation to subjective analysis, and he proposes that “the *objective* existence of all things, that is, their existence in our mere *representation or mental picture*, is generally agreeable, whereas their *subjective* existence, that consists in *willing*, is steeped in pain and misery.”³⁶ In other words, “all things are delightful to *see*, but dreadful to *be*.”³⁷ According to Schopenhauer, younger people are watching the world from a distance more than experiencing it, so they may fall in an illusion that life should be pleasant, but older ones may consider life terrible after being disillusioned by all sorts of frustrating personal experiences. As a result,

³⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, “On the Different Periods of Life,” in *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays by Arthur Schopenhauer*, vol. 1, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 478.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 479.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

people will gradually realize that “all happiness is chimerical, whereas all suffering is real.”³⁸ Although Schopenhauer approves such an understanding of life, he does not come to the usual one-sided conclusion that old age is suffering. On the contrary, he argues that when people gradually realize that happiness or pleasure is difficult to attain, in old age, they are more likely to be “at ease in the matter, enjoy a bearable present, and even delight in trifles.”³⁹ This point also shows traces of Eastern philosophy of life that one can easily find contentment in whatever situation, which will be discussed later. In Schopenhauer’s eyes, old age can be a perfect period, for only a person “who attains old age acquires a complete and consistent mental picture of life.”⁴⁰ As a result, he states that “[i]n youth intuitive perception predominates; in old age reflection; thus youth is the time for poetry, whereas old age is more for philosophy.”⁴¹ In regards to the advantages of old age over young age, Schopenhauer alludes to Plato’s idea in the *Republic* that “hoary old age is happy in so far as it has finally done with the sexual impulse which has incessantly disturbed and tormented us.”⁴² To Schopenhauer, the advantages of old age are not just restricted to the loss of troublesome sensual desire, but also lie in the wisdom gained over decades of life: the old person “is convinced...that all is vanity and knows that all nuts are hollow, however much they may be gilded.”⁴³

³⁸ Ibid., 481.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 489.

⁴¹ Ibid., 488.

⁴² Ibid., 491.

⁴³ Ibid., 492.

So far, we can see Schopenhauer made a great leap forward regarding the topic of senior subjectivity, compared with Western philosophers prior to him over the past two millennia. He integrated traditional Western ideas and notions that are both ideal and practical, humanistic and scientific, objective and subjective; his theory also bears the features of some traditional Chinese philosophy that takes old age as a satisfactory stage during which one can enjoy freedom and wisdom. In view of this, Schopenhauer's essay offers more insightful opinions about the subjectivity of the elderly, such as how old people perceive themselves and the world, how others understand old people, and how old people deal with everything in the world with the wisdom they accumulated over time in order to live a happy later life. It is interesting that, although well-known as a philosopher of pessimism, Schopenhauer offered a highly positive and optimistic outlook on old age. He believed that a person can attain a wonderful experience of life with a deepened comprehension of the world and him- or herself throughout the entire process of growing old. As a result, aging and old age are never dreadful. Such is Schopenhauer's viewpoint about senior subjectivity.

Schopenhauer's contemporary, German writer and statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), expresses his idea of life and senior subjectivity in his literary magnum opus, *Faust*.⁴⁴ The drama is generally about an old magician and alchemist called Doctor Faust who is highly successful in his profession, but finally finds himself dissatisfied with his past. He repents for spending all the time in a study and failing to live a full life. This mental state is one that old people frequently have. When people are getting old, they might regret some things that

⁴⁴ The legend of Faust is also a motif that appears in many literary, artistic, cinematic, and musical works that have reinterpreted it through the ages.

they did not have a chance to do in the past. So he decides to make a wager with the devil Mephistopheles for knowledge and power that are beyond his limits. But the narrative can also be deemed as an old man's last attempt for youthful power and self-realization. At first, old Faust is in his study, lamenting over the reality that he, as an old academic, has reached the limits of learning and knowledge. But he still wants to seek a fuller life by acquiring the satisfying higher power to realize the truth of the world. With the help of the Devil, Faust pursues and experiences the secular life that he never had before: a life of sexual love and affections, politics, aesthetics, and personal achievements. He regains youthful passion and a robust body and enjoys the pleasure of experiencing different types of life. However, after undergoing gains and losses in such secular things as political power and sexual desire, Faust finally realizes the truth of life—the eternal love for freedom, and then he dies with satisfaction. In the end, Faust announces:

The last word Wisdom ever has to say:
He only earns his Freedom and Existence,
Who's forced to win them freshly every day.
Childhood, manhood, age's vigorous years,
Surrounded by dangers, they'll spend here.
I wish to gaze again on such a land,
Free earth: where a free race, in freedom, stand.
Then, to the Moment I'd dare say:
'Stay a while! You are so lovely!'
Through aeons, then, never to fade away
This path of mine through all that's earthly.
Anticipating, here, its deep enjoyment,
Now I savour it, that highest moment.⁴⁵

Faust's final words reveal that he has realized the significance of Freedom, which can be taken as one of the characteristics of his self-identity in old age. His contentment before death suggests

⁴⁵ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust*, trans. A. S. Kline, Ebook, Poetry in Translation 2003 (<http://www.poetryintranslation.com>), 467.

that to have admirable personal achievements and thorough understanding of the self and the world are important dimensions upon which one can construct senior subjectivity. The desirable senior subjectivity is the one that fuses the self with the interests of other people in the world. But success never comes easy. Rejuvenated Faust must experience different lives that he once wishes to have and sees through worldly desires in which the Devil wants him to indulge. It is the expectation and enthusiasm for a better life that prevents him from deteriorating and sinking into Hell. If we analyze this verse by considering that Faust is an old man who has attained epiphany and wisdom as a result of various life experiences, we can easily see the resemblance between the thought behind Goethe's story and Schopenhauer's opinion: the elderly can learn from life experiences and gain an insight into life with the advancement of age. To old people, life is imperfect, but they can still enjoy it, for one's self is nothing in the face of an eternal love for a better world.

Different from the negative attitude toward old age in Western tradition since Aristotle and the idealized vision of self-fulfillment in old age since Plato, Schopenhauer and Goethe try to find a more practical and useful way of improving the well-being of the old. They do not deny the problems that old people may have, but concentrate on the internal connections of different life stages and the possibility of accumulating wisdom during life. They come to a conclusion that the happiness of the elderly is based on their own wise understanding and acceptance of the harsh reality and their own willingness to improve the world as well as themselves.

In addition to Schopenhauer and Goethe, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) expresses an opinion on old age in one of his speeches entitled "How to Grow Old." The purpose of Russell's account is to advise the public on how to stay youthful in spirit and avoid mental problems of old

age. Taking his maternal grandmother as a good example, Russell provides a “proper recipe for remaining young”—to “have wide and keen interests and activities” no matter how old one has become.⁴⁶ He holds that it is an effective way for an old person to forget about his or her age and therefore the old person will not worry about the probable shortness of his or her future. According to Russell, an old person should not be absorbed in the past or clinging to youth, but should “have strong impersonal interests involving appropriate activities.”⁴⁷ In regards to impending death, Russell argues that an old person, having experienced so much in life, has no reason to fear death, and that the best way to overcome the fear of death is “to make your interests gradually wider and more impersonal, until bit by bit the walls of the ego recede, and your life becomes increasingly merged in the universal life.”⁴⁸ In other words, Russell stresses that an old person should engage in appropriate activities to get rid of negative emotions about old age. The ultimate objective, according to Russell, is to get rid of the ego that has long entrenched in mind. Russell tries to tell us that only by forgetting about the self and merging into the universe can one live a truly happy old life and succeed in constructing a healthy senior subjectivity. Russell is a philosopher who takes a positive and constructive view on old age. Compared to Schopenhauer and Goethe, Russell is more conscious of constructing senior subjectivity by abandoning the self-centered mindset. His view of integrating the self into the universe is similar to the thought of some Chinese thinkers such as Zhuangzi. Since Russell lectured in China for a considerable period and admired Chinese philosophy and wisdom, it is

⁴⁶ Bertrand Russell, “How to Grow Old,” in *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 50-52, 50.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

very likely that his positive view of old age might have been influenced by traditional Chinese views of senior subjectivity.

Concluding Remarks

To sum up, in the Western tradition since ancient Greece, old age has long been taken as an unfavorable experience. In terms of the various Western views on senior subjectivity, they can be generally classified into three major types: negative, positive, and on a minor scale an attempt to reconcile the first two types. The former, represented by Aristotle, is obviously influenced by the social reality that old people are mostly less energetic and powerful than younger ones, and that old age is hopeless since it is the last stage of life and is faced with death. The latter, advocated by Plato, attempts to resist such social reality and find meaning in old age by visualizing a serene and valuable late life. Aristotle and his followers take old people as a kind of natural substances that deteriorate into nothing along with aging. They may not think humans are a part of nature, but they do believe humans are negatively affected by the environment. So in Aristotle's eyes, the old are the worst, whether physically, emotionally, or morally. Such a biased idea is a typical description of senior subjectivity in ancient Greece. On the other hand, some old people, including Cicero, have their own views on senior subjectivity. They try to demonstrate that old age is one of the best periods of life. Old people become morally superior to young people, because they have lost many sensual desires. Old people are physically weak, but they are mentally strong and can give wise advice from their rich life experience.

I think that the two types of opinions are both reasonable but also flawed, for they tend to be over-generalized or idealized. Senior subjectivity is not so simple as either of the views has

imagined. Bacon tries to reconcile the opposites of young and old age by saying that they can learn from each other, but he fails to realize the internal connections between an old person and his or her past life. The key is not that the old should learn from the young, but that the old should learn to live with themselves. Thus he fails to see real problems of seniors but comprehends senior subjectivity in a wrong way. After Descartes and Kant established human subjectivity and rationality, human beings are given more priority in philosophical studies and considered to have the potential and power to discern the world and themselves. Schopenhauer examines the subjective mind of an old person by considering his or her entire life completely and consistently. By taking the comprehensive situation of an old person into account, Schopenhauer concludes that old age is not absolutely positive or negative, but is determined by a variety of internal and external factors. He admits that life is suffering, but also believes that old people are able to gain wisdom from life and enjoy old age. This is a more advanced and justified contemplation of senior subjectivity. Based on Russell's argument, a better construction of senior subjectivity is to avoid self-centered or self-obsessed mindset but focus on external things.

The aforementioned intellectual thoughts about old age and senior subjectivity are a result of the development of Western society and culture. These thoughts, after being discussed and accepted by people, became influential factors for the further development of society. Literature plays the same role in history. Literary works embody human ideas and emotions, but also shape them in return. From *Greek mythology* and *Homer's Epics*, we can see that the aged are demonized or marginalized in ancient Greece. Those old people are supposed to be obstacles to a brave new world. From Greek dramas to Shakespearean plays, old people are described as

dotards, namely, the weak-minded due to senility. They are not only physically weak, but also spiritually and even morally weak. Literature, whether it is prose or poetry, favors narrating debility in old age. However, Goethe's *Faust* makes a breakthrough from the stereotypical depiction of old people and senior subjectivity. Analogous to his contemporary Schopenhauer, Goethe also expresses the idea that old people can find the truth of life and become content with themselves after all kinds of setbacks. With the help of tales and legends, literary works in different time periods can better illuminate their respective opinions on senior subjectivity, because they can technically enter the subjective mind of a protagonist in a particular social and historical background. This is one of the important reasons that the present research will focus on literary analysis in most of the following chapters.

Western intellectual thoughts and literary works have made deep and diverse inquiries into senior subjectivity for over two thousand years. By means of philosophy and literature, they perceive senior subjectivity in human nature and culture. Specifically, they have touched on moral, spiritual, mental, physical, parental, familial, marital, sexual, social, economic, historical, and even geographical aspects that may influence the construction of senior subjectivity. For example, these studies have shown that the social status of old people is on the rise since ancient times. In antiquity, humans are inferior to gods, and old people are inferior to other humans. But in modern times, old people can enjoy their senior subjectivity to some degree. Another clue is that in the West, family ties, especially those between old parents and young children, are often terrible. Some parents and children compete and even fight with each other for power, so that old parents are not sufficiently taken care of by their children. This is one of the reasons for generation gaps in the West. Still another point is that old women are absent, whether in

philosophy or literature. We can see all kinds of old fathers and old kings, but mothers and queens are hardly visible. This shows that thinkers and writers, as well as the general public, have paid much less or even no attention to the subjectivity of old women. The exploration of senior subjectivity will go deeper and wider in the 20th century with the theoretical development of human subjectivity and the emerging revolution of deconstructionism. In Chapter Three, I will examine traditional Eastern, especially Chinese, thoughts of old age and senior subjectivity in comparison with the relative Western ideas.

CHAPTER THREE

A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY IN THE EAST

Having examined and compared major Western thoughts on senior subjectivity in the previous chapter, we need to turn our eyes to the East in this chapter, with China as our focus, for its wisdom and understanding of old age. As is known to all, Western and Eastern thinking have their own distinctive features that are opposite to each other in some ways. In the West, people stress individualism, independence, and personal achievements, whereas in the East, people value collectivism, interdependence, and common achievements. In regards to senior subjectivity, in the West, an old person might strive for his or her personal success first and think the success will benefit his or her family, but in the East, an old person might believe he or she should first devote him- or herself to the family and then benefit from the prosperity of family life. As a result, compared to the Western tradition, the construction of one's senior subjectivity in the East is often connected to others' well-being.

Early Chinese and Japanese Writings of Virtuous and Wise Old People

From the early times of China, old people have been taken as symbols of virtue and wisdom. This concept is similar in some ways to Plato's and Cicero's positive views on old age. But in China, old people's virtues and wisdom are often reflected in assisting and guiding the young, rather than merely pursuing self-achievements. As a matter of fact, they might have identified young people's success with their own, whereby realizing their own subjectivity.

The legends of the elderly helping the young are abundant in Chinese history, literature, and even philosophical reflections. For example, in *Shi Ji (Records of the Grand Historian)*, the

first comprehensive history of China, the writer and historiographer Sima Qian (c. 165-110 BCE) records an episode about an old fisherman and Wu Zixu (559-484 BCE), an outstanding statesman. Wu Zixu's father and elder brother are killed by the king of Chu State, and he runs away by himself. With pursuers behind him, he is almost captured. Suddenly, Wu Zixu finds a river blocking his way, but at the critical moment, an old fisherman in a boat realizes his plight and takes him across the river. The fisherman saves Wu Zixu, but refuses to accept his reward, saying that if he turned Wu Zixu in, he could get much more from the king. The fisherman is said to have drowned himself later so as to keep Wu Zixu's whereabouts a secret.¹ Obviously, the old fisherman is courageous and righteous. Throughout the history of China, old fishermen have always been considered as a kind of hermits who are wise and virtuous with a profound understanding of the truth of life.

In another example recorded in *Shi Ji*, Zhang Liang (c. 250-186 BCE), a high official who makes eminent contributions to the founding of Han Dynasty, has also learned and benefitted from an old man. When Zhang Liang is young, he comes across a strange old man wearing a coarse gown. After careful and rigorous tests of Zhang Liang's character, the old man is satisfied with him and gives him a book which contains important military and political strategies to unify and rule a nation.² Zhang Liang is later proved to be highly successful. This story, as well as the previous one, establishes the basic concept of the quality of the old in ancient China, that is, the old are supposed to possess high principles and profound knowledge and deserve reverence.

¹ Sima Qian, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, vol. VII, ed. William H. Nienhauser, Jr., trans. Tsai-fa Cheng, Zongli Lu, William H. Nienhauser, Jr. and Robert Reynolds (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 51.

² Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, vol. 1, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 135.

Therefore, they can act as mentors and helpers of the young and become determining factors in the process of historical development, let alone their contributions to the prosperity of their own families. At the same time, the two legends imply that an old person's value also lies in helping the young. In traditional Chinese ethics, old people are supposed to sacrifice themselves for the good of the young and identify the success of the young with their own.

In the most important Taoist canon, *Zhuangzi*, we can find well-known stories about wise and virtuous old people.³ Their wisdom and virtues are a result of life experiences over decades that can hardly be acquired in youth. For example, an old hunchback undergoes hard and persistent self-training so that he can catch cicadas “with a sticky pole as easily as though he were grabbing them with his hand.”⁴ This story tells readers that one needs to keep the will undivided and spirit concentrated to become successful in whatever one engages. Old people are not only skilled at their work, but also able to discover underlying laws of the world. In another story, an old wheelwright P'ien tells Duke Huan that the recorded words of sages in books are “nothing but the chaff and dregs.”⁵ His argument is based on his own working experiences. As a highly experienced wheelwright, he cannot pass down his skills to his son in words, because such skills need first-hand experience and long-term practice. Therefore, he holds that “[w]hen the men of old died, they took with them the things that couldn't be handed down. So what you

³ *Zhuangzi* is an ancient Chinese text from the late Warring States period (476–221 BC) which contains stories and anecdotes, allegories, parables, and fables that exemplify the carefree nature of the ideal Taoist sage.

⁴ *Zhuangzi, The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 200.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

are reading there must be nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old.”⁶ In addition, in *Zhuangzi*, the elderly are usually representatives of virtuous people, which is reflected in a story about an old gardener who refuses to use a device to help him irrigate. According to the old man, a person relying on machines will have “machine hearts,” and with the machine heart, one will lose the “pure and simple” mind and will eventually lose “the Way.”⁷ In the end, the old gardener announces: “It’s not that I don’t know about your machine—I would be ashamed to use it!”⁸

In ancient China, old people are generally considered men of wisdom and accomplishment in the world. They are not only accomplished in themselves, but also wise enough to educate younger ones. These stories show that Chinese people traditionally respect the elderly and recognize their wisdom and virtues. In China, people believe that seniors are valuable and meritorious; at the same time, seniors believe that they are obliged to devote the remaining years of their lives to assisting the country and younger people. This is one of the original views on senior subjectivity in Chinese tradition.

Japan, China’s neighboring country, has long been influenced by China since antiquity. In pre-modern times, its philosophy and culture were based on Confucianism and Buddhism transmitted from China, and its values and ideology considerably resembled those orthodox ones advocated in China.⁹ As a result, we can find similar views on the aged in Japanese tradition, that

⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁷ Ibid., 134.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis, and John C. Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 5, 43.

is, Japanese elderly are also considered wise and helpful and should be well taken care of. This view is best represented in the legend of “Abandonment of Aged” which appeared in the eleventh century of Japan.¹⁰ As is known to all, in ancient times, due to the shortage of food or other necessities of life, there is a custom or rule that old people who are unable to contribute to the family should be carried to a mountain and abandoned to starve to death. Once, a son did not take his old father to the mountain but hides him at home instead. Later, the father, who obviously possesses profound knowledge and wisdom, helps the son solve some difficult problems and saves his son. The lord is very impressed after knowing this and abolishes the rule.¹¹ The tale generates some variants over time and forms a motif that is still popular nowadays. It is a good example to show that the Japanese tradition, like its Chinese counterpart, believe the value of the old is on the grounds of their wisdom and virtues, even though they are physically unable to contribute to the family and society.

Senior Subjectivity in Buddhist and Taoist Self-cultivation

Eastern thinkers believe virtue and wisdom of the old are not innate qualities, but are acquired by means of assiduous practice and self-cultivation throughout life. Buddhist teachings are exemplary in this aspect. At approximately the same time as the age of Socrates and Plato, in a place far away from Greece, a sage in the East named Shakyamuni (565-486 BCE) starts to ponder over human issues. He discovers that old age is one of the four major sufferings of human

¹⁰ Richard Mercer Dorson, ed., “The Mountain Where Old People Were Abandoned,” in *Folktales Told Around the World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 243.

¹¹ See Richard Mercer Dorson, ed., “The Mountain Where Old People Were Abandoned,” 243-5.

beings, so he is determined to help everyone rid themselves of all sufferings and afflictions. After years of arduous practice and meditation, Shakyamuni achieves the so-called supreme enlightenment and establishes Buddhism to help all sentient beings, including senior people, to gain the same achievement. Buddhism has long been taken not only as a religion, but also a life philosophy or source of ethics. In general, the Buddhist teachings tell people that they should detach themselves from all mundane desires. Only in so doing can they find ultimate happiness and cast off all suffering. Old people are of no exception. Having gone through all sorts of hardship, the aged are now faced with impending death, so they are badly in need of a savior. But the Buddhist teachings instruct them that they can only save themselves through Buddhist practice. In fact, according to Buddhism, such self-cultivation should be practiced throughout all one's life for the following two purposes: first, it can reduce the evil karma caused in one's past life and create good karma for the future; second, it can help practitioners with new interpretations of reality, that is, everything in the secular world is impermanent. Therefore, Buddhism stresses personal cultivation and enlightenment, so that old age will not be a period of suffering. Analogously, ancient Chinese thinkers and intellectuals generally hold that people are subjected to a myriad of sufferings before and in old age, and there should be some way to liberate humans from afflictions, which is one of the reasons that Buddhism spread and thrived in China.

In addition to the transmission and dissemination of Buddhist teachings, native Chinese thinkers also developed their own ideas about old age and senior subjectivity in terms of self-cultivation. Zhuangzi, (c. 369-286 BCE), the author of *Zhuangzi* and one of the founders of

philosophical Taoism, argues that humans, including the elderly, should think positively about their situations or be optimistic in their lives, even if the life is full of suffering. This idea resembles what Plato and Cicero advocate, but it is out of a different reason. Plato and Cicero advocate the advantages of old age by comparing and contrasting the old with the young. Zhuangzi does not compare the old with the young, but takes the entire human life as a whole. He also holds that a human being is an integral part of nature and that one can achieve self-liberation and retain youthful vigor through practicing Tao, an active and holistic practice of the natural order.¹²

Living in the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) characterized by wars and conflicts among kingdoms, Zhuangzi attached great importance to his own existential philosophy—how one can survive the social turmoil and unrest and safely live to old age. What concerns Zhuangzi was not only how to live a happy life in old age, but also how to live happily from youth to old age. Such an idea can be discerned in the fourth Chapter, *The Human Realm*, of his treatise *Zhuangzi*. I may summarize the ideas presented by Zhuangzi in terms of a paradox of his: *the usefulness of uselessness*. He tells two parables about useless trees and disabled people to impart his idea that, in a dangerous world, only those good for nothing can survive to a ripe old age and die a natural death. In the first parable, a huge old Li tree is rejected by a master carpenter when his apprentice recommends that it could be a splendid piece of timber. The master shouts,

Not another word about that tree! It's worthless wood. If you made a boat from it, the boat would sink. If you made a coffin from it, the coffin would rot in no time. If you made tools from it, the tools would break in no time. If you made doors and gates from it,

¹² See the inner chapters of *Zhuangzi*. The inner chapters are first seven chapters of the treatise entitled *Zhuangzi*, and they are unanimously deemed as either written by Zhuangzi or at least are truly representative of his thought. For details, see Zhuangzi, *Chuang Tzu: the Inner Chapters*, trans. David Hinton (Berkeley, California: Counterpoint, 2014).

they'd sweat sticky sap. If you made pillars from it, they'd soon be full of termites. That tree has no potential whatsoever. It's useless: you can't make anything with it. How do you think it's lived so long?¹³

This is the secret of how the old tree survives. It can enlighten us on the survival of old people in dangerous social environments. Zhuangzi also strengthens the idea through the words of the tree that appears in the master's dream: those fruit trees that are useful to humans cannot fulfill their allotted span of years, but perish prematurely; this tree, on the other hand, is useless to humans, but such a condition saves its life and becomes exceedingly useful to itself. Then Zhuangzi further points out that total uselessness cannot guarantee the survival, and that the tree escaped from being cut down is because it takes refuge in a temple as a sacred tree worshiped by villagers. Thus, Zhuangzi has clarified his idea about the dialectical relationship between usefulness and uselessness: to survive the dangerous world, one has to be useless, which will be useful to his life; if one tries to be useful, it may bring harm to him or her, so such usefulness is useless to him- or herself; at the same time, extreme usefulness or uselessness is dangerous, so one has to be wise enough to keep a balance between the two. According to Zhuangzi, only if a living being, whether it is a plant, an animal, or a human, finds itself an optimal position in the world between usefulness and uselessness, can it successfully get to old age and enjoy its entire life span. In a word, the happiness of old age is closely related to one's wise self-cultivation throughout life—keeping the middle way and avoiding extremity.

Zhuangzi is never a person with a passive attitude toward life, especially in terms of old age. He cherishes a natural life up to old age, but he also values self-cultivation for a better life in old

¹³ Zhuangzi, *Chuang Tzu: the Inner Chapters*, trans. David Hinton (Berkeley, California: Counterpoint, 2014), 44.

age. In another conversation made up by him, Zhuangzi indicates the close relations between old people's practicing Tao and preserving youth:

“You're old in years but your complexion is like a child's,” Adept Sunflower said to Dame Crookback. “How is it you look so fresh?”

“I have heard Way.”

“Is Way something you can learn?”

“No, no, of course not,” replied Crookback. “And you aren't cut out for it anyway.”¹⁴

The term *Way* is the translation from a Chinese word *Dao* (道), which is used symbolically in its sense of “way” as the “right” or “proper” way of existence, or in the context of ongoing practices of attainment or of the full coming into being, or the state of enlightenment or spiritual perfection that is the outcome of such practices.¹⁵ The purpose of practicing Dao is to stay in tune with nature and discover the true existence of life. To stay in harmony with nature means to evade the distorted human society. People who can achieve such harmony will find themselves easily remain in a natural state of youth, no matter how old they become. In this sense, Dao is extremely important to old age, for it keeps aged people in a youthful state both spiritually and physically, like Dame Crookback in the conversation. Dame Crookback is advanced in age, but she still looks like a child due to the acquisition of Dao or the true understanding of the inner connection between nature and human beings. Chinese people have long learned that one's appearance is determined by one's mind. This means a youthful mind generates a youthful face, regardless of the age. Such an idea corresponds to Zhuangzi's revelation of the truth of life in old age by means of practicing Dao. Therefore, Zhuangzi has brought forward an original

¹⁴ Ibid., 62-3.

¹⁵ Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of the Tao Te Ching* (SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture) (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 245-7.

interpretation of an ideal old age and construction of senior subjectivity—an old person should have the wisdom to find balance between usefulness and uselessness, keep youthful spirit, and stay in harmony with nature through persistent practice. This view has influenced Chinese old people in their understanding of the world and themselves for over two millennia.

Senior Subjectivity in Confucian Self-cultivation

In addition to Zhuangzi and philosophical Taoism, another major school of thought stemming from ancient China is Confucianism, founded by Confucius (551-479 BCE) and developed by his disciples and followers. In general, analogous to Buddhism, Confucianism looks on old age as a period of life characterized by physical and even mental weakness, and therefore will probably be accompanied by pain and suffering. To live a virtuous and successful life from childhood till old age, Confucius devotes himself to lifelong self-cultivation. At the age of 63, he describes himself as a dedicated pursuer of knowledge who always forgets to eat, and a happy man who leaves sorrows behind and is not aware of aging.¹⁶ This is an ideal state of old age in Confucius's mind. This statement is concise, but it contains necessary information about how to lead a successful and happy life in old age. First, an old person should engage in diligent study, as he or she has always done throughout life. As a Chinese proverb says, "one is never too old to learn." Old people still need to concentrate on self-enhancement and self-cultivation, which, in Confucius's eyes, is much more important than eating or other worldly desires. Second, an old person should be upbeat and positive, forgetting about all the unpleasant happenings in the

¹⁶ See Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. and annotated Arthur Waley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 127.

past. One might have suffered much in the past, but when he or she approaches old age, it is time to let go of the past. An old person has to look at the future, and look at old age as a new start rather than the end of life. An old person should also handle old-age problems wisely, looking at its bright side in a positive mood. Third, more importantly, with the intellectual, psychological, and spiritual improvement, an old person can finally step out of the shadow of negative feelings for old age and reach a state of serenity. He or she will become unaware of old age and even feel no difference between old age and young age. Such a situation is the one that Confucius achieved, and he might have wanted others to follow suit. In short, the statement above reveals that Confucius was able to fully attain a healthy senior subjectivity and his achievement has become a model for all Chinese people to follow to this day.

Confucius's view on old age and senior subjectivity can be discerned in another statement.

In retrospect of his life experiences, old Confucius concludes:

At fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right.¹⁷

This statement, which must have been made not long before his death at seventy-three, depicts the various stages of Confucius's personal development through various stages of life. From the age of fifteen when he determines to study until the age of seventy when he achieves a sort of spiritual freedom, Confucius must have believed that his old age is a successful one and his senior subjectivity is therefore well constructed. Throughout his life, his subjectivity is fluid under the influence of various factors such as ideology, knowledge, and discipline. If we analyze

¹⁷ Ibid., 88.

such construction in terms of the dynamic relations between the self and subject, we can draw an insightful conclusion to the reason for its success. When Confucius is fifteen, he makes up his mind to study, which means that he has decided to engage in the social construction of the self. At thirty, he has established a niche in the society, which indicates his preliminary success in the social construction of the self. At forty, he is free from perplexities, which suggests he has fulfilled self-construction and will not be affected by external influences any more. At fifty, he knows the mandate of heaven, which shows his self-construction has become compatible with social construction. The self and subject are in harmony with each other. At sixty, he hears others' words with a docile ear, which implies his self-evaluation and other's evaluations are in agreement. His subjectivity is perfectly constructed. Due to all the achievements Confucius makes in the past periods, at seventy, when he says that his desires will never cross the boundaries of right, it means that the self is completely in harmony with the external world. As a result, after decades of self-cultivation, old Confucius finally fuses the self and subject together, and his senior subjectivity is thus satisfactorily constructed.

When old Confucius is reminiscing about his life, he summarizes every major achievement he has made at each stage. As a sagacious old man, his wisdom is gained from decades of conscientious self-discipline and self-cultivation, so that he can now achieve such a perfect mental state without having to worry about making mistakes in both thoughts and actions. Confucius indicates that an old person can have a thorough understanding of the essence of human society, nature, and oneself through arduous spiritual exploration in the life journey. If the person is successful at each stage, he or she can certainly expect to live a satisfactory old life. This point is similar to Erikson's theory of life stages. Erikson, having divided a person's entire

life into eight periods, argues that the completion of each life period will benefit the following periods, and eventually will be conducive to one's life in old age. Confucius's experiences lend support to this theory from a different time and culture.

The Confucian thought is learned and developed by thinkers and scholars in later generations. They elucidate the Confucian statement based on their own understanding.¹⁸ In *Zhu Xi's Reading of the Analects*, Daniel K. Gardner compares Zhu Xi's reading of the *Analects* with the earlier standard reading by He Yan as well as some other scholars' interpretations.¹⁹ Take the account "At seventy, I followed the desires of my mind-and-heart without overstepping right" for example. Ma Rong explains, "Ju [right] means fa, 'rules.' He followed the desires of his mind-and-heart without ever going against the rules."²⁰ Zhu Xi's remarks are as follows: "...Ju [right] is a tool of standard measure, used for squaring. He follows the desires of his mind-and-heart and naturally never exceeds the standard measure. He is at ease putting them [his desires] into practice and, without any effort, hits the mean."²¹ These thinkers agree that a well-cultivated old person, like seventy-year-old Confucius, will never do anything unethical or make any mistakes in morality even though he or she only follows his or her own desires. Gardner comments that

¹⁸ Many Confucian thinkers in over two thousand years have devoted themselves to the exegeses of *The Analects of Confucius*, such as He Yan (何晏) (190-249) in the Three Kingdoms Period, Huang Kan (皇侃) (488-545) in the Southern-Northern Dynasties, Xing Bing (邢昺) (932-1010) in the Northern Song Dynasty, and Zhu Xi (朱熹) (1130-1200) in the Southern Song Dynasty, Liu Baonan (刘宝楠) (1791-1855) in the Qing Dynasty, etc.

¹⁹ The following interpretations are all quoted from Daniel K. Gardner's treatise, including the remarks of Ma Rong (马融) (79-166), Cheng Yi (程颐) (1033-1107), and Hu Yin (胡寅) (1098-1156). See Daniel K. Gardner, *Zhu Xi's Reading of the Analects: Canon, Commentary, and the Classical Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 42-6.

²⁰ Daniel K. Gardner, *Zhu Xi's Reading of the Analects: Canon, Commentary, and the Classical Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 44.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

“this influential remark is to link moral behavior directly to the pursuit of learning. In particular, it makes the Master’s will or desire to learn, not the learning itself, the very foundation of his life’s moral quest.”²² Through life-long learning and self-cultivation, one’s personal ethical standards can perfectly align with social standards, and one can achieve spiritual freedom in this way. Such spiritual freedom in old age is the perfect senior subjectivity in Confucianism.

By recounting his lifelong cultivation, Confucius intends to educate his disciples to attain the same senior subjectivity, which is the ultimate purpose of one’s cultivation. Cheng Yi, a renowned Neo-Confucianist in the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), remarks, “While Confucius himself says that such was the sequence by which he advanced in virtue, this was not necessarily the case for the Sage. He is simply establishing here a plan that, once they fill in the holes, enables learners to move forward and, once they complete all the steps, to achieve perfection.”²³ Hu Yin expresses a similar idea concerning Confucius’s statement: “The Sage says this, first, to proclaim to learners that they must immerse themselves leisurely and happily in it and must not skip any steps in going forward; second, to proclaim to learners that they must make daily advances and monthly progress, never giving up halfway.”²⁴ Cheng and Hu point out that Confucius has offered a practical blueprint for his disciples to make moral progress till old age so that they can achieve moral perfection during the lifelong cultivation. Therefore, in theory, everyone can follow these guidelines to get to a perfect senior subjectivity which represents a thorough fusion of the self and subject.

²² Ibid., 42.

²³ Ibid., 45.

²⁴ Ibid.

So far we can see that Confucius and Zhuangzi have similar ideas in achieving satisfactory senior subjectivity. They both believe that one can enjoy a happy old age through lifelong cultivation or that a joyful old age is determined by consecutive and cumulative development in cultivation. However, different from Zhuangzi whose self-cultivation is mainly personal well-being, Confucius aims at social well-being. They both advocate a harmonious life in old age, but Zhuangzi emphasizes one's harmony with nature, while Confucius seeks harmony in human society. Although they both stress a meaningful life through individual development, Zhuangzi takes a skeptical attitude toward politics and social power, so he strives to escape social connections, especially in the political sense. Confucius, on the other hand, focuses on the social and political aspect and considers it important to achieve personal perfection through the engagement in social affairs and interaction with others. Zhuangzi believes that a happy and successful old person is one who can be free from worldly things, but Confucius holds that such an old person should be adept at handling worldly affairs.

Lin Yutang (1895-1976), a renowned Chinese writer and scholar, summarizes the characteristics of Chinese senior subjectivity in his treatise *The Importance of Living* (1937). According to Lin, Chinese philosophy takes old age as a period of “peace and security and leisure and contentment,” and “a life with childhood, manhood and old age is...a beautiful arrangement,” just like the fact that “the day has its morning, noon, and sunset, and the year has its seasons.”²⁵ This mental state of old people is obviously rooted in Chinese philosophical thoughts, especially Confucianism and Taoism. Chinese people believe the stream-of-life theory in the family system and takes human life as a part of nature. Grandparents can find their lives

²⁵ Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1937), 31.

flowing in the bodies of their grandchildren. To senior members of a Chinese family, “life is no more regarded as beginning and ending with that of the individual,” and their ideal life is to bring honor to the family so that both the late ancestors and upcoming offspring will be satisfied with them.²⁶ Such a philosophical foundation determines that old people in China, upon realizing that they have contributed to the prosperity of the family in their best days, “would be able to look upon the sunset of his life as his happiest period, and instead of trying to postpone the much feared old age, be able actually to look forward to it, and gradually build up to it as the best and happiest period of his existence.”²⁷ By the same token, old people in China will not feel it shameful to be served and supported by their children, and on the contrary, they may comfortably enjoy staying with younger generations at home. It is quite opposite in America where old people are characterized by “their pride and their love of independence and their shame of being dependent upon their children.”²⁸ Chinese people consider seniors as an integral and inseparable part of the family and society, as is remarked in a saying, “An elderly person in the family is a treasure.”

Death and Senior Subjectivity

Death is a big issue that everyone has to face, but compared to younger ones, the elderly are a group of people who naturally feel more concerned with death. An old person’s attitude toward death can shape his or her perception of the self, because death means the annihilation of

²⁶ Ibid., 190-1.

²⁷ Ibid., 194.

²⁸ Ibid., 157.

a concrete self, a fatal challenge to the existence of the self. A correct attitude also needs cultivation. Cicero once expresses his opinion that an old person should calmly face death. Confucius, who stresses the development of social and political self, maintains that people should concentrate on living beings rather than the dead.²⁹ Zhuangzi, who stresses the connection between the self and nature, maintains that death is an integral part of the cycle of life, and human life is an integral part of nature. He created a dialogue between Confucius and a Duke, in which Confucius maintains, “[b]irth and death, living and dead, failure and success, poverty and wealth, honor and dishonor, slander and praise, hunger and thirst, hot and cold—such are the transformations of this world, this inevitable unfurling of things.”³⁰ Confucius explains why a man who lost one of his legs can still hold an optimistic view and live a happy and moral life: “But seen in terms of sameness, the ten thousand things are all one. If you understand this, you forget how eye and ear could love this and hate that. Then the mind wanders the accord of Integrity. And if you see the identity of things, you see there can be no loss. So it is that he saw nothing more in a lost foot than a clump of dirt tossed aside.”³¹ By means of this dialogue, Zhuangzi brings forward his idea of oneness of the world—life and death are essentially of no difference, so we should not differentiate them by considering one is better than the other. Based

²⁹ Once Zi Lu, one of Confucius’s best students, asks how one should serve ghosts and spirits. The master says that one should learn to serve humans first. Then Zi Lu inquires about the dead. The master answered that one should know the living first. See Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. and annotated Arthur Waley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 155.

³⁰ Zhuangzi, *Chuang Tzu: the Inner Chapters*, 54.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

on such a perspective, Zhuangzi naturally comes to a holistic understanding of human life as well as the ONE of life and death:

Life and death are inevitable. Heaven gives them the constancy of day and night. And we can't alter any of it—it all belongs to the very nature of things....This Mighty Mudball of a world burdens us with a body, troubles us with life, eases us with old age, and with death gives us rest. We call our life a blessing, so our death be a blessing too.³²

Zhuangzi holds that life is full of hardship, so it needs old age to relax itself and death to end all its troubles. This is Zhuangzi's unique and insightful perception of old age.

In Zhuangzi's eyes, like death, old age is a useful and beneficial part of life. A life without old age is incomplete and unnatural, and therefore unsatisfactory. But on the other hand, although Zhuangzi realizes the importance of old age, he does not deem it proper to strive for longevity with every means, but rather believes that one should live an elderly life according to the natural course. In other words, one should not try to fight against nature, but should live happily in harmony with nature, which is also the best way to achieve old age and fulfill one's senior subjectivity.

Filial Piety and Senior Subjectivity

As is well-known to all, Confucius stresses ethics and morals among people, especially those relationships among family members, neighbors, teachers and students, emperors and officials, etc. Confucius's principles become a basis of Chinese tradition and beliefs, one of which is the well-known Golden Rule: "Never do to others what you would not like them to do

³² Ibid., 59-60.

to you.”³³ In other words, one has to treat others the same way as one wants to be treated by others. Confucius’s principles contribute to the idea about how to take care of the elderly. Respecting the elderly thus becomes an essential part of Chinese tradition and thought. Such an attitude toward old people greatly determines old people’s identity and subjectivity. Senior subjectivity in China is not only dependent on old people’s personal cultivation and insight into the truth of the self and the world, but also shaped by social connections and treatment from younger generations. The principle of revering the elderly and following their instructions fundamentally influences old people’s understanding of themselves and their relations with the external world. As senior people, they usually benefit from such social relations, so they are not afraid of the approach of old age and are willing to dedicate themselves to others’ benefits. This kind of mutually beneficial relationship constitutes a major aspect in Chinese social psychology. Thus, senior subjectivity in Chinese thinking is distinctively defined by an integration of old people’s self-cultivation and younger people’s esteem for them.

In addition to the stress laid on self-cultivation, Confucius also disseminates principles and practices emphasizing that old people should be taken good care of by others, especially younger generations, in both the family and society. Confucius’s thought in this aspect can be summarized in one phrase—*filial piety* (孝道). In more general terms, filial piety means to respect and take care of one’s elderly relatives, especially one’s parents who are in old age and hardly able to take care of themselves. This concept is extremely important in that it regulates the

³³ Such an idea is mentioned twice in *The Analects of Confucius*. One is in the chapter Yan Yuan, when a disciple asked about Goodness (仁); the other one is in the chapter Duke Ling of Wei, when another disciple asked if there is a saying that one can act upon throughout one’s life. See Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Arthur Waley, 162, 198.

relations between generations and ensures the well-being of the elderly from over two thousand years ago. Therefore, it is a crucial element of senior subjectivity in Chinese tradition.

In Confucian thought, taking good care of the elderly is primarily embodied in the veneration for one's parents. In *The Analects of Confucius*, Confucius expounds the connotation of filial duty and illuminates how to comply with filial duty and show reverence to one's parents. According to Confucius, the basic principle of cultivating a young man or a student is teaching him to "behave well to his parents at home and to his elders abroad, to be cautious in giving promises and punctual in keeping them, to have kindly feelings toward everyone, but see the intimacy to the Good. If, when all that is done, he has any energy to spare, then let him study the polite art."³⁴ Being filial and fraternal are two of the most important morals that one has to learn and practice from youth, for they can regularize one's moral thought and behavior in the society. You Zi, one of Confucius's best students, believes that a good and filial child at home will become a well-behaved citizen in society: "Those who in private life behave well towards their parents and elder brothers, in public life seldom show a disposition to resist the authority of their superiors."³⁵ Therefore, Confucius summarizes the meaning of filial piety as "never disobey."³⁶ This idea indicates that old people are supposed to be given a supreme position in a family, and the more senior they are, the more venerable they become, because younger ones must always listen to the orders of the old and should never be disobedient to them. However, this viewpoint

³⁴ Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Arthur Waley, 84.

³⁵ Ibid., 83.

³⁶ Ibid., 88.

can cause negative effects to the intergenerational relations and even ruin one's senior subjectivity, which will be discussed later in Chapter Six.

Confucius also stresses the emotional bonds between the old and the young. He criticizes wrong treatment of parents, arguing that merely providing life necessities and food is not true filial actions. He tells his student, Zi You: “‘Filial sons’ nowadays are people who see to it that their parents get enough to eat. But even dogs and horses are cared for to that extent. If there is no feeling of respect, wherein lies the difference?’”³⁷ On another occasion, Confucius tells Zi Xia, another student, that filial piety means something much more than young people undertaking the hard work or serving their elders first with wine and food.”³⁸ These quotes show that Confucius believes elder people need not only material things, but also emotional and affectional support, which requires that their offspring should take care of their inner and spiritual well-being. This point is manifest especially when Confucius mentions that filial children should behave in such a way that their parents have no anxiety about them, except concerning their health.³⁹ In addition to this idea, Confucius makes a series of suggestions to regulate children's demeanor for the purpose of making sure that the elderly enjoy sufficient true respect.⁴⁰ Respecting the old is an integral part of the ideal familial obligations and relationships proposed by Confucius over two thousand years ago, which laid a solid foundation for the ethics in China.

³⁷ Ibid., 89.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ These suggestions are mainly in the chapter Benevolent Neighbors, see Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Arthur Waley, 105-106.

Filial piety is not just restricted within a family, but is extended to society, which ensures old people's social status. As we know, Confucius or Confucianism highly stresses children's respect for their parents, or the younger generation's respect for the older generation. Confucius advocates the notion of filial piety from the aspect of regulating or adjusting children's behavior, but in the meantime, we can find the high status that seniors possess in the society as well as in a family. Confucius stresses moral relations among people and he maintains that everyone in the world should play his or her part well, whereby constructing a rational moral order in the country. Just as he once said to Duke Jing of Qi about the way to govern a nation, "let the prince be a prince, the minister a minister, the father a father and the son a son."⁴¹ Therefore, what he cares about most is not an isolated personal development, but the development that should be in connection with the social network and in correspondence with interpersonal ethical relationship. He believes that family ties are the foundation of human relations in society—a harmonious society is based on harmonious families as basic units. Virtuous parents or elder members of a family deserve to be greatly loved and esteemed by their offspring. One must first respect elders at home before respecting elders from others' homes.

Mencius (cir. 372-289 BCE), another prominent representative of Confucianism, states a similar opinion: "Treat with the reverence due to age the elders in your own family, so that the elders in the families of others shall be similarly treated; treat with the kindness due to youth the young in your own family, so that the young in the families of others shall be similarly treated:

⁴¹ Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Arthur Waley, 166.

—do this, and the kingdom may be made to go round in your palm.”⁴² Mencius also stresses filial and fraternal duties, holding that a kingdom will be well administered if “the old wearing silk and eating flesh, and the black-haired people suffering neither from hunger nor cold.”⁴³ All in all, in the ideal society constructed by Confucian thought, the old, usually those with frail bodies, are in need of support and reverence. A country will become prosperous when all the old people are highly respected and able to lead a happy life. For over two thousand years, Confucianism has become the dominant ideology in China, so that the notion of filial piety is widely propagated and the respect for the aged is universally practiced. As a result, filial piety becomes a key virtue in Chinese culture and due to its influence, old people in China generally can enjoy their old age. It is widely accepted that a well-run family should be one in which parents look out for the interests of their children and children obey their parents and support them in their old age.

Such a virtue of respect for one’s parents, elders, and ancestors in Confucian philosophy is best reflected in one of the Confucian classics—*Xiao Jing* or *Classic of Xiao* which came out around the Qin and Han Dynasties (221 BCE-220 CE). The book, consisting of a conversation between Confucius and his student Zeng Shen or Zengzi, is about how to set up a good society using the principle of Xiao (filial piety). In the beginning of the book, Confucius points out the significance of filial piety: “Filial piety is the root of (all) virtue, and (the stem) out of which

⁴² Mencius, *The Chinese Classics: the Works of Mencius*, trans. James Legge (Taipei: SMC Publishing Inc., 1991), 143.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 149.

grows (all moral) teaching.”⁴⁴ Confucius attaches great importance to the use of Li (礼), or rites, in social life to realize or preserve his theory of ethics, which is largely represented in another Confucian classic—*The Book of Rites*. The book records a variety of social forms, administration, and ceremonial rites of the Zhou Dynasty as they were understood in the Warring States and the early Han periods. When once asked about the right treatment of parents, Confucius replies, “While they are alive, serve them according to ritual. When they die, bury them according to ritual and sacrifice to them according to ritual.”⁴⁵ This statement clarifies the connection between filial piety and rites: filial piety is shown, embodied and practiced in rites.

The Book of Rites also illuminates another important concept of Confucianism—one should not just pay respect to his or her own parents, but should care for all the aged in society, which is exactly one of the important ways of building an orderly nation:

When the Grand course was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky; they chose men of talents, virtue, and ability; their words were sincere, and what they cultivated was harmony. Thus men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secure for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were all sufficiently maintained. Males had their proper work, and females had their homes.⁴⁶

This statement depicts the Confucian ideal of a perfect nation of rites and ethics, in which all the aged in the world are supposed to be taken good care of. So far we can see that senior subjectivity in ancient China is not restricted to personal cultivation in isolation from the other,

⁴⁴ *The Hsiao King, or Classic of Filial Piety*, trans. James Legge (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing), 10.

⁴⁵ Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, 89.

⁴⁶ F. Max Muller, ed., *The Sacred Books of China: the Texts of Confucianism, Part III The Li Ki I-X*, trans. James Legge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1885), 364-5.

but a comprehensive concept that incorporates an old person's personal, familial, and social relations and development.

The Book of Rites is replete with details and objectives of such rites. The Confucian theory of ethics as exemplified in rites and rituals is based on three important conceptual aspects of life: 1. ceremonies associated with sacrifice to ancestors and deities of various types; 2. social and political institutions; 3. the etiquette of daily behavior. In regards to the issues related to the elderly, the book touches on proper behavior, or the code of conduct, of showing respect for one's own parents or seniors at home and those of others in society. First, the book illustrates an idea on how to pay homage to parents or seniors at home. For instance, the rule goes that sons should warm the bed for their parents in winter and cool it in summer, that they should adjust everything for their parents' repose in the evening and inquire about their health in the morning, and that before travelling out of home, they must inform their parents of the destination and after returning home, they must present themselves before their parents.⁴⁷

The dos and don'ts are not restricted to family members but purposefully extended to the society, and senior citizens in general can enjoy esteemed late years. *The Book of Rites* clearly divides human lifetime into different periods and describes the major situation of each period:

...When he is sixty, we say, "He is getting old;" he gives directions and instructions. When he is seventy, we say, "He is old;" he delegates his duties to others. At eighty or ninety, we say of him, "He is very old." ... [People who are] very old, though they may be chargeable with crime, are not subjected to punishment. At a hundred, he is called a centenarian, and has to be fed.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid., 67-68.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 65-6.

This passage is important in that it divides old age into different but consecutive stages, which is helpful for further exploration. It not only defines old people and their privileges, but also lays a foundation for their high-ranking social status in the following two thousand years in China.

Respecting the elderly is not just a private behavior, but also an official requirement throughout the nation. Even the emperor is supposed to show his reverence for the old. For example, according to royal regulations, the emperor should inspect the country and worship the heaven every five years, during which he must visit people who were about 100 years old. Such behavior is deemed beneficial to the prosperity of the empire.⁴⁹ As a result, supporting the elderly was included in the national legislation and became an important part of public welfare. *The Book of Rites* describes ways of taking care of the elderly as national rules,⁵⁰ and it even details food provided for the elderly.⁵¹ Cherishing and paying tribute to seniors can benefit not only old people themselves, but also the nation at large, either in civilizing the populace or in governing the nation. As is argued in the *Book of Rites*, “[w]hen the people knew to honor their elders and nourish their aged, then at home they could practice filial piety and fraternal duty. Filial and fraternal at home and abroad, honoring elders and nourishing the aged, then their

⁴⁹ Ibid., 216.

⁵⁰ For example, in terms of the provision for the aged, “[t]hose of fifty years received their nourishment in the (schools of the) districts; those of sixty, theirs in the (small school of the) state; and those of seventy, theirs in the college. This rule extended to the feudal states. An old man of eighty made his acknowledgement for the ruler’s message, by kneeling once and bringing his head twice to the ground....An old man of ninety employed another to receive (the message and gift for him).” See Muller, ed., *The Sacred Books of China*, 240.

⁵¹ According to the book, “[f]or those of fifty the grain was (fine and) different (from that used by younger men). For those sixty, flesh was kept in store. For those of seventy, there was a second service of savory meat. For those of eighty, there was a constant supply of delicacies. For those of ninety, food and drink were never out of their chambers. Wherever they wandered (to another place), it was required that savory meat and drink should follow them.” See Muller, ed., *The Sacred Books of China*, 240.

education was complete, and this led to the peace and tranquility of the state.”⁵² Respecting the elderly at home and in society are the two most important ethical principles of Confucianism. It is said that all the greatest ancient kings esteemed old age, so their kingdoms thrived under the sky. *The Book of Rites* argues that the importance of paying respect to the elderly is just “next to the service of parents.”⁵³ Put simply, China established in both theory and practice a comprehensive system of honoring and venerating the elderly over two thousand years ago.

Legends of Filial Piety and Senior Subjectivity

In China, people naturally respect and obey the old, and wish the latter longevity and felicity, which is exactly represented in many philosophical essays, historical records, and literary works. Mencius once replies to a question about what Shun, one of the earliest kings in Chinese history, would do if his father had murdered a person. Mencius says that Shun would order that his father be apprehended, but then “Shun would have regarded abandoning the kingdom as throwing away a worn-out sandal. He would privately have taken his father on his back, and retired into concealment, living somewhere along the sea-coast. There he would have been all his life, cheerful and happy, forgetting the kingdom.”⁵⁴ In Mencius’s mind, a filial son, even if he is a king, should do everything to save and take care of his old father. If the old father has committed crime, the son should abandon the kingdom and run away with him. Such an

⁵² Ch’u Chai and Winberg Chai, eds., *Li Chi: Book of Rites*, vol. II, trans. James Legge (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1967), 440.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁵⁴ Mencius, *The Chinese Classics: The Works of Mencius*, 469-70.

audacious statement best reflects the Confucian opinion that one should give highest priority to the happiness of one's parents or people of older generations at home.

Stories advocating filial piety are abundant in Chinese literature. One example is an article authored by Li Mi (224-287 CE), in which he declines the emperor's appointment to a high position in the imperial court with the excuse of having to take care of his 96-year-old grandmother.⁵⁵ Li Mi lost his parents when he was very young, and it was Li Mi's grandmother who had brought him up. So he considers it his duty to care for her, which is much more important than serving the emperor. His pleading is so persuasive that the emperor has to approve it, and his article is later taken as one of the best that embodies filial piety in Chinese orthodox ideas. People value the virtue of filial piety to such an extent that their actions sometimes seem irrational or unbelievable to us. For instance, in one of the Dramas entitled *The Little Butcher Zhang* produced in the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), a butcher and his wife are willing to offer their son at a temple for the recovery of the man's sick mother.⁵⁶ Qian Yong (1759-1844), a writer in the Qing Dynasty, composes a short story about a filial son who travels thousands of miles to look for his dead father's remains. After innumerable hardships, he finally finds his father's tomb and is able to take the remains back home.⁵⁷ Stories such as these are exemplary as totally unconditional and selfless affections for one's parents.

⁵⁵ See Li Mi, "A Pleading Memorial," *The Oxford Book of Aging*, 114-116.

⁵⁶ Chung-wen Shih, *The Golden Age of Chinese Drama, Yüan Tsa-chü* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), 84.

⁵⁷ Qian Yong, "Quest of the Filial Son," in *Stories of Old China*, trans. W. W. Yen (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2003), 208-239.

As a matter of fact, Chinese people, including literati and politicians, tend to excuse old people for their mistakes, even though the blunders may have caused huge losses. Take the romance in the Tang Dynasty between Emperor Xuanzong (685-762) and Concubine Yang (719-756) for example. Emperor Xuanzong had been an ambitious and meritorious monarch, but when he was old, he lost his ambition and indulged himself in sensual pleasure with his concubine Yang Yuhuan. The emperor's weakened power incurred a strong military rebellion, which caused enormous damage to the nation. The emperor's indignant soldiers thought the concubine was the main cause for the rebellion and forced him to have her strangled. Later, many poems and dramas based their stories on this romance, and they generally held a sympathetic view on old Emperor Xuanzong, and ignored his mistakes. The most well-known case is the poem *A Song of Everlasting Sorrow* written by Bai Juyi (772-846) in the Tang Dynasty and the play *Rain on the Plane Trees* composed by Bai Pu (1226-cir. 1306) in the Yuan Dynasty. They both depict how the old and frail emperor lamented sorrowfully over his lost love. In their eyes, the emperor is a victim of the times, rather than a decadent loser. Chinese writers are lenient to an old person and have sympathy for him or her.

Concluding Remarks

Confucianism, integrated with Taoist thought and Buddhist teachings, has dominated Chinese philosophy, ethics, politics, and social psychology for over twenty centuries, and greatly influenced life styles and interpersonal relations in China. Under such an influence, old people in China naturally consider themselves a part of a bigger picture—the prosperity of the family, the clan, and even the country. In this sense, we may say that the construction of a person's senior

subjectivity in China is traditionally interwoven with the development and fortune of all members of a family. It is reasonable to maintain that in a way there is no independent senior subjectivity in Chinese culture, for the old are involved in the social network which shows high respect to them. Due to their high social status and close family ties, many Chinese old people do not have to fight for personal dignity or authority, but they are willing to sacrifice themselves for others. This is the senior subjectivity of distinctive Chinese style.

The ideal Chinese senior subjectivity is composed of three major features: personal qualities of the elderly (virtuous and wise), self-cultivation throughout life (personal and interpersonal), and filial piety from younger generations (familial and social). It is true that there must be some vicious old people in historical and literary works, but the old in China are generally considered as being virtuous and wise. They are willing to use their own wisdom to help the young if needed. They are beneficial rather than harmful. Such an assumption seems too good to be true, or it seems to be another idealized assumption similar to Plato and Cicero. But in China, there is a mechanism to help produce more old people of high morality: self-cultivation. Zhuangzi and Confucius have different methods and purposes of self-cultivation. The former concentrates on personal improvement, while the latter on interpersonal relations. Since the elderly are generally considered as virtuous and wise, it is necessary for younger people to revere and tend to them. It is called filial piety, which is not only practiced at home, but also in society. These three categories are important constituents of senior subjectivity in traditional Chinese culture, ideology, and even politics.

So far, I can summarize what I have acquired from the theoretical exploration in Chapter Two and Three. Both Western and Chinese thoughts on senior subjectivity are so life shaping that they each cast an important impact on human ideology, psychology, culture, history, interpersonal relations, and even life styles, not to mention literary production. After combing through Western and Chinese philosophical sources and traditions, we can perceive the underlying reasons for such a phenomenon. Simply put, in the West, Aristotle and Bacon, who are committed to establishing a scientific system for the world in which humans dwell, take the characters of old people as a target of objective analysis without emotional involvement; Plato and Cicero, on the other hand, focus on the idealized subjective feelings of the elderly and argue for a humanistic concern about the well-being of the old; Schopenhauer and Bacon, on the other hand, probe into the reality that one has to confront throughout life and the life experience on which one is able to wisely build senior subjectivity. Thinkers in ancient China, such as Zhuangzi, also articulate the importance of old people's personal spiritual accomplishments as well as a sensible way to look on death; Confucianism, which has dominated Chinese ideology for two thousand years, attaches importance to incorporating personal development and survival of the elderly into the destiny of their family or clan. On that account, senior subjectivity is interpreted in different ways. In the Western tradition, old people are more independent. They are born in such an environment that no one is supposed to unconditionally respect and support them, so they have to struggle for themselves even at old age. On the other hand, Chinese old people are conventionally more dependent on their children and so their subjectivity is greatly influenced by their relations with other family members.

Just as I pointed out in the previous chapter, senior subjectivity is determined by a variety of elements in various situations. But after a careful analysis in this chapter, we can see that the most important situations, whether in the West or in the East, are old people's family ties and personal achievements. In the following chapters, I will closely analyze and interpret a couple of selected canonical novels or short stories produced in China and America, in order to discover how the building of family ties and the pursuit of personal achievements influence senior subjectivity in different contexts.

PART II

REPRESENTING SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY IN WESTERN FICTION

CHAPTER FOUR

NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY:

A CASE STUDY OF FAULKNER'S *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

AND OTHER LITERARY WORKS

As is illustrated in Chapter Two, numerous literary works that more or less involve the exploration of senior subjectivity have been produced by many novelists, poets, and dramatists. Under the dual influence of traditional thought and social reality, writers contemplate the meaning of life and embed their ideas and values in the literary works they create. In this chapter, I am going to explore representations of senior subjectivity in the western tradition with a focused analysis of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* in the context of similar themes in western literary works. By analyzing Sutpen's life in old age, I seek to show how a tragic senior subjectivity is constructed through a variety of narrative accounts in certain historical and cultural environments of the late nineteenth century American South.

Senior Subjectivity as a Subject of Tragedy

Intellectual reflections have illuminated that the formation of senior subjectivity is affected by all sorts of elements in various situations. My research of relevant literary representations cannot explore each of them exhaustively, and I will just focus on two of the most important situations: the family ties and personal achievements of old people. Senior subjectivity is constructed in interactions with other family members and also in the pursuit of one's personal achievements. They are both subject to all sorts of internal and external factors, and often display close mutual relations. As is pointed out in my first chapter, senior subjectivity is not just a result

of old age, but is gradually formed throughout one's life. In this sense, the family ties of old people not only refer to those between old people and their offspring, but to the ties that exist before they become old. Likewise, their personal achievements not only refer to those made when they are old, but also to those made before they get old. Hence, the construction of senior subjectivity can be a dynamic process over time.

Every family has a skeleton in the cupboard. Concerning family ties in the conventional Western thought, as we saw in the first chapter, they are often considered as a kind of relationship that is full of problems and conflicts. In literature, old women are largely ignored, while old men often symbolize something that is out of date and should be forsaken. In fact, literary old fathers are usually having a hard time to live a satisfactory life or reach a happy ending, because they are often described as either too cruel and tyrannical, or too stupid and fatuous. Aging fathers are the cause of personal and domestic tragedies. Stories of familial conflicts are so widespread that they have become a leitmotif in Western literature.

In ancient Greek mythology, Zeus becomes king of the gods by defeating his father Cronus with the help of his siblings in a war that lasts over ten years. Cronus is also a rebellious son who overthrows the reign of his own father. Zeus, on the other hand, tries to kill his own offspring in order to strengthen his power and secure his dominance. Mythology is created by humans to reflect their own secular lives or ideas. The patricide complex is best shown in the Greek play, *Oedipus the King*, in which Oedipus is destined to kill his father. In other words, the old king is destined to be killed by his own son. The story implies that a son is born with an instinct for patricide. *King Lear* is another example, in which the old king is maltreated by his daughters and finally dies miserably. In these legends or tales, the old fathers are usually

successful in career, for all of them are already kings. What troubles them most is the relationship with their children. Children are rebellious and threatening to their father kings. Sometimes it is the young who are voracious and trying to snatch more fortunes from the latter, but mostly in these literary works, the conflicts are caused by the old who have flaws in personality and behavior. The story of *Le Père Goriot*, written by Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) in 1835, is another typical example. Old Goriot has accumulated substantial wealth from his life-long business, but when he is old and retired, almost all his money is mercilessly taken by his daughters. He devotes everything to his daughters, but they even refuse to attend his funeral. Old Goriot is another King Lear. Both of them are incapable of discerning their daughters' true colors, or they just have been attached to wrong objects due to their flawed personalities. In this novel, as well as in many others portraying senior subjectivity, the topic is often grounded in and negatively shaped by family ties.

The leitmotif of domestic conflicts, especially those between an old father and his adult children in such works as *King Lear* is transplanted by William Faulkner (1897-1962) into the context of the American South in the second half of the 19th century in his masterpiece, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). According to *The Bible*, the third son of David, King of Israel, was named Absalom. Absalom rebels against his father, but is defeated and killed in the end, which greatly grieves King David. Faulkner uses this title to allude to a wayward son who fights against his father but fails. The father does not benefit from the victory over his son, but is actually another victim of the distorted family ties. Faulkner's novel narrates the story of a father who wants to

have a son but is finally destroyed by his son.¹ The conflicts between old father and adult children in Faulkner's novel are represented by Sutpen and his children Henry Sutpen, Charles Bon, and Judith Sutpen.

Narrative Construction of Senior Subjectivity in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Prior to the 20th century, the exploration, whether in the West or in the East, was mostly grounded on the belief that there is a solid subjectivity in old age. Thinkers were interested in analyzing the elements of constructing senior subjectivity and the patterns of such construction. Starting in the 20th century, however, the research concerning human subjectivity arrived at a new stage. An increasing number of thinkers started to deny or reject the existence of a true subjectivity. The new trend boosted a deeper understanding of human subjectivity and the essence of human life. In 20th century literature, authors also probe into the fluidity and illusory quality of self-identity in their narratives. Identity is considered by many as a result of narration or discourse, rather than as an objective entity on a stable foundation. According to Dan McAdams, "Narrative identity is the internalized and evolving story of the self that a person begins to work on in late adolescence and emerging adulthood and continues to rework for much of the rest of life."² People tend to constantly construct or reconstruct the self by means of

¹ See Faulkner's mail to his editor, Harrison Smith, in August, 1934: "I have a title for it which I like, by the way: *ABSALOM, ABSALOM*; the story is of a man who wanted a son through pride, and got too many of them and they destroyed him...." in William Faulkner, *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, ed. Joseph Blotner (New York: Random House, 1977), 84.

² Dan P. McAdams, "Narrative Identity," in Seth J. Schwartz, Koen Luyckx, and Vivian L. Vignoles, eds., *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research* (New York: Springer, 2011), 111.

narration, which means that the narrative self-identity is changeable and hardly faithful to the truth.

Absalom, Absalom! is one such narrative critic David Minter considers as “a double story:” the story of Thomas Sutpen and the story of its telling.³ In other words, it is not just a story of Sutpen’s life experiences, but more like a story made up by several narrators in various times and places out of their respective imaginations. Minter holds that the incessant talk of narrators not only “imposes itself...on the novel’s readers,” but also “draws the readers into active participation in the process of articulation.”⁴ In his analysis of *Absalom*, Doreen Fowler maintains that Sutpen is born “as a subject in the cultural order, which is narrated by Quentin and Shreve in chapter seven,” and that “this entrance into subjectivity and culture is profoundly at odds with essentialist notions of a unified, coherent, autonomous self.”⁵ Using Lacanian postmodern notion, Fowler argues that Sutpen’s “identity is represented...in the novel as socially constructed in loss.”⁶ In the following sections, I intend to examine the narration of old Sutpen’s identity from the angle of family ties, such as their features and determining factors. I will analyze various elements that influence the conflicting and complex construction of Sutpen’s identity and senior subjectivity from the narration of other characters, Sutpen himself, and the author of the novel, that is to say, Faulkner.

³ David Minter, *Faulkner’s Questioning Narratives: Fiction of His Major Phase, 1929-42* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2001), 98.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Doreen Fowler, “Revising *The Sound and the Fury: Absalom, Absalom!* and Faulkner’s Postmodern Turn,” in John N. Duvall and Ann J. Abadie, eds. *Faulkner and Postmodernism: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1999* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 98.

⁶ Ibid.

Sutpen's Senior Subjectivity in the Narration by Character-narrators

What is Sutpen's subjectivity in his old age? Faulkner does not tell us up front. Instead, he adopts a way to present the old man's subjectivity through narrative construction. One of the distinctive features of *Absalom, Absalom!* is Faulkner's narrative technique. According to John Carlos Rowe, "*Absalom, Absalom!* is one of the best possible test cases for how narrative unreliability and literary self-consciousness might serve the political and moral criticism of social reality."⁷ In order to portray Sutpen the protagonist, Faulkner applies a mode of multilayered narration. Throughout the novel, Sutpen's identity or subjectivity is not directly displayed by an omniscient narrator, but is told or retold by different narrators. Several characters are involved in the narration, but each offers only fragmented and even falsified information about Sutpen. Dirk Kuyk points out that the narrators are "untrustworthy" and they "build their accounts on their own knowledge, inference, and imagination and color those accounts according to their own assumptions, desires, antipathies, and perhaps even aesthetic preferences for one kind of narrative or another."⁸ Therefore, their statements are often inconsistent with one another. Faulkner gives his narrators either limited knowledge or limited opportunity to talk about Sutpen. In so doing, he seems to indicate that one's identity or subjectivity is to a large extent constructed by language or speech, and such construction is usually untrue.

⁷ John Carlos Rowe, "Faulkner and the Southern Arts of Mystification in *Absalom, Absalom!*," in *A Companion to William Faulkner*, ed., Richard C. Moreland (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007), 446.

⁸ Dirk Kuyk, Jr., *Sutpen's Design: Interpreting Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1990), 28-9.

In the novel, every narrator has his or her own version of Sutpen's story, and will tell the part that he or she concerns most. Besides, Faulkner makes the narration even more sophisticated by inserting more components into the structure. It is true that all the narrators may know something about Sutpen, but their accounts are not necessarily based on first-hand materials. In fact, those miscellaneous ideas may have originated from a variety of places. For instance, Rosa, the younger sister of Sutpen's wife and the main teller of Sutpen's story, is born in 1845, years after Sutpen appears in Jefferson in 1833, builds his mansion in 1835, and gets married in 1838. So her understanding of Sutpen's earlier behavior comes largely from second-hand sources, such as her father Mr. Coldfield, rumors from townspeople, and even her own imagination. In addition to Rosa's vehement denouncement of Sutpen, the original experiences of the latter are transmitted from person to person, making his name a floating signifier. Each time something is added to the story, and something else is missing. As a result, each time when narrators think they are talking about Sutpen, they are probably just talking about what they have heard, read, or thought about that person. Sutpen seems to have been created more by other characters of the novel than by the author. This is Faulkner's way of constructing Sutpen's subjectivity—Sutpen is the object of diverse perspectives.

The history of Sutpen's family ties in Jefferson is negatively narrated by Rosa with overwhelming bitterness and hatred. In Rosa's eyes, her experience with Sutpen is no less than a trauma: "[M]y life was destined to end on an afternoon in April forty-three years ago [because of Sutpen]" (AA, 12). Sutpen is depicted as a demon, "the evil's source and head" (AA, 12). Rosa despises Sutpen: "He wasn't a gentleman. He wasn't even a gentleman" (AA, 9), and that is repeated later: "No: not even a gentleman" (AA, 11). The repetition of the negative sentence

structure best represents Rosa's overall construction of Sutpen's personality. In regards to his house and family in Jefferson, Rosa uses these words to describe Sutpen's behavior: he "tore violently (a plantation)" and "without gentleness (begot two children)" (AA, 5). This comment shows that Rosa believes Sutpen was never an eligible husband or father. He is married to Rosa's sister, but he never treats her with good manners. Rosa maintains that Sutpen is a villain, a cheater, who, with suspicious wealth, comes to Jefferson to seek land and a decent marriage. The reason for her resentment is that she believes Sutpen has greatly harmed Jefferson, her family and her life.

Faulkner introduces Sutpen and his family through Rosa's biased words. Rosa's narration is certainly not the whole picture of Sutpen's image, because she does not tell readers why Sutpen is such a demon. But the words quoted above appear in the first chapter of the novel, conveying to readers the first impression of Sutpen, a rather unpleasant one. Sutpen's relations with other family members, such as his wife, children, and even sister-in-law, are doomed to go from bad to worse. They will greatly affect his mental state and behavior in old age, resulting in a negative representation of his senior subjectivity.

Two other important narrators are Quentin and Shreve, both of whom visualize the old Sutpen based on what they have heard or read. Being sympathetic with Rosa's resentment, Shreve, Quentin's roommate at Harvard University, describes Sutpen as "Faustus, demon, and Beelzebub"⁹ (AA, 145). Quentin also calls old Sutpen "the old demon" (AA, 148). To the majority of people who have ever seen or heard of Sutpen, "Demon" is his label. When he is old, he becomes an old demon who is totally unpardonable for his deeds. Faulkner makes use of

⁹ In the Christian *Bible*, Beelzebub stands for demon.

different narrators to reinforce one another and give readers a strengthened feeling that Sutpen is a bona fide villain and cheater who cares only about himself.

The image of old Sutpen can perfectly fit into the traditional Western concept of an old person in its negative sense. The old were thought of as possessing all sorts of problems, physically, mentally, and morally. In this story, old Sutpen becomes less powerful, but is still self-centered and cruel to whoever is still alive in his family. He is not willing to give up his initial objective of having an ideal son to inherit his property, although there is not much left on his plantation that is called Sutpen's Hundred. Shreve's imagination of the scene of Sutpen's old age is as follows:

Came back home and found his chances of descendants gone where his children had attended to that, and his plantation ruined, fields fallow except for a fine stand of weeds, and taxes and levies and penalties sowed by United States marshals and such and all his niggers gone where the Yankees had attended to that, and you would have thought he would have been satisfied: yet before his foot was out of the stirrup he not only set out to try to restore his plantation to what he used to be, like maybe he was hoping to fool the Creditor by illusion and obfuscation by concealing behind the illusion that time and change had not elapsed and occurred the fact that he was now almost sixty year old until he could get himself a new batch of children to bulwark him... (AA, 146)

This short passage shows the subjectivity of old Sutpen to be founded on "illusion." Old Sutpen appears to be extremely stubborn. At about sixty years old, after failing twice in his life goal, Sutpen wants to give it another try as if he were still young. Failures in his younger years have severely distorted his personality, so now he is desperately but vainly looking for a white woman who can deliver a white boy for him. As a man who is becoming old and weak, Sutpen might have believed that his identity is merely centered on having a son. He spots Rosa first, and then seduces Jones's fifteen-year-old granddaughter, but both attempts amount to nothing in the end.

Faulkner further emphasizes the insanity and incapacity of old Sutpen by describing him as a “mad impotent old man” twice. One is in Shreve’s comment: “...he didn’t even need to be a demon now but just mad impotent old man who had realized at last that his dream of restoring his Sutpen’s Hundred was not only vain but that what he had left of it would never support him and his family” (AA, 147). The other is in Quentin’s words: “...the day after I came back thinking Mad impotent old man who realized at last that there must be some limit even to the capabilities of a demon for doing harm, who must have...seen himself as the old wornout cannon which realizes that it can deliver just one more fierce shot and crumble to dust in its own furious blast and recoil” (AA, 148). The term “mad impotent old man” is Faulkner’s version of an abnormal and useless old person in Western thought. It easily reminds readers of other literary figures like King Lear. These seniors might have once been highly successful in their young age, but when old, they become “mad” and “impotent.” Old people are likely to be offended or ignored by their children, and these stories become the best source for tragedies. Just like Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Faulkner makes up a tragic story about Sutpen’s family ties. It is difficult for an old person like Sutpen to accept the reality that his heyday is over, and he still makes use of others to help him realize his life-long dream. So conflicts inevitably arise between his relations and him. This is also the reason why both Shreve and Quentin hold a rather negative opinion about old Sutpen. They believe that as an old person, he is not only evil, but also useless.

Sutpen’s Self-narration of His Identity in Old Age

Having constructed the subjectivity of old Sutpen as a wicked and villainous old man through others’ words, the author gives this character an opportunity to talk about himself,

particularly his earlier experiences, although the self-narration is put in an indirect way and happens very late in the novel. The self-narration is essential for readers to discern the origin and nature of Sutpen's self-identity. After everyone, both readers and many characters in the novel, is deeply convinced that Sutpen is "an old demon," Faulkner comes to his earlier experiences of other family ties for the reasons for his mental state and behavior in old age. His experiences before coming to Jefferson originate from his own statement, but they are passed down from Quentin's grandfather to Quentin's father, and then from the father to Quentin. Quentin's family is closely related to Sutpen, and therefore plays an important role in the novel's narration of Sutpen's subjectivity. This is Faulkner's unique and outstanding narrative technique. Previously, similar ways of information transmission show that the narrators are unreliable, but this time, Faulkner indicates that they are more reliable and therefore it offers better clues to analyze Sutpen's personal understanding of the self. Judging from the novel's narrative techniques, the reasons are twofold. First, in Chapter Two, Faulkner repeatedly hints that General Compson, Quentin's grandfather, is different from other character-narrators. Readers often come across such sentences as "it was General Compson who first realized that..." (AA, 25), "...some of them began to suspect what General Compson apparently knew..." (AA, 26), "it was General Compson, who seemed to have known him well enough to..." (AA, 30), "It was General Compson who knew first about..." (AA, 31), "Compson was the first man in the county to tell himself that Sutpen did not need to..." (AA, 31), and so on. Faulkner is telling readers that General Compson knows Sutpen better than other folks of Jefferson. It is partly because the General is less, if ever, affected by the insecure "first impression" of Sutpen that most people have, and partly because Sutpen is willing to confide his secret to him. As one of the few friends

of Sutpen in town, General Compson's judgment is much more rational than most of the townspeople. He is a character in the novel that Faulkner employs to reveal more about Sutpen, so his part of Sutpen's portrayal is more realistic and less frightening.

Second, the account of Sutpen's past from General Compson is comparatively more reliable than other descriptions, because here in Chapter Seven, Faulkner starts to use first-person narration to refer to Sutpen and unveil his past, and for the first time we can directly look into Sutpen's subjective mind. The most obvious episode is when Sutpen feels he is insulted by a black slave. He hides himself in a cave under a tree to ponder over the problem and find a solution. His self is split into two: one insists on shooting the slave while the other discourages him: "But I can shoot him....No. That wouldn't do no good....What shall we do then?....I don't know" (AA, 190). The narration turns from the third person to the first, offering first-hand information or showing the mental activities of Sutpen to readers. This is a critical moment in narration that rarely, if ever, happens in the previous chapters of the novel. So to speak, Faulkner directly exposes Sutpen's initial subjectivity to all of us. For the first time in Sutpen's life, he starts to ponder over his future and realize that he should do something for himself, instead of merely following others' orders. He is awakening, looking into himself and making a decision by himself. This decision, although incorrect at the outset, is a blueprint that he will strive to fulfill throughout the rest of his life.

In the novel, Sutpen's identity is to a large degree reflected in his first-person narration. After the aforementioned incident, more and more words are presented from Sutpen's subjective viewpoint, as if he were talking directly to readers. For example, his original words are quoted when talking to General Compson: "I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a

house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife. I set out to acquire these, asking no favor of any man. I even risked my life at one time...” (AA, 212). It is another key statement of Sutpen, because it suggests his philosophy of life and the foundation of his life goal. It is so important that Faulkner has to make Sutpen spell it out directly: “I had a design.” Sutpen follows his design, or the plan to succeed and get revenge, all his life. He executes the plan in such a strict way that the plan becomes inseparable from his self. He and the design are one, which changes his self-identity and leads to his tragic failure in the end. Sutpen’s point of view best explains and rationalizes his deviant behavior due to the design, such as the reason why he hates to have a wife with black ancestry, even if she is an octoroon and does not look black at all. His life goal is to become a wealthy man and to be the master of black slaves, but he never wants to be related to them. So he repudiates his first wife and child when he discovers that they will block his way to success.

The discourse analysis above shows that Faulkner intends to convince readers that General Compson’s version of Sutpen’s story is more reliable, which can be taken as a solid and reasonable foundation for readers to comprehend his later life. Sutpen’s self-introduction or self-vindication is not about his old age; however, his early experiences and childhood memory have greatly shaped his self-identity and furthered his senior subjectivity. More importantly, he mainly talks about his parents and first wife, which offers a clue to his behavior and treatment of his children in old age. Before he starts over at Jefferson, Sutpen runs away from home and later abandons his first wife and son. Then his kingdom at Jefferson is destroyed and his last attempt to have a son is defeated. There are some fundamental reasons behind the tragic life stories of

Sutpen and his family. These reasons are various problems in the American South in the late 19th century that Faulkner uncovers in the novel, problems I will discuss below.

The novel's narration enlightens us that the construction of an old man's senior subjectivity is much more complicated and unreliable than one can imagine. An old person's identity is not self-defined or self-determined, but lies in others' accounts. Therefore, the narrative shows that the process of one's subjectivity formation is fluid rather than fixed, dynamic rather than static. It is narration that defines Sutpen, not Sutpen that defines narration. The multidimensional narration of the novel impresses readers with an enigmatic and capricious Sutpen. According to Rosa, he is a hero because he joins the army to fight for the south in the civil war. But he is also a villain, because he devastates the happiness of all other family members to fulfill his own unrealistic goals. When he is old, he even goes to extremes and becomes increasingly cruel. For another example, after everyone is convinced that Sutpen is a demon, Faulkner unveils his past life to readers, hinting that these are the causes of his mindset at old age. Therefore, reading the novel might resemble playing a jigsaw puzzle. Readers have to carefully distinguish and put every piece of the puzzle in the right place. In the end, they may generally conclude that old Sutpen is an old demon but he is not the only one to blame.

Then, what has made Sutpen an old man that is stuck in his scheme? Throughout the novel, Faulkner seems to convey to readers that in the nineteenth-century American South, senior subjectivity and family ties are largely affected by issues of race, land, and wealth. It is true that the process of constructing subjectivity is fluid, but under certain circumstances, the major influential factors are specific and can be discerned. In the following sections, I will explore how Faulkner unveils these factors by means of his peculiar narration.

Faulkner's Account of Sutpen's Racial Construction of Subjectivity

The novel is narrated with “strong racial overtones.”¹⁰ Readers can easily find that racial issues are important elements affecting the interpersonal relationship in Sutpen's family, and such an impact also shapes his self-identity and senior subjectivity. Racial problems in the American South at that time were serious. Numerous Native Americans and African Americans were killed or cruelly suffered as slaves. Faulkner sets up Sutpen's story in this context to manifest its influence on Sutpen's entire life.

How can racial issues mold one's senior subjectivity through his or her family ties? Faulkner's story explores the situation from such aspects as inheritance, gender, patriarchy, childhood trauma, and family dilemma—all these issues are marked with racial features. To clarify this point, it is better to reconsider Sutpen's behavior and mind at old age. Despite repeated frustrations, old Sutpen still dreams of having an eligible successor to inherit whatever is left on his land. The successor should meet two essential qualifications: being white and being male. It should be a truly and completely white son, and Sutpen will not accept a son who just looks white. As a result, inheritance in Sutpen's family is connected to race and gender: to strictly maintain the same blood and the same family name. Sutpen is thus a character with deep racial and sexual prejudices.

Racial issues are one of the factors that shape Sutpen's senior subjectivity. Despite the fact that he has fallen from power, old Sutpen still wants to execute his plan, or “design” in his own words. He needs a white woman to help him continue the genealogy, but only takes women as

¹⁰ Frederick R. Karl, “Race, History, and Technique in *Absalom, Absalom!*” in Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, eds. *Faulkner and Race: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1986* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 209.

tools of reproduction. Women, even if they are white, are only considered by Sutpen “as the means of perpetuating [his] dynasty” and they only stay “in the shadows and margins of the narrative.”¹¹ For example, he proposes to Rosa but has no intention of marrying her unless she can give birth to a boy for him: “...on the day when he established definitely that he would be able to keep at least some of his land and how much, he approached her and suggested they breed like a couple of dogs together” (AA, 147). In Sutpen’s mind, Rosa is not a human, but an animal, or a machine. Earlier on, he also thinks of his black slaves as dogs when they are working at the construction site on his land. Both Rosa and black slaves are tools to build a perfect kingdom for him. For another example, when Sutpen finds that Milly Jones gives birth to a girl and his last hope is dead, he says, “Well, Milly, too bad you’re not a mare like Penelope. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable” (AA, 151). Here, Sutpen not only compares Milly to a mare, but insults her by expressing the idea that if she cannot deliver him a son, she is even inferior to a mare, because she is useless to him. Sutpen’s subjective mind is such that everyone else is a stepping stone for him to climb up to success. What he cares about is a white son as his heir, and even this heir is a tool to complete his design. Faulkner’s narration shows readers a hyper-inflated egoist who is characterized by racism and sexism. In other words, Faulkner tries to tell readers that Sutpen is a mixture of a racist and sexist. This is a distinctive trait of Sutpen’s identity. In all his years from a little boy to an old man, Sutpen believes that his racist ideas are highly justified and thus he has the right to do whatever he likes. As a result, we can say that his senior subjectivity is greatly grounded on these ideas.

¹¹ Susan V. Donaldson, “Subverting History: Women, Narrative, and Patriarchy in *Absalom, Absalom!*,” *Southern Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 4 (Summer 1988): 19.

Race is a core issue in Faulkner's narration of Sutpen. This issue is an underlying factor that practically influences every decision he has made in life and every conflict in his family ties. If the above listed examples are not sufficiently cogent in terms of Sutpen's racist senior subjectivity, his hostile attitude toward his first son, Charles Bon, can also illustrate this point. As is shown by Faulkner, Bon is the key character that causes the fall of Sutpen's empire, because Sutpen cannot accept or bear a hybrid son who might inherit his property, which finally leads to the resistance and death of the son. As a representative of the patriarchal society, Sutpen's attitude is such that he will make every effort to get rid of Bon. While in his twenties, Sutpen divorced his first wife in Haiti and abandoned Bon, because he learned that they are not "white," or at least not white enough. This is a huge setback to his life goal, but it is not the last one. Then, about thirty years later, Sutpen is approaching sixty and has almost finished his design when Bon appears again. Sutpen has to remove Bon with the help of his other son Henry Sutpen, for Bon is going to marry his daughter Judith Sutpen. The result is that Bon is killed by Henry and Henry runs away from home. The family tragedy is obviously caused by the insolvable issue of race. In the novel, Bon is not merely a person of color, but is emblematic of racial issues that have lasted for centuries in America and now become a kind of unconscious heavy burden that Sutpen has to eradicate from his mind. So he automatically and persistently keeps Bon out of his territory and if necessary, he will get rid of Bon at all costs.

Although the fatal incident between Sutpen's two sons is basically his own plan, it is still a lethal blow to his design and deteriorates his mindset in old age. From Faulkner's labyrinthine narration, we can see that before the incident happens or before Bon appears, Sutpen, as a man in his fifties, is highly successful in his design. He has gradually accumulated not only fortune, but

also self-confidence and a sense of accomplishment, and he is expecting a satisfactory later life. His appearance and mental state at that time is seen as follows: one day, thirty years later, he sits in General Compson's office "in his fine clothes now..., with money to rattle in his pocket and his beard at its prime too: beard body and intellect at that peak which all the different parts that make a man reach, where he can say *I did all that I set out to do and I could stop here if I wanted to and no man to chide me with sloth, not even myself...*" (AA, 193-4). His fine clothes, his beard, and his money are all symbols of success. After years of hard work, Sutpen has arrived at the best times of his life, and he is probably considering retirement when saying that he could stop here. For a moment, he must have believed that he was a successful old man.

However, Sutpen's children, particularly Bon, refuse to obey his orders or cooperate with him. They finally ruin his plan, which is just like the situation King Lear confronts in his old age. Both Sutpen and King Lear fall into a category of Western literature and thought that an old king who is highly successful but somewhat morally or mentally weak will be defeated or even killed by his own rebellious children. In traditional Western thought, old people are vulnerable to both internal and external evils. The difference is that, in Faulkner's narrative of Sutpen, the conflicts of family relations are mainly founded on racial issues. Old people are believed to be incapable of sustaining what they have achieved and after they have reached the peak of their career, it is time to descend for whatever reasons. Faulkner comments on the turning of fate: "...maybe this the instant which Fate always picks out to blackjack you, only the peak feels so sound and stable that the beginning of the falling is hidden for a little while..." (AA, 194). When Sutpen is stepping into old age, his empire starts to collapse despite the illusion that he has fulfilled his life

goal. Therefore, Sutpen is one of those literary Western old people who are destined to fail, no matter how hard they try.

In the story of *King Lear*, the king is given another chance of regaining his dignity and power when his third daughter comes back with an army to rescue him. But she is defeated in battle and executed, and consequently King Lear dies of a broken heart. Analogously, Faulkner gives Sutpen another chance to continue his life goal and the result turns out to be the last straw that destroys him. Old Sutpen is not immediately in despair after the strike from Bon, but he makes up his mind to start his plan once again. According to Mr. Compson, old Sutpen “was not concerned...about the courage and the will, nor even about the shrewdness now. He was not for one moment concerned about his ability to start the third time. All that he was concerned about was the possibility that he might not have time sufficient to do it in, regain his lost ground in” (AA, 223). This mental state is typical of Sutpen who has been fighting almost all his life to achieve success. But it is probably just an illusion for an old person to think that he or she has the same power as before and refuses to accept reality. What Faulkner intends to express in Sutpen’s story is that Sutpen is also a victim of racism. He might have excellent personal qualities such as courage, will, and shrewdness, but under the circumstances, nobody who is influenced by racial issues can escape from them. Old Sutpen is one of those people. He may get rid of Bon, but he cannot get rid of the idea of racial conflicts in his unconscious mind.

This is how Faulkner constructs Sutpen’s identity and senior subjectivity. Old Sutpen is a racist and sexist who is thus described as an old demon. He might be equipped with good personal qualities, but deteriorates into an evil person under the pressure of social and racial

conflicts. Although he is old and much less powerful, he still makes efforts to rebuild family ties and produce an heir for himself. Family ties are an important element to his success, but he is eventually destroyed by his children. It seems that there is one thing concerning Sutpen's senior subjectivity that has not been fully discussed, that is, how the social and racial environments influence his childhood memory and then further shape his family ties and senior subjectivity.

Different from Shakespeare's *King Lear* which focuses on the king's old age, Faulkner intentionally brings up Sutpen's traumatic childhood experience and suggests its impact on his senior subjectivity. It seems that all of Sutpen's troubles and struggles stem from the scene of a child standing at the front door of a big house: one day, the father sent little Sutpen, who was no more than fourteen years old at that time, to the big house with a message, "now he stood there before that white door with the monkey nigger barring it and looking down at him in his patched made-over jeans clothes and no shoes....it was the nigger told him, even before he had had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back" (AA, 188). This confrontation is the most critical moment of Sutpen's life, because it radically changes or subverts how he thinks of himself. He feels extremely humiliated to have been despised and ordered by a black slave to leave the front door and go to the back of the house. Before that moment, he always thinks that, as a white and free person, he is superior to the black. He always observes the world and everybody in it from a distance, but he never imagines how he is looked on by others. When the well-dressed slave looks "down at him in his patched made-over jeans clothes and no shoes," Sutpen's original self-identity is smashed.

As a result of the gaze of the black slave at the front door, little Sutpen is suddenly gripped by a new self-awareness or subjectivity. This subjectivity is not true or reliable, because it is

rooted in the power of racial discrimination and other external elements like money and even clothes and shoes. Sutpen's sense of subjectivity is triggered by other people's watching, from which he also learns to perceive himself from the perspective of others. As is stated by Faulkner, Sutpen imagines that "...the rich man (not the nigger) must have been seeing them all the time—as cattle, creatures heavy and without grace, brutally evacuated into a world without hope or purpose for them" (AA, 190). He realizes from others' eyes that his family might have been looked on as hopeless and aimless animals, and his life is therefore meaningless. The thought motivates him to change his present situation and fight for a brighter future. As a result, this episode is one of the most important scenes in Faulkner's characterization of Sutpen.

This episode is also influential to Sutpen's senior subjectivity. To overcome childhood trauma, usually one has to rely on one or more of the following three ways: to re-experience, reinterpret, and/or replace it. It is obvious that Sutpen cannot re-experience the encounter at the front door of the house to regain his dignity, so he chooses to replace it with other achievements to improve his self-identity. Throughout his life, Sutpen strives to become a member of the upper class in terms of both economy and race. In other words, he aims at forming a wealthy family of his own and meanwhile possessing a white son as the successor of his wealth. After about forty years, just after he enters old age, he believes that he finally succeeds in his business and it seems that the subjectivity of old Sutpen is accordingly well-constructed. In Faulkner's narration, old Sutpen even tries to reinterpret his childhood trauma to soothe the pain in his mind: he envisions a scene that the boy is finally let in and "never again need to stand on the outside of a white door and knock at it" (AA, 210). The reinterpretation of Sutpen's experience as a boy shows that old Sutpen has decided to compromise with life, due to his success.

However, one of Faulkner's core ideas is that Sutpen's self-identity is formed wrongly on the basis of wealth and race, so it is doomed to fail. When Bon, another strange boy, comes to the door of Sutpen's big house, he is rejected by the house owner. The rejection discloses Sutpen's unconscious mind that takes Bon as the other and it brings about the downfall of his lifelong design and the destruction of his senior subjectivity. In this sense, "Sutpen is further defined by his son, Charles Bon."¹² Ulfried Reichardt argues that "[t]he relation to the Other subverts the identity of Self."¹³ Sutpen rejects Bon because of his "black blood," which is a repetition of the affront he suffered decades earlier. At that time, he is rejected by the other in the house, but now, he acts as the other does in his dealing with the boy outside door. Meanwhile, Bon is also the other in Sutpen's eyes. After so many years, Sutpen still cannot come to terms with the world due to his racist mentality. According to J. G. Brister, Bon is the racial other who "functions as the semiotic" and "threatens the stability of the symbolic order" in Sutpen's mind: "his introduction into the text is transgressive, distortive, and destabilizing to the ordering of the symbolic."¹⁴ Bon's appearance not only tears the family apart and destructs Sutpen's design, but also destroys Sutpen's seemingly successful attempt to construct an ideal self and eventually ruins his self-identity in old age. In Reichardt's words, "[u]ltimately, subjectivization in and

¹² Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 302.

¹³ Ulfried Reichardt, "Perceiving and Representing Slavery and 'Race' 'Through' Time: William Faulkner's 'Absalom, Absalom!,'" *American Studies*, vol. 42, no. 4, *William Faulkner: German Responses* (1997): 621.

¹⁴ J. G. Brister, "Absalom, Absalom! and the Semiotic Other," *The Faulkner Journal*, vol. 22, issue 1/2 (Fall 2006/Spring 2007): 47.

through the relation to the 'racial' Other involves a breaking up of the homogeneity of the Self.”¹⁵

In conclusion, Sutpen's self-identity and senior subjectivity are deeply influenced by his racist mentality. Sutpen's subjectivity is a kind of “white subjectivity” that Faulkner intends to smash.¹⁶ To Sutpen, senior subjectivity, racism, and family ties interweave with each other. Racist (and sexist) ideas undermine his attempts to form good family ties. Each of his attempts turns out to be a failure. By the same token, his subjectivity is mainly formed on the basis of his family ties, so when he is old and his family ties are broken due to racial conflicts, his attempt to construct subjectivity is also defeated. Old Sutpen is an ardent supporter of a racist society; however, an exploration of his childhood trauma shows that he himself is a victim of racism and the abnormal family ties on which he grows up.

Land and Sutpen's Construction of Senior Subjectivity

If race is an indication of one's biological identity, land is what defines one's economic identity. Both kinds of identity are determined by certain social, historical, and cultural factors. Before the American Civil War, the economy of the Southern states of America was mainly based on plantation agriculture. Land was the most important source of wealth and the most fundamental symbol of social status. As a writer who is prominent in Southern American Literature, Faulkner seeks to stress the significance of land and everything that grows from it,

¹⁵ Reichardt, “Perceiving and Representing,” 622.

¹⁶ See Masami Sugimori, “Racial Mixture, Racial Passing, and White Subjectivity in *Absalom, Absalom!*,” *The Faulkner Journal*, vol. 23, issue 2 (Spring 2008): 3-21.

including its residents, and tries to figure out how land shapes the personalities and identities of Southern people. As a matter of fact, Faulkner's initial idea is to write a novel about land, which later becomes *Absalom, Absalom!*. In the letter to the editor Harrison Smith, he briefly introduces it: "Roughly, the theme is a man who outraged the land, and the land then turned and destroyed the man's family."¹⁷ Land always plays an important role to characters in Faulkner's novel, especially Sutpen. The subsequent passages will focus on the novel's representation of land and its influence on Sutpen's family ties, self-identity, and then further on his senior subjectivity.

The humiliating incident at the front door of the big house awakens not only Sutpen's subjective consciousness but also his spirit of resistance. He, a previously ignorant boy, begins to understand the importance of land. In his innocent mind, owning land is a precondition for defeating his enemies: "So to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what he did. You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with" (AA, 192). Little Sutpen's strategy is that, to defeat those hateful people, he needs to live in the same way as rich white landowners do, which means he should also become a landowner. Thus, the quest for land becomes Sutpen's primary objective in life, and his subjectivity relies on and combines with the land he seeks and owns.

Faulkner repeatedly demonstrates that Sutpen's personality is closely related to and highly influenced by land, or by his understanding of land. In the same way, Sutpen's senior subjectivity is constructed greatly on the basis of land, not only in his old age, but also before it. Faulkner shows his readers that old Sutpen is weak and wicked, but obviously he is not born with

¹⁷ William Faulkner, *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, ed. Joseph Blotner (New York: Random House, 1977), 79.

such a personality. On the other hand, according to Faulkner, Sutpen “fell into it” when his family moves from the mountainous West Virginia to the coastal plain of Virginia (AA, 180). It not only means that he and his family go down to a place at a lower altitude, but also has a figurative implication that they fall from the domain of “paradise” to “hell.” Little Sutpen is originally innocent and carefree in the western mountains, just like living in paradise. At that time, his self is not differentiated from nature, forest, or land; his subjectivity has not yet been discovered or formed. The only opportunity for him to see the Other is by observing native Americans, but they are far away from his life and land. As is mentioned by Faulkner, “...the only colored people were Indians and you only looked down at them over your rifle sights” (AA, 179). Sutpen is too young to understand the cruel reality that white colonists are constantly invading and taking Indian territories. He is unaware that the beautiful land is a result of bloody plunder. The land can offer him everything he needs: home, food, and a play field. It is needless for him to seek pleasure out of the land that nourishes and protects him. This is Sutpen’s first impression of land and such an innocent feeling for land lies in his unconscious self until old age.

Sutpen’s subjectivity starts to form along with his new apprehension of land when his family moves out of the mountainous area. Before that, Sutpen “had never even heard of, never imagined, a place, a land divided neatly up and actually owned by men who did nothing but ride over it on fine horses or sit in fine clothes on the galleries of big houses while other people worked for them,” and “he didn’t even know there was a country...all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own” (AA, 179). Sutpen seems to be suddenly plunged from a primitive society into a modern world that is divided by money, class, and race, and all of them are characterized by the possession of land. In

the process of his fall, his original innocent self degenerates and disintegrates into a sophisticated social self. Sutpen has learned the difference is not only between white men and black ones, but also between poor white men and rich white men (AA, 183). The rich white own much more land than the poor white. His family belongs to the poor white who lead even more miserable lives than black slaves. The poverty, hardship, and injustice that he undergoes have greatly shaped his views on life and impelled him to plan for owning land in the future. In the process of his fall, Sutpen involuntarily goes “down;” when he realizes this, he decides to do something to reverse the direction and go “up.” It is his attempt to rebuild subjectivity when confronting identity crisis. His subjectivity, however, is formed under the influence of external power relations and by an unhealthy and unrealistic attachment to land. Such formation of subjectivity is strongly linked to his concept of land, property, and territory. As a result, his senior subjectivity is also interwoven with the view on the prestige of owning land.

Faulkner alludes to a turning point that changes Sutpen from an innocent and ignorant young man to a reckless and ruthless old man, which is also closely related to land as well as to family ties. It is the experience in a plantation in the West Indies, where he works as an overseer or foreman for a French sugar planter. There he has learned two lessons: one is about family, the other is about land, and they are interrelated. Before he goes to the West Indies, Sutpen is described as a virtuous, veracious, and vigorous young man who seeks wealth on a strange land. Nevertheless, after the frustration there, he becomes increasingly vicious in other characters’ eyes. While Sutpen thinks that one needs to be “courageous and shrewd” to make money in the West Indies, General Compson realizes that it is actually “unscrupulousness” (AA, 201). Faulkner tells readers that the transformation is not only because he believes that he has been

deceived by his first wife, but because he has learned the truth of the land: it is a place “where high mortality was concomitant with the money and the sheen on the dollars was not from gold but from blood—a spot of earth which might have been created and set aside by Heaven itself...as a theater for violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of human greed and cruelty” (AA, 201-2). The reality teaches Sutpen the fundamental reason why some people possess more land and wealth than others. Land in the modern world is not a natural product, but defined by violence and bloody exploitation. Sutpen learns from his experiences that to obtain land of his own, he cannot just rely on honesty and diligence. From then on, an evil element of greed and cruelty is added to his subjectivity, which contributes to his success in cheating an Indian Chief out of his land and building the Sutpen’s Hundred. Meanwhile, the quality of innocence still exists in his unconscious mind. It is exactly the conflicting qualities of cruelty and innocence that constitute Sutpen’s senior subjectivity and lead to his tragic end.

On the one hand, old Sutpen, after the huge failure of his design, is still obsessed with the innocent illusion that he can obtain everything from the land to bring about wealth and status. On the other hand, he ruthlessly makes use of every woman that he can possibly reach in his land to achieve the goal. It is a combination of innocence and ruthlessness. Despite the situation that, after the Civil War, “his plantation ruined, fields fallow except for a fine stand of weeds, and taxes and levies and penalties sowed by United States marshals,” Sutpen plans “to restore his plantation to what it used to be,” as if he were still young and not a man of almost sixty years old (AA, 146). He believes that the land is his only chance of having descendants, which is “the entire fecundity of dragon’s teeth” (AA, 268). Sutpen wants to become a king on his land, but

like King Lear, his plan fails due to the disobedience of his offspring, and such disobedience is the consequence of his own erroneous choices.

Old Sutpen's final failure is not only due to his foolishness and cruelty, but also comes from his senility. Faulkner describes the younger Sutpen as a man "among the first and foremost of the brave—who had galloped also in the old days arrogant and proud on the fine horses about the fine plantations" (AA, 232). Sutpen and people of his type are "the gallant, the proud, the brave; the acknowledged and chosen best among them all to bear the courage and honor and pride" (AA, 232). With these words, Faulkner implies that younger Sutpen has become one of the white landowners or planters who enjoy lives on their own lands, and that such qualities as "the courage and honor and pride" are drawn from the land he possesses. But when he becomes a "mad impotent old man," it gets much more difficult for him to restore the fertility of the land or keep everything and everybody on it under control. He even cannot deal with the defiance of Rosa when she refuses his offer, because Rosa can easily run away from his land. Old Sutpen still insists on his original objective even if he is much more powerless than ever. All his previous experiences in life restrain him from compromising with his self and his family and living in peace and tranquility.

Insanity is one of the features of Sutpen's senior subjectivity and one of the reasons for his failure. Such insanity is foregrounded and exacerbated by his senility. The connection between insanity and senility is also one of the traits of King Lear. Both Faulkner and Shakespeare, although in different periods of Western history, create characters in their literary works that conform to the traditional Western thought of the senior. The old are usually taken as being feeble both physically and mentally, so that they are incapable of making wise decisions. Both

old King Lear and old Sutpen become weak in handling problems in their families. They might have been valiant and heroic when they are young, but when they are old, they only appear to be insane. Senility is one of the characteristics of old age, but in Western tradition, senility is closely related to negative feelings. As a result, in Faulkner's narrative, Sutpen's senility is another element that leads to his failure in constructing a healthy senior subjectivity.

Land symbolizes production and reproduction. Everyone is born and grows up on the land and everything is yielded from the land. Without land, Sutpen cannot survive, nor can he have anything for his son to inherit. Sutpen's vitality is interrelated with the productivity of land. When he is young, he is energetic and his land is highly productive; when he is old, he is enervated and his land is barren. With the help of land, the young Sutpen can sustain a big family; when the land is devastated, old Sutpen loses the chance to regain prosperity. In Faulkner's description, Sutpen "realized at last that his dream of restoring his Sutpen's Hundred was not only vain but that what he had left of it would never support him and his family" (AA, 147). Land, family, and Sutpen's old age are like vertices of a triangle that influence one another. Old Sutpen can only run a little crossroads store, but the store will never help him rebuild the plantation. In short, old Sutpen's land cannot produce or reproduce as much as it used to do, which indicates the problems of his old age. Old Sutpen is incapable of rebuilding an ideal family on his land. Ironically, after his death, the only male descendants on his land are the hybrid ones whom he refuses to accept.

In the novel, Faulkner shows the course and consequence of the formation of Sutpen's senior subjectivity, which is closely connected to his changed understanding of land in varied environments: in the mountain, he is unaware that land can belong to individuals, and he is at

one with nature; on the Virginian plains, he realizes that land represents wealth and social status and believes that he needs land to achieve success, which causes his separation from nature and the malformation of his subjectivity; on the Haitian plantation, the cruel reality teaches him that to obtain and protect the land, he must resort to dishonesty and unethical means, which turns him from innocence to cruelty; on Sutpen's Hundred, he puts his understanding of land and family into practice, obtaining what he desires, but the temporary success amounts to nothing in the end due to the wrong foundation of his subjective consciousness. His senior subjectivity is constructed as a result of his understanding and experience of land and family ties throughout his life.

Faulkner emphasizes Sutpen's misconception of land and mansion. Sutpen attaches his subjectivity to land and the mansion on it, but constructing a mansion does not mean he has a correct way of constructing his identity. To realize his self-value, Sutpen frequently infringes on other's rights, especially those of his relatives and family members. But Sutpen himself is also a victim of the times and all sorts of power in it. Power changes the shape of land. Land is not simply territorial but political, not natural but artificial. The deterioration from the "innocent paradise" to the "evil hell"—two extremes of realms—fundamentally changes Sutpen's self-identity and his view on family relations.

In Faulkner's narration, Sutpen's design is composed of two stages: entering the upper class and revenge. For the purpose of fighting the black person or whomever he believes has insulted him, Sutpen decides to go to the West Indies to make a fortune from slave plantations. He devotes himself to the design. In the West Indies, he works hard, learns a new language, protects the plantation at the risk of his own life, etc. In Jefferson, he works even harder, builds a

mansion and a plantation, has a family, joins the army to protect his land, and so on. But his plan is thwarted again and again from the West Indies to Jefferson, Mississippi. It seems that his design is too complicated for him to keep everything under control. But if we look deeper into his design, we may find it is impossible to realize it from the very beginning. The reason is that Sutpen attempts to fight against the power of social injustice by becoming a part of the system. To use the Freudian concept, Sutpen “rejects his father as the model and adopts the plantation owner as his surrogate father,”¹⁸ or he rejects his “biological” father and accepts the “ideological” one.¹⁹ According to Carolyn Porter, “[a]fter his traumatic affront at the planter’s front door..., Sutpen chooses not to kill the father but instead to become him.”²⁰ In fact, he can become a part of the power system and live with it, or stay out of the power system and fight against it. But he wants to enjoy the benefits of the system and meanwhile tries to be different from it. It is like a man who sits on a chair but also wants to lift the chair. In this sense, Sutpen’s life is a tragedy because he is unable to escape the historical and spatial environment. He tries to revolt against the power behind land, but goes about it the wrong way. If we put it in another way, Sutpen’s design is doomed to fail because he chooses to stay “in” the system instead of going “out” of it. By contrast, it is ironic that Wash Jones, another poor old man in the story, is the one who stays out of the system but succeeds in his revenge by slaying Sutpen. By slaying

¹⁸ John T. Irwin, *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975), 98.

¹⁹ John N. Duvall, *Faulkner’s Marginal Couple: Invisible, Outlaw, and Unspeakable Communities* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 104.

²⁰ Carolyn Porter, “*Absalom, Absalom!*: (Un)Making the Father,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Faulkner*, ed. Philip M. Weinstein (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 179.

Sutpen, Wash claims “the power of turning insult, injury, and rage into revenge,” and therefore, Wash fulfills the construction of his own senior subjectivity in such an unexpected and ironical way.²¹

Concluding Remarks

The stories of King Lear and Sutpen are apparently tragedies, for they both fail to live an old age which is anything close to what they have designed. Their failure is primarily due to unsatisfactory family ties, especially their damaged relations with children. However, the deeper reason for their failure is their wrong-headed way of constructing their image, self, identity, and subjectivity for their old age.

In the aforementioned analysis, we can see that Faulkner produces a masterpiece by showing how one’s identity and subjectivity in old age is formed in narration. This is why I have adopted the term “narrative identity” to capture its dynamic process of formation. Sutpen’s identity is not presented to readers in a direct manner, but rather represented in the narrations of multiple persons, including other characters in the novel, Sutpen himself, and even the author of the novel. Whatever readers learn about Sutpen comes from the words of different narrators in the novel, most of whom are inconsistent and therefore unreliable, and the novel never directly describes him. Therefore, Sutpen’s identity is grounded on language. If Faulkner had applied another way of narration to this novel, readers would have formed a different impression of old Sutpen.

²¹ Minter, *Faulkner’s Questioning Narratives*, 27.

In the final analysis, when we review Sutpen's subjectivity, we recognize its dual dimensions: one constructed by the fictional characters' narration and the other by Faulkner's narration. The former displays conflicting and contrasting impressions among different narrators. Sutpen himself believes that he is an innocent and resolute person who strives to realize his childhood dream and social recognition, while others mostly believe that he is a mad impotent demon, villain, or cheater who is self-centered and cruel to his family and other people. Sutpen's senior subjectivity is composed of such positive and negative characteristics.

In the other dimension, Faulkner explores the influential elements in Sutpen's identity. Subjectivity in this novel is constructed by means of discourse and narration, and such construction is also on the basis of certain historical and cultural environments. In Faulkner's narration, Sutpen's self, identity, and subjectivity in old age are affected by the issues of race and land. The seeds for his bitter old age are sowed in his childhood because he embarks on an erroneous road of wealth and race. Faulkner provides the reasons why old Sutpen is so controversial in different characters' narrations. In the course of realizing his childhood dream and seeking social recognition, Sutpen's self unconsciously degenerates from innocent to inhumane, from dedicated to desperate under the influence the social power of race and wealth,. In the end, he is turned into a racist, sexist, selfish, and ruthless plantation owner. In my opinion, this is Faulkner's representation of Sutpen's senior subjectivity.

CHAPTER FIVE

A MODERN VERSION OF GOETHE'S *FAUST*:

SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY IN *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA*

Although in the West, many admit that old age is a stage of life one must accept, most Westerners do not wish to grow old. Old people seem to be futureless. They have no more chances to improve themselves and whatever they have will become nothing. No hope, no future. That being said, old people also have dignity and unfulfilled dreams, and they are unwilling to surrender themselves to fate. A common but distinct strategy for the elderly to construct their senior subjectivity is to resist or change people's perception of them as feeble, pitiable, and aimless. With this strategy, they attempt to subvert stereotypes about old age. This strategy requires old people to tackle the dilemma between youthful ambitions and senile challenges. Will they drop or stick to youthful ambitions? Will they stand up to or shy away from senile challenges? Senior subjectivity is invariably implicated in the attitudes toward these problems, which can be found in the literary representation that I will explore in this chapter.

From Faust to Santiago: Literary Old People's Struggle for Youthful Ambitions

Longing for rejuvenation in old age constitutes a fascinating subject matter in literature. In creative writings, we often see old people's attempts to remain young or regain youthful power, as portrayed in such widely known legends as *The Fountain of Youth* and *Faust*.¹ In my opinion, rejuvenation not only means becoming younger or staying in a younger state, but also means

¹ To learn more about the leitmotif of *The Fountain of Youth* and *Faust* in terms of senior subjectivity, please refer to my relevant exploration in Chapter Two.

gaining the same achievements as younger people do. Faust is lucky, because he is given an opportunity to live a life he desires, and in the end, he reaches a full comprehension of the meaning of a perfect old age. Faust's story suggests that with achievements in young age, an old person can alter his or her view on old age, and therefore change his or her fate.

The Old Man and the Sea (Ernest Hemingway, 1952) provides another picture of an old man who struggles to resist people's construction of his senile identity and realize his dream in old age. It is an interesting coincidence that Hemingway wrote the story of the old man in Bimini, the very islands where the legendary fountain of youth is supposedly hidden. As Hemingway's last major work of fiction, the short novel shows his idea of what an old person should do to protect his dignity and sustain his self-identity. Both Hemingway's and Goethe's stories are narratives of old people's resistance against fate.² Faust and Santiago are both brave warriors who strive to reach old age. Scholars have proposed various ideas to explain Hemingway's suicide. In my opinion, it might be viewed as a valiant act to defy the coming of old age.

My brief comparison of Goethe's *Faust* and Hemingway's novel is only a prelude to a focused study of the latter that reveals a developmental trend in the reconstruction of subjectivity of people in their old age. A person's subjectivity is never a stable and static thing. It varies in different stages of life, but one thing is sure: an old person will inevitably attempt to retain his or her youthful subjectivity through various ways. Faust's way is quite similar to that of Santiago in Hemingway's novel. Through a focused study of Santiago's struggle to keep his youthful self and identity, this chapter will explore how old people like Santiago desperately but dauntlessly

² It took Goethe over sixty years to compose the legend of Faust and he finished writing *Faust Part Two* in 1831, one year before his death; Hemingway was entering old age when writing *The Old Man and the Sea*, the last major fictional work in his career.

endeavor to reconstruct their subjectivity by resisting the physical, emotional, and spiritual weaknesses of old age. In Hemingway's narrative, young Santiago's subjectivity is grounded on his strong will and ambition, but it is a great mental and physical challenge for Santiago to maintain the same youthful dreams in the new situations of old age. In order to illuminate Santiago's senior subjectivity, I will examine how he strives to struggle with the fate of old age, maintain youthful ambitions, and overcome ethical dilemmas. In so doing, he subverts the stereotype of old age and achieves self-realization, thus completing the construction of senior subjectivity.

Hemingway's Santiago: An Old Man Who Defies Old Age

The Old Man and the Sea is a short novel about an aging Cuban fisherman named Santiago who catches a giant marlin. Despite its many themes, the novel's main theme is the old man's defiance of the fate of old age and all its negative effects. "Santiago is a fighter whose best days are behind him, who is too old for what his profession demands of him and, worse, is wholly down on his luck."³ Santiago kills the marlin, but fails to bring its body back to shore because of the attacks of sharks on the way. Hemingway's story may remind readers of the old hero Beowulf in the well-known old English epic entitled *Beowulf*. Beowulf is a king who has made great accomplishments when young. When he is old, he is once again faced with the challenge of fighting a powerful evil dragon. He follows the dragon to its lair and finally slays it, but he is mortally wounded and dies. Both old Beowulf and old Santiago are typical heroes in Western

³ Philip Young, "The Old Man and the Sea: Vision / Revision," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Old Man and the Sea: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Katharine T. Jobes (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 19.

tradition who struggle with destiny despite old age. It is the Western spirit that a person should fight all his or her life to live a truly meaningful life. In both narratives, old Beowulf and old Santiago go long distances to the wild and wrestle with a supernatural demon or wild beast there. They are fighting not only with external enemies, but also with their own destinies. The tragic effect of these stories, as well as the notion of senior subjectivity, is represented in the old heroes' impossible victory over fate.

From the very beginning of the novel, the old Santiago is confronted with the downfall of his fortune. The first sentence of the novel implies Santiago's unusual bad luck in the present situation: "He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish" (*OM*, 9). Hemingway uses "old" and "alone" to refer to the fact that the old man is much less powerful and popular now than ever before, and such words as "eighty-four days" and without "a fish" make a striking contrast, indicating his extremely bad luck. The beginning sentence of the novel concisely provides the necessary background information, and in order to emphasize Santiago's misfortune, Hemingway comments that "the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky" (*OM*, 9). Even the old man's sail, patched with flour sacks, looks "like the flag of permanent defeat" (*OM*, 9). When "old," "worst," "unlucky," and "permanent defeat" are linked together, Hemingway seems to have created a rather miserable and gloomy old age for Santiago. With these descriptions in the first paragraph of the story, Hemingway effectively arouses readers' interest in and worries about the old man. What will happen to him? Will he oppose his fate, or will he just succumb to it? Will he consistently try to prove himself, or will he just compromise with fate and accept reality?

In the second paragraph, Hemingway starts to describe the old man's appearance: "The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and his hands had the deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords" (*OM*, 10). This is a typical portrait of an old man who has had a hard time in his life. He must have worked hard, for his skin and body have apparently been harmed through decades of physical work. When he is old, he still has to work to survive. The writer does not tell readers why he has bad luck recently, but readers can speculate that old age might be one of the major reasons.

The first two paragraphs offer an overall picture of an old man who works hard but suffers from bad luck. As we have previously mentioned, becoming old usually means becoming both physically and mentally weak. This idea can be found in many Western philosophical and literary works. However, Hemingway apparently does not intend to show us an old man of such a stereotype. In paragraph three, he uses just one sentence to overturn all previous impressions that readers might have on Santiago: "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated" (*OM*, 10). This statement reveals a hue opposite to those in previous paragraphs, which goes from cold to warm, from passive and pessimistic to active and optimistic. "This adjustment in our response is part of Hemingway's narrative strategy: the later sentence corrects the earlier one—or, rather, it corrects our interpretation of the earlier one."⁴ As a matter of fact, this sentence is the core of the whole

⁴ William E. Cain, "Death Sentences: Rereading *The Old Man and the Sea*," in *Hemingway: Eight Decades of Criticism*, ed., Linda Wagner-Martin (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009), 555.

story and the best representation of Santiago's senior subjectivity. It predetermines and foreshadows all the actions that the old man will take in the following struggles. Santiago is full of confidence and resolution to control his own fate, rather than be controlled by it. When the boy mentions that his father does not have much faith in the old man, the old man says, "But we have" (*OM*, 11). It is such a strong faith that encourages the old man to go to sea persistently despite all failures.

The beginning of the novel offers an account of the old man's self-identity through other characters' perception of him as well as his perception of himself. With the conflicting perceptions, the author indirectly presents the main features of Santiago's self-identity and subjectivity in old age. The rest and majority of the short novel, in my opinion, is concerned with how the old man takes action to realize his youthful ambitions and maintain his ideal youthful subjectivity. In order to master his own fate, the old man persists in fishing at sea every day. His persistence changes not only his own lot, but also that of other marine animals. Hemingway tries to reveal that the fate of the old man and that of some other animals are closely connected and mutually affected. In other words, through persistence and endeavor, the old man affects his own fate, the environment, and other living beings in the environment.

For example, when Santiago is wrestling with the giant marlin, he realizes that their fates are closely correlated: "Now we are joined together and have been since noon. And no one to help either one of us" (*OM*, 50). This is a straight fight between the old man and the fish. They are not only rivals, but have become a part of each other's fate. Under this circumstance, they are both subjects who are inseparable from each other. Such a fateful connection does not happen naturally, but is the choice of the old man: "My choice was to go there to find him beyond all

people. Beyond all people in the world” (*OM*, 50). The old man is not going to find this particular fish, but he needs to find a fish that can help him prove that he is still powerful enough to fight and win. He is going to find his self and rebuild his subjectivity at sea. In Hemingway’s narrative, this fish is emblematic of the old man’s fate, and his struggle with the fish can be taken as his attempt to beat his fate and establish subjectivity in his own way. It provides him with an opportunity, maybe the last one in his life, to prove that he is not old in his own mind or in the eyes of others. To the old man, the fish is “a spiritual more than a physical necessity.”⁵ On the other hand, the old man brings the fish up from deep dark water and makes it visible and known to the world. In this sense, it is the old man who has created the fish. The old man gives the fish an opportunity to display its power and wish to win the struggle between them. Without the fish, readers will not be able to see the old man’s dauntless spirit; without the old man, readers will not know the existence and power of the fish. According to Stoltzfus, the fish is the “invisible Other that has been accompanying him since infancy, the repressed self that swims in the depths, present but unseen, until it rises to the surface (of consciousness).”⁶ Therefore, the strength of the fish could be said to stand for the old man’s unconscious willpower.

Such a relationship best illustrates intersubjectivity—the subjectivity of the old man and the fish are mutually defined and mutually determined. Their identity is established due to the existence of the other, and their fate and characteristics are shaped by each other. In Hemingway’s narrative, the old man’s comprehension of the relationship between the fish and

⁵ Clinton S. Burhans Jr., “*The Old Man and the Sea*: Hemingway’s Tragic Vision of Man,” *American Literature*, vol. 31, no. 4 (January 1960): 448.

⁶ Ben Stoltzfus, “*The Old Man and the Sea*: A Lacanian Reading,” in *Hemingway: Essays of Reassessment*, ed. Frank Scafella (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 197.

himself is deepened along with the process of their contact and conflict. In the beginning, he views the fish as an enemy or the Other. He is delighted to see the fish take the bait and plans to kill it with the harpoon (*OM*, 44). When the fish pulls the wire and the fisherman is obliged to follow it on the boat, he feels the strength of the fish, and it arouses his will to fight. He shouts to the fish, "I'll stay with you until I am dead" (*OM*, 52). This announcement shows the old man's resolution to fight till the end. His resolution becomes even stronger after seeing the huge body of the fish. But his feelings about the fish gradually change after they have struggled for two days and one night. He starts to sympathize with the fish, for they both have suffered much and the fish is faced with a worse situation without food or rest. Then the old man shows admiration and respect for the fish. In the old man's eyes, the fish is calm, strong, fearless and confident, so he tells himself, "You better be fearless and confident yourself, old man" (*OM*, 84). The formidable fish teaches the old man to have a strong mind and behave tough. When the final attack comes, the exhausted old man almost identifies himself with the fish, taking it as a friend of his or even believing the fish is also a killer who is capable of killing him. During the struggle, the old man's resolution and bravery are greatly strengthened, and the fish encourages him to become fearless and confident. When he succeeds in slaying the enormous fish, he seems to have killed his old self who has become increasingly feeble and unlucky with aging, and transformed himself into a new state that is full of strength and confidence. He and the fish become one in spirit, just as Hovey points out that "in this mortal battle, fish and man become one, killer and killed become one."⁷ In so doing, Hemingway completes the construction of the old man's senior subjectivity.

⁷ Richard B. Hovey, "Santiago Is at Peace Because He Understands His Connection to

In the novel, the old man is part of Mother Nature, in which every living being is compelled to compete for their fate. According to Hovey, Hemingway's subject is "man in nature and the nature of man."⁸ In one of the early paragraphs, Hemingway describes a scene on the Terrace where fishermen gather to have beer and a meal, which shows how the old man is looked on by others: "They sat on the Terrace and many of the fishermen made fun of the old man and he was not angry. Others, of the older fishermen, looked at him and were sad" (*OM*, 11). Whether making fun of him or feeling sorry for him, people think that Santiago is truly less useful now. The present situation has constructed an identity of the old man that he loathes and is determined to resist and change. If he succumbs to this kind of identity and subjectivity, he will live a miserable old life. Fortunately, as one of Hemingway's tough guys, Santiago still believes that he is capable enough and he does not care about other people's opinion. In the same paragraph, Hemingway also describes how other fishermen deal with the captured marlin and sharks. The implications of this episode are twofold: first, it contrasts the unlucky old man and the successful fishermen, making the old man's comedown more conspicuous; second, and more importantly, Hemingway seems to imply that the old man and the prey have the same fate—they are destined to fail. The old man cannot sustain the strength and luck he used to have, while the marlin and the sharks cannot escape the tragic result of being killed. The old man, the marlin, and the sharks are enemies who try to kill each other, and subsequently are all beaten by fate.

Humanity," in *Death in Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea (Social Issues in Literature)*, ed. Dedria Bryfonski (Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2014), 52.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

Hemingway's narrative is about how the old man's subjectivity is reconstructed during the ordeal. When travelling alone at sea, the old man is not just a human, but a natural creature. Hemingway shows readers a network in which everyone's fate is interrelated with that of others. They are all subjected to the mighty and mysterious sea. The sea supplies them with food, but also deprives them of life. The old man is no different from animals, except for his perseverance and intelligence. His subjectivity is greatly shaped by the sea and everything in it. Santiago has long learned his close relations with animals at sea, and this time, at least partly because of his old age, he gains a deeper understanding of his self and identity through the interaction with animals. Hemingway touches upon a variety of animals in the novel, such as sea birds. Birds have special meanings in the story. They are taken by the old man as the embodiment of his self. Miriam Mandel argues that "Santiago identifies with birds, who look for fish as he does."⁹ The old man's identification and sympathy with birds is put by Hemingway as follows: "He was sorry for the birds, especially the small delicate dark terns that were always flying and looking and almost never finding, and he thought, the birds have a harder life than we do except for the robber birds and the heavy strong ones. Why did they make birds so delicate and fine as those sea swallows when the ocean can be so cruel" (*OM*, 29)? In this sense, the fate of the old fisherman at sea resembles that of a small bird. Hemingway's words suggest that the old man must have felt that they have much in common. They have to hunt for food in the vast and endless sea but it is hard to get a reward. The words "always flying and looking and almost never finding" refer not only to birds but also to the old man himself. He fishes everyday but has for a

⁹ Miriam B. Mandel, *Reading Hemingway: The Facts in the Fictions* (Lanham, ML: The Scarecrow Press, 2001), 347.

long time not been able to capture a fish. At the same time, the old man compares small and delicate birds such as sea swallows with the robber birds and the heavy strong ones. This comparison can also be taken as a symbolic contrast between the old man and stronger younger fishermen. The latter kind of birds and people are generally more successful and hopeful, and small birds and the old man are leading a harder and hopeless life.

The somewhat pessimistic idea of the old man is generated before he comes across the huge marlin. After he has fought with the marlin for one day and one night, he is not frustrated but regains youthful morale. Here Hemingway skillfully designs an episode that an exhausted small bird, a warbler, comes to perch on his boat. This time, the old man does not feel pity for the bird, although he speculates that it is chased by hawks and in danger. He says to the bird, "Take a good rest, small bird.... Then go in and take your chance like any man or bird or fish" (*OM*, 55). Now Santiago has realized that man, bird, and fish are of no difference in front of nature. They all need to struggle to realize themselves or just to survive. Therefore, he has made up his mind to face up to the challenge. Since the small bird is taken as another self of him, in the old man's mind, it should also be courageous. The old man and the bird are both faced with rather unfavorable situations at sea, but they must fight back. To the old man, he should not just drift with his predestined fate, but should do his utmost to control it. This is exactly the author's attempt to reconstruct the old man's senior subjectivity.

In the process of reconstructing his subjectivity, a critical moment comes when old Santiago realizes that he is a part of almighty nature. Hemingway uses one paragraph to describe it:

He looked across the sea and knew how alone he was now. But he could see the prisms in the deep dark water and the line stretching ahead and the strange undulation of the calm.

The clouds were building up now for the trade wind and he looked ahead and saw a flight of wild ducks etching themselves against the sky over the water, then blurring, then etching again and he knew no man was ever alone on the sea (*OM*, 60-1).

Prior to this moment, Santiago, although a determined old man, believes that the huge marlin is just his enemy and he should try to become a conqueror of the sea. In the first sentence of the paragraph, when he looks across the sea, he feels alone, because he is an outsider of nature. However, when he observes that everything—seawater, sunlight, clouds, sky, wind, flying wild ducks, and even the wire that hooks the fish—are so harmoniously and beautifully mingled together, he suddenly senses that he too is also part of nature, living in it and dying in it. At that moment, he knows that he is never alone on the sea, and he is the master of his own fate, just like everything else in nature. By means of this scene, Hemingway expresses that “each living thing, man and animal, acts out its destiny according to the drives of its species, and in the process becomes a part of the profound harmony of the natural universe.”¹⁰ The old man is enlightened when he realizes that he is connected to everything but not subject to anything. This is an important moment for the old man to realize his destiny in old age, which is an important element that shapes his subjectivity.

In conclusion, this section reveals how Hemingway describes the determination of the old man to fight with fate and change his bad luck. In my opinion, this is also an attempt to reconstruct his senior subjectivity. Through the interaction with animals at sea, the old man begins to understand them and even identify with them. This mental state offers him an opportunity to look on his self and identity from diverse angles of animals. He even feels at one

¹⁰ Leo Gurko, “Hemingway Believes Heroic Man Can Transcend Pain and Tragedy,” in *Death in Ernest Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea*, ed. Dedria Bryfonski (Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2014), 60.

with them. From such spiritual connections with the world, the old man's subjectivity is well reconstructed.

Santiago Redefining Himself through Youthful Ambitions

Hemingway shows that although Santiago fails to protect the marlin that he captures, he manages to master his destiny and rebuild his youthful subjectivity characterized by youthful ambitions. In Jobes's words, "When [the old man] is threatened by the weakness of old age, he summons visions of his own youthful strength."¹¹ The courage to fight with fate originates in his rich experiences in life. He has been to many places and seen many people and things; he is constantly struggling throughout life. The indomitable struggling spirit impels the old man to constantly confront all sorts of pressure and challenges. His youthful ambitions are continuing in old age. Not everyone has youthful ambitions or keeps struggling in old age, which is one of the characteristics of Santiago that is worthy of admiration. The everlasting ambition is an important reason of the successful construction of senior subjectivity and an important component of senior subjectivity. Hemingway alludes to this idea by means of various images in the novel.

The most prominent emblem of the old man's youthful subjectivity is the image of the lions that always appear in his dreams. He must have seen lions when he was young, as he repeats this experience to the boy, "When I was your age I was before the mast on a square rigged ship that ran to Africa and I have seen lions on the beaches in the evening" (*OM*, 22). If this account is accurate, the old man is just a boy when he meets the lions and this experience has

¹¹ Katharine T. Jobes, Introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Old Man and the Sea: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 2.

long become his childhood memory. The image of lions has been rooted deeply in his unconscious. Lions represent strength, perseverance, and valiancy, all of which constitute the personalities of the old man and underlie his senior subjectivity.

The significance of lions in Santiago's mind can be illustrated in one statement: "He no longer dreamed of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife. He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach" (*OM*, 25). Hemingway enumerates a series of important people, things or happenings in the old man's past life. The words "no longer dreamed of" imply that he used to dream of them, but at present, they seem to have all gone out of his mind. He even does not think about his late wife any more. According to Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, dreams can function as wish fulfillment or the satisfaction of desires in one's unconscious mind. Ben Stoltzfus holds that old Santiago's dream can be rephrased as a metaphor that Santiago is a lion and therefore a king, "since dreaming of the lions is the ultimate endorsement of selfhood."¹² When Santiago is getting old, he has lost almost all his ambitions or desires except one, which is to become someone like a lion. Lions are the kings of land, and the old man might desire to become a king or hero in his own territory. This is his skiff and the stretch of sea on which he voyages and fishes. Lions are hunters on land, and the old man is a hunter at sea. At the same time, lions in his dream are usually playing happily together on the beach. This scene might mean that he wishes for a carefree life that is difficult to obtain. By any means, lions are obviously important in his unconscious. He identifies himself with lions, hoping he could become a lion or fulfill whatever wishes symbolized by the image of lions.

¹² Stoltzfus, "*The Old Man and the Sea: A Lacanian Reading*," 191.

Hemingway associates the old man's subjectivity in youth with the image of lions in a number of places. During his struggling with the huge fish, the exhausted old man hopes to sleep for a while to dream about the lions. Probably it is because lions can provide him with strength. But meanwhile he is also bewildered: "Why are the lions the main thing that is left" (*OM*, 66)? The old man does not understand that the lions in his dreams represent his youthful subjectivity rooted deep down in his unconscious. Lions represent his unfulfilled lifelong dream of becoming a hero. This description is completely in conformity with Freudian theory of the structure of one's subjectivity. Hemingway uses images of lions to dig into Santiago's mind, which is an effective technique for readers to understand the old man's self-identity. At the end of the novel, the old man dreams about lions once again, by which Hemingway tells readers that the old man still keeps his youthful ambition.

Santiago's youthful ambition is also represented in his relationship with the boy. According to Baker, "the boy Manolo serves to recall for Santiago the period of his own lost youth when he was in full possession of all his powers, and when his greatest achievements yet lay in the future rather than as now in the past."¹³ The boy is one of the few people who keeps in touch with him or looks after him. He is the old man's apprentice and helper at work and also his hope for the future. Hemingway shows the connection between the boy and the old man's ambition: "[The lions] played like young cats in the dusk and he loved them as he loved the boy. He never dreamed about the boy" (*OM*, 25). In this brief comment, we can see that the old man

¹³ Carlos Baker, Introduction to *The Old Man and the Sea*, in Ernest Hemingway, *Three Novels of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), xi.

transfers his love for the boy in reality to the love for lions in dreams. However, since the boy never appears in his dreams, it might mean that the boy is not only his past, his wish, or the reflection of his self, but also someone in his life who is important to him. If the lions are symbols of the old man's strengths and power in youth, then the boy is a harsh reminder of his lost youth and his youthful identity. Santiago is old, despite all the achievements that he has won previously when he was young. The old man is not willing to accept the fact that he is not as young and strong as before, but his physical condition has influenced his mind and made him less confident than before, at least unconsciously. During his wrestling with the huge fish, he frequently wishes that the boy were with him and helping him. However, it is interesting that, after a careful analysis of his wishes, we can see Hemingway does not narrate the old man's feelings randomly. After the old man has hooked the huge fish, he finds that it is a tough rival and it will be very difficult for him to defeat the fish alone. So he repeatedly wishes the boy were present, such as "I wish I had the boy...", "I wish the boy were here...", or "If the boy were here..." This idea occurs to him seven times.¹⁴ Judging from the time of its occurrence, six times of the idea happen in the first twenty-four hours of his fighting with the fish. The last one happens in the second night, and it never happens again in the rest of the story. Judging from the language the old man uses, from the first time to the fifth time, he always starts with "I wish...", and in the last two times, he uses "If the boy..." to begin his wishes.

We can easily discover the reasons behind Hemingway's purposeful arrangement of the old man's wishes. First of all, when the old man uses "I wish..." to express his ideas, he is

¹⁴ See Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 45, 48, 50, 51, 56, 62, 83.

placing himself at the center of everything, or he is centering on himself, merely caring about his own needs. When he uses “If the boy...” to express his wishes, he is still caring about his own needs, but in his mind, he is not placing himself at the center. He is more likely to hold that he is a part of nature rather than the center of the world. The change happens due to his present unusual experience at sea. The determination of the huge fish makes the old man realize that other things in the world also have a right to live and to fight. The boy is an independent existence rather than old Santiago’s dependent. The change of the subject in sentences reveals that Santiago has perceived himself and the world from a new angle, which can also be essential to the construction of his senior subjectivity.

In addition, the last time when the old man thinks about the boy are especially worthy of analysis: “If the boy was here he would wet the coils of line, he thought. Yes. If the boy were here. If the boy were here” (*OM*, 83). In the first sentence, Hemingway uses “If the boy was...” to express the old man’s thought, while in all the other sentences that begin with “If the boy,” Hemingway follows them with “were.” In such a structure, when “was” is used, the sentence can be in the subjunctive mood, but it can also be the indicative mood. The former indicates that the meaning in the statement is less likely true, while the meaning of the latter is just the opposite. The conflicting meanings in this sentence imply that the old man believes the boy can help revive his youthful identity, but his wish for the boy’s help is weakened under the circumstance. So, the word “Yes” in the second sentence is the old man’s confirmation of his own judgment that the boy is a good assistant. In regards to the repetition of “If the boy were here,” the two sentences have several features. First, they are grammatically incomplete sentences, not showing what would happen if the boy were here. It probably means that the old man’s stream of

consciousness is interrupted, and the reason might be that he unconsciously refuses or gives up the hope to rely on the boy's help. Second, now "was" is replaced by "were," which is definitely the subjunctive mood. It means that the old man admits to the reality that the boy is impossible to be there. Third, the second "If the boy were here" might not just be a simple reiteration. Reiteration usually indicates emphasis, so here it might mean the old man's emphasis on the absence of the boy and on his determination for self-reliance in the following struggles. In short, these words show the old man's shift in thinking, from relying on external help to relying on personal efforts, from lack of self-confidence to being full of self-confidence. As a matter of fact, after this moment, the old man never thinks of the help of the boy but makes up his mind to fight by himself and rebuild his own identity.

The previous linguistic analysis can explain why the old man thinks of the boy six times in the first twenty-four hours of his struggling with the big fish, one time during the second night, and never again during the following day or night. Shortly after his last thought of the boy, the old man says to himself, "You better be fearless and confident yourself, old man" (*OM*, 84). This declaration and self-motivation can be taken as the agency of his senior subjectivity. The entire journey is the process of his reconstructing senior subjectivity, and now he has made a great leap forward by forgetting about the boy or any other external help. True subjectivity is grounded on self-reliance and self-confidence. Such self-reliance and self-confidence impel the old man to devote himself to the decisive final attack against the huge fish and the subsequent fierce fighting against sharks. During the fighting in the last day and night, the old man never tries to seek aid from others, nor does he care about the loss. In this way, Hemingway shows how the old man strives to do his best to win his dignity back and carry on his youthful ambitions.

Old Santiago needs help to achieve more, but when he is badly in need of help, no one can come to rescue him. The situation compels him to overcome the problems caused by old age and rely totally on himself. Hemingway's narrative makes the old man's greatness much more prominent. In order to illuminate the influence of Santiago's youthful ambitions on his senior subjectivity, Hemingway considers one of the old man's earlier experiences: "As the sun set he remembered, to give himself more confidence, the time in the tavern at Casablanca when he had played the hand game with the great negro from Cienfuegos who was the strongest man on the docks" (*OM*, 68-9). Santiago, who is a young man at that time, defeats the black person after twenty-four hours. At that time, he is full of confidence and knows that he will beat his opponent. This incident is parallel to his struggle with the huge fish decades later in several respects. First, Santiago is faced with a strong rival in each of the confrontations. Second, both struggles last a long time. Third, both struggles require him to use the strength of his right hand. Fourth, he defeats both of his rivals. The difference is that, in the first competition, he is young and full of confidence. According to Hemingway, "[the old man] was sure then that he had the negro, who was a fine man and a great athlete, beaten" (*OM*, 70). In the second fight, however, Santiago is old and short of confidence, which is the reason that he frequently wishes for the presence of the boy in the beginning.

The account of a similar earlier experience implies that the old man's struggle with the huge fish is the continuation of his youthful ambitions. His senior subjectivity is also founded on youthful ambitions. It is the confrontation with the huge fish that awakens his self that has been withering along with aging. In addition to the lions and the boy, Hemingway also connects the old man with Joe DiMaggio (1914-1999), a well-known American baseball player. Obviously, in

Hemingway's opinion, DiMaggio's outstanding performance in professional baseball is another representation of the old man's youthful ambitions.

Old Santiago absolutely worships DiMaggio. He once tells the boy, "Have faith in the Yankees my son. Think of the great DiMaggio" (*OM*, 17). Even when Yankees losses a game in the American League, the old man still maintains, "That means nothing. The great DiMaggio is himself again" (*OM*, 21). DiMaggio has undoubtedly become his idol, and he always uses "great" to refer to him. The old man also tries to relate himself to DiMaggio. For example, he once says, "I would like to take the great DiMaggio fishing.... They say his father was a fisherman" (*OM*, 22). He even imagines that they have similar life backgrounds, although it is untrue. When he is faced with great difficulty in dealing with the huge fish, the old man talks to himself, "I must have confidence and I must be worthy of the great DiMaggio who does all things perfectly even with the pain of the bone spur in his heel" (*OM*, 68). In his mind, DiMaggio is a hero who is full of confidence and courage, and so he should do the same. Besides, he asks himself, "Do you believe the great DiMaggio would stay with a fish as long as I will stay with this one? ...I am sure he would and more since he is young and strong" (*OM*, 68). This affirmation reveals one of the reasons that the old man admires DiMaggio—"he is young and strong." Young DiMaggio is more powerful than old Santiago, so DiMaggio can best represent the old man's youthful dreams. After the old man kills the huge fish, he speaks to himself, "My head is not that clear. But I think the great DiMaggio would be proud of me today" (*OM*, 97). Santiago thinks that his achievement can compare to those made by DiMaggio. Santiago's spirit and DiMaggio's spirit are fused together. Therefore, it can be concluded that the old man has fulfilled himself in terms of regaining youthful ambitions and rebuilding subjectivity on it.

In conclusion, Hemingway makes use of the image of lions, of the boy and of the baseball player as painful reminders of the old man's lost youth, youthful self, and constructed subjectivity. To reconstruct his identity and subjectivity in his old age, he needs to prove that he is not old both to himself and to his fellow fishermen. His reconstruction requires a strong opponent or opponents in the natural world. This is how his struggle at sea and with the fish and sharks becomes the main action in the novel.

Ethical Dilemmas and Senior Subjectivity

In his attempt to rebuild subjectivity in old age, Santiago is constantly faced with ethical dilemmas. In Hemingway's narrative, old Santiago is not an ordinary old person doing ordinary business. His job is fishing and killing day after day. It causes the old man extra difficulties in realizing his self-identity, because he consistently finds himself in ethical dilemmas related to fishing and killing and doubts whether his deeds are morally correct or not.

Throughout the old man's life experience, he is trained to become a powerful and merciless fisherman. Fishermen's philosophy or judgment aligns to some extent with the Nietzschean style of will to power: a man should be valiant enough to stand up to challenges in life, even if he is old. Nietzsche vehemently advocates the importance of power. He believes happiness can only come from the feeling that power is increasing, and the weak and the failures shall perish.¹⁵ According to this opinion, men can receive respect only through fighting, and evasion of their duties is considered contemptible. A powerful person is considered morally good,

¹⁵ Louis P. Pojman and Lewis Vaughn, *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 140.

while a weak one is morally bad. As a fisherman, Santiago must have been brought up in an environment in which this philosophy is sincerely believed.

What Santiago has learned and felt in his personal hunting career is much more complex than the philosophy that values power, especially when he is stepping into old age. Hemingway sets up old Santiago's hunting games in a special mode, which plunges the old man into ethical dilemmas that younger people are less likely to encounter. Hunting happens between a predator and a prey. It is universally agreed that the predator is usually strong and dominating, while the prey should be weak and vulnerable. But the hunting mode in *The Old Man and the Sea* is atypical, distinct from normality. Here, the hunter is not overwhelmingly stronger than the prey, which makes the whole process of chase and combat even more thrilling and unpredictable. In terms of morality, Hemingway attempts to clarify three issues concerning morality mainly from the old man's perspective: 1. Santiago struggles with and slays the huge marlin with great effort, but is he morally superior to it? 2. He is defeated by sharks, but is he morally inferior to them? 3. Do human beings have better morality than the animals that they hunt? In his attempt to rebuild subjectivity in old age, Santiago is compelled to deal with such ethical dilemmas.

The whole story of the old man revolves around the cruel reality of fishing and killing: the marlin bites the bait and is hooked; the old fisherman captures and kills the great fish; sharks defeat the old man and eat up the fish. In the life-and-death struggle between Santiago and a marlin, the fish, albeit a prey, is stronger than the old man. At some point, readers might be bewildered about who is the real hunter. Fortunately, Santiago is an experienced fisherman who is clear about how to capture his quarry. He certainly outsmarts the fish, which contributes to his final victory. The old man is physically less powerful than the fish, but he can beat it with

intelligence, fishing skills, and above all, perseverance. Then, he fights bravely against sharks which considerably outnumber him and are much better armed than him. The old man fails to protect his fish, but his fighting spirit deserves every reader's reverence. It is generally agreed that the old man's spirit is what Hemingway intends to praise in the novel.

Hemingway expresses the idea that hunting is the most direct life-and-death confrontation between opponents, in which the predator does not have to be physically stronger than the prey; on the contrary, it is willpower that guarantees success. The old man's story seems to advocate that if you are mentally stronger, you will be morally better. This implication is just in line with Nietzsche's ethical opinions, especially with his will to power. According to Nietzsche, good is "[a]ll that enhances the feeling of power, the Will to Power, and the power itself in man," bad is "[a]ll that proceeds from weakness, and happiness is "[t]he feeling that power is increasing—that resistance has been overcome."¹⁶ This assertion conveys a message that the more powerful mind people have, the better they will become. Hemingway's narrative supports this opinion by illustrating that strong mental power is equal to good morality. In this sense, killing and violating the rights of other people or of other animals is not evil in nature, which is quite opposite to traditional understanding of good and evil. Nietzsche believes that "[t]here is a wild spirit of good-naturedness which looks like malice."¹⁷ Therefore, the best way to make ourselves better is by becoming stronger, and the best way to become stronger is by killing and violating, just as

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 107.

Nietzsche claims, “Life always lives at the expense of other life”—he who does not grasp this has not taken even the first step toward honesty with himself.”¹⁸

However, a close reading of the novel can reveal another idea that Hemingway expresses: stronger ones are not necessarily superior in morality, whether physically or mentally. Morality is not only determined by power or will, but by a deeper understanding of one’s self and one’s environments and true sympathy for every being in the environment. Such an idea of Hemingway is mostly expressed through the old man’s contemplation at sea.

In the novel, old Santiago’s attitudes toward the self and the world change during his struggle with the huge fish. At first, Santiago’s perception of himself is that “I may not be as strong as I think, ...[b]ut I know many tricks and I have resolution” (*OM*, 23). The old man is quite clear about his disadvantages and advantages. He knows that he is still a capable fisherman despite old age. He does not care about others’ feelings about his bad luck, because he believes he will have an opportunity to prove his ability and skills. When the fish is taking the bait, the old man thinks to himself, “Eat it so that the point of the hook goes into your heart and kills you.... Come up easy and let me put the harpoon into you. All right. Are you ready? Have you been long enough at table” (*OM*, 44)? Obviously, at that moment, he takes it as a rival and wants to kill it as soon as possible. These are the usual feelings of fishermen for their prey and the old man does not have conflicting ideas regarding himself or the fish. His subjectivity is based on the conventional concept of morality.

¹⁸ Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 199.

Ethical dilemmas arise after the old man has struggled with the huge fish for a while and realized that it is no less perseverant and courageous than he is. Although hooked by the fisherman, the marlin refuses to give up its life to him. It bears the pain from the hook and drags the wire, as well as Santiago and his skiff, incessantly for about three days until it is exhausted and killed. This stage, as we have seen, is also a period for the old man to explore his self-identity. During this process, the old man gradually develops sympathy for the fish, which causes the ethical dilemma in his mind. On the one hand, he must defeat and kill the fish; on the other, he senses that the fish has a right to fight for its life. He feels pity for a fish that is so wonderful and strange. In Santiago's eyes, it is "such a calm, strong fish" and it seems "so fearless and so confident" (*OM*, 84). Such a feeling causes an ambivalent attitude toward the fish, as is expressed by the old man, "Fish, ...I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends" (*OM*, 54).

The old man and the giant fish are linked with a fishing line. The longer they stay together, the more the old man ponders over the ethical relations between them. He further analyzes and reflects on himself, the fish, and fishing, and finds himself caught in deeper dilemmas. In the previous paragraphs, I have pointed out two relations between the old man and the fish generated in the old man's subjective mind: first, the old man believes that he is still capable of fishing and the sea fish is his enemy and he never likes it; second, the old man starts to respect the fish, but the fish is still considered as an enemy and he still uses every means to kill it. But after that, the fish is gradually considered by the old man as both friend and foe, which is the third mode of moral relations between the two, and which is, of course, the old man's personal understanding. He not only frequently strengthens the original objective and resolution of killing the fish, but

also takes it as his friend, as someone like him. According to the old man, “[t]he fish is my friend too.... I have never seen or heard of such a fish. But I must kill him” (*OM*, 75). Here, “must” is used to show the old man’s determination to kill the fish; however, it also reveals that the old man takes killing as his social obligation rather than a natural need. He is not willing to kill the fish but is obliged to do so. Otherwise, he will not be recognized by other people as an excellent fisherman and his self-identity in the society will not be established in a socially accepted way.

The feelings that the fish is his friend and that he has to kill his friend cause an ethical dilemma in the old man. These feelings also urge him to think for the fish instead of just for himself. Hemingway describes the dilemma in the following words: “Then he was sorry for the great fish that had nothing to eat and his determination to kill him never relaxed in his sorrow for him” (*OM*, 75). At the same time, the old man further realizes the immorality of human beings, believing the fish is morally better than humans: “How many people will he feed, he thought. But are they worthy to eat him? No, of course not. There is no one worthy of eating him from the manner of his behavior and his great dignity” (*OM*, 75). This account shows that although the old man cannot free himself from the ethical dilemma at that time, the experience of struggling with the huge fish has offered him a clear recognition that human beings, including himself, are ruthless destroyers of the environment and murderers of innocent animals in it. In this way, Hemingway expresses the idea that avaricious humans are morally inferior to other animals in the world, even though humans are more powerful than those animals.

With this understanding, the old man reflects on his behavior of fishing and killing, knowing that he has caused suffering to the fish. However, here the old man is once again

stranded in an ethical dilemma. Hemingway describes this conflicting situation in different places of the novel. For example, on the first evening when the old man has struggled with the fish for some time, he reflects on the consequence of his actions: "His choice had been to stay in the deep dark water far out beyond all snares and traps and treacheries. My choice was to go there to find him beyond all people. Now we are joined together and have been since noon. And no one to help either one of us" (*OM*, 50). The huge fish lives far away from human beings, but it is caught by the old man in an unusual fishing area. Hemingway uses "snares and traps and treacheries" to refer to vicious and immoral humans. Besides, we can see a few ambiguities in these sentences. The words "go there to find him beyond all people" can mean to find the fish which is far away from people or to find the fish morally better than all people. Analogously, after killing the fish, the old man concludes that "I am only better than him through trickery and he meant me no harm" (*OM*, 99). This shows the old man believes he is vicious while the fish is virtuous. By thinking from the perspective of the fish, the old man has a clearer understanding of humans as well as himself. Hence, he has the following idea: "Perhaps I should not have been a fisherman, he thought. But that was the thing that I was born for" (*OM*, 50). He realizes he is one of the evil humans and should not have done the work of fishing, but he also knows that he is destined to do it, which is an insoluble dilemma. The idea makes the old man despise himself and admire the fish. In his mind, the fish is "more noble and more able" (*OM*, 63), and he even wishes to become a fish like it. This understanding is vital for the old man to perceive his self, identity and subjectivity, because he learns to know better about the self by thinking from the perspective of his rivals. Now, by identifying himself with the fish, the old man has a new

perception of the self and reconstructs his subjectivity on the basis of an object that represents power and youthful ambition.

The old man's psychological conflicts continue even after he kills the fish, and now he is pondering whether his behavior is a sin or not: "Perhaps it was a sin to kill the fish. I suppose it was even though I did it to keep me alive and feed many people. But then everything is a sin. Do not think about sin. It is much too late for that and there are people who are paid to do it. Let them think about it. You were born to be a fisherman as the fish was born to be a fish" (*OM*, 105). The quoted words also reflect the old man's dilemma. He regrets that he has killed the fish, for the latter is innocent and caused him no harm. He believes he has done something immoral. Susan Beegel argues that "Santiago understands that man, with his knowledge of good and evil, cannot be an innocent killer."¹⁹ But the old man once again excuses himself by saying that he is destined to be a fisherman and fishing is his obligation, which is "more Darwinian than Christian."²⁰ Judging from all the above analysis of the old man's ethical dilemmas, we can see that his attitude toward the fish, other people, his self, identity, and his behavior have changed greatly, but he cannot liberate himself from the dilemmas because he always justifies himself by asserting that he was born a fisherman. As he tells himself: "[E]verything kills everything else in some way. Fishing kills me exactly as it keeps me alive" (*OM*, 106).

¹⁹ Susan Beegel, "Thor Heyerdahl's Kon-Tiki and Hemingway's Return to Primitivism in *The Old Man and the Sea*," In *Hemingway: Eight Decades of Criticism*, ed., Linda Wagner-Martin (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009), 535.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 536.

Hemingway finds the old man a way out by his confrontation against the sharks. In the novel, sharks that snatch the dead fish play the role of villains and the old man now becomes a real hero. He is defeated by sharks, but he has tried his best to protect the huge fish. Santiago believes that the fish also contributes to slaying sharks: "I am sorry that I went too far out. I ruined us both. But we have killed many sharks, you and I, and ruined many others" (*OM*, 115). He believes this is an achievement obtained by them both. He and the fish become companions; they are weak and vulnerable, but they bravely fight against strong enemies. The old man holds this kind of struggling and killing is nothing immoral, although he is much weaker than the sharks. As a result, the old man's fighting against sharks helps him get rid of the ethical dilemmas.

It would be simplistic if we just consider the old man's experience as a tragedy. His way of returning home is also a path of self-discovery. He is defeated by sharks, but simultaneously he is also liberated from the ethical dilemmas and feels at ease, as Hemingway puts it: "It is easy when you are beaten, he thought. I never knew how easy it was" (*OM*, 120). He has laid down the burden and let go of all the worries or afflictions he used to have. Keiichi Harada maintains that "Santiago has learned much in a few days of fishing voyage through much suffering, and he is now able to pronounce a judgment upon the inscrutable human existence and man's destiny.... His failure has thus turned out to be his victory."²¹ The old man realizes that since nothing is really important, his failure is actually not a failure. That is the reason why he soon claims that nothing has beaten him and he just goes out too far. This experience at sea makes him realize the

²¹ Keiichi Harada, "The Marlin and the Shark: A Note on *The Old Man and the Sea*," in *Hemingway and His Critics: An International Anthology*, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1961), 276.

emptiness of life. In this way, he overcomes the ethical dilemmas and realizes the essence of self-identity. We need to note one detail toward the end of the novel that the old man has a long contented sleep.

To conclude, in Hemingway's narrative, the struggle between the old man, the huge marlin, and the sharks turns out to be an arduous journey of self-discovery. The old man is forced to find a proper location to place his self and his identity in ethical dilemmas. Faced with brutal slaying, he is engaged in the moral interrogation of the self and identity by reestablishing his relations with the marlin. In so doing, he realizes the emptiness of life, achieves self-realization, and thus establishes a new subjectivity in old age.

In a comment on the novel, one scholar holds that "Santiago shares many traits with the best of Hemingway's heroes.... He does not admit to a limited set of hopes for man; there are no impossibilities."²² Hemingway unfolds the reasons for the old man's successful construction of senior subjectivity from three aspects, which are his dealing with fate, youthful ambitions, and ethical dilemmas. The old man's odyssey is perilous, but it also provides him with an opportunity to succeed. Only by overcoming old-age challenges can he successfully attain senior subjectivity. In this process, he realizes that his fate is not determined by someone else, but by his own choice. He is a part of nature, so his fate is connected to other beings in the same environment. He sticks to his youthful ambitions that always inspire his fighting will, and in the meantime he becomes much more mentally independent and tough despite his declining physical

²² Linda W. Wagner, "The Poem of Santiago and Manolin," in *Ernest Hemingway: Sixty Decades of Criticism*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1987), 282.

strength and flexibility. He is stuck in ethical dilemmas when struggling with the huge fish, but finally gets rid of them on the voyage home after fighting against sharks which he is unable to defeat.

Hemingway creates all those encounters and hardships in the novel, which considerably contribute to the re-construction of the old man's senior subjectivity. Before Santiago goes out to sea this time, he believes he is a skilled and confident fisherman who shall never fail. When returning home empty-handed, however, he does not think that he has been beaten. What happens in between? In my opinion, in the process, he has had a deeper understanding of nature and all animals in it, especially himself. He realizes that all animals in the environment share the same fate or that their fate is closely connected to one another. All beings have to fight for their future and during the fighting there is no success or failure if everyone is doing what they are supposed to do by nature. Based on this understanding, the old man, Santiago, has a better knowledge of the self, holding that he should not just focus on the result of his efforts but should cherish the opportunity and enjoy the experience of struggling. In the novel's last sentence, Hemingway writes, "The old man was dreaming about the lions." This depiction is important in that it shows the old man is not defeated by one of the biggest challenges in his life but succeeds in rebuilding his self, identity, and subjectivity in his old age. As is stressed by the old man, "But man is not made for defeat. ...A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (*OM*, 103). Hemingway tells readers that this statement can also apply to a man who is old.

Concluding Remarks

Hemingway's hero Santiago rediscovers the self and rebuilds his identity by relying on youthful ambitions and overcoming ethical dilemmas while fishing far out at sea. In this sense, *The Old Man and the Sea* also contains the theme and idea of rejuvenation, just like Goethe's *Faust*. Goethe's play is a legend, while Hemingway's novel is a realistic account. The reconstruction of senior subjectivity in the latter, however, bears some resemblance to that in Goethe's *Faust*. Old Faust and old Santiago both strive to redefine their subjectivity through personal achievements in old age. The former, after several unsuccessful attempts, finally realizes that true success is not to be obsessed with personal interests and desires but is to work for the welfare of all human beings. The latter, after gaining and losing the huge marlin, gradually learns that he is merely a link in a chain of all sorts of competitive or harmonious relations in nature and that he should not just concentrate on whether he can obtain the fish or not. Faust and Santiago rid themselves of egocentricity and connect themselves to the development of the world and to other beings in the world. They are at peace with themselves and enter a state of no-self. They realize the essence of the world and come to terms with everything in it. In other words, Goethe and Hemingway make their characters deconstruct the old self which is affected by various external elements to discover what they really need and who they really are. Consequently, by forgetting about the self, they successfully reconstruct senior subjectivity, which resembles but radically differs from that of their youthful days. Although each has his distinct way of tackling the mental conception of their self, identity and subjectivity, Santiago can be said to be a modern Faust.

PART III

REPRESENTING SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY IN CHINESE FICTION

CHAPTER SIX

SUBJUGATED BY FAMILY HIERARCHY:

FEMALE SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY IN *A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS*

AND *THE GOLDEN CANGUE*

Traditionally, there were more extended families than nuclear ones in China. It was common to see three or even four generations live under the same roof. When so many people are living together, they must maintain a certain order so that the family will be kept in a peaceful and harmonious order. This order, simply put, is based on the Confucian principles of respecting the old and cherishing the young. An ideal Chinese family is usually composed of strict and loving parents and diligent and obedient children. Nowadays, families are becoming smaller and increasingly more grown-up children are leaving their parents, but family ties are still close and the traditional spirit still exists in every aspect of society. Family ties are so important that the senior subjectivity of Chinese people is largely constructed with the vicissitudes of their families, especially in those traditional big families in pre-modern China. In this chapter, I will examine senior subjectivity in traditional Chinese families by focusing on two matriarchal figures in a novel of the 18th century and a novella written in the first half of the twentieth century. Although the two literary works are widely different in terms of authorship, social conditions and familial power structure, they are closely related through the common theme of matriarchal dominance, a form of twisted patriarchy in traditional Chinese families. An examination of both works will shed light on how senior subjectivity is constructed in traditional Chinese societies.

Portrait of a Contented Subject Constructed by Means of Confucian Family Values

The first matriarchal figure to be examined is in China's greatest pre-modern novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* authored by Cao Xueqin (1715-1763) and Gao E (1758- c. 1815).¹ In the novel, the authors vividly portray an old woman called Jia Mu (Grandmother Jia or Matriarch Jia). Even though she is a woman, she rules the Jia clan at least nominally because of her seniority and traditional ethics centered on filial piety. As nominal head of the clan, she does not have a distinct self-identity. Rather, she lives her life guided by a subjectivity preordained by Confucian patriarchy in family relations. In the novel, the Jia clan with multiple families is described as a society in miniature. In this small society, Jia Mu plays various roles in the conglomerate of families throughout her life. She contributes to the rise and prosperity of her family, but is unable to prevent its decline and downfall. In Cao's narrative, Jia Mu is the senior who has served and supervised the large family for decades. She once talks about her own history to the younger people at home: "I came to this house as the bride of a great-grandson, and now I have great-grand-daughters-in-law myself. In my fifty-four years first and last here, I've had plenty of shocks and frights and seen all manner of amazing happenings" (*DR*, 99). This statement is a concise summary of the old lady's perception of herself after decades of life in a big family. It not only shows that she is the one who has lived the longest time in the family, but also indicates that she is now extremely experienced in family affairs and capable of dealing with everything happening here. At this point, the old lady must be highly confident of herself or even proud of herself.

¹ See Cao Xueqin and Gao E. *A Dream of Red Mansions*, trans. Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994).

From the above statement, we can roughly see the process of constructing Jia Mu's identity and subjectivity in her husband's big family from a young girl till old age. When she is the young bride of a great-grandson, she is obviously at the bottom of the family's power structure. There are layers of power or authorities above her. However, although the family hierarchy is suppressive, it also gives her an opportunity to climb. In the process, her role and status in the family keep changing and we observe an upward mobility. She learns to adjust herself to new environments in more than half a century. When the novel opens, she is already the only one of the oldest generation in the family, and has obtained unparalleled power. On the one hand, she is able to wield the power to control the family and everybody in it; on the other hand, she enjoys respect from the entire family, especially her offspring. Therefore, as an old woman who has successfully ascended to the top of the family hierarchy in the end, Jia Mu is having an old age with which she must be highly satisfied.

However, the author also reveals that Jia Mu's satisfaction is only part of her feelings about her old age. As an old person, she is obviously ambivalent about her present situation, which is best represented in another episode of Cao's narrative. It is in Chapter Thirty-nine when an old poor village woman named Granny Liu visits Jia Mu's grand mansion and seeks economic assistance. This episode is unusual in that it offers a picture of two old women from different social backgrounds and statuses meeting and talking about themselves and each other in front of a group of young people. As a result, when they comment on old age, their words sometimes show their true feelings arising from their true selves, but sometimes conceal those feelings. A detailed analysis can reveal the profound meanings of the episode in terms of Jia Mu's reflection on old age and her senior subjectivity.

First of all, Jia Mu basically has a positive attitude toward old age, which is the result of her wisdom and success throughout life. When she overhears others mentioning Granny Liu and learns her information, Jia Mu demands to see her: “I’ve been wanting to have a chat with some experienced old soul. Ask her over to see me” (*DR*, 571). Jia Mu’s instinctive response to the unexpected arrival of Granny Liu shows her curiosity and interest in her peers who might have the same situations in old age and wants to know if the other has similar views on old age. Clearly, Jia Mu enjoys sharing her ideas with other seniors, while at the same time learning more about someone else’s later years. That is why she uses “experienced old soul” to refer to other old people and is eager to meet Granny Liu. To put it another way, Jia Mu generally holds a positive attitude and looks upon life with curiosity.

On the other hand, Granny Liu is obviously much less happy about her old age, still less confident in herself. When she is given an opportunity to see the old lady, she shrinks from it, believing that she is “not fit to be seen” by Jia Mu (*DR*, 571). What Granny Liu has is a negative experience of her social status. Although she is approximately the same age as Jia Mu, she does not think that she deserves the same respect as what the latter receives. In other words, in her self-assessment, she believes that she is inferior to Jia Mu. In this sense, her view of life in old age is without doubt negative, which is just opposite to Jia Mu’s view. As is shown in the novel, the different feelings about old age reflect their different senior subjectivity constructed in different social, economic, and political situations.

The social and psychological gap between the two old women becomes even more evident when the maid Ping-erh encourages Granny Liu to see the old lady by saying good words about Jia Mu: “Go on, don’t worry about that....Our old lady is goodness itself to the old and needy.

She's not haughty and high-handed like some people. If you're shy, Mrs. Chou and I can come with you" (*DR*, 571). Ping-erh's words presuppose that the two old women are different, and Jia Mu is at a higher position in the social hierarchy. To Ping-erh, Jia Mu is a kind and benevolent old lady that deserves everyone's respect. When she says that the "old lady is goodness itself to the old and needy," she also implies that Granny Liu belongs to the "old and needy." Although old people generally require the same type of respect from others, they are actually not equal in others' and even their own eyes. Compared to Jia Mu who is confident due to her higher social status, the old and poor Granny Liu is expected to be worried and shy in front of Jia Mu. Their identity is thus formed differently.

So far, we can see that even before the two old women see each other, they have already been put in different mental states and given different identities. Such states continue at the beginning of their meeting when they greet each other. Granny Liu is conscious of her humble origin as a visitor of the big mansion, so she greets Jia Mu with the title of "Goddess of Long Life." Jia Mu, the mistress of the mansion, tries to show her close connections to Granny Liu and greets her with "venerable kinswoman." An individual's social identity can be constructed or recognized from the title with which he or she is addressed. The title can also serve as an important judgment of their subjectivity. In the dialogue, Granny Liu and Jia Mu try to form a good relationship by placing each other in a joyfully higher position than the actual status they have. Goddess or God of Long Life refers to an immortal in many Chinese legends that symbolizes happy and healthy old age. By using this title, Granny Liu highlights Jia Mu's supreme status and healthy body. It also conveys her best wishes for Jia Mu's condition in old age, both physical and mental. At the same time, by using "venerable kinswoman," Jia Mu gives

to Granny Liu what she deserves as an old woman respected by others for her age. Therefore, the two titles serve the same function of ascertaining respective status and making them feel better and more comfortable during the communication. Each of them uses an appropriate title to define the other's identity, and from the title used by the other one, they construct their own subjectivity in a suitable and positive manner.

The two old women's different identity and senior subjectivity are further illustrated by the author in the contents of their dialogue:

“How old are you, venerable kinswoman?” asked the Lady Dowager.
Granny Liu rose to answer, “Seventy-five.”
“So old, yet so hale and hearty! Why, you're older than I am by several years. If I live to your age, I doubt whether I shall be so spry.”
“We're born to put up with hardships, madam, and you to enjoy good fortune,” replied Granny Liu with a smile. “If we were all like you, who'd do the farming?”
“And your eyes and teeth, are they still good?”
“I can't complain. But this year one of my back teeth on the left side has come loose.”
“I'm old and useless now,” rejoined the Lady Dowager. “My sight's failing, I'm hard of hearing, and my memory's going. I can't even remember all our old relatives. When they call I don't see them for fear they'll laugh at me, I've become so helpless. All I can do is eat pap, sleep, or amuse myself for a while with these grandchildren when I'm bored.”
Granny Liu smiled.
“That's your good fortune, madam. We couldn't manage it even if we wanted to.”
“Good fortune? I'm nothing but a useless old thing.”
Everyone laughed at that (*DR*, 572-3).

This dialogue takes place during the two old women's first encounter and interaction, in which they describe their present situations and express their feelings about physical conditions as elderly women. The talk is happening in front of a group of younger women in Jia Mu's home and between two old people of different social statuses, so it displays a collision of views on old age. The quoted words show that the talk follows a pattern: Jia Mu initiates a question about Granny Liu; Granny Liu offers a short answer; Jia Mu follows it by praising Granny Liu's

excellent physical condition and describing her own condition negatively; Granny Liu responds to Jia Mu by complimenting her for her admirable good fortune and luxury and leisurely life in old age. Such a pattern happens twice in the conversation, showing that Jia Mu cares more about physical condition in old age, while Granny Liu considers wealth and status as factors more important to old people. As a matter of fact, in order to live a better life in later years, they both long for what they lack due to their differences in social status.

Interestingly, although Jia Mu starts by inquiring about Granny Liu's condition, she actually intends to focus on her own state. It offers a good opportunity to examine Jia Mu's identity and subjectivity in old age. First of all, Jia Mu laments that she is both mentally and physically feeble. She compares herself with seventy-five-year-old Granny Liu and finds that the latter is a few years older but more energetic than her. Jia Mu's eyesight, hearing, and memory are increasingly betraying her, while Granny Liu seems to be in a relatively younger and healthier condition. Therefore, she admires Granny Liu and wishes to keep the youthful body and spirit as long as possible.

In addition, Jia Mu is worried that her worsening physical health has ruined her capability of contributing to the prosperity of the big family. In her own words, "I'm old and useless now.... I've become so helpless." According to Jia Mu, "old" is connected to "useless" and "useless" leads to "helpless." Both "useless" and "helpless" due to old age can refer to the fact that it is hard for her to live normally as a human being and that she is unable to function normally as a leader of the family. The former meaning stands for her sense about the self which is more biological and personal, and the latter her feeling about the self which is more social and interpersonal. Jia Mu dislikes old age to such an extent that she even avoids her old relatives "for

fear they'll laugh at" her. Her fear is owing to the fact that she is gradually losing power after entering old age. On the whole, aging and old age have caused worries for Jia Mu.

However, in Granny Liu's eyes, Jia Mu's life in old age is everything but miserable or sorrowful. Granny Liu believes Jia Mu always enjoys good fortune and has nothing to worry about. When Jia Mu considers herself so useless that she can only eat, sleep, or amuse herself with her grandchildren, Granny Liu takes it as her good fortune and it is hard for others to obtain such good fortune. From Granny Liu's perspective, Jia Mu is enjoying her happy old age, just like a Goddess in paradise, which is opposite to Jia Mu's view about her own life. The different views on old age originate from the different grounds on which their senior subjectivity is constructed. Jia Mu has been used to staying at the top of the family hierarchy, so she is certainly unsatisfied with merely playing with her grandchildren with her weakened body. However, Granny Liu is from a poor farmer's family where everyone has to work hard, so it is not easy for her to enjoy a leisurely life with her children or grandchildren. Jia Mu and Granny Liu have different views on life values which shape their respective attitude toward old age.

Jia Mu definitely believes having fun with younger people at home is interesting, but she cares more about the power she used to have. That is the reason why she rejects the idea that her present situation as an old woman is "good fortune," but concludes it by saying "I'm nothing but a useless old thing." This statement of self-assessment sounds like a joke, for nobody would use "a useless old thing" to describe her- or himself, and it does make everyone laugh. But Jia Mu could have meant it if we consider it from the viewpoint that she has to let go of the supreme hierarchical power due to old age. The power can give her authority to both control and

contribute to the family. But now she has to step down from the top of the family power system, so it is natural for her to lament or grieve.

From the previous paragraphs, we can see that Jia Mu's self, identity, and senior subjectivity are a result of her long and complex experiences in the hierarchical power system of a big family. In Cao Xueqin's narrative, it is the hierarchical power that brings her confidence, achievements, and happiness in old age, so she is content with her life. But at the same time, she also has a sense of loss because she has to give up the power due to old age. The conversation between Jia Mu and Granny Liu shows the two old women's different perceptions of old age. Granny Liu, an old woman who lives in poverty and has experienced much less or even no hierarchical power in her family, cannot understand Jia Mu's feelings but instead admires her. When Jia Mu and Granny Liu are facing and talking to each other, they seem to be looking at another self, for they are both in their seventies and become physically weaker. But they are constantly conscious of the difference between them, such as wealth and social status. They are physically similar, but socially different, and their senior subjectivity is thus differently constructed due to each other's different social status.

Senior Subjects as Victim and Victimizer

In Chapter Three, I probed into the senior subjectivity based on optimal family ties advocated by Chinese thinkers. However, ideal family ties are difficult to establish and maintain in reality; conflicts can easily arise even among family members. Old people may not be well respected by their offspring and they even suffer from maltreatment by their children. On the other hand, old people may have too much power or influence over their children and constrain

young people from growing and developing freely. Family ties can be affected by various external and internal factors. This is the reason why many Chinese thinkers stress self-cultivation and harmony, and many Chinese writers create literary works concerning issues concerning family ties and senior subjectivity. It might be useful to regulate people's behavior in terms of paying homage to seniors, but too much emphasis on the authority of the old might also cause some negative effects that undermine social and familial relations. Both the contributions and the problems of old people, as well as the attitude toward old age and senior subjectivity, can best be found in literary works rather than in philosophical or political treatises.

As is mentioned above, *A Dream of Red Mansions* is the tale of a large family with extremely complex interpersonal relations and intergenerational conflicts. In such a family, the senior, both in age and in status, are usually at the top of the pyramid, managing and controlling the whole family. On the one hand, the senior might act as wise mentors who try to coordinate relations in all aspects of the family and make them live in harmony with one another; on the other hand, the senior might be considered evil tyrants who compel their children to obey rules that go against the children's will or well-being. The powerful elderly in a big family may play dual roles: helper and destroyer. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Jia Mu, the Lady Dowager and also the oldest of the family, is described as a respected and authoritative old lady who wields supreme power over the family. But actually, she is powerless to confront and handle various problems in every corner of the grand but decaying mansion. To make matters worse, she even destroys the happiness of her grandson Baoyu by interfering with his marriage. This is Jia Mu's dual roles: on the one hand, she loves and protects Baoyu explicitly; on the other hand, she controls and suppresses his desire for freedom of choice in love implicitly. Jia Mu is like the

queen of the family, and her fate is somewhat like that of King Lear: they both fail to sustain a big family. The difference is that Jia Mu is always respected, at least ostensibly, by her children, while King Lear is disrespected and even maltreated by two of his daughters. The portrayal of Jia Mu can be seen as emblematic of old people in traditional Chinese big families.

A Dream of Red Mansions is one of the most influential novels in China, for it digs into the fundamental situation of Chinese family ties in its traditional sense, as well as the status and identity of the old in such families. Many writers in China imitate this novel and compose stories with the same motif. One of them is the novella *The Golden Cangue* authored by Zhang Ailing (Eileen Zhang) (1920-1995).² Chih-Tsing Hsia considers it “the greatest novelette in the history of Chinese literature.”³ Zhang Ailing is a devoted reader and critic of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, who even publishes a series of essays about the novel.⁴ In her own novella, Zhang Ailing narrates a story that takes place in a traditional Chinese family. Despite the differences, what is common to both literary works is that they each represent a wealthy big family on the decline. In either of the two families, the one who is in power is the oldest woman whose husband has already passed away. Analogous to *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the *Golden Cangue* describes a senior woman—Old Mistress, who enjoys the supreme power and status in the family. Everyone

² Zhang Ailing published *The Golden Cangue* (金锁记) in Chinese in 1943 and later she translated it into English. See Eileen Chang, “The Golden Cangue,” in *Modern Chinese Stories and Novellas, 1919-1949*, eds. Joseph S. M. Lau, Chih-tsing Hsia, and Leo Ou-fan Lee (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 528-560.

³ C. T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 3rd edition (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 398.

⁴ See Zhang Ailing, *Nightmare in the Red Chamber* (Beijing: Beijing Shiyue Literature and Art Press), 2012.

in the family has to follow her order, and she can even choose spouses for her children. This old lady is exactly another Jia Mu, both of whom represent matriarchal figures.

However, the protagonist in Zhang Ailing's novella is another woman—Qiqiao (Ch'i-ch'iao). Zhang Ailing portrays Qiqiao's old age, as well as her younger years, in flashbacks, from which readers can perceive the formation of her personality and subjectivity. On the following pages, I intend to mainly probe into Qiqiao's senior subjectivity in the large context of traditional Chinese family ties. Zhang Ailing's fictional pieces, exemplified by *The Golden Cangue* are considered the best in modern Chinese literature for the "descriptions of dysfunctional families."⁵ I will try to elucidate this point by exploring how Qiqiao's senior subjectivity is constructed through the dysfunctional family hierarchy. Family hierarchy in the novella greatly influences Qiqiao's attitude toward personal property and sex, both of which are also the best representations of ethical relations and the influential factors of her subjectivity.

Cao Xueqin's narrative does not specify how Jia Mu climbs up to the summit of family hierarchical power, so we do not have direct evidence of how she constructs subjectivity throughout life. But it is evident that her parents' family is no less important than her husband's family, so it must not be difficult for her to occupy a favorable position in her husband's family after marriage. Zhang Ailing's narrative offers a relatively more detailed description of Qiqiao's life story, which makes it easier for readers to discern how she forms her identity and constructs her subjectivity under the influence of family hierarchy. Qiqiao's family is by far inferior to her husband's in social status, so from the moment she becomes a bride, she is at the bottom of the

⁵ Kam Louie, *Eileen Chang: Romancing Languages, Cultures and Genres* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 4.

family power hierarchy. Her identity is affected by the power in family hierarchy and her subjectivity is gradually built along with her struggle for power. Therefore, the process of Qiqiao's construction of her senior subjectivity is also the process of her obtaining power step by step with aging and changing environments. In my opinion, it can be divided into two opposite but intimately related components: victim to family hierarchy and victimizer empowered by the same hierarchical structure.

Portrait of a Woman as a Sick Subject

Confucius believes that a progressive and prosperous family is built on the stable relations between its members, in which everyone is devoted to his or her duty and needs are properly fulfilled. His theory is that, through lifelong self-cultivation, a person will grow up from a young person who respects the old to an old one who is respected by the young. Such commitment is an ideal way of constructing one's senior subjectivity. However, regulating family ties is also a process of building family hierarchy, which might cause many problems and conflicts. Such family hierarchy might consist of such ideological and ethical components as filial piety, female obedience and virtues,⁶ male privilege, authority of the husband, patriarchy, and even matriarchy. These components collectively construct an illusory environment that affects a person's world view as well as his or her self-consciousness. A person, especially a woman who is brought up in this environment, will possibly encounter a lot of suffering and challenges that eventually impact her senior subjectivity, if she can survive to old age.

⁶ In pre-modern China, a woman was required to have three obediences (obeying her father before marriage, her husband during married life, and her sons in widowhood) and four virtues (fidelity, physical charm, propriety in speech, and efficiency in needle work).

In *The Golden Cangue*, Zhang Ailing, who is “deeply indebted to *Dream of the Red Chamber* for its style and boudoir realism,” makes a vivid description of various characters in a big family.⁷ In this family, everyone is exposed to the rule of a strict hierarchy. Qiqiao lives in this family for decades, which undoubtedly shapes her self-identity. In the last paragraph of the novella, the narrator summarizes Qiqiao’s life experiences in a short but important statement that is in the form of a metaphor: “For thirty years now she had worn a golden cangue” (GC, 558). The golden cangue is the core image in Zhang Ailing’s narrative. The word “golden” represents the wealth in a big feudal family, and “cangue,” a large wooden collar in ancient China worn by criminals as a punishment, symbolizes the rigid hierarchy in such a family. Analogous to *A Dream of Red Mansions*, *The Golden Cangue* describes a landlord and official family in pre-modern China, which belongs to the affluent class but is declining. Such families strive to maintain the feudal hierarchy and its ideology, not only in society, but also in the family.

In the story, Qiqiao becomes one of the victims of such hierarchy being present throughout her life. To clarify this point, we may look into a series of hierarchical comparisons between Qiqiao and other people who are related to her in one way or another. Qiqiao plays different roles in different power relations of family ties. These relations are between Qiqiao and her own parents and brother, her husband, her sisters-in law, her mother-in-law, etc. In each of them, Qiqiao is unfortunately at the lowest level of the system or in an oppressed position. As a female, she is deprived of the freedom to design and seek her own happiness. Specifically, Qiqiao is brought up in a patriarchal family, because she has no right to choose a spouse whom she loves

⁷ Joseph S. M. Lau, Chih-tsing Hsia, and Leo Ou-fan Lee, eds., *Modern Chinese Stories and Novellas, 1919-1949* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 529.

or reject the man she does not love. Her marriage is determined by her parents and her elder brother. Zhang Ailing alludes to this point by quoting Qiqiao's brother Da Nian: "If I'd been greedy for wedding gifts and asked for another several hundred taels of silver from the Chiangs and sold you for a concubine, you'd have been sold" (*GC*, 539).⁸ In this statement, "another several hundred taels of silver" reveals that he has obtained much money by marrying his sister off to an invalid, but he insists that he is not greedy and is kind to her. With this simple sentence, Zhang Ailing indicates that the protagonist is practically sold to her husband's family as a commodity, and that she has no rights as a human. Qiqiao's identity is tagged with a price; her status is a result of the trade between two families. In such an environment, male privilege is best preserved and practiced. Da Nian, the brother, can determine the fate of his sister, Qiqiao. The sister, however, cannot do the same to her brother and can only accept what has happened or been assigned to her. The power of Da Nian originates in the fact that he is a man. A woman is born with inferior status and identity at home.

In Zhang Ailing's story, Qiqiao is confronted with more severe situations in her husband's family, one that is characterized by many more hierarchical relations. To her, it is not a harmonious family but a place full of conflict and suffering, as she concludes years later: "The whole family treading me down, if I'd been easy to bully I'd have been trampled to death long ago. As it is, I'm full of aches and pains from anger" (*GC*, 539). Qiqiao is sold to become a wife, so she has no freedom of choice concerning her marriage. She hates her husband, a paralyzed man suffering from the soft bone illness or tuberculosis of the bones. But it is impossible for her

⁸ In ancient China, a man can have one wife and one or more concubines. The status of a concubine at home is inferior to a wife. Here Da Nian indicates that he charges less so that his sister can become a wife, instead of a concubine, after marriage.

to divorce him or to improve her situation. She is cursed to be trapped in the destiny, a hierarchical network where a wife has no right to reject or discontinue the disappointing marriage. In the new family, Qiqiao is not only under the control of her mother-in-law, but also despised by almost everyone, even the housemaids. The narrative begins with two maids gossiping about Qiqiao's manners in the big family and her background before marriage. They obviously look down upon Qiqiao by comparing Qiqiao's family with her husband's family and her sisters-in-law's families. In their words, Qiqiao is not from "a respectable family" and she uses "vulgar language" that even slave girls would never speak (*GC*, 531). The maids are used by Zhang Ailing to act as narrators of the social hierarchy. These negative comments leave readers an impression that Qiqiao is inferior to her peers in the family. Such an experience, as well as the one in her parents' family, is deeply rooted in Qiqiao's mind and it even affects her self-identity, mind, and behavior in old age, which will be discussed later.

Property, under the influence of family hierarchy, plays an important role in Qiqiao's life, affecting the formation and alienation of her self and subjectivity. Qiqiao has three families in her life: her parents', her husband's, and her own family. It turns out that all of them are based on the desire for more property instead of domestic affections. Hierarchical relations greatly shape the mental state of these family members and make them realize that power and property are most important in their lives. Power and property are interrelated to each other: more power contributes to the possession of more property, and vice versa. In Zhang Ailing's story, younger Qiqiao is maltreated and/or despised by almost everyone in her life. Nobody is really concerned with her, and they only care about how they can benefit from her. According to Lin Zou,

“[h]uman relationship in Zhang Ailing’s world is essentially commercial, in the sense that it is dominated by interest calculation and exchange.”⁹

Through telling Qiqiao’s story, Zhang Ailing reveals one of the darkest sides of human nature—self-profiteering at the expense of others. Qiqiao is practically sold by her brother for money and discriminated by her husband’s family due to lack of money; her brother and sister-in-law want her money, and her beloved man wants her money, too; money provides her with power, so, to protect her money, she keeps herself away from people, even at the cost of her daughter’s happiness. She struggles with money from beginning to end, which causes herself and others a lot of suffering. All this suffering constitutes Qiqiao’s entire life, making it impossible for her to construct normal or satisfactory senior subjectivity. When she is old and loses all hope in life, she can only attach the self to the idea that money is better than man and take actions to construct her subjectivity accordingly.

Qiqiao has been subjugated to family hierarchy throughout her life, which undoubtedly affects her values and self-identity. As is shown in Zhang Ailing’s narrative, family hierarchy affects Qiqiao in many ways, including her perception of property and her sense of sex. Sex is a concept closely associated with body, marriage, incest, gaze, and even one’s emotional attachment, and it is also inseparable from elements of society, power, economy, identity, and ideology. Qiqiao becomes a victim of the hierarchy in Jiang’s family, one of the major reasons of which is the sexual oppression and repression she suffers there. Qiqiao is taken by other family members as a senseless instrument rather than a sensitive human, and thus is deprived of the

⁹ Lin Zou, “The Commercialization of Emotions in Zhang Ailing’s Fiction,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 70, no. 1 (February 2011): 29.

right to sex. She is forced to marry and look after a paralyzed and sexually useless man whom she never loves, while at the same time, she is forbidden to get close to her husband's younger brother who is the man she loves. What is worse, she is repeatedly deceived by the younger brother, which causes her more emotional suffering. Qiqiao has long been deprived of opportunities to fulfill her passion and physical desires. In the novella, Zhang Ailing shows the strong impact of sexual issues on the formation of Qiqiao's personality and subjectivity.

The body, frequently a symbol of one's subjectivity, is mentioned in the story with a sexual implication. Qiqiao's understanding of the self and identity is partly based on her observation of her own body. Old Qiqiao's body is described as follows: "She groped for the green jade bracelet on her wrist and slowly pushed it up her bony arm as thin as firewood until it reached the armpit" (*GC*, 558). The author focuses on the character's arm, which is "bony" and "as thin as firewood." This simile gives a vivid depiction of the appearance of an old person. The elderly are usually shriveled with age, and their skin is often dry, rough, and darkened. Old Qiqiao's body is such a typical one, making her resemble a withered flower. The author compares the body of old Qiqiao with that of young Qiqiao: "She herself could not believe she'd had round arms when she was young. Even after she had been married several years the bracelet only left room enough for her to tuck in a handkerchief of imported crepe" (*GC*, 558). The sharp contrast between "bony" arms and "round" arms makes her senility much more conspicuous, and it also implies the loss of her sexuality. The bracelet around her arm also has symbolic significance. One scholar suggests that "[t]he Chinese 'green jade bracelet' and the symbolic

‘golden cangue’ are tightly connected with the transformation of Ch’i-ch’iao’s body.”¹⁰ It carries Qiqiao’s beautiful memories, embodies the old woman’s irreversible past, and more importantly, witnesses her transformation from glowing youth to dim old age. Zhang Ailing probes into old Qiqiao’s subjective mind by using “She herself could not believe....” It further reflects the old woman’s regret and sadness, especially when her youthful wishes and sexual desires have never been fulfilled. In this sense, I can safely argue that old Qiqiao probably believes she has never fulfilled herself and her subjectivity is never properly constructed.

The author also makes a direct description of young Qiqiao’s appearance before her marriage: “As a girl of eighteen or nineteen, she would roll up the lavishly laced sleeves of her blue linen blouse, revealing a pair of snow-white wrists, and go to the market” (GC, 558). This must be the best time of her life. At that moment, she is a lovely and adorable girl who leads a carefree life and looks forward to a happy future. This state of life represents her youthful subjectivity, the one she longs for but will never attain in old age. Once again, in the author’s imagery, “lavishly laced sleeves” and “blue linen blouse” are exclusively women’s attire that is fashionable and can display a girl’s charms. Therefore, they undoubtedly convey sexual connotations. Furthermore, Qiqiao would roll up the sleeves and reveal “a pair of snow-white wrists” to “go to the market,” which is uncommon to people at that time and will certainly be eye-catching. We can imagine that many passers-by and vendors, especially young men, will gaze at her. As a result, her youthful subjectivity, marked with sexual connotations, is to a large degree constructed by others’ adoring gazes.

¹⁰ Jessica Tsui Yan Li, “Self-translation/Rewriting: the Female Body in Eileen Chang’s ‘Jinsuo Ji,’ *the Rouge of the North*, *Yuan ü* and ‘The Golden Cangue,’” *Neohelicon*, vol. 37, issue 2 (December 2010): 395.

However, after her marriage, such loving gazes are replaced by scornful eyes which eventually destroy her self-esteem and self-identity. When Qiqiao is old, her senility is not only a result of a natural process but also a process under the influence of the hierarchical system. The body is the carrier of the mind, and so the change of one's physical condition will lead to the change of one's awareness of the self and the world. If one's youthful wishes are not fulfilled, he or she will probably develop a sense of loss or frustration in old age. In my opinion, this sense can be taken as a fundamental feeling of deficiency that is mainly concealed in one's unconscious. Young Qiqiao suffers from deficiency in terms of sex, which can be one of the reasons that cause her eccentric mindset and behavior in old age. The unconscious feeling of deficiency will compel an old person to generate negative emotions for past experiences, such as grief, pain, remorse, and detestation. Meanwhile, due to the unconscious deficiency, the old person may strongly wish to find a substitute or a new way to resume and complete the unfinished dream. If deficiency becomes a characteristic of a young person's subjectivity, when the person is getting old, he or she will probably try to reconstruct the subjectivity by mending the deficiency.

The unfulfilled love from Qiqiao's husband and brother-in-law deals a double blow to Qiqiao, and gradually twists her soul. Zhang Ailing describes this twist in a special way, namely, by drawing an analogy between Qiqiao and a butterfly specimen. When she is rejected by Jize, "[s]he stared straight ahead, the small, solid gold pendants of her earrings like two brass nails nailing her to the door, a butterfly specimen in a glass box, bright-colored and desolate" (*GC*, 537). This analogy is apt in that it reflects not only physical but also spiritual similarities between the two. Analogous to a beautiful butterfly specimen which is nailed to a door, Qiqiao,

in her blossom age, is also confined to the hierarchical family and loses her freedom. The butterfly is killed due to its beauty, and Qiqiao feels spiritually suffocated in the family. Qiqiao is just like a dead butterfly that is deprived of any hope to escape. Decades of sexual repression cause physical and emotional pain to Qiqiao and rewrite her personality and mind. For instance, her mind has to continuously struggle with her body, prohibiting herself from approaching Jize. The author uses just one sentence for this suffering: “How many times had she strained to suppress herself until all her muscles and bones and gums ached with sharp pain” (GC, 545).

To summarize, family hierarchy relentlessly turns Qiqiao from an innocent and glamorous girl into a victim of miserable experiences. The suffering, mainly caused by wealth and sex, fundamentally changes her mental state, personality, and her understanding of the self and identity, and thus affects the construction of a healthy subjectivity.

From Healthy Self to Sick Subjectivity

In the previous section, I argued that Qiqiao’s subjectivity is constructed on the basis of the fact that she has long been a victim of family hierarchy, both in her parents’ and in her husband’s. At the same time, Qiqiao learns to adapt herself to the reality and integrate herself to the hierarchical power, so that she can make use of the power to protect herself and control others. Thus, her subjectivity is also constructed or consolidated by internalizing the hierarchical power.

To illustrate this point, we may return to the quotation about Qiqiao’s situation in old age: “For thirty years now she had worn a golden cangue. She had used its heavy edges to chop down several people; those that did not die were half killed. She knew that her son and daughter hated

her to the death, that the relatives on her husband's side hated her, and that her own kinsfolk also hated her" (GC, 558). The statement "For thirty years now she had worn a golden cangue" not only shows that Qiqiao is a victim of the family hierarchy, but also indicates that, in the past thirty years, she has been involved in the big family and gradually learns to live with it. She is unable to fight against the system, so she has to get used to whatever happens to her in the family and accepts its values and principles. Therefore, the system has a profound and cumulative impact on her personal development as well as her subjectivity. As Qiqiao is getting old, she gradually loses all hope of realizing her own dreams and chooses to turn herself into a part of the system or the power structure, so her aging is simultaneously a process of internalizing the hierarchical power.

In Zhang Ailing's narrative, Qiqiao's life after marriage is divided into two periods: as a daughter-in-law and as a widowed mother. When she is a daughter-in-law, she is fettered by the hierarchical power of her mother-in-law and her husband. But when they both pass away and she can move out of the big family and live independently with her children, Qiqiao finds herself obtaining the same power from the hierarchical system. With the power, Qiqiao decides to fight back, but her fighting is grounded on the system itself and she becomes an accomplice who strengthens the system. In other words, she does not fight against the hierarchy and malicious things in it, but, analogous to Sutpen in Faulkner's novel, she utilizes the system to meet her individual needs. Having been considerably affected by the hierarchical system for decades, Qiqiao's personality is totally warped. She is indulged in the pleasure of manipulating and destroying her children instead of helping them. This is what the author means by the metaphoric statement that Qiqiao has used the heavy edges of the cangue to chop down several people.

When Qiqiao believes that everyone in her family hates her, it is because she knows that she has hurt them much with the power. Qiqiao's aging can also be taken as a process of her alienation. Hierarchy ruins her personality and self-identity. As she becomes older, she is continuously pushed away from the original innocent self that she used to have. To illustrate this point, the author highlights the biggest turning point in Qiqiao's life: her marriage. After she is sold as a wife to an invalid, she suffers from two blows: being abandoned by her parents' family and being despised by her husband's family. Both of them are the consequences of family hierarchy.

Zhang Ailing places Qiqiao's change or alienation in other characters' observation or gaze on her. For instance, Qiqiao's difference before and after marriage is noticed by her own elder brother's wife: "How is it Ku-nai-nai has changed so?"¹¹ Before she was married she may have been a bit proud and talked a little too much. Even later, when we went to see her, she had more of a temper but there was still a limit. She was not silly as she is now, sane enough one minute and the next minute off again, and altogether disagreeable" (*GC*, 540). These words illuminate that Qiqiao's temper or character has been worsening since her marriage. This comment indicates that Qiqiao is not born with such a weird and unpredictable personality. On the other hand, it is the oppressive and even stifling hierarchical environment that deteriorates her mindset and behavior step by step. When she is old, she becomes even more ruthless and heartless, which is seen by Shihfang, her daughter Chang'an's fiancé "Shihfang looked over his shoulder and saw a small old lady standing at the doorway with her back to the light so that he could not see her face distinctly.... Shih-fang instinctively felt this was a mad person. For no reason there was

¹¹ Ku-nai-nai (姑奶奶) is an honorific for the married daughter.

a chill in all his hairs and bones” (*GC*, 557). This description of old Qiqiao is a summation of her entire life. At this point, Qiqiao has become an abnormal or eccentric person, a ghost-like being in both appearance and character. Zhang Ailing makes it clear that Qiqiao’s alienation is under the impact of hierarchical connections between Qiqiao and other family members. She suffers from the system, but is also a criminal in the system. The two seemingly conflicting characteristics combine in Qiqiao. Therefore, her senior subjectivity is not just a result of suffering from the power, but also a consequence of internalizing the power and persecuting others.

In the foregoing sections, I argued that family hierarchy adversely affects Qiqiao’s senior subjectivity by means of property. This is clearly seen in Qiqiao’s degeneration, which is first of all due to her abnormal mindset in association with property. She embraces wealth and attempts to rebuild her subjectivity on it, but it turns out that her innocent self is destroyed by property when she wrongly believes that it is the only thing in the world on which she can rely. Such a psychological change is also a dynamic process. Throughout the novella, the author repeatedly describes how Qiqiao is affected by the desire for property under the pressure of family hierarchy, and how she tries to dominate others with the help of property and the same pressure of family hierarchy. Under that circumstance, Qiqiao increasingly attaches herself to personal property to ensure her status at home. She is forced to identify herself with wealth, the gold of the “golden cangue.” As she redefines her identity in terms of wealth, she gradually alienates herself from emotional connections with whoever appears in her life, hoping that she can protect her property and power in this way. Finally, she trusts nobody and nothing except for her wealth.

In the story, the author vividly represents different mental states of Qiqiao when she is in different families. It shows how the alienation caused by the desire for wealth deteriorates Qiqiao's self and subjectivity from her childhood all the way until old age. Each time she longs for love, she is beaten by others' desires for money. When life teaches her one lesson after another, old Qiqiao unconsciously flinches from reality and is entrenched in her belief that property is more important than anything else. Therefore, she gradually learns to connect herself to money and interprets everything around her on the basis of this theory. In this way, she not only alienates herself from the external world, but also destroys the happiness of her children and anyone near her. Put simply, Qiqiao internalizes the hierarchical power by becoming attached to wealth, which is one of the major characteristics of her senior subjectivity.

The author also makes it clear that Qiqiao's reconstruction of her subjectivity is also dominated by unfulfilled sexual needs. She is so obsessed with them that she will explain everything from the angle of sex. In her younger years, Qiqiao is divested of the right to sex. It greatly affects her understanding of humanity as well as her self-identity. When she is getting old, she chooses to do the same to her children for the purpose of revenge and compensating for what she had lost. When her daughter Chang'an wants to get married to Shifang, Qiqiao, who has long lost her belief in pure love, assumes that Chang'an and Shifang already had sex and Chang'an is pregnant now. Old Qiqiao increasingly uses sex as a weapon to persecute her children. Her persecution might be a way of making up for what she has lost when she was young. In this sense, it is also a way of reconstructing her subjectivity, albeit in a wrong and twisted way. In the process of the reconstruction, she enjoys her children's pain. For example, Qiqiao insists on binding Chang'an's feet, which causes pain to the daughter, but Qiqiao is satisfied with it. In

Chinese tradition, women's feet also convey sexual connotations. Jize once touched Qiqiao's foot when flirting with her. Qiqiao's decision to have her daughter's feet bound can also be considered as a sexual oppression, from which Qiqiao obtains pleasure.

Due to the lack of adequate sex in her early life, old Qiqiao's self is so seriously twisted that she tries to apply her understanding or misunderstanding of human nature to her children, which causes much suffering to them. Ming Dong Gu has offered an insightful view on Qiqiao's mindset from the perspective of self-alienation and gender politics. He looks on Qiqiao's alienation as a failure in self-fulfillment due to the oppression of the patriarchal society.¹² Through the analysis of the conflicts between Qiqiao and her daughter-in-law, he points out that Qiqiao's insane jealousy is not only a result of the sexual frustration as a young woman, which makes her extremely intolerant of her children's marriage, but also a demonstration of her sadism, namely, she repeatedly destroys her children's love life to alleviate her own frustrated marriage.¹³

In Zhang Ailing's narrative, Qiqiao's deeds of hurting others also lead to harmful consequences to herself. Younger Qiqiao, particularly before she is sold to Jiang's family, lives a full and joyful life. Her subjectivity might have taken a healthy route in life if she were not sold to a sexually deficient husband and did not suffer from sexual repression there. Since her situation worsens with age, she attempts to destroy anything related to love and birth, including her children's marriage. One element in Qiqiao's subjectivity related to sex is shown in her

¹² Ming Dong Gu, "Eileen Zhang's *The Golden Cangue*: A Study of Self-alienation and Gender Politics," in *Anxiety of Originality: An Interdisciplinary Study of Language, Literature, and Culture* (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2009), 232.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 240-1

enjoyment of possessing her son, which reflects a sort of mother complex: a mother's jealousy and unconscious desire to "remove the wife so as to repossess the son."¹⁴ As I mentioned before, Qiqiao's personality is characterized by deficiencies, especially in the lack of sex. When she is old, she still tries to make up for the deficiency, but now the only man around her is her son, Changbai. Although Changbai is not totally eligible as the object of love, Qiqiao is still afraid that she might lose him: "But being her son, he amounted to less than half a man. And even the half she could not keep, now that he was married" (GC, 549). So she tries to keep him with her as long as possible, even staying in her room overnight. She uses two strategies to achieve her purpose: one is to claim filial piety from her son, the other is to use flirty actions. For example, she "put a foot on his shoulder and kept giving him light kicks on the neck" (GC, 549). Qiqiao's words and actions are full of sexual implications, which inevitably arouse Changbai's feelings for his mother. Ming Dong Gu points out that Changbai is brought up by the single mother, so the Oedipus complex cannot be cleared up from his unconscious.¹⁵ As a matter of fact, he enjoys staying with her. In this way, she prevents her son and daughter-in-law from having sex. This is another torture to her daughter-in-law, who suffers much from the abnormal and dubious relationship between her husband and his mother. She feels life in this family is intolerable, because "a husband not like a husband, a mother-in-law not like a mother-in-law" (GC, 550). The comment that Qiqiao is not like a mother shows that her self is twisted and that her subjectivity is constructed on the perverted basis. Different from that of Jia Mu, Qiqiao's

¹⁴ Ming Dong Gu, "The Filial Piety Complex: Variations on the Oedipus Theme in Chinese Literature and Culture," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, vol. LXXV, no. 1 (2006): 174.

¹⁵ Gu, "Eileen Zhang's *The Golden Cangue*," 241.

subjectivity is mainly destructive rather than constructive because of her own abnormal experience in life.

At the same time, out of the same reason, Qiqiao's mindset compels her to hate her daughter's fiancé and her son's wives. She utters hostile words against her daughter-in-law at the wedding ceremony: "I can't say much in front of young ladies—just hope our Master Pai won't die in her hands" (GC, 549). This comment implies that the young couple might indulge themselves in too much sex after the wedding and it will impair Changbai's health. If the humiliation of this sentence is not explicit, Qiqiao's insult in another statement is more evident, which happens just three days after the wedding of the young couple: "Our new young mistress may look innocent—but as soon as she sees Master Pai she has to go and sit on the nightstool" (GC, 549). Qiqiao brings shame on her daughter-in-law by describing her as an oversexed woman. She repeats such words to all relatives, causing heavy blows to the newly-wedded wife. In Zhang Ailing's story, Qiqiao continually uses the topic of sex to humiliate her son's wife and finally causes her death. And later, she uses the same strategy to cause the death of her son's second wife. Old Qiqiao knows that she is doing harm to others, but she is so deeply affected by the death instinct, and only in this way can she find peace and pleasure in herself. Therefore, we can say that Qiqiao attempts to rebuild the subjectivity by persecuting her children. When her daughter-in-law is suffering from her victimization, she seems to be reliving her own experience which happened decades ago. Her daughter-in-law's suffering makes her happy, giving her an illusion that she has fulfilled the self.

Therefore, the author unfolds that under the pressure of hierarchical power, Qiqiao's original innocent self is destroyed and she is plunged into a network so powerful that she has no

choice but to become a part of it. In the process of constructing senior subjectivity, she is transformed into a representative of the power system and instinctively harms the younger generation. This can be understood as her way of getting revenge for the harm she has experienced. In so doing, Qiqiao's subjectivity in her old age is represented as a sick victimizer.

Concluding Remarks

The comparison between Cao Xueqin's and Zhang Ailing's narrative makes it clear that both Jia Mu's and Qiqiao's subjectivity are built on Confucian family hierarchy, but they have different experiences concerning the hierarchical power. Jia Mu is born as a part of the power, an insider who mainly benefits from the power and generally holds a positive attitude toward it. Therefore, there is little to no conflict between Jia Mu's self and subjectivity. When Jia Mu is old, she becomes unhappy mainly because she is going to lose the power. Qiqiao is born in a family with neither money nor power, and as a consequence holds a negative view on it. Therefore, there is great conflict between Qiqiao's self and subjectivity. When Qiqiao is old, she not only internalizes the power, but also tries to consolidate her identity with power, namely, through wielding power over her children. Jia Mu's senior subjectivity is constructive while Qiqiao's is destructive. The former benefits the self and others, while the latter destroys the self and others.

In *The Golden Cangue*, the author constructs all sorts of rigid social relations that constrain the character and subjectivity of Qiqiao, including a hierarchical network that firmly locks her inside. It is just like a cangue that constrains her and there is no way of escape. Qiqiao is described as both a victim and a victimizer. Young Qiqiao is a girl who is innocent in nature, and her mind is full of romantic fantasies for life and love. But the reality is extremely cruel to

her: in the first half of her life, Qiqiao is severely tortured. Her tragic encounter not only fundamentally changes her outlook on life, interpersonal relations, and the whole world, but also greatly twists her self-recognition and thus shapes her subjectivity. As a result, in the second half of her life, she strives to impose similar suffering on her children and their beloved ones. In the narrative, by internalizing and exercising the power of family hierarchy, Qiqiao persecutes them in terms of property and sex, so that she can ruin their love and marriage. The persecution of children also contributes negatively to the reconstruction of her subjectivity in old age. With the erroneous perception of the world and the self, Qiqiao fails to recover her real value and is unable to rebuild her desired subjectivity. Hence, Zhang Ailing successfully represents a failed old subject.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TRADITIONAL AND MODERN SENIOR SUBJECTIVITY IN CONFLICT AND
HARMONY: A CASE STUDY OF LIN YUTANG'S *MOMENT IN PEKING*
AND MO YAN'S *FROG*

As I have argued, the subjectivity of the elderly is closely connected to their family ties and personal achievements, both of which are influenced by various forms of social power and ideology. As a result, the construction of senior subjectivity is anything but simple. As a sweeping generalization, an old person in the West is likely to struggle to keep his or her youthful state as long as possible, while an old Chinese person may embrace old age with an attitude characterized by serene acceptance or helpless resignation. Although in China the elderly are usually highly revered, sometimes generational conflicts and divisions might arise due to the difference in values and interests. In the preceding chapter, I discussed both positive and negative effects of Confucian family ties in pre-modern China. In this chapter, I will examine two literary works, Lin Yutang's *Moment in Peking* and Mo Yan's *Frog*. By analyzing the two novels in relation to traditional Chinese ideas of the old age and modern ideology that interpellates people into subjects, I will explore how the construction of subjectivity in old age are carried out in different epochs and what different subjects are constructed as a result of the difference in intellectual and ideological foundations.

Buddhist Self and Senior Subjectivity in Lin Yutang's Novel

As an embodiment of senior subjectivity, personal achievements of Chinese old people are rarely individually centered, but are family and society oriented. One's success is not considered

as such if it does not benefit one's family or country. Such a conception has long been rooted in the Chinese philosophy and ideology. Previously, I have illustrated that, for many Chinese old people, fusing the self, family, and society is a perfect way to realize self-fulfillment and construct senior subjectivity. However, if we look deeper into one's self in terms of the relations between the elderly and their world in the large context of Chinese tradition, we can see that there are several modes—the Confucian one, the Taoist one, and the Buddhist one. The Confucian type of self and subjectivity is represented in *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *The Golden Cangue* that I discussed in the previous chapter, and the latter two, in my opinion, are reflected and advocated in Lin Yutang's novel, *Moment in Peking*, although the narrative does not exclude the significance of Confucianism.

What is the Buddhist self and subjectivity? Lin Yutang offers an example in *Moment in Peking*. In the work completed in 1939, Lin Yutang intends to introduce the West to Chinese tradition and reality from the beginning of the 20th century. He focuses on family ethical relations, an important part of which is the intergenerational affections. In the beginning of the novel, Lin Yutang presents an old lady—the grandmother of Tseng family, who, as readers can expect, wishes the best to her children and keeps a good relationship with them. Her children and grandchildren deeply respect her, considering her as “the head of the family” (*MP*, 96). This is a typical traditional Chinese family predicated on the Confucian ethics of filial piety. The old lady, on the other hand, believes there is a better way for her to contribute to the prosperity of the family as well as her own future. Lin Yutang describes her as follows:

...the grandmother had refused to go to Peking with her son's family. She had in her own time seen the splendors of the court, but now that her son was so successful as an official, she was thankful for her lot and had turned into a devout Buddhist, believing in

doing good deeds to accumulate merit for her future life and “shadow” or bring blessings upon her progeny (*MP*, 96).

By describing that the old lady has “seen the splendors of the court” in younger years, the author implies that she has lived a quite successful life in the past, probably because of her husband’s position as a high-ranking court official. She must have devoted herself to the family to overcome all kinds of troubles. Such a life experience must have become a necessary foundation for her positive views on the self, family, and society. Her mindset at old age is also shaped by it.

In the novel, the old lady’s value and subjectivity are family orientated. She is satisfied with her present life, because her son is highly successful in career and family. Her belief now is that she needs to continue helping her children and meanwhile plan for her own next life, both of which are closely connected. She knows how to keep harmonious relations with her adult children. Unlike a typical Confucian “head of a family” who involves him- or herself in the family business by keeping everything under control, the old lady decides to detach herself from the center of power by staying away from her son’s family. Although all younger family members plead with her to come to Peking and stay with them, the old lady, with sufficient wisdom and sense, declines the request. It makes her daughter-in-law very pleased, as the author writes, “Mrs. Tseng was secretly glad, as all women are, to live without her mother-in-law, and as the sole mistress of the house in Peking” (*MP*, 97). With this judicious decision, the old lady avoids many unnecessary generational conflicts at home, which reveals her clear understanding of the new situation and relations with others. In short, Lin Yutang’s characterization of the old lady is opposite to Zhang Ailing’s Qiqiao that I analyzed in the preceding chapter in terms of generational relations.

The author makes it clear that the old lady's self-knowledge or self-awareness is not totally Confucian, but more Buddhist. The Buddhist notion of no-self stresses that one should abandon the self-centered or self-obsessed mindset and merge the self harmoniously with the world. A Buddhist who strives to attain no-self is supposed to surrender him- or herself to others' happiness or benefits, and only in so doing can he or she benefit him- or herself. The old lady uses the Buddhist teaching to deal with family issues, including her relations with the young. She does not place herself in the center of the family although she is highly respected. Instead, she leaves aside her self interest for their benefit. As a result, she is trying to construct her senior subjectivity in a Buddhist way.

In addition, the novel shows that the old lady's Buddhist self-construction is embodied in the way that she chooses to help her children. She does not engage herself in the family's important business, but uses an indirect way—charity—to accumulate good karma for herself and the family. Buddhism believes that giving alms or making donations can bring rewards. It is obvious that the old lady devoutly believes in this doctrine. With the charitable belief and behavior, she strives to accumulate merits and gain blessings for the family and herself. For example, she donates money to buy four front pillars for a Yanluo (the King of Hell) temple to make herself feel comfortable when faced with death (*MP*, 96). This is her idea about her personal achievements, and it is also a strategy to realize her subjectivity. In short, Lin Yutang creates an old woman living in the traditional Chinese culture and ideology who believes the Buddhist way is what she can find to benefit everyone in her family.

The Buddhist thought is an important complement to Confucianism. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Jia Mu formulates her subjectivity in old age in terms of the Buddhist cultivation.

When she is eighty years old, she organizes ladies in her family to copy *The Diamond Sutra* and *The Heart Sutra*, two important Buddhist scriptures, for the purpose of bringing virtuous karma to herself and the family. Jia Mu, as an old woman, realizes that Buddhism is more beneficial to her than Confucianism. Therefore, these narratives represent how pre-modern old women, such as the old lady of Tseng family and Jia Mu, rely more on Buddhism to construct their subjectivity.

Taoist Self and Senior Subjectivity in Lin Yutang's Novel

In the novel, Lin Yutang also portrays an ideal old person, one of the protagonists named Yao Si'an who largely embodies the Taoist self and subjectivity. Yao Si'an's old age falls into the perfect style: he takes good care of and offers necessary help to the family, but gives his children complete freedom to develop by themselves; he is concerned with the fates of the nation, family, and himself, and has his own way to handle them. Throughout life, Yao Si'an's thinking is a combination of Confucianism and Taoism, namely, he achieves a delicate balance between the Confucian "entering the world" (social engagement) and Taoist "leaving the world" (social detachment in self-cultivation). When Yao Si'an is young, he practices Confucianism to do business and educate his children; when he is getting old, he relies more on Taoism for a further understanding and improvement of his self and life.

In Lin Yutang's narrative, Yao Si'an's Taoist thought is manifest in two aspects: the view on death and life-long self-cultivation, which are completely consistent with Zhuangzi's ideas and are also the core values of Taoist construction of one's senior subjectivity. A right view on death can also be taken as a result of long-term self-cultivation of Taoism. After the death of his

wife, Yao Si'an summons his children and relatives, explaining to them why he sheds no tears at his wife's death: "Life and death and growth and decay are the very law of nature. Luck and adversity are but the natural consequences of each one's personal character, and there is no avoiding them. So although parting in life or through death is sad according to normal human sentiments, I wish you to take these things and accept them as part of the Way" (*MP*, 651). His words can be interpreted from two angles. First, life and death are both just parts of natural evolution or the Way, and there is no essential difference between them, so people do not need to distinguish them by feeling happy for life or sad for death. Second, life and death are also characteristics or components of human life, so we cannot avoid death just because we do not like it. In fact, everything belongs to the law of nature and one's self is of no exception.

Yao Si'an displays a typical Taoist view on the self. His attitude toward his wife's death is a modern version of the Zhuangzi's attitude toward death at his wife's funeral. Zhuangzi holds a holistic view of the relations between self and nature, considering the self, as well as the death of a subject, as an inseparable part of nature. In the episode of his wife's death, Zhuangzi explains why he refuses to grieve for her:

In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery, a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change and she had a body. Another change and she was born. Now there's been another change and she's dead. It's just like the progression of the four seasons: spring, summer, fall, winter. Now she's going to lie down peacefully in a vast room. If I were to follow after her bawling and sobbing, it would show that I don't understand anything about fate. So I stopped.¹

Zhuangzi realizes that life, as well as everything in the universe, constantly changes. A person, such as his wife, comes from nothing and disappears into nothing, becoming a negligible being

¹ Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 124.

that mixes together with everything else in nature. As a result, a self is actually not a constant entity and is never a permanent existence. One should not become over-attached to such issues as body, fame, wealth, etc.

The reader can easily find that, under the influence of Taoism, Yao Si'an has a detached view about death, which greatly resembles Zhuangzi's view that death is but a part of life and there is no need to mourn for it. On his deathbed, he calmly tells his daughter Mulan: "Life and death are the very law of existence. A true Taoist merely triumphs over death. He dies more cheerfully than others. He is not afraid of it, because he is 'returning to the Tao'" (MP, 836). Yao Si'an is a Taoist in essence and he has long integrated his self into the natural Way or Tao—the ultimate rule of the universe. When one has forgotten about the self and considers the self as a part of the universe, one will not fear death any more. This is what the author believes the Taoist view on the relations between the self and death, upon which Yao Si'an builds his senior subjectivity.

In *Moment in Peking*, the author also reveals how Yao Si'an constructs his Taoist senior subjectivity through decades of self-cultivation. The novel clearly divides Yao Si'an's personal experiences into three periods with two turning points: one is in his thirties when he is married to his wife; the other happens at the age of 62 and his wife just passes away. In the first period, Yao Si'an is "a sensuous, adventurous rogue and playboy" who has "drunk, gambled, ridden on horseback, fenced, boxed, philandered and kept a sing-song artist" (MP, 12-3). His life before marriage is "a complete dark chapter to his family" (MP, 13). In this period, younger Yao Si'an

stands for an untamed subject that indulges in all sorts of sensual pleasures. His subjectivity is shaped by various negative elements that cover or conceal his virtuous nature.

The marriage changes him suddenly and drastically. Maybe it is the true love for his wife that brings about this drastic change in his perception of the self and the world. In the second period, which lasts about thirty years, Yao Si'an devotes himself to the Taoist practice, both mentally and physically. For example, he stops such wrongdoings as gambling, reckless drinking, philandering, etc. and leaves the family business to his wife's brother, so that he can focus on the endeavor of following Taoist teachings (*MP*, 13). By this means, he consciously remolds the subject that has been wrongly constructed in the social and familial environments.

Based on Taoist doctrines, Yao Si'an believes that a perfect self is an integrated long-term training of one's body and mind. He frequently practices a physical regimen to nourish his Qi, or simple vital energy (*MP*, 13). In this way, his mind and body are well kept in a calm and unperturbed state. This state also deepens his understanding of the self. Once he tells his daughter Mulan, "Excitement is not good for the soul" (*MP*, 7). To a Taoist practitioner, the soul is the fundamental or core component of the self, which needs to be under the surveillance of the Taoist mind to avoid harmful excitement or spiritual disturbance. A well-cultivated self is extremely powerful, as Yao Si'an argues on another occasion, "When you yourself are right, nothing that happens to you can ever be wrong" (*MP*, 8). This argument illuminates that an upright self can resist anything wrong or harmful. Such a self undoubtedly requires years of strenuous self-cultivation. In the second period and also the best times of his life, Yao Si'an wholeheartedly practices Tao and improves his perception of the self and the world, which lays a foundation for the construction of senior subjectivity in the third period of his life.

When Yao Si'an is just 62 years old, his beloved wife passes away, and this triggers his plan to practice Tao and discover the true self out of home. Yao Si'an believes that his value and subjectivity lie not only in the contributions to the family and the country but also in the spiritual detachment from them. Having devoted himself to the well-being of the family for decades, old Yao Si'an decides to leave home to find the inner peace of his own mind. He confides his feelings to his children:

I have lived with you and your mother, and have seen you grow up and all satisfactorily married. I myself have had a happy life and have lived up to my human obligations. Now I am ready for a rest.... I am going out and try to find myself; to find oneself is to find the Way and to find the Way is to find oneself; and you know 'to find oneself' is to be 'happy.' I have not yet found the Way; but I have obtained an insight into the ways of the Creator, and I shall try to reach a greater understanding" (*MP*, 651-2).

With these words, the author presents that Yao Si'an believes he has fulfilled the duty for the prosperity of the family, and now he decides to reconstruct senior subjectivity in his own way—a Taoist way. He makes up his mind to discard the thought of worldly gains and losses and send himself on a search, so that he can find the true self and really understand the Way. He realizes the true self is different from the socially constructed subject, and can only be found out of all the social connections in his life. Therefore, the process of self-discovery is the process of transcending the subject, or the self in the mundane world. This might be the reason why he announces "I have obtained an insight into the ways of the Creator." In my opinion, this idea also reveals that he has achieved a clear understanding of what one's senior subjectivity should be like.

At the same time, by claiming "to find oneself is to find the Way and to find the Way is to find oneself," Yao Si'an asserts that the self and the Way are essentially at one with each other. The Way is the law of the universe, and the true self in the Taoist sense should conform to the

law of the universe. Yao Si'an believes it is his obligation to find the true self or the Way so that he can realize the value of life—the life as a creature in nature but not as a human in society. That is why he chooses to become a tramp and travels long distances for ultimate salvation. So far, Lin Yutang has shown to the reader an old man who is determined to diligently practice Taoist subjectivity.

Ten years later, after returning home, Yao Si'an shares his feelings with his children: “The basis of all salvation is the training of the body. You must have no money and no worries, and you must be ready to die at any time. Then you travel like a man come back from the dead, and you look upon every day and every moment as a gift from Heaven, for which you offer thanks” (*MP*, 784). These words suggest that only when an old person totally throws him- or herself into nature, can he or she really sense the pain that the body suffers and look deeper into the mind. Through becoming a part of nature, he or she can understand the real meaning and significance of life and the self.

Such a deeper understanding can be discerned from one incident told by old Yao Si'an: “I passed a tiger on Hua Mountain, ... and he looked at me and I looked at him and he slunk off” (*MP*, 783). The encounter with a tiger in the wild is really dangerous, but the old man is capable enough to overcome the huge challenge in his Taoist practice. He uses his willpower to defeat the tiger, because he has nothing to fear when he considers himself a part of nature. He has arrived at such a level that in his mind, his self is of no difference from anything else in nature, including the tiger. This mindset can be reflected in another statement: “My children, I was traveling partly to enjoy nature and partly to free myself. The two are really the same” (*MP*, 783).

When the old man really frees himself in nature, he gets to the essence of the self and becomes a Taoist saint.

To conclude, by the characterization of Yao Si'an, the author provides a full path of Taoist practice for a thorough understanding of the self, identity, and subjectivity in the human and natural world. The lifelong self-cultivation transforms the protagonist from a playboy to a sincere Taoist practitioner until in the end he is enlightened to know the truth of the universe. This narration also implies that old age can be a stage superior to one's younger years.

The Difficult Route to Modern Subjectivity in Old Age in *Frog*

Unlike the old man in Lin Yutang's novel, who is still very much influenced by traditional Chinese values concerning the old age, senior people in the tumultuous years of modern Chinese society beset with drastic social upheavals have a harder time in coming to terms with their senior self and subjectivity. In many ways, a Chinese senior's route to his or her senior subjectivity is a journey no less tortuous than that of his or her western counterpart.

A representation of such senior subjectivity is to be found in a novel *Frog* (2009) authored by the Chinese Nobel Laureate Mo Yan. The entire story is narrated by one of the characters nicknamed Tadpole, who writes several letters to his Japanese friend Sugitani Akihito about his paternal aunt, Gugu. Gugu is old now, but Mr. Sugitani is very interested in her stories, so the letters give Mr. Sugitani, as well as readers of the novel, an opportunity to look into Gugu's life experiences. This narrative also offers me ideal material to explore how the senior subjectivity of old Gugu is constructed in the background of the particular period of Chinese history and society. In the remaining pages of this chapter, I will study the hard spiritual journey of Gugu represented

by Mo Yan, regarding the rediscovery of her life value and the reconstruction of her subjectivity in old age. The process of rediscovery or reconstruction, in my opinion, is composed of three stages, each of which is characterized by a particular mindset and determined by particular external factors. First, old Gugu strives to preserve the past glories, believing it stands for her true subjectivity; second, she reflects on the past and probes deeper into the self, identity, and subjectivity; third, she makes amendments to atone for the past misdeeds and reconstructs her subjectivity. It is after these three stages of mental growth that Gugu realizes the real life value and attains a deeper understanding of the self and subjectivity.

A Woman's Futile Efforts to Retain Youthful Identity at Old Age

The protagonist Gugu is an enthusiastic, talented, and strong-willed midwife. Quite like the old Santiago in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, she at first attempts to maintain her youthful sense of self as a way to compensate for the coming of old age. In others' eyes, Gugu is not an ordinary woman, but an outstanding one who distinguishes herself from the majority in both personality and career. The novel starts with a short letter from Tadpole to Sugitani, which offers a very brief introduction to Gugu in old age: "an obstetrician for more than fifty years" who speaks "quickly in her accented Chinese" and has mixed feelings of grief and joy in her mind (*F*, 3). The profile of Gugu is like a drawing sketch that seems very simple, but it contains complex meanings. Readers may wonder what has happened to Gugu over the more than fifty years of her career and what has caused her mixed feelings. That she speaks quickly is probably because she thinks quickly and is good at expressing herself. Such a characteristic might have

come from her active and outgoing personality. In short, she is essentially not a placid Chinese woman in the traditional sense but might be a powerful woman who subverts the tradition.

The last paragraph of the letter highlights the red blossoms that burst onto a “talented” old plum in the yard of Tadpole’s family on a snowy day, which attracted many villagers, including his Gugu (*F*, 4). Obviously, the blooming old plum can be taken as an analogy or symbol of old Gugu. Mo Yan uses the image of blossoming red plum—an auspicious scene in Chinese tradition—to indicate a revival of Gugu in her later life, or a satisfying or even perfect construction of her senior subjectivity. This letter is put in the beginning of the novel, even before the first chapter begins, so it serves as a prelude to the novel. It not only reveals some of the background information of old Gugu, but also indicates or foresees her final destiny.

Gugu is filled with the sense of achievement in her younger years when she is in charge of midwifery and birth control, two seemingly conflicting missions. Mo Yan sets up Gugu’s story in a period of Chinese history from 1949 to 2000 that is characterized by all sorts of social upheavals. The novel focuses on the population-control policy implemented by the government, which is never heard of in Chinese history and goes against the traditional Chinese thought that a couple should give birth to as many children as possible to ensure the continuity and prosperity of the family. The majority of Chinese couples at that time are determined to give birth to at least one boy to carry on the family name. So if their eldest child is a girl, they are determined to produce more children until they get a boy. The policy is an expedient measure to tackle the problem of China’s explosive population growth in the long-term interest of the country and its people, but is contrary to the age-old tradition of having more children at home and certainly goes against the desire of many families.

In Mo Yan's description, younger Gugu obviously holds a positive view of herself owing to her achievements at work. Her work is divided into two phases. From the age of 17, she practices modern birth delivery methods that she learns in a medical school, which is strongly resisted by old midwives who make a living through their old midwifery methods. Gugu fights against them and gains a complete victory "with her unconventional experience and privileged background" (*F*, 19). Throughout her life, she has delivered thousands of babies, which is a great achievement. But later, Gugu plays a role of the executor of the policy. She devotes herself to the control of the birth rate by compelling villagers to take surgeries of abortion or vasectomy, which is resisted and tragically leads to the death of a few pregnant women, not to mention many fetuses that lose their lives before coming into the world. Younger Gugu is proud of her duty and considers it another achievement. She believes that her life value lies in the mission to carry out national policies, no matter what those policies are.

In the novel, Gugu is described as a character with dual personalities, as is summarized into two typical scenarios in the first letter mentioned above. Sometimes, Gugu is seen as "a doctor laughing joyfully as she holds a newborn infant in her hand, her sleeves spattered with blood," but some other times she is seen as "a doctor with a care-laden face, a cigarette dangling from her lips, clothing rumpled" (*F*, 3). Externally, Gugu's joy and sorrow are mainly caused by her job as an obstetrician, but deep inside, Gugu is an idealist who strives to fulfill whatever she considers is correct, and this is the root of her feelings and attitudes toward herself and the world. Villagers have ambivalent attitudes toward her. They appreciate her but also hate her, taking her as both an angel and a devil—a benevolent life-giver and a ruthless life-destroyer. However, she is fully confident that her actions are justified when performing birth control measures for

pregnant villagers who are unqualified or unpermitted to have more kids to take the surgery of abortion. Under that circumstance, Gugu does not sense anything wrong in herself. She does not believe she has done anything harmful to others until she is old enough to rethink her entire life.

It is after experiencing decades of chaotic social conflicts and personal sufferings that Gugu enters her old age. In this novel, Mo Yan not only focuses his depiction on the social turmoil, but on how the old female protagonist reflects proudly but painfully on her life experiences and how she struggles to reconcile with herself for a peaceful mind in old age. When Gugu is young, she valorously and even ferociously fights against all kinds of opponents and wins victories over them one by one. But her dominance is obtained at the cost of her own happiness and interest in those youthful days. As a result, when she looks back at the past, she becomes a person with a split mind who thinks that she has gained a lot but meanwhile, been deprived of a lot as well. Mo Yan grasps and stresses the conflicting situation of Gugu from the beginning of his narration, which is best represented when old Gugu compares her best time in the past to her poor situation at present:

In her later years, Gugu often thought back to this period—modern China’s golden age [early 1950s], and hers as well. I don’t know how many times I saw her eyes light up as she said longingly: I was a living Buddha back then, the local stork. A floral perfume oozed from my body, bees swarmed in my wake. So did butterflies. Now, now nothing but goddamn flies... (*F*, 26)

Butterflies and flies are two images that can arouse opposite feelings in the mind of Chinese people who prefer the former but dislike the latter. They make a vivid contrast between the young and the old. This passage appears in the first half of the first chapter, with which Mo Yan establishes the basic conflict of the story. It is obvious that Gugu is unsatisfactory with the

present, especially the fact that she is old and less powerful and attractive than ever before. In the past, she is respected by villagers as “a living Buddha,” the deity who brings babies into the world for common people. But now she has obviously lost that stature due to old age. In this sense, the images of butterflies and flies not only indicate Gugu’s physical changes, but also show that she is not as valuable as what she used to be. She is upset because she is both physically and socially old and valueless, and her past glories will never come back. This is Gugu’s negative perception of herself when she enters old age.

But Gugu strives not to be considered by others as being obsolete, particularly in front of her relatives. This can explain a scene where old Gugu intrudes into a banquet held by her brother’s family without being invited, and she tries her best to flaunt her ability and privilege but others are all astonished and embarrassed at her presence. The narrator, Tadpole, notices: “Overweight and graying, she had the look of a commune cadre from the Cultural Revolution. Seeing her provoked mixed emotions in me. This is what Gugu, who had once been pretty as a lotus fresh out of the water, had become” (*F*, 44). This is another contrast depicted in the first chapter of the novel between Gugu’s past and present situations. In Chinese aesthetic perception, “a lotus fresh out of the water” is frequently used as a metaphor for the most beautiful women. Now, a “pretty” girl has become an “overweight and graying” old woman (and therefore is not considered pretty any more). What is worse, Gugu is dressed in the typical clothes that were in fashion over twenty years ago. In so doing, she intends to show that she is still young, but sadly it just displays that she is out of date. Therefore, the narrator, as well as many Gugu’s relatives who are at the dinner, feels sorry for her.

In the above two episodes, Mo Yan describes the physical and mental states of Gugu in old age. Everyone knows that Gugu has already stepped down in her life, but she still lives in or tries to maintain the glories of the past by boasting about her achievements. This could be the first thing that every person wants to do upon feeling that they are older and less powerful or useful than ever before. As a matter of fact, the aforementioned family banquet is the best opportunity for Gugu to show off her capability, so she makes full use of it and it works to some degree due to the strategy she uses. Gugu starts with bringing up her past glories and then switch the subject to her pride at present, thus she makes a connection between her present and past. As soon as she arrives at the dinner party, Gugu claims her right to have a seat there: “What’s this? After spending most of my life on the road, I come home to find there’s no seat for me” (*F*, 44). Ostensibly, she needs a seat, but the true intention is to show that she deserves respect from others. By stating “spending most of my life on the road,” Gugu stresses her decades of contributions to people around her. However, when her elder brother compliments her for the past contributions, she stops him: “A hero is silent about past glories.... Back then...what’s the point of dredging up the past? Let’s drink” (*F*, 44-5)! The change of topic is important, because Gugu’s real purpose is not to repeat the past, but to focus on the present. To demonstrate that she is still an accomplished doctor, she takes with her a bottle of Maotai—the very expensive liquor in China that symbolizes the carrier’s high social status. In this way, Gugu attempts to show that she is still her usual self, or may be even better than her younger self.

Trying to maintain the past glories is an important part of constructing one’s senior subjectivity. Many senior citizens who used to be highly successful in their careers attempt to keep their positions or maintain their social life as long as possible and are unwilling to retire.

They cannot face the fact that the heyday of their lives is over, so they will desperately try to hang on to it. Mo Yan is aware of it and begins shaping the image of old Gugu in this way. Gugu is like an excellent actress who takes the dinner as a show and deliberately presents or unconsciously exaggerates herself in front of others. In so doing, she strives to change their view that she is old and much less valuable than ever.

Enlightenment through Self-Rediscovery at Old Age

Senior subjectivity is complex and fluid. When the elder gradually realize that the past glories are over and they have to face the reality at present, they will probably contemplate their lives in a more practical manner. In this case, they may reinterpret their past experiences and the present situation, thereby gaining a deep and fresh understanding of the self and identity. Previously, I explored how old Gugu attempts to maintain a youthful state by relating her present situation to the past achievements and pretending that her elder self is still as capable and valuable as the younger one. This is a usual way that an old person applies to find the mental balance and spiritual needs when facing the daunting old age.

However, we know that such an idea in old age is unrealistic and unable to really solve the problems that bother the elderly. If an old person refuses to accept the reality that old age is different from youth, he or she will have even more suffering. The traditional Chinese thought has taught people that they should find contentment in old age rather than deceive themselves by holding they are still young. In order to accept the reality as it is, one has to learn to face up to it in the first place. Gugu, in the process of struggling with aging, not only relies on the reminiscence of her youthful achievements, but also gives new interpretation to her difficulties

both in the past and at present. This point is manifest in the episode of the dinner party mentioned above. For instance, Gugu enlightens her elder brother who is in his eighties: "If I tell you to drink, Elder Brother, you have to drink. You and I are the only two left from our generation. We should be eating and drinking anything we want. What's the point in saving money? Money is just paper until you spend it" (*F*, 47). The sense of old age becomes true and deep when people of one's own generation are mostly gone. Gugu obviously realizes that whatever glories she used to have, she has to plan for her old age and draw a line between the present and the past. Chinese people are used to saving money for the future and the elderly in China are even thriftier than young people. Gugu's words show that she believes the old should learn to live a better life for themselves. According to Gugu, it is meaningless for her and her elder brother to save much money, for their days are numbered. The most important thing for such old people as Gugu and her brother is to enjoy old age rather than be enslaved to wealth or any other external burdens. To live a satisfactory old age, one needs to change his or her attitude toward money: happiness in old age is not from saving money, but from spending it. Attachment to external things, such as money, is unwise for an old person; on the other hand, he or she should remain detached and realize the inner peace of the mind. In this sense, I can say that Gugu has preliminarily attained a solid foundation of her senior subjectivity.

So far we can see the nuance of Gugu's mindset since she appears at the dinner. In the beginning, she intends to boast about her achievements and expertise as an obstetrician. It is evident that she attempts to show her capability of working as an excellent obstetrician to earn money and respect despite old age. After a while, when she is slightly drunk and talking about money versus senility, she seems to have come to terms with old age and is willing to change

herself. The change reflects an old woman's mental development in Mo Yan's narrative. It should be noted that mental development happens throughout one's entire life, not just restricted to children or youth. When one enters old age, one of the challenges is to accept the reality. Gugu seems to have accomplished it. When she enlightens and educates her elder brother, she is also getting herself enlightened and educated.

The enlightenment is a starting point for old Gugu to engender an insight into her past life, which further shapes her understanding of old age. She starts to look at herself and others from new perspectives, which also influences others' views on her. For example, before she leaves the dinner party, she is asked to talk about her ex-boyfriend, a pilot who abandoned her and defected to Taiwan decades ago. His double betrayal does great harm to Gugu, so much so that she even attempted to kill herself under the pressure. But now, after so many years, old Gugu's comment is that "he destroyed me, but he also saved me" (*F*, 47). It means that Gugu has learned to come to terms with life by reinterpreting past sufferings so that her mind can achieve serenity. This is the ideal mental state of an old person in Chinese philosophy. In Chinese tradition, an old person is supposed to have sufficient wisdom to shed light on the essence of life, human relations, and the universe. Gugu, although growing up in the modern society, finally becomes such an old person, even though she does this unintentionally and her mindset is much more complex than an old person in the sense of traditional Chinese philosophy.

Gugu's new perception of her ex-boyfriend embodies her new perception of the self, because she learns to view her past without the influence of external elements. As a result, old Gugu starts to view other people and things in a positive light. In the story, Gugu has

experienced various fights and conflicts throughout life, and therefore, she has many enemies. Now, when reconsidering her encounters, Gugu finds that her enemies are not necessarily malicious and that she herself is not necessarily as virtuous as she has believed. For instance, in her later years, Gugu often speaks of her old colleague and adversary, Huang Qiuya, to Tadpole and other young people (*F*, 61). Gugu and Huang used to hate each other's guts and were even engaged in life-and-death fights, so their conflicts are absolutely irreconcilable. But now Gugu learns to look at things from the opposite angle, and so the image of Huang has been completely changed: "Huang Qiuya was a magnificent obstetrician. She could be beaten bloody in the morning and show up in surgery in the afternoon, so focused and composed that not even an opera being performed right outside the window would have had an effect on her. What a pair of hands she had! ...With them she could create a flower on a pregnant woman's abdomen..." (*F*, 61). Gugu's comments on Huang are all positive now. It is not necessarily that Huang is a much better person than Gugu, but Gugu is looking at Huang from a positive angle.

The change happens only after Gugu enters old age, which is a result of her changed mind. When she looks at her former enemy with fresh eyes, she is actually looking at herself in the same fresh way. Tadpole notices that "Gugu always enjoyed a hearty laugh at this point; she'd laugh till tears spilled from her eyes" (*F*, 61). This statement is of deep significance, because it reveals that Gugu has become conscious of the absurdity of her past experiences and struggles. When we are involved in certain social environments and meanwhile deeply affected by them, we will easily lose the awareness of the self. Our subjectivity is shaped by the external power and we feel it safe to judge everything according to the established social criteria. Both Gugu and Huang are victims of such power. They could have become close friends and good colleagues,

but end up in deadly hostility. When old Gugu recalls her old enemy, she discovers her virtues that were neglected decades ago. In front of the brutal political struggle, the virtues of human nature usually disappear; however, with the social development and the richer life experience during the process of aging, Gugu regains the good side of her nature. When an elderly person uses “magnificent” to describe her long-term enemy and shed tears for her, it means she has had a different and deeper understanding of life as well as the self. She has discarded the politically constructed subjectivity and attempts to build a new one, a true one.

This episode touches on the radical change in Gugu’s subjective mind and indicates that Gugu has entered a higher level of constructing her self-identity—she knows how to consider her life from a comprehensive perspective and how to compromise with the past. Mo Yan is very successful in delineating a character in this respect, but he does not stop at the point, and it is in the description of other changes of the protagonist Gugu that makes the novel a great one.

As I have previously argued, senior subjectivity can be largely built on one’s perception of life value. In the novel, when Gugu makes positive and affirmative comments on Huang, she is actually making negative comments on herself. When she admits that her old enemy was right, then she has to confess that she herself was wrong. She realizes that life is a paradox between rights and wrongs, and this is why she laughs in tears. In other words, Gugu comes to know how valuable Huang was and how valueless she was. She now believes that Huang is a “phoenix” while she herself is a “chicken,” which means that in her mind Huang is actually much more valuable and virtuous than her (*F*, 61). Her present view of the self and life value is greatly different from the one that she held when she was a young woman. When Gugu realizes that her

past can be reinterpreted from another angle, she comes to know her mistakes in the past and feels extremely uneasy for them. Tadpole remarks: “In her later years Gugu believed she’d been guilty of terrible, unforgiveable things. I thought she was being too hard on herself, convinced that she was no worse than anyone who lived during those times. You don’t understand...The note of sorrow in her voice was palpable” (*F*, 85). Here, as well as in many other episodes of the novel, Mo Yan “adopts an ethical perspective...characterized by an attitude of regret and forgiveness.”² Gugu is caught in the deep remorse and tries desperately to find a way out in order to redeem herself.

What are the terrible and unforgiveable things? Obviously they are the numerous abortions that Gugu forced pregnant villagers to have. When Gugu was young, she was a strong supporter of the Party’s policies. Mo Yan “presents her as a part of the apparatus, and a part that goes wrong.”³ Just as Tadpole’s first wife Wang Renmei observes, “She’s a loyal running dog of the Communist Party. She goes after anyone the Party sics her on” (*F*, 157). Younger Gugu shows her unfaltering loyalty to and strong identification with the Party. As she once states, “I have always been a Party member, and I will die a Party member” (*F*, 58)! But when Gugu is old and dwells on her life from a different angle, a deep sense of regret and guilt bursts out of her mind, which splits her personality. At that moment, the construction of Gugu’s self gets to another stage, namely, she totally discards her past glories or achievements that she once strived to

² Chengzhou He, “Rural Chineseness, Mo Yan’s Work, and World Literature,” in *Mo Yan in Context: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller*, eds. Angelica Duran and Yuhua Huang (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2014), 86.

³ Lanlan Du, “Abortion in Faulkner’s *The Wild Palms* and Mo Yan’s 蛙 (*Frog*),” in *Mo Yan in Context: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller*, eds. Angelica Duran and Yuhua Huang (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2014), 71.

maintain, but is obsessed with the idea that she committed crimes to the villagers. She is faced with a truer self by probing into the deeper mind. To live a complete or full old age, one needs to inspect every aspect of his or her own past and give reasonable explanations for them. By dissecting herself, old Gugu finds that many so-called past glories are merely false feelings or misconceptions in her subjective mind.

As I mentioned previously, human subjectivity is often understood as being formed on the grounds of the double influence caused by internal desires and external power. The former is the focus of psychoanalysis with much interest in gender, sexuality, and family relationships, while the latter is represented by Foucault's well-known work focusing on the broad relationships of power and subjectivity. In this novel, "power," an element that has greatly affected Gugu's life, contains dual meanings: one is the authoritative influence of the society, either verbal, cultural, or political; the other one is the individual influence over other individuals. When Gugu is young, she tries to have more power over others when dealing with everything at work or in life. But she is just a trivial component of the social trend. Her subjective thought and behavior are formed and determined by the external world rather than the other way around. In Andrea Riemenschnitter's words, Gugu is compelled by historical vicissitudes to "oscillate between being a savior and an annihilator of life."⁴ According to Foucault, "subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts etc. We should try to grasp subjection in its material

⁴ Andrea Riemenschnitter, "Another Modest Proposal? Science and Seriality in Mo Yan's Novel *Wa* (Frogs)," *International Communication of Chinese Culture*, vol.1 (2014): 13.

instance as a constitution of subjects.”⁵ Gugu as a subject is constructed in the already existing world, and the power of the world is internalized into Gugu’s unconscious mind to make her mistakenly believe that it is her own intrinsic force. In other words, she is dominated rather than dominating. When Gugu is old and out of the influence of political power, she can look into it from afar and find that the power that she used to stand for is not necessarily, or completely, right. As a result, it causes crisis in her unconscious mind and propels her into taking actions to change and amend the regrettable mistakes of the past.

A Serene Mind through Redemption at Old Age

As is represented by the author, Gugu is a controversial figure in everyone’s eyes due to her diametrically opposite roles as a life-giver and a life-killer in her youth. As soon as she enters old age, she purposefully or unconsciously conceals the negative aspects of her past life. However, the more she looks into the past, the more ethical problems of her own are uncovered. As a result, she has to constantly struggle with the conflicts in her mind, which leaves her in endless pain. Gugu has to find a way to conquer the spiritual trauma instead of merely repress it. According to what I concluded in the previous section, Gugu has gained the new conception of life, other people, and the self after long and painful self-examination; however, in order to let go of her past pain, she has to take actions to achieve self-redemption.

Gugu’s endeavor to atone for her misdeeds bears the distinctive features of Mo Yan’s narrative. In order to reveal the protagonist’s efforts to reconstruct an image of herself in old age,

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 97.

Mo Yan adopts the technique of so-called “hallucinatory realism.” Since Gugu is a character created by Mo Yan, to have a better understanding of Gugu’s senior subjectivity, it is necessary to review Mo Yan’s technique in the context of Chinese tradition and culture. When awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, Mo Yan was honored by The Swedish Academy for his work as a writer “who with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary.”⁶ Hallucinatory realism has been listed as one trend of surrealism—“a careful and precise delineation of detail, yet a realism which does not depict an external reality since the subjects realistically depicted belong to the realm of dream or fantasy,” and the term is also considered to have connections to the concept of magical realism.⁷ In this sense, I venture to regard many of Mo Yan’s works as narratives of Chinese Magical Realism, because folk tales merged in his novels are typically of Chinese style and tradition, and his fictional reality is usually represented as if it were a dream-state. *Frog* is filled with all sorts of Chinese allegories, metaphors, and symbols, integrating Chinese Buddhist thought of Samsara with the ancient totem and reproduction worship, and embedding the whole story in the Chinese social upheavals in the second half of the twentieth century. In the characterization of Gugu, particularly Gugu’s experience in old age, Mo Yan develops such a hallucinatory or magical atmosphere that best illuminates the change of her mindset.

In the novel, old Gugu is impelled to find a way to atone for her sins so that her ego can escape the spiritual agony and she can live the rest of her life in serenity. At this point, Mo Yan

⁶ National Public Radio, “Mo Yan’s ‘Hallucinatory Realism’ Wins Lit Nobel,” October 11, 2012, accessed November 27, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/11/162703689/mo-yans-hallucinatory-realism-wins-lit-nobel>.

⁷ Harold Osborne, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 529.

leads his story to a hallucinatory or magical atmosphere, in which images such as frogs and colored clay dolls play important roles in Gugu's coming to terms with her past. Simply put, frogs symbolize the traumatic experience repressed deep down in her unconscious mind and she needs to get rid of it, while clay dolls are symbols of her self-redemption that finally contribute to the tranquility in her unconscious and the reconstruction of her self-identity.

Frog is the title of the novel, and it also represents the novel's core image and theme. Old Gugu is terrified of frogs and she would cry out in fear and pass out at the sight of a frog. Her fear of frogs is best represented by Mo Yan in the vivid narration of a dream-like or hallucinatory experience on the first night of her retirement. When she is intoxicated after dinner and walking home in the moonlight, she is surrounded by the croaking sound of frogs in the fields. Suddenly, Gugu, who was never afraid of frogs before, becomes "terror-stricken," for the croaking of frogs that night "sounded to her like human cries, almost as if thousands of newborn infants were crying," and "the cries that night were infused with a sense of resentment and of grievance, as if the souls of countless murdered infants were hurling accusations" (*F*, 250). Obviously, Gugu has gradually developed a sense of guilt in the long medical practice of forced abortion for villagers. She feels that she has killed many innocent lives before they can even come into the world. When she is young, she strongly believes that she is doing the right thing. But in the process, and especially when she is old and retired, she must have gradually realized, consciously or unconsciously, that she has done evil things to others. Therefore, the moonlight, frog croaks, and the counterfeit liquor she drank at dinner, combine to act on her mind and arouse the remorse and fear from her unconscious. The effect is so strong that Gugu even begins to hallucinate that numerous frogs are jumping at her and attacking her, as if those unfortunate

fetuses are seeking revenge. This episode is filled with fantasy and hallucination. Mo Yan does not clarify in the novel whether Gugu's encounter with frogs really happens or not, but I believe Mo Yan intends it to be out of Gugu's imagination so that it reflects the torture of the trauma and guilt in her soul.

Gugu's mindset of connecting frogs with babies can be understood in the traditional Chinese culture that draws connections between the meanings of homophones. In Chinese, the pronunciation of the word for a frog (蛙 wā) sounds similar to the word for a baby (娃 wā), and also similar to the crying sound made by a baby (哇 wā). Having known this connection, we can easily understand why the narrator is nicknamed tadpole and why Gugu is so frightened of frogs. The images of frogs, tadpoles, babies, as well as clay dolls, constitute a network of signifiers and signifieds that are interrelated and interwoven with one another. They form a structure that constitute an important part of Gugu's unconscious mind, so it is easy for her to take them as one and the same thing even before she knows it. For instance, baby can be considered as the center or a critical nodal point of the net in Gugu's mind and all the other elements interacts with it in different ways. The pronunciation of frog in Chinese sounds like a baby, a tadpole is the "baby" of a frog and takes the shape of human sperm, and clay dolls obviously resemble and symbolize real babies. Therefore, all the images of frogs, tadpoles, and clay dolls converge at the concept of the baby. If these images are signifiers, then the baby is the signified. They have intrinsic connections and symbolize one another. At the same time, in the context of the birth control policy in China with Gugu as one of the merciless enforcers, these images not only connect to one another, but also as a whole, indicate weakness in front of the formidable power in the world

that tries to eliminate them. For instance, in Lanlan Du's statement, "the narrator Tadpole's name provides a persistent reminder of the fragility and brevity of life."⁸

With various Chinese cultural implications, the signification in this case is much more complicated than the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified maintained by Saussure. In fact, the signification here fits more into Barthes's "second-order" signifying system. According to Barthes, second-order signifying systems are systems which build on already existing ones, i.e. first-order signifying systems, and they are connotative rather than denotative. He identifies connotation with the operation of ideology, or *myth*.⁹ Obviously, in the novel, the pronunciation of frog conforms to the second-order signifying system, because it not only generates the concept of the frog as an animal in nature (the first order), but associates with human babies (the second order).

According to the previous analysis, the reason why Gugu is scared of frogs is that, in the second order, frogs remind her of the babies that have been aborted by her. By the same token, that Gugu worships the clay dolls is also due to the second-order signification. Here clay dolls are not just toys for children, but embody the spirit of real human babies in the context of local culture and tradition described in the novel. Gugu's husband, Hao Dashou, is a county folk artist who specializes in making clay dolls. It is said that his dolls have the spirit of real babies, so a lot of couples who intend to have a baby will come to purchase a doll that they like. The legend goes that the doll they bought is supposed to bring good luck and even a real baby to them (*F*, 108). By creating such a tale, the author gives Gugu an opportunity to correct her mistakes. She

⁸ Du, "Abortion in Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* and Mo Yan's 蛙 (*Frog*)," 74.

⁹ Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, 26-7.

imagines that the spirits or souls of the children whom she has prevented from being born into the world are in the clay dolls made by her husband, so she worships and makes offerings to them, wishing them to be reborn into well-off families and have good lives.

To make her prayer more effective, Gugu follows a traditional pattern of ritual: she “lit three sticks of incense on an altar in the center of the room, fell to her knees, brought her palms together, and muttered prayerfully” (*F*, 309). This worship is similar to what Buddhists do when praying to the Buddha or Bodhisattvas. By resorting to the Buddhist thought of reincarnation in Chinese tradition, Gugu tries to assuage her deep feelings of guilt. Here we can see the sharp difference between Gugu in her young age and old age. As a loyal member of the Communist Party who believes in atheism, young Gugu kills many fetuses without having to worry about the consequence. At that time, Gugu’s consciousness of herself is ideologically and politically constructed. When she enters old age, however, she is afflicted by the killings in the past. As a consequence, her previous subjectivity is shattered to pieces. To achieve her sense of serenity at old age, she needs to rebuild her self and subjectivity. In order to achieve this purpose, Gugu relies on self-atonement conducted in a mystical way. In this sense, we can see that Mo Yan offers readers a picture of how an old Chinese woman tries to reconstruct her subjectivity by falling back on another kind of ideology that she never believed as a young woman. It is an ideology based on traditional Chinese thinking and practice, but also contains modern cultural meanings. The mystical way is effective, for Gugu is greatly relieved after she enshrines and worships the clay doll that represents the last aborted baby. As is said by herself, “I’ve fulfilled my desire.... Every one of these children has a name. I’ve brought them all together here where they can accept my offerings. Once they have reached spiritual attainment they can leave for

wherever they are fated to be reborn” (*F*, 310). Gugu gives each of the abortive child a name and wishes them a bright future. When she says that “I’ve fulfilled my desire” with a smile, we can conclude that she has fulfilled the construction of her senior subjectivity in a satisfactory manner.

At this point, I would like to emphasize the influence of babies as a symbol of diverse meanings on Gugu’s subjectivity. The theme of the novel is closely related to reproduction or babies. Throughout her life, Gugu gives lives to many babies, and also takes lives from many others. Her spirit and emotion are inseparable from the fate of the babies, and her personality and subjectivity are strongly shaped accordingly, whether such relations are favorable or unfavorable to her development. However, without a child of her own in life, it is difficult for Gugu to sense a mother’s feelings for babies. When she is young, she saves the lives of many babies and mothers with scientific birth delivering methods. But at that time, she is emotionally detached from those babies and what she cares most about is her work. She builds her subjectivity on her achievements at work, rather than on her emotional connections with babies. In her middle age, Gugu strictly carries out the policy of birth control and forces many pregnant women to receive induced abortion. She hates those fetuses, believing that they are her enemies and should be removed ruthlessly. At that time, she totally identifies herself with the government’s policies, and so her subjectivity is politically constructed. In other words, younger Gugu only regards others’ babies as a means to realize her self-fulfillment. When she is old, she tries to make up for her past wrongdoings by relying on clay dolls. Thus, old Gugu begins to integrate the babies in her memory with her subjective self-awareness. When she imagines that they have found good

endings in the next lives, she is using the psychological compensation to find herself a good ending, and thus her senior subjectivity is symbolically reconstructed.

By means of showing Gugu's construction of her senior subjectivity, the novel probes directly into the subject of birth and death, both biologically and socially. Mo Yan intends to find the meaning of life by depicting how the biological life struggles to survive in the society based on human civilization. Or, to be more exact, the novel explores how Gugu's original self-awareness struggles painfully to come to terms with her subjectivity that is socially constructed, and how she finally discards the socially constructed subjectivity to return to her original self. Birth, life, and death are three key words of the novel. Gugu once has the power of saving or killing, but as we previously mentioned, what she possesses is not the real power, or she is not really so powerful, because she does not have free will. When she is given the power to dominate others, she is actually controlled by the power. But when she is old and loses the power, she finally discovers her true self—the self that should be awed by life rather than power. So she resorts to religious rituals for the reincarnation of the aborted fetuses. In so doing, she wishes to remedy mistakes she made decades ago and appease her agitated mind. With these actions, Gugu returns to her own strength or power, the power engendered from within herself rather than from the external world.

From the above analysis, I can say that Mo Yan has successfully created a character who struggles through her entire life under the influence of political and ideological power to construct her self and social identity. The way that she uses to regain the self from the external power is to take the clay dolls as symbols of real babies aborted by her and worship them for their better next lives. This is also a kind of confession—a mark of repentance and an admission

of misdeeds or faults. According to Foucault, who claims that the subject is produced through power, one of the ways that power produces subjects is through the process of confession: “[t]he truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power.”¹⁰ For Foucault, confession is an example of the reversal of the traditional relationship between truth and power. Instead of being freed, the one who confesses contributes to his or her own subjection by articulating the truth about him- or herself. Through the ritual of confession, one is constituted as a subject in both senses of the word: to be a subject and to be subjugated or subjected. This argument can partly explain old Gugu’s behavior and its effects on her mind. By worshipping and making wishes for the clay dolls, Gugu not only gives new lives to those babies in her imagination, but also gives a new life to herself. She performs the symbolic midwifery in her mind, so that she can fulfill her mission and therefore her own life can stay in harmony with those babies. In other words, by means of confession, Gugu becomes a subject of her own and simultaneously she is subjected to new power—the power of those clay dolls that is created by herself and that originates in her own subjective mind rather than in the external world. Through the characterization of Gugu, Mo Yan illuminates an unusual but reasonable way for the elderly to construct their senior subjectivity, especially for those who have suffered greatly in their younger lives. When Gugu put the last clay doll onto the shelf, she finally put the fragmented self into one and becomes the blooming old red plum Mo Yan mentions at the beginning of the novel.

The consequences of unsatisfactory or unfortunate life experiences of the elderly could be so serious and indelible that their mindset is confined to the pain that shapes their understanding

¹⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* vol. 1, 59.

of the old self. Erikson argues that senior people will judge their experiences throughout life, the result of which determines whether they can live a satisfying life in old age. The view offers a valuable insight into the formation of senior subjectivity. In the novel *Frog*, Mo Yan seems to suggest that to an elderly person, the first and most important thing is how to interpret his or her past experiences wisely, which to a large extent determines whether or not the elderly can rediscover their life values and overcome the crisis that comes with old age. It is also a great personal achievement if an old person can have a thorough understanding of the self and the world, and attain true peace of mind. Such a peaceful state of mind is of considerable importance because the elderly can never return to the past and re-experience it in a right and desirable way, and they have no choice but to mend the problematic self in their imagination. As a result, to keep mental balance in old age, the elderly can probably only rely on alternative means, just like what Gugu has done in the story. Gugu chooses to use clay dolls to represent and replace real babies, hoping that by worshipping the clay dolls, she can bring good luck to those babies. Thus, Gugu does what she can do to correct her mistakes and find tranquility in her mind. Such mental balance or tranquility, in my opinion, is one of the manifestations of a senior subjectivity represented in the novel.

Concluding Remarks

The two novels analyzed in this chapter represent how Chinese old people who have undergone social and political upheavals try to achieve inner peace and fulfill the construction of subjectivity by falling back on traditional ideas. Lin Yutang's narrative clearly embodies the traditional ways of constructing subjectivity in old age through the Taoist and Buddhist ideology

during the turbulent days of old China before 1949. Both the grandmother of Tseng family and old Yao Si'an know better than to interfere with their children's lives. They assist others but never intend to control them. Armed with conventional ideas, ethics, and values, they attach importance to self-improvement and self-realization by becoming a useful part of the big family and gaining a deeper understanding of the world and the self.

Mo Yan's novel offers us a profound insight into the mystical way of constructing senior subjectivity by the protagonist. With the narration of Gugu's life story, Mo Yan illuminates that senior subjectivity is affected by both the variant social realities and the female protagonist's unconscious wishes. Gugu is a woman who enthusiastically participated in the great mission of the new China but is at the same time profoundly influenced by the ideology, religion, folk belief, and even superstition of the old China. Younger Gugu's identity or subjectivity is dominated by the social and political power. When she is old, her subjectivity manifests itself as a remorseful ego in search of atonement for the past. Upon entering old age, she tries to reinterpret her old self and reconcile its conflict with her life's vicissitudes. At first, she attempts to keep her youthful self and tries to stay as strong and powerful as what she used to be. But she also realizes that old age should be different from youth and it is useless to pretend to be young. Then she feels it necessary to take a new look at the situations and the self both at present and in the past. In so doing, Gugu digs up everything, good or evil, from her unconsciousness and reinterprets them. The reinterpretation precipitates Gugu into a self-accusation that urges her to take actions to atone for her mistakes. Obviously, it is impossible for Gugu to bring the dead back to life, so she symbolically revives them through a mystical way in the traditional Chinese religion. Judging from the previous analysis, I believe that the whole process of Gugu's self-discovery and self-

redemption is exactly a process of reconstruction of her subjectivity in old age. In short, Mo Yan's masterpiece clearly constructs an environment in which Gugu, by relying on the traditional folk belief, finds a symbolic reconciliation between her original self and socially constructed subjectivity in the twenty-first century.

CONCLUSION

After research on a selection of Western and Eastern intellectual thought and critical analysis of a series of chosen literary works, I am now in a better position to summarize my findings concerning old age and senior subjectivity and draw conclusions. In the previous chapters, after a concise review on the philosophical and psychological exploration of the notion of human subjectivity since Descartes, I have found the answers to my three questions. First, what is the conceptual condition of senior subjectivity? Second, how is senior subjectivity constructed in various historical, cultural, social, and psychological situations? Third, what are the specific elements that affect the construction in different situations? In order to better understand these questions, I initiated an inquiry into two different, contrasting even, intellectual traditions that center on ancient Greek and Chinese thought and produce a rich variety of ideas on old age, self, identity, subject, and subjectivity.

My research started with the supposition that Western and Eastern people have distinctively different concerns about old age that result in different types of senior subjectivity. However, when I examine the heterogeneous views on old age in complex environments, what I see immediately is the similarities of human nature in both the West and East—every old person tries to find meaning in his or her life despite the potential onset of senility. They strive to live to a satisfactory and serene old age with integrated identity and subjectivity. In order to achieve this purpose, they must compromise with the past, adapt to the present, and plan for the future, even though their remaining time is limited. The self-conscious elderly will confront and struggle with fate for inner satisfaction and happiness. They perfectly embody the resistance of the weak.

Except for the common human nature, however, Western and Eastern thinkers and writers have developed diverse thoughts on senior subjectivity. In the West, there are two contradictory opinions on old age: one represented by Plato, who sees the positive aspect, and the other by Aristotle, who finds the negative side. People following Plato believe that old age is a period that has advantages that one should enjoy; people in line with Aristotle argue that the aged are filled with undesirable issues and gloomy expectations. Both of these conventional views, although contradictory, are formed on the basis that the old and the young are in opposition to one another. More recently, Western philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Russell have made advancements with regard to old age, holding that the elderly may have mental and physical deficiencies, but they also have potential to gain wisdom and deeper understanding of the self and the world by learning from past experiences.

In addition to the diversified Western thought, Chinese thinkers tend to form a consensus under the dominance of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist thoughts throughout history. The three traditional Chinese ideologies argue in their own ways that life is a continuous process, so they give priority to lifelong self-cultivation for the purpose of helping the old achieve a successful and satisfactory later life. Confucianism stresses the elderly's social and familial relations, while Taoism and Buddhism encourage one's spiritual detachment from those relations. Through self-cultivation, the old can accumulate wisdom and an ability to understand the self and they establish harmonious relations with the internal and external world. Therefore, old people are generally regarded as being virtuous and venerable, and they can take joy in old age by relying on familial reverence, an ethical theory and practice centering on social and familial relations that regulates interpersonal relations between older and younger generations.

Both Western and Eastern intellectual thoughts on senior subjectivity can be discerned in literary works. In the West, we can see two distinctive genres of literary representations of senior subjectivity: the miserable conditions of old age and the old people's wish for rejuvenation. *Absalom, Absalom!* falls roughly into the first genre, and *The Old Man and the Sea* into the second. They both align with the view of old age as an undesirable or even dreadful experience. The former usually describes how an old person becomes weak and incompetent with aging and is maltreated or defied by his or her own children. In these narratives, the aged often bear unhealthy personal traits that lead to tragic ends. The latter reflects old people's endeavor to change their fate by attempting to stay in a young and vigorous state, physically or mentally. They try to keep youthful ambitions and retain power so that their subjectivity will not be damaged by the ever-weakening body and mind in old age. In the first type of narrative, old people are subjugated to adversity, while the second type manifests old people's personal awakening and attempts to subvert the stereotype.

In China, literary representations of old age and senior subjectivity also embody philosophical views. Old people in Chinese literature are usually depicted as being authoritative in front of the younger generation. This authority can provide the elderly with power to control the family and keep it in order, but it is virtually a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can benefit family members and others if the old person is wise enough not to be self-opinionated and willing to assist and guide younger members. This situation is presented in the characterization of the elderly in the novels such as *The Dream of Red Mansions* and *Moment in Peking*. On the other hand, old people's power may hinder younger people from free development, and it could destroy their happiness and future. *The Golden Cangue* is a good

example of this type. In terms of self-cultivation—an important concept in traditional Chinese thought—old people are also supposed to improve themselves to better understand the self and the world. This is another theme presented in the *The Dream of Red Mansions* and *Moment in Peking*, as well as in *Frog*.

My close reading of fictional works in previous chapters suggests that when one reaches old age, that person is acutely sensitive to issues like physical and mental health, contrasts between past and present, and anxieties over personal survival. Ian Watt argues that, just like Locke and Hume who hold that one's personal identity is rooted in the repertoire of memories, in many novels, "the exploration of personality...is defined in the interpenetration of its past and present self-awareness."¹ Analogously, senior subjectivity is one's self-awareness caused by multifarious encounters before one steps into old age and the new challenges of old age.

The construction of senior subjectivity is a long, dynamic and fluid process rather than a transitory or static one. This is a common feature of humans regardless of their social, cultural, or historical backdrops. Take those literary images for example. Sutpen designs his life goal when he is a little boy, but his insanity in old age is the consequence of a series of frustrations in different stages of life. The same is true of Qiqiao, whose mental state deteriorates over decades with worsening interpersonal relations. Jia Mu, on the other hand, is a typical example of a healthy and constructive senior subjectivity that originates in a successful life experience. The above examples represent the senior subjectivity which is largely shaped by one's younger years.

¹ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), 21.

At the same time, old people need to reconstruct subjectivity by dealing with problems arising in later years, which is also widely represented in literature. For example, old Santiago perseveres in his fishing at sea to fight with fate and rediscover the self; Yao Si'an, upon entering old age, leaves his children and goes on a long journey in order to find the true self; Gugu is representative of self-redemption in old age, by which an old person atones for past mistakes and finds inner peace. Therefore, the construction of senior subjectivity is a person's consistent negotiation with past memories and present challenges for a better self. It is a dynamic process that never ceases, and will continue until the end of one's life.

Judging from the tension between the self and the subject, the construction of senior subjectivity is also a painful process of alienation and disalienation. To be alienated is to be estranged or separated from the original condition of something due to some external force, while disalienation is a return to the original state. Mental conflicts arise when one's self-awareness is inconsistent with other's expectations and when one's personal development collides with social requirements. In this case, the self and the subject are conflicting and an old person has to find his or her own way to unite the two. I discovered three ways of constructing senior subjectivity from my exploration of fictional works. First, the aged succumb to social subjectivization and abandon the attempt to recover the self. Both old Sutpen and old Qiqiao rejoice in the innocent self before they are plunged into and subjugated by the social power structure. They suffer from alienation but are unable or unwilling to return to the self, so their senior subjectivity is characterized by the pain caused by the discrepancy between the self and the subject. Second, the old are flexible in dealing with social subjectivization and can always find an appropriate way to integrate the self with their surroundings. Jia Mu and Yao Si'an are

ideal examples. They are always happy to devote themselves to the prosperity of the family, which reveals the fusion of the self and the subject. When old age comes, they can adapt to the new role and adopt a new strategy to connect the self and the world harmoniously. Third, the elderly, although highly successful at an early age, are confronted with physical and mental challenges of old age, which compel them to rebuild the relations between the self and the world. Old people such as Gugu and Santiago can hardly feel alienation due to earlier accomplishments, but they, faced with disappearing youthful ambitions, have to reflect on life and strive for a new interpretation of ethical dilemmas and other troubles arising from old age. Gugu and Santiago are fortunate because they finally find a way out and successfully return to the call of the self. In both cases, when constructing senior subjectivity, the awakened have to struggle painfully with alienation to find for the self a proper and peaceful place in the mind.

To wrap up the dissertation with a succinct statement, I conclude that the construction of senior subjectivity is necessitated by a heterogeneous array of factors and issues confronted by senior people. These factors include, but are not restricted to, the painful awareness of old age and the brevity of life; a sense of loss accompanying physical and mental deterioration; the consequent need to resist alienation from family and society due to social, cultural, and generational gaps; the wish-fulfilment of unrealized youthful ambitions and dreams; and the desire to retain or regain erstwhile glory or power, if there was any in earlier stages of life. The ultimate purpose of such construction, in my opinion, is to find peace and tranquility in the mind for the final phase of life.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Tao Feng was born in Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, China. He received his M.A. in English Linguistics and Literature from the School of Foreign Studies, Yangzhou University, China in 2008. As a lecturer of foreign studies at Yangzhou University, he has published scholarly articles in the fields of literary studies, film studies, history of ideas, and Buddhism. In 2013, he was admitted to The University of Texas at Dallas as a PhD student majoring in Comparative Literature.

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B.A., English Education, School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Nanjing Normal University, China, Sept. 1995—June 1999

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Teaching Assistant, School of Arts and Humanities, The University of Texas at Dallas, Aug. 2016—Apr. 2018, working under Prof. Ming Dong Gu at The Confucius Institute at The University of Texas at Dallas

Teaching Assistant, Film Studies, School of Arts and Humanities, The University of Texas at Dallas, Aug. 2015—June 2016, working under Prof. Adrienne L. McLean, Prof. Shilyh Warren, and Prof. John Petty in the course *Understanding Film*

RESEARCH INTERESTS

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Graduate Tuition Scholarship, School of Arts and Humanities, the University of Texas at Dallas, 2015-2018

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PUBLICATIONS

Articles

"The Research on the Relationship between Buddhism and Science in America," *Religious Studies*, No. 4 (2016): 146-150.

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Books

Creative Learning of 5500 English Words (Band Six), Beijing: China Translation and Publishing Corporation, 2007.

Translated Works

Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2015, pp. 339. (English to Chinese; third translator)