

THE ROOT OF EXCELLENCE:
AN INTERPRETIVE APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING ELDER CARE WITHIN
TRANSNATIONAL CHINESE FAMILIES IN CANADA

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ABSTRACT

Situated at the intersection between globalization and demographic aging, this dissertation seeks to add a critical and interdisciplinary voice to the vibrant conversation on the topic of elder care. It weaves the complex conceptual threads of aging, transnational migration, and the ethics of care into a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of the elderly and their adult children in the intimate space of seven transnational Chinese families in Canada. The research conceptualizes old age as a matter out of place in a neoliberal system marked by growth and productivity, and formulates a theoretical framework of *sticky ambiguity* as a way to reveal the tensions inherent in the discourse on elder care as a social, cultural, and intercultural phenomenon. In order to resist essentialist narratives of Chinese Canadian families, I emphasize the importance of cultural translation as a responsibility and an important means to unsettle meanings and cultural differences. An interpretive and reflexive methodology is used to analyze qualitative data in an attempt to move beyond a surface reading of the texts. In contrast to typical narrative analysis that aims to code, characterize, and thematize qualitative data, this method treats narrative as the subject's attempt to reconcile the divided self as he or she searches for a good way of representing the problem. The analysis makes observable the subject's orientation to values and idealization, and reveals the hidden struggles and conflicts that are often concealed in speech. Through three case studies on the themes of ambivalence, death, and filial piety, I try to understand how the subject orients to each phenomenon as a problem-solving situation in order to produce a dialogue about the meaning and sticky ambiguity of aging and elder care. My analysis shows that the meaning of aging and elder care is far from stable and singular. It is constructed through an evolving process of moral reasoning that is entangled in a continuous struggle with cultural identities, selfhood, gender, class, heritage, intimacy, and morality.

DEDICATION

To my mother and father

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INTRODUCTION

It never has been the case that what was of great importance has been slightly cared for, and, at the same time, that what was of slight importance has been greatly cared for.

(Confucius, 1861, p. 2231)

Indeterminate Care

The translation of “care” into a Chinese word yields many different results. As the Chinese language embodies a long history and cultural transitions, there are different ways of translating the word “care” that bring to our attention the many usages, forms, and conceptions that the notion of care could take. For example, the translation of care as *guan zhu* 关注 or *zhu yi* 注意 simply means paying attention, showing interest and being aware of something or someone. But the translation of care as *guan xin* 关心 or *guan zhao* 关照 is closer to the meaning of *care of* and *be concerned of*. The second character in this translation—*xin*—means *heart-mind*, which is a philosophically rich concept in both traditional and contemporary Chinese language that emphasizes the unity of thoughts and feelings². Such a translation of care as a genuine

1其所厚者薄，而其所薄者厚，未之有也。《礼记·大学》 Translation by Legge (1861).

2 *Xin* is a rather complex philosophical concept in traditional Chinese thought. For example, in *Daodejing*, the core Daoist text, *xin* is used in Chapter 49 in the form of “wu xin” (无心 heartlessness) of a sage ruler (Moeller, 2006, p. 58). In order to unite the society as a whole, the sage ruler should be both impartial to the society, and at the same time position himself at the heart of the society, merging his heart with that of society as a whole. The duality of impartiality and wholeness exist in the concept of *xin*. *Xin* therefore resides both within oneself and outside itself. It is the living center of an individual who is also always already connected with the outside world. *Xin* also forms part of the characters that constitute the main theoretical foundation of Confucius’s *dao*—*Zhong* and *Shu*. Both characters have the character *xin* in them. *Zhong* (loyalty) describes one’s conduct with and to others, as in “doing

concern originating from a person's heart-mind implies a profound level of connection, affection and intimacy. In research on caregiving practices, care can also be translated as *hu li* 护理, which means *nursing* and *caregiving activities* that pertain to the field of social work. Care as nursing can be practiced by both formal and informal caregivers, but the meaning of this translation primarily refers to the *physical* work of taking care of something or someone.

The meaning of care in the Old English and German origin also bears a multitude of interpretations³. As more research begins to use a transnational framework that examines the often layered and complex relations of care in an era of global migration, demographic aging, and neoliberalism, it is useful to rethink the concept and practice of care in the transnational context. It is at this contemporary and transnational intersection between globalization and aging that my research on elder care resides. Furthermore, with Chinese immigrants, including seniors, representing the largest and fastest growing visible minority⁴ group in Canada, the formal and

one's best" (Lau, 1979). *Shu* describes "using oneself as a measure to gauge others" (Lau, 1979), "altruism" (Chan, 1973), and "reciprocity" (Dawson, 2000). *Xin* thus also describes the dialectical orientation to both oneself and to the other.

³Derived from ancient Rome, the term *cura* refers to a mythological figure in Latin literature. On one hand, the word means anxieties, worries and concerns, and on the other hand it also means providing care for and attending to the other (Reich, 1995). The mythological origin of *cura* appears in Heidegger's writing twice, which shows the significance of the myth in Heidegger's own thinking about *Sorge* (care). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962) recognizes the double meaning of *cura* as both concern in the sense of "absorption in the world", and care in the sense of "devotion".

⁴See the definition of visible minority by Statistics Canada at <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-562/note-eng.cfm>

informal system of elder care in contemporary Canadian society has come under great pressure (Statistics Canada, 2008). However, the gesture of generalizing a statistically defined population under the name of “Chinese” or “Chinese community” is problematic, essentializing, and misleading. The quantitative growth in this population does not offer a nuanced picture of the kinds of pressures and difficulties this group faces. The so-called “Chinese community” in Canadian society is immensely diverse and complex. Even though there are different official ways of “categorizing” this population by immigration status (e.g. foreign-born, newcomers, non-permanent residents, etc.), by generation (first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants), or by place of origin (mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc.), these categories do not conclusively represent the diverse immigration histories, cultural memories, filial structures, transnational linkages, cultural heritages, and diasporic consciousness that they signify. Therefore, situating my inquiries in relation to such a diverse population provides me with a challenging yet timely opportunity for research.

Studies on transnational elder care are also burgeoning and span multiple disciplines. However, as indeterminate as the concept of care is, the ways in which scholars conceptualize and study the phenomenon remain elusive. The study of care, compounded with the problem of aging in a transnational context, needs further theorizing. Some empirical research on cross-cultural elder care remains problematic. For example, China is often praised for its strong traditional foundation in family support, which functions as a substitute for the public health system (Liu, 1998; Liu & Kendig, 2000). Studies (Ikels, 1998; Lai, 2010) have sought to provide empirical evidence in mainland China and among Chinese Canadians⁵ that the traditional

⁵ In this research, Lai (2010) uses Statistics Canada’s definition of Chinese visible minority as the screening criteria for his sample. However, “Chinese Canadians” from different backgrounds, such as Hong Kong, and from different

Confucian value of filial piety can effectively reduce caregiver stress. These studies seem to view family care as a possible antidote for reducing the burden of care for the public sector. The definition of “Chinese Canadians” in Lai’s (2010) study follows Statistics Canada’s category of visible minority, which fails to recognize the highly diverse orientations to and interpretations of the traditional Chinese concept of filial piety. Furthermore, as a cultural tradition filial piety is often recollected as a good old-fashioned social value that is being threatened and eroded by modernization and its alleged concomitant of individualism. But praise of the tradition often skims over the question of the quality of the inheritance, seeming more focused on the erosion of what must remain enigmatic.

To me, what remains enigmatic is the notion of care beyond its empirical and practical manifestation as “describable recognizable recurrences, of generality, and of comparability of these productions of ordinary activities” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 6). The orderly devices of what Garfinkel calls “formal analysis” invariably lose grip on the phenomenological details of the lived experiences of care. Arendt (1998) also points out the lost phenomenon in our understanding of the human condition in instances where the particularity of the private sphere destabilizes its collective representation in the social and public realm. What is intriguing about the topic of elder care is that it stimulates a number of lasting debates about the social and the bodily, the objective and the subjective, the public and the private, the physical and the emotional, and the universal and the individual. It is in the conflicts and tensions of these debates where I position my entry point into the discourse on transnational elder care. By adopting an “interpretive approach” to the topic in this dissertation, I seek to treat different positions in the immigrant periods, identify the ideology of filial piety differently. These differences were not taken into account in the data collection.

discourse on care as a collective representation of the problem. My goal is to examine how the problem is addressed in different ways and the tensions occurring between multiple perspectives in order to reveal the interpretive structure of the phenomenon.

The objective of the dissertation is to develop such an understanding specifically in a parent-child relationship, based on 24 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in a city-wide research project in Toronto, Canada. All of the 24 participants identified themselves as Chinese Canadians, but from a variety of backgrounds with differences in their immigration histories, intentions, family structures, languages spoken and socio-economic status. They also identified their kinship practice as transnational in the sense that they have sustained ties with family members, friends, resources, and networks in other countries (Zechner, 2008, p. 32). To resist the homogeneity and essentialism of the “Chinese Canadian” category, I will provide contextual details of each participant in my analysis. In order to contribute to the methodological discussion on cross-cultural research, cultural translation, and narrative analysis, I also attempt to develop a topology of subjectivity as a theoretical basis for formulating cultural influence as an internal process in which a subject relates to one’s self in the way of doubling into two orientations. I demonstrate a topological structure of self with influences from multidisciplinary sources and use it as an interpretive method for a discussion on selfhood and subjectivity. With this topological formulation of subjectivity and cultural influence, I will situate the subject in relation to the other, the self, and cultural heritage as a way to understand the inherent sets of properties that retain and sustain the caring relationship under processes of transformation due to migration and globalization.

Generally speaking, I ask the following questions in this research project: How do the participants understand and experience elder care in the parent-child relationship? How does

one's interpretation of his or her cultural background influence their orientation to the elder care relationship? What conditions problematize the parent-child relationship in an elder care situation? How can we formulate a concept of care as both an orientation to the other and as a reflexive and ethical relation to the divided self? How can we develop a methodological framework to study care that draws on influences from the hermeneutic and phenomenological traditions?

My dissertation attempts to add to the field of global and transnational studies (especially research on transnational family experiences), bringing a reflexive dimension that is sometimes compromised in the empirical domains or abstracted in philosophical discussions. Through a method of interpretive narrative analysis, I will use a number of case studies to preserve a degree of reflexivity in the data analysis, as a way to open up more discursive and methodological possibilities to complement existing empirical and statistical research on care.

The Project

This dissertation came into shape through a very unique and personal journey. It will be helpful to introduce the background of the project, which began as a purely empirical investigation without much reflexive analysis. My personal roles as bilingual researcher, daughter, immigrant, and translator play a central role in shaping my reflections on this project. The experience I had also illustrates the challenge of working with multiple stakeholders while trying to protect the integrity of the study. Furthermore, as an active advocate and organizer of various community-based projects, I hope to articulate a framework that could be referenced by other community-based researchers and provoke a critical conversation regarding the role of cultural translation in both community advocacy work and the process of policy making.

In 2014, the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter (CCNCTO) invited me to chair a research project on elder abuse issues within Chinese families in Toronto. The CCNC⁶ is a national community organization whose mandate is to promote social equity and justice among Chinese Canadians. The organization's definition of Chinese Canadians is as broad as Statistics Canada's, which includes anyone who identifies himself or herself as racially, ethnically or culturally Chinese. Since the founding of the organization in 1980, CCNC has been working closely with other Chinese Canadian and grassroots organizations across Canada to design and carry out programs to empower and educate its members in civic participation, social and political advocacy, and historical and cultural heritage. With deep roots in communities, the organization was looking for ways to connect its resources to academic research in order to advance public knowledge about the issue of elder abuse in Chinese Canadian communities. To me, this opportunity aligned perfectly with my research interests in aging and elder care, and allowed me to ground my thinking in a very specific project.

Literature on elder abuse issues among Chinese Canadians and other immigrant communities is not scarce (Tam & Neysmith, 2006; Cooper, Selwood, & Livingston, 2008; Podnieks, et al., 1990; McDonald, Hornick, Robertson, & Wallace, 1991). When the CCNCTO

⁶ "The Chinese Canadian National Council was formed in 1980 as part of a successful national campaign mounted by Chinese Canadians to protest the irresponsible journalism of the CTV W5 program "Campus Giveaway," which alleged that "foreigners" (Chinese Canadians) were taking away legitimate places from non-Chinese-Canadians in universities. Successful organizing in the Chinese Canadian community around this incident led to a public apology from CTV, and the formation of the CCNC and some of its first member chapters. The Toronto chapter of the CCNC is a direct offspring of the Toronto Ad Hoc Committee Against W5. It is also one of the local chapters under the umbrella of CCNC." (CCNCTO Website)

approached me about the project, the initial objective was to understand the status of elder abuse problems in Chinese Canadian communities in the Greater Toronto Area. By status, the organization was referring to questions about what is happening in the community, how many seniors experience elder abuse, what kinds of resources are available for elder abuse victims, and how service providers can better assist seniors who are in need of help. For a community-based project like this, the immediate approach is often to conduct surveys and questionnaires to get the answers to its questions, and then to map out the findings and indicate the severity of the problem. This method is believed to help the organization present the issue most effectively to both the community and policy makers. As indicated in a great deal of the literature, the problem of elder abuse exists, and immigrant communities face more difficulties due to various social and cultural barriers (Cohen, De Vos, & Newberger, 1997; Moon & Benton, 2000; Iecovich, 2005; DeLiema, Gassoumis, Homeier, & Wilber, 2012). However, how significant would this project be if we were to do the same thing? Other than affirming the severity of the phenomenon, what other value can this project provide to the community, service providers, policy makers, and the general public? Do we need more quantification of the severity of the problem to provide incentives to service providers and policy makers to attend to the needs of immigrant communities? Do we need to supply the public imagination with another generalized picture of what Chinese Canadian communities are like?

With these questions in mind, our team finally decided to take the project in a new direction. Instead of designing a research project that surveys the extent of elder abuse issues in Chinese Canadian communities in Greater Toronto Area, we decided to look at the tensions and conflicts in elder care relationships among intergenerational Chinese families that possess the potential of developing into elder abuse cases. We recognize that there are a variety of elder care

settings ranging from spousal care, to institutional care, to paid domestic care. Each setting has its particular character that deserves exclusive study. Due to the scope of the research, we decided to focus on intergenerational families in which adult offspring provides primary care to elderly parents. According to Statistics Canada, this type of family structure is very common among different immigrant communities. Other studies (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988; Kosberg, 1988; Lachs & Pillemer, 1995; Kosberg & Nahmias, 1996; Yan, So-Kum, & Yeung, 2002) have also confirmed that intergenerational cohabitation is a salient risk factor for elder abuse cases. In many intergenerational immigrant families, members also have sustained ties with people and organizations in other countries. Transnationalism is common in these families. What is interesting about this type of elder care setting is that each elderly subject faces two types of transition: the transition of self in the process of aging and the transition resulting in the migration of family relationships. By orienting our research to the lived experiences of subjects involved in elder care relationships who undergo the transition of transnational migration, we shift our analytical focus from the external correlates of elder abuse to the conditions that make this phenomenon possible. These conditions are often grounded in a much larger set of discourses on aging, the ethics of care, migration, transnational families, diasporic identity, intersubjectivity, etc.

After we proposed the research plan to the CCNCTO and an advisory committee consisting of service providers, community delegates, and government agencies, we encountered strong resistance. First, the committee was afraid that we might not be able to generate an immediate list of executable actions and recommendations, which would impede their policy-driven advocacy work. Second, a community delegate was concerned that by shifting the focus from elder abuse to elder care, we would undermine the integrity of the research. I responded to

their concerns by asking: If we cannot have a clear understanding of the problem at hand, how can any specific solution or policy be effective? What makes us assume that there is a clear line separating elder care and elder abuse that puts them at two ends of an ethical spectrum?

Throughout the project, I became increasingly aware of the tension between our research objective and the community organizations that this research was intended to serve. These organizations include long-term care centers, hospitals, and elder abuse support agencies. Due to the nature of their work, they are more interested in actionable and specific recommendations regarding their services. Therefore, insights about service usage and client experience are more relevant to their interests. As the researcher of this project, I want to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, which is often complex and ambiguous, and does not entail any immediate or direct solutions.

After much negotiation, our team managed to defend our position and carried out a study that stayed true to its objective—a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of subjects involved in elder care relationships among self-identified intergenerational Chinese families living in Toronto. We collected 24 in-depth semi-structured interviews from both Chinese elders⁷ who live with their adult offspring and adults who live with their elderly parents. I shall introduce the details of the research data later in the chapter. Here, I want to highlight something I learned from my experience, which guided my method in this dissertation. I came to

⁷ Throughout the dissertation, I will use “elder” and “elderly” instead of “senior” as the terminology for referencing aging and the participants in the project. The term “senior” is often used in demographic studies and government contexts as a specific age range of 60 or 65 and above, and as a biological benchmark for age. My research tries to recognize the positive aspects of knowledge, life experience, and wisdom that are often associated with the term “elder”.

realize that indeterminacy tends to cause people anxiety and discomfort. The fact that my research would not generate a list of determinate findings that would exactly illustrate the problem under study met with resistance from community stakeholders. Furthermore, during my interviews with several participants, their failure to articulate a specific feeling or meaning also made them uncomfortable and distressed. Such an inability to determine often encouraged people to seek an immediate interpretation or explanation of the problem at hand. As a researcher and a daughter who cares deeply about her aging parents in another country, I am fascinated by the indeterminacy and ambivalence encountered by the subjects in describing their experiences. In other words, I have encountered similar experiences when what was often unspoken and held in abeyance by me pointed to a deeper struggle that I was trying to solve and work through.

Every participant I interviewed had a general conception of what good care was, but almost everyone also had some experiences that could not be captured through any articulation of care. I first became interested in the topic of transnational elder care precisely because of the indeterminate nature of care. As an only child and an immigrant who lives thousands of miles away from my parents, I have experienced first-hand how transnational care can be a struggle. At first, I thought the problem was the distance, which inevitably inhibited my ability to provide immediate and in-person care. Then I realized that such a spatial separation actually drove me to reflect on what kind of care relationship I was desiring, what kind of care I could and could not provide, and how this limit forced me to orient to my condition differently, hopefully in a stronger way. Like many other immigrants living and working in a country that is far away from aging parents, and like those who live in proximity to aging parents but are not able to improve their conditions, I often feel a strong sense of powerlessness, uselessness, regret, ambivalence, and guilt (Abel & Nelson, 1990; Joseph & Hallman, 1998; Lin & Rogerson, 1995; Schoonover,

Brody, Hoffman, & Kleban, 1988). The conditions of transnational families exaggerate the tensions of managing the giving and taking of care. It also makes the tensions between giving to the other and preserving the self more vividly felt, if not also painful. At the same time, the role of the geography of the family and the effects of distance are not absolute, but must be interpreted and understood within the context of gender, culture, and other modifiers (Joseph & Hallman, 1998). In other words, distance might generate not only guilt, but also a sense of relief in cases where the situation permits family members to be less involved in the caregiving responsibilities. As a researcher, I am interested in exploring this phenomenon further as a collective problem in the context of the 24 participants we interviewed.

Diaspora and Transnationalism

The concepts of diaspora and transnationalism have been widely studied and theorized, but instances of interchangeable usage or loose definition are still prevalent. Therefore, it is important for me to clarify my position on terms like “diaspora,” “diasporic,” and “transnational” in relation to my usage of “transnational elder care,” “transnational family,” and “transnational practices.” In this dissertation, I situate both the diversity of the research subjects and the phenomenon under study in the conceptual framework of *transnationalism*, and invoke the concept of diaspora only in cases where the theoretical overlap between transnationalism and diaspora occurs. I shall briefly introduce the conceptual differences and overlaps between diaspora and transnationalism, and elaborate how I position my work in relation to both fields.

Cohen (1997) argues that the concept of diaspora has evolved through four distinct phases, beginning with the first classic phase in which diaspora is viewed as “the idea of dispersal following a traumatic event in the homeland, to two or more foreign destinations” (Cohen, 1997, p. 2). The second phase is marked by Safran’s (1991) writing as he works towards

a more specific definition of an ideal type of “genuine diaspora” (Safran, 1991, p. 86) that consists of different categories of people in order to protect its meaning and conceptual boundaries. Described by Clifford (1994) as a “centred diaspora model,” Safran’s (1991) definition of diaspora focuses on the triangular relationship among the diaspora, the host country, and an (imagined) homeland, and emphasizes a “myth of return” (p. 91) that is driven by a collective “diaspora consciousness” (p. 94) caught between an imagined utopia and a lived dystopia (p. 94). In the third phase, this notion of diaspora is deconstructed and re-interpreted by scholars, shifting from a centred model to a deterritorialized (Clifford, 1994) and hybrid model (Bhabha, 1995). For example, Clifford (1994) describes the deterritorialization process as living in tension. He states, “Diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place” (p. 311).

In an attempt to consolidate these various definitions of diaspora, or what Cohen (1997) describes as the fourth phase, he develops five categories of diaspora based on the Weberian notion of “ideal types”—victim, labour, imperial, trade, and deterritorialized. Cohen’s (1997) typology of diaspora is adopted by some empirical researchers and critiqued by others (Butler, 2001). The debate about the definition of diaspora continues to this day. Even without a consensual definition, it is widely agreed that there are a few commonalities that different conceptions of diaspora share. For example, there is a common understanding of diaspora as “a social condition involving multiple allegiances and belongings, a recognition of hybridity, and the potential for creativity” (Ní Laoire, 2003, p. 277). The concept also deals with the notion of dispersal and displacement, be it traumatic or not, and “the resulting emergence and reproduction of some sort of collective identity, with varying intensities of ties to the country of emigration and the countries of immigration” (Faist, 2010, p. 21). Most importantly, there is an element of

temporality that conditions the emergence and production of diaspora practices (Ní Laoire, 2003; Faist, 2010), which differentiates it from the concept of transnationalism. Diaspora often refers to “a multi-generational pattern” and “formations reaching across generations,” while transnationalism can be situated in temporary and recent migrant flows (Faist, 2010, p. 22).

On the other hand, transnationalism is also a loaded and complex concept. To evoke the definition by Porté et al. (1999), transnationalism is “composed of a growing number of persons who live dual lives: speaking two languages, having homes in two countries, and making a living through continuous regular contact across national borders” (p. 217). It is sometimes considered a broader term than diaspora and can be used to describe “everyday practices of migrants engaged in various activities,” such as “reciprocity and solidarity within kinship networks” (Faist, 2010, p. 11). Based on the temporal and conceptual differences between diaspora and transnationalism, Faist (2010) argues that “transnational communities encompass diasporas, but not all transnational communities are diasporas” (p. 21). Furthermore, in this dissertation, I emphasize the notion of “transnational practices” more than “transnational communities” in my usage of “transnational elder care.” The idea of transnational communities, though widely used, can still connote an essentialized notion of the migrant group as having a shared national identity based on the place of origin, which is counterproductive to the accompanying discourse of diasporic hybridity. With a focus on the transnational *practice* of elder care, the research treats transnationalism as a condition of everyday life through which transnational community-making and hybrid diasporic consciousness emerge and evolve.

Given the multiple diasporic identities of the research participants, it is more appropriate for me to situate my study in relation to the larger concept of transnationalism, which encompasses the condition of diasporic identities. However, as each case study reveals more

details about the specific historical, socio-cultural and political context of the subject, we will see the emergence of hybrid diasporic narratives. Therefore, I consider both transnationalism and diaspora as working frameworks for my research, with the former concept as the leading framework and the latter as an important analytical lens.

The Situation of Transnational Elder Care

What exactly is the common situation that my research intends to examine? How is the situation understood and studied by other scholars? In this section, I use one story collected in my research to illustrate the problem under study. I also show how similar situations are often analyzed in literature on transnational elder care. Every transnational elder care story is different and particular to the cultural and historical background of the family. By formulating a common situation, I do not intend to generalize or essentialize the experiences of a diverse group of immigrants and diaspora families. What I hope to do is to formulate a common structure that conditions the relationship that I seek to examine.

The Story: “Father’s Love as Great as The Mountain”

Without affiliation with any community agency, many Chinese elders who live in Toronto informally organize gatherings and activities as a way of creating opportunities to connect to each other. The activities range from singing and dancing to poetry reading and theatre. This story came from one of the self-organized groups of Chinese elders, which consisted of immigrants from mainland China who moved to Canada ten years ago, newcomers who came here within the last two years, as well as temporary family visitors. This group of 10 to 20 Chinese elders formed a storytelling and theatre club. They wrote their own life stories in the form of a five- to ten-minute short play and performed it in front of their club members. Due to a lack of formal gathering space, they often met at one of the members’ houses.

One of the short plays was written and performed by a family that immigrated to Canada five years ago in celebration of the group's Father's Day gathering in 2014. The story was about a three-generation family living in Scarborough, Ontario. The adult couple was originally from Shanghai, and immigrated to Canada as skilled workers. After they settled in Canada, the husband also moved his aging parents to live with them. He wanted to be closer to his parents in order to take care of them, but also hoped to receive their help with childcare duties. The story began with an argument between the husband and wife. The wife was unhappy with her father-in-law. One year ago, when she was eight months pregnant with twins, her father-in-law suddenly decided to move back to China with her mother-in-law. This elderly couple had promised to stay in Canada to help the family take care of their future grandchildren, but they broke their promise all of a sudden. The wife complained to the husband, accusing his parents of abandoning the family when their help was most needed. The father-in-law used to be a well-respected civil engineer in China. He was the chief engineer for some of the most important bridges in China's recent history. The reason he gave to the family for leaving Canada was an engineering consulting job that needed his expertise. The fact that the elderly father abandoned the family at a critical moment for a job made his daughter-in-law angry and bitter. The husband tried to defend his father's decision by praising his great achievements and sacrifice for the country, and criticized his wife for being selfish. The wife made a sarcastic comparison between the father-in-law's self-interested career aspirations and his responsibility to take care of his own children.

The second part of the play began with the husband and wife calling their father in China on Father's Day. Their mother picked up the phone and told them that she had received the wonderful flowers and gifts they sent to their father. However, she started crying on the phone,

and told the children that their father had already passed away. It turned out that their father had been suffering from severe stomach pain a year ago in Canada and did not want to make their children worry. The elderly couple decided to go back to China for medical help where the father was diagnosed with late-stage stomach cancer. Knowing how hard their children's life was in Canada, the father did not want to burden the adult children with any caregiving obligations. Most importantly, he did not want to burden his children with such bad news while they were expecting the birth of new life and new hope. As a result, he decided to hide his health condition from his children, and chose to leave the country on his own. By doing so, he did not give them any opportunity to take care of him.

The sudden revelation of the sad news brought all kinds of emotions to the adult children. The wife felt extremely guilty for not being able to take care of her father-in-law at the end of his life and for being selfish about her earlier demand for childcare support. The husband felt guilty for violating traditional filial piety and for burdening his mother with all the caregiving responsibilities. Both the husband and wife were heartbroken by the father's choice to conceal his death. This sadness then turned into anger at their own neglect and lack of care for the father's health while he was in Canada. The play ended with the children's self-denunciation of their failure to provide elder care and a promise to take better care of the mother. They promised to move her to Canada to live with them without burdening her with any childcare responsibilities. They also promised to send the grandchildren to daycare and find a community center for their mother to connect with other Chinese elders. The husband said at the end of the play, "Mom, you've been caring for the entire family for your entire life. It's time for you to live a carefree senior life" (Zhang, 2014).

In a short five-minute play, the story covers a wide range of issues related to the experience of elder care—in-law relationships, childcare, aging, and mortality. The father's death becomes a pivotal moment in the play that anchors the dramatic shift from anger to guilt in his children's attitude towards their elderly parents. At the end of the play, their solution to resolve such guilt—to take better care of their mother—implies a problematic conception of care as a form of exchange and a fair reciprocity of give and take. In this case, parenting and childcare from the elderly parents are conceived by the adult children as a debt and ethical condition for soliciting the responsibility of elder care as a form of payback. But the elderly father's decision to refuse such “payback” points to a different interpretation of care that echoes what Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (2003) argues as the cultural particularity of ancestor worship in the tradition of filial piety, which “compels people to forget the suffering of the past if only enough people survive to preserve the continuity of the clan” (p. 2). Let us turn to some literature on transnational elder care and see how stories like this are often analyzed.

The Literature

Based on the literature on transnational caregiving, this story exemplifies a typical transnational setting in which a family has sustained ties across multiple nation-states and the practice of care is negotiated across national borders and different social policies (Zechner, 2008; Baldassar, Baldock, & Wilding, 2006; Brijnath, 2009; Lunt, 2009). Studies indicate that it is common for elders to contribute to the care work in the family as “part and parcel of kin-keeping” (Treas & Mazumdar, 2004, p. 106). The elderly subjects sometimes provide more care than they receive from their family members by performing domestic labor such as cooking, nursing, babysitting, and cleaning (Treas & Mazumdar, 2004; Lie, 2010; Yoon, 2005; Zhou, 2012). Such contributions by elders often serve two purposes: on one hand, the elders' willingness to relocate

in old age to a distant country and their devotion to the family demonstrate selfless support for their children, which enables them to participate in the workforce; on the other hand, the enactment of caregiving also brings them self-satisfaction, recognition of others, and self-value (Treas & Mazumdar, 2004; Chao & Roth, 2000; Jones, 1996).

The story dramatizes a very common phenomenon in transnational elder care. Studies have shown that most people express their willingness and desire to provide care for their aging parents despite the overwhelming nature of care work (Spitzer et al., 2003; Kodwo-Nyameazea & Nyuyen, 2008). However, most elders still view themselves and their need for care as a burden on their children (Zhou, 2012). In Zhou's (2012) study of transnational Chinese families, he also finds that seniors are inclined to immediately fly back to China in case of a major illness in order to avoid burdening their children (p. 238).

Most of the literature on transnational caregiving focuses on the ways in which transnational care is practiced. Transnational migration creates a flow of people across nation-states in the context of a global economy (Appadurai, 1990) and the transnational family therefore becomes a new phenomenon that entails a unique mixture of practices and meanings (Herrera Lima, 2001). A family is often conceived as a site of "resource exchange—help, care and economic resources—across generations" and "plays an indispensable role in care and welfare provision" (Zhou, 2012, p. 233). The transnational family, therefore, becomes a changing and evolving site for the reconfiguration, renegotiation, and reinterpretation of the meaning of roles, work, and care.

The studies cited above represent a common positivist approach to studying the practical, empirical, economic, and functional dimension of transnational families. With this approach, the particularity of any story provides a justification for the pattern and rationale identified in a

larger sample that aims to normalize or explain the subject's behavior and action with an objective distance between the researcher and the research subjects. However, as the only child and daughter of a transnational family, I struggle to orient to my own relationship with my aging parents, to my condition as an immigrant in Canada, to the influence of my cultural inheritance, and to a future uncertain to both myself and my family. This struggle manifests not only in those big decisions about immigration, health, life, and death, but also in the most trivial everyday decisions such as how to cook this particular Chinese dish, what to do on a snowy weekend, and how to translate a specific word into Chinese in a way that makes sense to my parents. On the surface, all transnational families have to deal with a similar set of problems. However, the results produced by these empirical studies often risk losing grip on the phenomenological relation to the situation at hand. In other words, the purpose of these studies is often to reduce, rather than to engage, the struggle in transnational experiences.

My research takes an approach that resembles the more transformative cultural discourse on Asian Canadian identity, which is characterized by the condition of cultural destabilization and ambiguities, more so than a conformed and stable identity (Miki, 2000). Such an approach is oriented to the rich nuances and diversity of cultural expressions, subjectivities, experiences, imaginaries, and practices of transnational families (Li, 2011). Family, therefore, is conceived not only as a site of resource exchange, but also as a continuous struggle with cultural politics, identities, interpretations, and meanings. Instead of taking these empirical findings as a surface understanding of the situation, I want to treat them as different perspectives, opinions, and representations that together form the collective discourse on transnational elder care. All of them aim to think through the perplexing and indeterminate question of care, aging, love, family, and social relations under the condition of transnational migration. Instead of taking the position

that one of the perspectives or beliefs represents the “best” solution to the problem, my research intends to make visible and clarify the common problem raised and addressed by the different positions in the discourse. In other words, I seek to examine the heterogeneity of the relationship to transnational elder care and to reveal the tensions inherent in the discourse on elder care as a social, cultural, and intercultural phenomenon.

The Perspective of a Phenomenological Approach

How does each family member orient to the changes brought by the transnational experience? What does it mean for the elderly to age in a society and culture that is completely foreign to them, and where family—not theirs but their children’s—becomes an important place of belonging? What is the place of heritage and its influence upon Chinese families on the move in the migratory process and in their life-world? How do the elderly adjust to a migrating relationship at the end of life?

Only by asking these types of questions can we gain a deeper understanding of the father’s decision to conceal his death and his intention to remove the obligation of care from his children. The shifting responses of anger and guilt in the children become expressions of a situation of which they are trying to make sense. Towards the end of the story, the children seem to have found a resolution to their understanding of good care—reducing the childcare burden on their mother and finding a senior Chinese community for her. However, such a resolution reduces the form of care to the practice and exchange of labor, and simplifies the experience of aging as mere biological and social need. The puzzle of why their father left them and concealed his death still remains unexamined. How might we interpret qualitative data and narratives in a way that brings to the surface those hidden tensions that could arrest, engage, and reflect the ambiguity of the concept of care itself? How can we interpret the father’s decision as orienting to

a notion of care that goes beyond the discourse of the exchange of labor and services, productivity, self-management, and the scarcity of time and resources? How do we begin with these stories and interpret the transnational elder care situation as an ethical problem that the subjects struggle to solve and make meaning of?

This dissertation hopes to inquire into these hidden tensions as a way to recover a phenomenological understanding of the lived experiences and meaning of aging and elder care among the transnational Chinese Canadian families under study. By using an interpretive approach to studying transnational relationships and subjectivity, my analysis will focus on addressing these tensions by examining various ways in which subjects orient to and respond to them as a “problem-solving situation” (Blum, 2003). The goal is not to find the best solution, nor to compare and judge different approaches, but to produce a conversation about the meaning of care, knowing that the question can never be settled conclusively but is always open to view as a way to engage the concept in a stronger way.

Chapter Descriptions

In the first chapter of my dissertation, I begin my inquiry by examining a number of common conceptions of aging and elder care in the literature and public knowledge, showing how most conceptions are constructed based on an ideal of “normal aging” that is characterized by values of youth, performance, health, life, growth, and wellbeing. Recognizing the impasse that emerges from these conceptions, I introduce my central idea that we need to re-conceptualize aging and elder care as a phenomenological notion of sticky ambiguity that sits in-between articulate forms of interpretation, referring to Douglas’ (1966) theorizing of the notion of dirt. A confrontation with this phenomenological impasse does not entail pure avoidance or rejection, but rather enables a stimulating and enriching experience in which the subject is

animated to re-order and organize his or her sense of stability. After outlining the problem of the research and theoretical framework, I then explain the method I use to ground my analysis. Drawing on critical and hermeneutic theories of cultural translation, social theories of the duality of self and the role of narratives, I conceive myself as a cultural translator and analyst tasked with uncovering the ground of narrative as a problem-solving situation. I treat narrative not just as an expression of meaning, but as always already orienting to an ideal speaker (the imaginary). The ideal speaker can be seen in the manifestation of the divided self through contradiction, tension, ambiguity, and ambivalence, creating a problem to solve for the speaking subject. With this approach, all of the participants in my research can be seen as struggling to understand their life situation in their speech. Their stories and narratives become the “equipment for living” (Burke, 1973) and “tactics” (de Certeau, 1984) of dealing with the problem of aging, elder care, and family relationships. Instead of treating their narratives as truth or solutions to the problem, the method I use aims to make visible their formulation of and engagement with the problem. Such an inquiry will reveal the hidden struggle, conflict, and tension that are often concealed in individuals’ speech as they search for a good way of representing the problem. The following three chapters aim to demonstrate my methods and analysis in three conceptual clusters—ambivalence, death, and heritage—with detailed case studies from the qualitative research data collected.

Chapter two begins with two case studies about two elderly subjects’ struggles with ambivalence in their experience of aging in Canada. My analysis moves beyond the phenomenon of ambivalence as an empirical conclusion, to treat it as a sticky ambiguity that invites subjects to orient to it as a problem-solving situation. In their narrated attempts to look for the best interpretation of ambivalence as a way to reduce its ambiguity, the subjects also display their

idealization of family, care, and intimate relationships. The first case looks at the risk of treating the experience of migration as a mechanical relationship of family, which provokes the subject to reflect on the lost “aura” of the original home. The second case looks at a conflictual relationship between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law as a battle for power and a pursuit of potency, reflecting the sense of powerlessness in the elderly subject’s construction of self. Through two case studies, chapter three further examines the expression of self by the elderly subjects and the interpretive structure of death and mortality. The chapter takes up the topic of death as another occasion of sticky ambiguity that has to be oriented to and reflected upon by the elderly subject at the end of life. Metaphors and imaginings about dying and death are used by the elderly participants to ground their reflections on the meaning of life. My analysis treats metaphor as an aesthetic framework for understanding the subject’s fear, anxiety, and orientation to aging and death. Chapter four looks at the sticky ambiguity of elder care from the perspective of the adult children, in particular, their orientation to the Confucian concept and cultural heritage of filial piety. In order to resist the homogenous understanding of filial piety as the best practice of elder care in Chinese society, I outline a number of problematic views of the concept and introduce my re-interpretation of filial piety as a cultural practice that is driven by a process of moral reasoning in relation to one’s inheritance and a cultural heritage in transition. I use three case studies to show the convergence and divergence in the subjects’ moral reasoning about why they should care for their elderly parents. Chapter five concludes the dissertation with a reflection on the interpretive method, opportunities for further research, and my experiences of providing knowledge translation to a variety of community stakeholders.

CHAPTER ONE
STICKY AMBIGUITY: AGING, DEATH, AND ELDER CARE IN TRANSNATIONAL
CHINESE FAMILIES

Introduction: Common Conceptions of Aging and Elder Care

The transnational elder care situation is conditioned by the phenomenon of aging on two levels. On the macro level, increasing globalization and the accompanying flow of migrants across nation-states give rise to the phenomenon of the transnational family. As the population ages across the globe, caring for the aging population becomes a global issue as well, and has unique implications for transnational families. On the micro level, providing care for the elderly is far more than maintaining the livelihood of a person, even though such a conception is widely shared. Elder care in a transnational setting is also about maintaining a relationship under transition. Such a relationship could be conditioned by the dependency of an elderly member, the culture of kin-keeping, and the availability and accessibility of formal and informal support. Whatever form it takes, it is the relationship between the elderly and their family members that is central to the problem of elder care. My dissertation focuses on this particular type of situation—the relationship between the elderly and their adult offspring under co-habitation. My conception of the elder care relationship is grounded in contemporary feminist ethics, which embraces the notion of human interconnectedness and the value of intersubjectivity (Gilligan, 1982, 1987; Butler, 2005). Therefore, in order to give an account of the elderly subjects involved in the relationship, it is important to recognize their own orientation to the concept of aging. In order to see how such a relationship is often conceptualized, problematized, and operationalized for research and policy-making, I turn to a number of dominant discourses on the problem of aging

and elder care. In making visible the underlying approach to the problematic, I hope to animate a dialogue among the discourses by highlighting the tensions in their differences.

A Definition of Elder Care

Before we turn to the dominant discourses on elder care, it is important to note how elder care is often defined in both research and policy discussion. In this dissertation, my approach is oriented to deconstructing these definitions, rather than using them as conceptual boundaries to constrain my discussion. However, to have a general concept of what elder care refers to can help us see the analytical focus of different paradigms and discourses. Most researchers on elder care do not offer an explicit operational definition of the term, but often refer to a range of task-based definitions. Elder care is often defined as a set of tasks and services that are delivered or provided to elderly subjects by both formal and informal caregivers (Keating, Fast, Connidis, Penning, & Keefe, 1997). These tasks and services aim at maintaining and enhancing the elderly client's independence and quality of life "to the extent to which basic needs are met and values realized" (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993, p. 437). Such a task-based definition is primarily used in social policy research within the emerging paradigm of a client-centered service delivery and partnership model, which places the elderly subject at the center of a network of stakeholders that are responsible for providing these tasks and services. The task of caregiving is further defined as a multidimensional concept consisting of different types of labor—physical, organizational, and emotional (Keating, Fast, Connidis, Penning, & Keefe, 1997; Nolan, Grant & Keady, 1996). We can see how these definitions of elder care are often driven by a desire to categorize it into practical and empirical concepts. But the actual lived experience of elder care, as we will learn in the case studies, is often characterized by ambiguity, moral dilemmas, and ethical collisions. In order to account for these phenomenological and intersubjective aspects of

elder care, we need an operational definition that engages this ambiguity rather than reduces it to categorical segments. Therefore, the working definition of elder care in this dissertation is grounded in the feminist ethic of care, which theorizes connection and interpersonal relationship as primary and fundamental in human life, and which recognizes human lives as “interwoven in a myriad of subtle and not so subtle ways” (Gilligan, 1995, p. 122). Later in this chapter, I will elaborate on how such an orientation to care helps shape the theoretical foundation in this dissertation. Let us now turn to the dominant discourses on aging.

The Official Discourse

At a time of unpredictable challenges for health, whether from a changing climate, emerging infectious diseases, or the next microbe that develops drug resistance, one trend is certain: the ageing of populations is rapidly accelerating worldwide. For the first time in history, most people can expect to live into their 60s and beyond. The consequences for health, health systems, their workforce and budgets are profound. (World Health Organization, 2015, p. vii)

Let us first examine how aging is conceptualized in the official discourse of the World Health Organization (WHO). In the Introduction to the *World Report on Ageing and Health 2015* published by the World Health Organization (WHO), Margaret Chan, Director-General of WHO, declared and emphasized an aging population worldwide as an unprecedented challenge in history. A first glance at the report tells us two things. First, the problem of aging is primarily defined as the increase of population in the age bracket of 60 and above. Second, the increasing life expectancy of the general population implies increasing morbidities, illness and disabilities in both quantity and variety, which ultimately demand elder care from both the private and public sector in terms of health management. For the public sector, the aging population is

directly linked to consequences for the healthcare system in terms of labor, financial resources, and public policy. For the private sector, which is often praised as the backbone to the public sector, the hope lies in future technologies (“smart homes”) to enhance the safety and functionality of home care so that it becomes a more desirable choice for the elderly, hence reducing the financial burden for the public sector.

Chan’s address represents the official discourse that defines the phenomenon of aging and elder care as a challenge for public health in our modern society. Not only is aging represented as a demographic and biological marker that has statistically significant implications for health outcomes (often considered as an inevitable decline), it is also considered the cause of a public health crisis, therefore demanding solutions and interventions in terms of biomedicine and health policy. On the micro level, it also reinforces the definition of elder care as providing tasks and services to maintain the health and livelihood of an elderly person rather than a relationship. As a result, research like ours, claimed Chan, becomes paradigmatically important for a future that represents “the first time in history” (World Health Organization, 2015, p. vii). Chan, in her address at the *Congress on Gerontology and Geriatrics and the 20th International Seminar on Care for the Elderly*, affirmed the significance of our research: “Your work is important for health budgets and, indeed, national economies, as the universal ageing of populations comes with substantial financial challenges” (Chan, 2012). Can my research live up to her expectations as a contribution to world economies of aging and health policies governing elder care?

The official discourse on aging offered by the WHO primarily focuses on the symptom of aging only as it appears—the decline of a person’s biological health and mental health

conceptualized as neurological and mental disorders.⁸ Therefore, the symptom of elder care can only be seen as the management of such a health crisis. The discourse reduces the phenomenon of aging to the biological status of health and treats it as the cause of a larger social problem. However, is aging a cause of this social and economic problem? Or, does the social and economic understanding of aging problematize itself as a crisis?

My questions are not intended to dismiss or undermine the importance of biomedicine and public health policy on health management and social equity, nor are they positioned as an oppositional voice to the biomedical, neoliberal and technological discourse on aging and elder care. I ask these questions as a way to conceive of aging not as a cause of a problem, but as an impasse or ethical collision (Blum, 2003) that conditions the collective representations of it as a problem-solving situation. Or, to put it in the Foucauldian sense, the central issue is to “account for the fact that it is spoken about,” to treat aging as a “discursive fact,” and to examine the way in which aging is being “put into discourse” (Foucault, 1978, p. 11). In this case, by reducing aging to a biological status and elder care to a public health crisis, the official discourse already understates the notion of aging as a social phenomenon. If we conceive of aging as an irrevocable, incurable and inevitable human condition (as implied by the WHO) that poses itself as a common situation which elicits different responses and relationships to it as a problem-solving situation, then we can consider the official discourse on aging as just one representation of it. Such an official representation takes the symptom of aging as it appears, making it difficult to engage the problem as a social and cultural phenomenon.

⁸ See more on WHO’s conception of mental health at <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs381/en/>

The official discourse on aging relies on the belief that aging is primarily a biological condition. Such a biological approach to aging assumes a dominant role in our common conception of the problem, and further enhances our reliance on biomedicine to promise us a better and longer life. Let us now turn to the two dominant perspectives on aging—biomedical and neoliberal—that provide the rhetorical conditions for this official discourse.

The Biomedical Perspective

According to Arxer and Murphy (2012), two major models have emerged since the turn of the twentieth century that have come to shape the dominant social imagery of aging. The first model is characterized by “a commitment to science as a system of epistemological principles,” which confines aging to the discourse of biomedicine (p. 3). Rooted in a developmental scheme, the biomedical discourse of aging positions a person on a “biological continuum” (p. 4). Such a developmental scheme associates growth with positive development and old age with “decline” and “entropy” (p. 4). The biological decline of aging is claimed to be verified as a universal and scientific truth, and is also used as a rhetorical condition for explaining why elderly subjects withdraw from social life (Cumming & Henry, 1961).

In addition to the biomedical definition of aging, we can also identify an interesting paradox that positions aging between life and death. On one hand, the biological aging process poses a verified and inevitable threat to the growth and development of life, thus challenging the limits of biomedicine in prolonging and sustaining life. On the other hand, what biomedicine has achieved over the years in terms of increasing life expectancy continues to promise us a longer and better life, thus rendering aging as a problem to be conquered. Therefore, aging not only reminds us that our mortality is the fundamental human condition, it also continues to be treated as a problem to be studied, understood, and solved through biomedical intervention. The term

“average human life expectancy” thus becomes the measurement and reminder of the success of biomedicine over decades and centuries of fighting illness and diseases that led people to death. This demographic status has also become a measure of a society’s prosperity and age-friendliness as a desirable place to grow old. In other words, the problem of aging gives significance to biomedical knowledge, but at the same time confronts the limits of biomedicine’s power to sustain life. To treat aging as decline and entropy is to remind people of illness and death as the ultimate threat of life, and at the same time to celebrate the promise of biomedicine to delay and minimize that threat. Thus, aging assumes a paradoxical force between the fear of death and the hope of life, both generated by biomedical discourse. Describing the paradoxical nature of aging, Arxer and Murphy (2012) say, “On the one hand, science promises to define and improve the ‘real’ possibilities of aging. On the other, the market system inspires persons’ decisions about how to manage the aging process, so that their lives are prosperous” (p.3).

The power of life and death remains asymmetrical as the purpose of biomedicine and bio-power relies on the continuous celebration and administration of life. Therefore, aging, despite being interpreted as an inevitable decline, becomes a process to be managed so that life continues to be fostered. This seems to explain why Foucault (1978) describes modern man as “an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question” (p. 143).

The Neoliberal Perspective

If the biomedical model of aging encourages people to manage their body as a way to foster life, the neoliberal model of aging dramatizes such a practice of management. Arxer and Murphy (2012) describe this “market system” as the second model of aging—the “current hegemonic version of globalization—guided by neoliberal capitalism” (p.1). Such a neoliberal model supplies a “social imagery that supports a skewed distribution of material and cultural

resources that shapes and limits life trajectories” (p. 1). The most important idea underlying neoliberal discourse is the notion of the marketplace as a self-regulating and bias-free determinant of our social condition. According to neoliberal economists, “as persons compete freely for valued resources, the apolitical laws of the market, such supply and demand, ensure a free, rational, and prosperous society” (Arxer & Murphy, 2012, p. 6-7). However, what is not “rational” about this seemingly natural and just market is the blatant ignorance and legitimization of the inherent differences, inequalities and social disparities that characterize our humanity. Under this logic, elderly subjects are expected to compete and conform to the dominant values of the market, despite their biological “disadvantages” that are propagated by biomedical discourse, in order to achieve the optimal “quality of life” designated by the marketplace and promised by biomedicine. Describing the intersection between these two symbolic paradigms on aging, Arxer and Murphy (2012) say, “Persons are expected to participate in their own development; however, their inclusion consists of bringing the self into alignment with the standard aging profile that is best suited for a successful life under global capitalism” (p. 7).

The most prominent discourse that has emerged out of this intersection is *successful aging*, which is “understood to be the result of obeying these signs, while personal and social dysfunction relates to ignoring market tendencies” (p. 7). In other words, what qualifies as successful for an aging subject now corresponds to a set of criteria and standards that are “in demand” in the marketplace (p. 7).

In a neoliberal capitalistic society, power is understood in the form of market, money and capital. Instead of celebrating life, neoliberalism celebrates the market as having the power to “automatically and inscrutably optimize the distribution of social goods” (Berdayes, 2013, p. 17). In other words, if biomedicine treats elderly subjects as physically weak, neoliberalism treats

them as powerless and worthless. The term “total market” is used by many scholars to describe the social conditions under neoliberal globalization (Berdayes, 2013, p. 13). Even though this concept falls under the more radical interpretation of neoliberalism, in which the totality of the global market is expected to expand to the totality of human existence, examining aging under this condition will help us understand the construction of the power of the market.

The neoliberal theory of “total market” conceives our society as a market that is “governed by underlying laws that guarantee social harmony and govern an orderly process of growth” (as cited in Berdayes, 2013, p. 17). Because the market-based social ontology claims absolute objectivity, as opposed to an authoritarian form, and is developed from “the rational satisfaction of individual desires,” therefore “those who fail in the marketplace must be mentally or morally deficient” (Berdayes, 2013, p. 19). Furthermore, such a deficiency or failure to submit to the laws of the total market is often calculated via a model of production and consumption. Under this logic, the market demands each individual’s participation in terms of labor and production in order to sustain its orderly growth, and in return, each individual is rewarded with access to capital to satisfy his or her desires as a consumer. The market defines the value and worthiness of a person in terms of his or her contribution to its growth. Otherwise, a person becomes a consumer of the goods and services the market generates (i.e. even the functioning of social welfare programs depends on the sufficiency of taxes). Therefore, Berdayes (2013) describes the concept of aging under neoliberal rationality as “a process of drifting out of the market” (p. 19).

I want to extract two things from this brief description of the neoliberal total market in relation to aging—the resistance to subjectivity and temporality. The rise of neoliberal ideology has its roots in a critique of the authoritarian conception of society and the position of “the State

as the highest expression of this autonomous social reality” (as cited in Berdayes, 2013, p. 16).

The State is subject to being criticized as authoritarian precisely because one can never eliminate the existence of the subjectivity of its governors. Therefore, the celebration of the market mentality as one that is bias-free also implies a resistance to subjectivity. As a result, the paradigm of population aging, often represented as objective data, fits the neoliberal discourse on aging well.

The neoliberal market mentality also resists the notion of temporality because the market is often imagined to be permanent with its cyclical nature. The sustainability of a productive population should fuel the engine of the market to ensure its unceasing growth. However, in this market society, the growth of an individual is still limited by mortality until biomedicine’s next miracle. Individual growth, which is essentially temporal, comes to be defined by the eternal growth of the market in the form of different periods “in which people participate competently in the market” (Berdayes, 2003, p. 19). When the power and value of the individual is externalized as periods of productivity by the market, aging becomes a powerless yet objective process. The value of aging is not only undermined by the productive paradigm of the market, it is also seen as a public issue in terms of expenditure of resources and capital needed to provide retirement, elder care, and health services. Therefore, the temporality of the human being becomes a problem that conditions the growth of the market, and at the same time, the success of the market is claimed to be crucial for the public problem of elder care that treats elderly subjects as consumers of its resources even if they are no longer capable of being producers. Aging, which conditions the temporality of the human being and threatens the sustainability of a productive population, thus carries the symbolic power of endangering the eternal and orderly growth of the market. The same rhetoric is resurfacing in the emerging concern over automation and the

replacement of human productivity by machines and technology. A productivity model of the value and power of human life in the marketplace continues to challenge the notion of human potency and the meaning of life, creating the potential to produce a self-fulfilling crisis in modern society.

The biomedical model of aging treats the person as a biological entity and an object of scientific knowledge. The neoliberal model of aging treats the person as an object of production, consumption, and labor exchange. Both models fail to recognize the agency, subjectivity, and experience of the aging subject. The notion of productivity in the neoliberal model is only limited to the material processes of labor, work, and consumption. The resistance to subjectivity in the total market mentality also forecloses any discursive understanding of the phenomenological and subjective experience of participating in the market. The question of the meaning of work, the concept of free time, and the idea of the reward of retirement has little voice in these two paradigms. These two paradigms are often criticized by the social constructivist model of aging, which conceives aging as a socially, culturally, and symbolically mediated experience.

The Social Constructivist Perspective

The social constructionist model of aging recognizes the experience of the aging subject and how he or she is influenced by the social and cultural construction of aging. Like gender, aging is socially and culturally constructed, and the experience of old age is largely influenced by a variety of social factors, such as race, gender, ethnicity, income, family structures, etc. The conception of aging as a social construction means that all of these social factors contribute to the experience, perception, and meaning of the elderly subject. Intersecting with these factors is the cultural construction of aging, which refers to a range of cultural representations, imageries,

and symbolism that constitute what old age means. These representations include cultural stereotypes, stigmas, and differences constructed to define the meaning of and maintain power relations around age in our society.

Many scholars have argued that there is a tremendous amount of negative and stigmatizing representations and stereotypes about old age in societies in North America (Horton, Baker, & Deakin, 2007; Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005), Asia (Ryan, Jin, Anas, & Luh, 2004; Yun & Lachman, 2006) and other parts of the world (Lamont, Swift, & Abrams, 2015). These stereotypes are often based on the biomedical symptoms of aging, such as bodily decline, cognitive disorder, and disability, as well as the neoliberal imagery of old age as anti-productive. These signifiers can shape an elderly subject's experience, self-esteem, selfhood, and identity (Rodin & Langer, 1980; Levy, 2003). In other words, if the biological understanding of aging conditions the bodily experience of the elderly subject, the social construction of aging conditions the subject's identification with the meaning of old age. A number of discourses have emerged from this model—active aging, positive aging, harmonious aging—all aimed at deconstructing and reconstructing the meaning of old age.

What these discourses have in common is the desire to emphasize the distinction between the biological and social dimensions of aging. For example, Gergen and Gergen (2016) give a radical definition of the signifier of aging:

There is nothing about changes in the human body that requires a concept of aging or of decline. There is no process of aging in itself; the discourse of aging is born of interpersonal relationships within a given culture at a given time. (p. 18)

Taking their position as an extreme one under the social constructionist spectrum, we can still detect the general hostility of these scholars towards the definition of aging as biological

decline. In other words, they exemplify a strong desire to identify aging as something that is beyond the biological, bodily, and developmental scheme. Even if aging means inevitable changes, if not deterioration, of bodily and cognitive ability, there is still a strong possibility to exert symbolic power over what it means to the subject.

In opposition to the often negative stereotype of old age based on its biological symptoms, the social constructivist approach also tries to recover a range of diverse representations of old age, moving beyond the subject's body to the cultural and symbolic meaning of old age. For example, a growing body of studies aim at breaking down the often negative stereotypes and stigmas surrounding patients of dementia by invoking a sense of the strength, capability, personhood, wisdom, spirituality and resilience of the elderly subjects (Harris & Keady, 2008; Kitwood, 1990). In anthropology, we can also find examples of studies that focus on uncovering a rich array of cultural interpretations of old age (Featherstone & Wernick, 1995). Instead of treating these representations as either positive or negative, these studies try to situate these representations in the larger context of historical and cultural specificities. For instance, Cole (1993) traces such a genealogy of cultural interpretations of the elderly in America and offers us a nuanced history of the social and cultural constructions of old age. Cole (1993) claims that what characterizes the nature of aging is paradox and ambiguity rather than science and categorization:

All cultures maintain ideals of aging and old age. Existentially vital ideals reflect the ineradicable paradoxes of later life: aging is a source of wisdom and suffering, spiritual growth and physical decline, honor and vulnerability. These ambiguities, and the ambivalent feelings they evoke, cannot be neatly clarified and placed into separate categories without violating the nature of aging itself. (p. xxv - xxvi)

To me, the social constructivist approach seems to support the idea that, despite bodily changes, the symbolic understanding of aging has the ability to empower the elderly with a sense of control, coherence and strength in their construction of self and identity, as well as to enrich the perception of old age in the community. The notion of decline is not only restricted to the biological and physiological sense, it is also considered as a bad, negative and disabling signifier for defining the meaning of aging. The social constructivist model thus puts more value on the subject's mind, spirituality, meaning, and symbolic construction of self than the bodily and biological process of the aging body.

The tension between the biological and neoliberal model, on the one hand, and the social constructivist model, on the other, seems to lie in the dichotomy between the bodily and social/cultural/symbolic dimension of aging. To address this dichotomy, I now turn to the critical disability perspective on aging, which is deeply rooted in a phenomenological understanding of the body.

The Critical Disability Perspective

In Wendell's (1996) critique of dominant feminist theory on disability, she highlights the danger of maintaining a sharp distinction between the biological and social construction of disability. Wendell (1996) references Haraway's (1991) paper on immune system discourse to demonstrate that theorizing the body at the level of discourse might actually risk rejecting and discounting the lived reality of the body—suffering, frustration and limitations—and its relationship to the development of the discourse (p. 44). Speaking from her own experience as a disabled feminist theorist, Wendell claims that, "In most postmodern cultural theorizing about the body, there is no recognition of...the hard physical realities that are faced by people with disabilities" (p. 45). Some social constructivist scholars on aging are also reluctant to highlight

the negative and painful aspects about the aging body because they are afraid of enhancing the already negative cultural stereotypes of old age. However, the rejection of the lived reality of an aging body, according to Wendell (1996), implies a bigger danger—it might actually reinforce the cultural ideals about the normal body and aging, and further stigmatize “the Other” group who fits outside the ideals and suffers from age-related illness and disabilities. Therefore, even though the discourse on positive aging begins with a good reason to resist cultural stereotypes of old age, it might appear to be counter-productive and ableist, limiting our knowledge and cultural representations of the diverse experiences of aging. The challenge, Wendell (1996) adds, then becomes how to “strike a balance between, on the one hand, thinking of a body’s abilities and limitations as given by nature and/or accident, as immutable and uncontrollable, and, on the other hand, thinking of them as so constructed by society and culture as to be controllable by human thought, will, and action” (p. 45).

To recognize the variety of lived experiences of the body requires a phenomenological approach to aging that acknowledges the subject’s embodied subjectivity. This offers us a framework to conceptualize aging as an embodied experience that challenges the Cartesian duality of body/self and body/mind. A number of studies on dementia try to draw upon the concepts of embodiment (Kontos & Martin, 2013) as a way to challenge the biomedical model of dementia that treats it as a disease of the brain resulting in a loss of self. These studies offer us a new range of diverse lived experiences and enrich our understanding of the embodied experience of dementia. Thus, rethinking aging as an embodied experience not only recognizes the active, positive and engaged bodies, but also gives voice to the painful, frustrating, disabling ones. This approach opens up possibilities for diverse representations of the lived reality of aging and helps deconstruct the discourse on the “normality” of the aging body and mind.

Leder's (1990) book *The Absent Body* further highlights the importance of embodiment for the study of aging. The book explores the relationship between body and subjectivity, and argues that such a relationship is not always symmetrical. In the book, Leder (1990) gives a detailed account of the body's tendency to disappear from our awareness and action—of how our body “moves off to the side” of consciousness (p. 69). He suggests that the “self-concealment” of our body is influenced by Western culture's tendency to “identify the essential self with the incorporeal mind” (p. 69). Thus, a phenomenological orientation to the body needs to “refute this view but account for its abiding power” (p. 69). In this way, we become aware of our body only when it brings us discomfort, pain, and suffering. The sense of embodiment and the weight of the body tend to appear only when our consciousness is forced to confront its limit and ambivalence. Thus, the construction of the “normality” of aging tends to mask the absence of body and portray a distorted and skewed version of its lived reality. To treat aging as an embodied experience, and to see embodiment in all of its manifestations, is to give the discourse on aging a more equitable and authentic ground of understanding.

Theoretical Framework: Conceptualizing Aging and Elder Care as Sticky Ambiguity

Some of the perspectives I describe above that treat old age as moribund, unproductive, and negative tend to orient to the question of aging as a problem to solve. Be it a biological decline, a demographic crisis, a social construction, or an embodied experience, the question of aging exemplifies a *problem-solving situation*, which reveals a collective desire to find the best answer and solution to the question. To me, one central theme that underlies the different perspectives is the question of *change* and *adjustment*. How does society address and adjust to a changing demographic? How does an individual come to terms with and adjust to a changing body? How does any social relationship evolve and adjust to the changing demands of care? The

solution to the question always remains elusive and ambiguous, yet the desire to find an answer continues to drive subjects to engage the problem of aging and care, forming a collective representation. Blum (2016a) describes the relation between the fundamental impasse and the collective desire for solving it in the following way:

The problem is then never solved as in an algorithmic model of a finite and determinate outcome but clarified as a site of ambiguity that can be engaged in ways that might produce *jouissance* for all participants in disclosing the situation as a common project that remains irresolute. (p. 264-5)

If we adopt this approach as a research method, the question then becomes: How do we perceive this orientation to ambiguity, irresolution, and impasse as a form of productive and meaningful social inquiry? Instead of treating any discourse as an articulation of a problem, Douglas's (1966) writing exemplifies a breakaway approach to conceptualizing an otherwise definitive practice as a site of ambiguity. Drawing on insights from her writing, I would like to re-conceptualize the problem of aging and elder care as a site of *sticky ambiguity* that animates the collective desire to orient to such ambiguity as a problem to solve. In other words, what makes different discourses on aging and elder care *collective* is precisely this *desire* to reduce ambiguity and anomaly. I will use Douglas' writing to formulate such a *desire* for the expression of order and the clarity of articulation as a way to *reveal* the sticky ambiguity of the phenomenon. The goal of my dissertation then is to make visible the various ways in which subjects formulate and engage with the problem—their tactics for dealing with sticky ambiguity. Such an inquiry will reveal the hidden struggles, conflicts, and tensions that are often concealed in individuals' speech as they search for a good way of representing the problem. I turn to Mary Douglas now to demonstrate how her theory on the notion of dirt sheds light on my approach to aging.

In the second chapter of her seminal work *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas (1966) argues that the notion of dirt in primitive culture and religion was not as simplistic as some theories suggest. She says:

In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea.

There is nothing fearful or unreasoning in our dirt-avoidance: it is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience. (p. 2)

She begins with William James' notion of medical materialism, which suggests that religious experience and ancient rules regarding defilement have a hygienic basis (p. 2). Rites are designed to give a practical guide to avoid defilement and diseases based on a clear system of distinguishing what is pure and impure, and different means of contagion. Therefore, primitive people are considered "medical materialists" who use practical knowledge of hygiene to justify their ritual actions (p. 33). However, as she explores further, Douglas realizes that these ritual practices are symbolic in nature (p. 36). To caution against the comparative view that our modern culture of hygiene is purely practical and the primitive ritual purification is symbolic, Douglas asks us to "re-examine our own ideas of dirt" (p.36).

Douglas (1966) continues to argue that the notion of dirt and the practice of dirt-avoidance in our modern culture are based on the knowledge of pathogenicity, which is only a recent phenomenon. Ideas of dirt go far back in our culture. Therefore, it is important to examine these ideas before they became dominated by bacteriology (p. 36). Here, Douglas introduces her thesis on the notion of dirt:

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies

two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity. (p. 36-37)

It is noteworthy to point out that by no means do I not intend to designate aging or the elderly subject as “dirt” or “waste” in the literal sense. I try to extract from Douglas’ writing a new orientation to dirt that posits it as an *essential* rather than an *excessive* element of an orderly system. Compared to other anthropologists, Douglas (1966) opposes the view that dirt is the simple excess of a system or “a residual category, rejected from our normal scheme of classifications” (p. 37). Whether in the form of impurity, danger, or profanity, dirt is often treated as that which does not belong to a system, that which is to be avoided and exterminated as “matter out of place” (p. 36). However, Douglas adds two conditions that help distinguish her notion of dirt from its conventional definition. Dirt, in her definition, is not just a by-product of a system—that which falls outside the system—but a by-product of a *systematic ordering*. In other words, dirt is not just “matter out of place”, but a *relationship* that defines what place is.

To return to our analysis of aging, I argue that both the biomedical and neoliberal notions of aging treat old age as something out of place in an orderly system marked by growth. In the biomedical model, aging—accompanied by physiological decline, disease and illness—threatens the system of the organism that is symbolized by health and wellness. The neoliberal ideology, which designates the elderly population as an unproductive segment of the labor market, also treats aging as a phenomenon that threatens the growth of an orderly market economy.

Analogously, these ideas about aging carry the same character as those about dirt and uncleanness.

Douglas (1966) explains that even though our definition of dirt seems to refer to all “rejected elements of ordered systems” (p. 37), it is still a relative idea. In other words, it is not the system that rejects the dirt that falls out of place, but the dirt itself that defines the system that it threatens to spoil. Therefore, she concludes that in order to study the notion of dirt, we need to begin with the notion of order. As I have discussed in the previous sections, the notion of aging is not constructed purely based on the physiological nature it entails. Be it the notion of decline or entropy, the discourse on aging is constructed against the dominant discourses on health, life, and growth. In other words, the notion of aging as a process of decline not only adopts its meaning from the biomedical definition, it also reveals *a symbolic system* that is dominated by idealizations and values about youth, productivity, performance, health, life, growth, and wellbeing.

In explaining the relation between dirt and order, Douglas (1966) defines dirt as situations of anomaly and ambiguity. She says, “When something is firmly classed as anomalous the outline of the set in which it is not a member is clarified” (p. 39). In a similar way, when aging becomes classed as anomalous and outside the dominant symbolic system, all the discourses on such an anomaly become further clarifications of the set to which aging is not a member of. In this way, we can conceptualize the discourses on successful, active, and positive aging as responses to addressing the anomaly and ambiguity of old age in the manner of what Douglas calls “systematic ordering and classification of matter” (p. 36). She defines this ordering as a “filtering mechanism” we use to assimilate new experiences into our stable structure of

assumptions, perceptions, and impressions—the same way culture works towards mediating the experiences of individuals under the “standardised values of a community” (p. 40).

In order to treat dirt as an essential part of this symbolic system of order, Douglas (1966) encourages us to examine the “filtering mechanism” of dirt (p. 38). To apply this framework to my study, I propose to shift the analytical focus from the symbolic system of health, life, and growth, to the problematic of aging that is conditioned by the phenomenon of change resulting from inevitable bodily decline, diseases, illness and death. This problematic functions like “matter out of place” that animate subjects to individualize and imagine different responses to their aging conditions a way to represent, negotiate, display and ground their orientations to the question of change and adjustment, the meaning of life, and anxiety over mortality. As Douglas (1966) and many other thinkers (Freud, 1913; Levinas, 1969; Deleuze, 1994) describe, confronting something as ambiguous as death, dirt, or aging is not always a pleasurable experience. We are most comfortable in the “stable world” we construct with a sense of recognition, depth, and permanence (Douglas, 1966, p. 37). We constantly adjust to changes as a way to maintain the order and pattern that give the world its structure and coherence. Both anomaly and ambiguity tend to spoil the pattern and order of this world, thus injecting a sense of danger and anxiety into our perceptions. Douglas (1966) defines anomaly as “an element which does not fit a given set or series” and ambiguity as “a character of statements capable of two interpretations” (p. 38). What is interesting is that she treats these two terms as the same in their “practical application” (p. 38). In other words, what is anomalous does not necessarily fall outside the boundary of a given category. In spoiling the pattern of the category, an anomaly essentially evokes a sense of ambiguity. And because ambiguity can be poetic and aesthetic,

confronting anomaly no longer entails pure avoidance and rejection, but could also become “stimulating” and enriching (p. 38).

Douglas’ definition of ambiguity adds an aesthetic dimension to the notion of dirt. To further conceptualize the notion of ambiguity, Douglas borrows a story from Sartre’s (1969) essay on stickiness. In the story, Sartre (1969) describes in vivid detail the sensation an infant feels when he plunges his hands into a jar of honey. This subjective experience of stickiness contests the categorical definition of liquid and solid, evoking a strong sense of ambiguity that pierces through this sense of in-between-ness, which results in a new learning of “the interrelation between self and other things” (Douglas, 1966, p. 39). The metaphor of this sticky ambiguity reminds us that classifications and experiences do not always fit and that “life does not conform to our most simple categories” (Douglas, 1966, p. 39). Both Sartre’s (1969) notion of stickiness and Douglas’ (1966) notion of ambiguity point us to the aesthetic and phenomenological dimension of experience that transcends any articulate form of interpretation. As Douglas puts it, “by settling for one or other interpretation, ambiguity is often reduced” (p. 40).

I would like to use Douglas’ notion of ambiguity as the guiding theoretical framework for my inquiry into the phenomenon of aging and elder care. My research thus treats each interpretation of aging and elder care as a beginning and seeks to re-begin and recover the ambiguity and impasse that it intends to reduce and mask. If we conceptualize aging as an experience that is essentially ambiguous—caught between the social, cultural, and symbolic order and bodily, phenomenological, and subjective experience—we can then carve a site of inquiry that examines how individuals address and respond to this stickiness. Such an orientation to aging and elder care recognizes the dynamic interrelation between individual subjectivity and

the structural and symbolic system. It also opens up the possibility of a phenomenological and aesthetic understanding of aging and elder care that encompasses both their universality and particularity.

In the example of the story about the elderly father and his children in the Introduction, the notion of stickiness emerges from both the elderly father's decision to conceal his illness and his children's response to the news. For the elderly father, the incurability of cancer is conceived as an anomaly that would spoil the stability of an idealized family, evoking a fear of burdening his children. He responds to the paradox of elder care as both meaningful and burdensome by choosing to exclude this anomaly from the family, as if hiding his condition from the children would keep the family functioning normally. However, the concealment of truth and the abjection of illness mask the stickiness of care. Once the mask is lifted, it triggers a dramatic shift in the daughter-in-law's response, from anger over the father's temporary absence to a strong sense of guilt over his permanent death. The sudden shift in emotion signifies a collapse of the seemingly symbolic system of the family, revealing the stickiness of elder care not only as a responsibility for maintaining the livelihood of the elderly subject, but also as a response to the shared temporality of human life. But the way in which the adult children respond to the death of the father illustrates another way to manage the orderly and symbolic system of the family. They transform the sticky feeling of guilt into an understanding of good care as removing the burden of labour from their elderly mother. Such a response, which seems manipulative, demonstrates their way of dealing with the ambiguity of elder care by treating it as a matter of managing a formula of exchange. Freud uses the term *Nachträglichkeit*, translated as "deferred action" or "afterwardsness," to refer to "a traumatic event that is only experienced emotionally at a later date when the individual is mature enough to appreciate its significance" (Phillips, 2008, p. 7). In

this case, the children's belated appreciation of the father's decision also shows the power of narrative to disrupt, represent, and re-create memories and the significance of past events as a way of bringing coherence to the subject's incomprehensible experience.

An Interpretive Methodology for Translating Impasse

If we conceptualize aging and elder care as a situation of sticky ambiguity, the research method for studying these lived experiences requires a phenomenological and interpretive approach. The interpretive methodology I use in this dissertation is influenced by a combination of theoretical perspectives that acknowledge the fundamental ambiguity in everyday situations. In this section, I introduce the three theoretical pillars that support this methodology—*cultural translation*, *reflexive sociology*, and *the topology of self*. The three pillars build upon the social theories of a number of thinkers (Simmel, 2010; Foucault, 1988; Arendt, 1998; Derrida, 1985, 1998; Benjamin, 1968; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Deleuze, 1988; Gadamer, 1989; Mead, 1934; Blum, 2003, 2011, 2016a), which cover a wide range of disciplines including classical sociology, ethnomethodology, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenology. Each of the three theoretical pillars addresses an important theoretical concern in this dissertation. Cultural translation theory helps me define my understanding of culture and my role as a bilingual researcher in the context of the study. My reference to reflexive sociology aims to address the gap between empirical and theoretical approaches to research. The formulation of the topology of self provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the relation between self and narrative. I will elaborate the method of interpretive narrative analysis that is formulated based on the theoretical pillars, and explain how I intend to use the method for analyzing the qualitative data collected for this study.

Cultural Translation: Interpreting the Impasse

All of the 24 interviews in this research project were collected in either Mandarin or Cantonese. After the data collection phase, a team of trained research assistants performed phonetic transcription of all the audio recordings into written Chinese. As I approach the written Chinese transcripts for case analysis and document my analysis in English, I inevitably encounter a translation process. When it comes to cross-cultural and bilingual research, we often think of cultural translation as a simple act of communication between two or more languages and cultures in order to make them understandable and comparable. However, such an understanding of cultural translation is problematic as it presupposes a set of cultural differences and risks homogenizing the notion of culture in the postcolonial context. In this section, I will critique this model of translation and introduce a more critical theory of cultural translation as an interpretive method for analyzing bilingual data.

This step is crucial both for myself as a bilingual (Mandarin Chinese and English) researcher and for justifying the interpretive method I propose. In other words, when I conduct my analysis of the narratives, my role is not to decipher the meaning in both languages and cultures with the goal of identifying some similarities and differences. Rather, my goal is to recognize that the impasse of translation is both *necessary* and *impossible*, and that the meaning of the narrative is both *irresolute* yet still *worth engaging*. Doing cultural translation thus becomes a hermeneutic task—an interpretative process that is oriented toward understanding rather than truth. The ambiguity of language that makes translation impossible is also what makes translatability a desirable trait that compels us to interpret the multiplicity of meanings in the subject's narratives. I turn now to a number of translation theories in order to show how

cultural translation can be used as a method for interpreting and unsettling our understanding of meaning and culture.

Let us first examine the traditional model of translation, which is founded on a dichotomy of foreignization and domestication and positions the original text and its translation in a hierarchal relationship. This model often views the practice of translation as derivative and the translated text as subordinate to the original. In cross-cultural research that adopts this model, translation enables the comparison of cultural differences, which always remains an objective that is foreclosed through the fiat of standardization. The presumed cultural differences are often seen as external conditions that impinge upon the psyche and behavior of the research subjects. And the practice of translation proposes that two different cultures can be translated into an equivalent and measurable discourse for comparison (Ilesanmi, 2009, p. 82). This model assumes the necessity of translation in the first place. Such necessity presupposes a difference between two texts, languages, and cultures that demand translation in order to turn the foreign into the familiar. However, such necessity also reveals an inherent paradox in translation—that the incommensurability of two languages makes the task of translation both necessary and impossible.

To treat translation as a binary and hierarchical process of turning the foreign into the familiar is both problematic and homogenizing. Bhabha (1995) criticizes the presumption of cultural difference underlying this model of translation as a “process of the enunciation of culture as ‘knowledgeable’, authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification” and a “process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity” (p. 206). Bhabha continues to remind us that the translation of culture does not

only occur on the linguistic level. Rather, it is at the “significatory boundaries of cultures, where meanings and values are (mis)read or signs are misappropriated” (p. 206). Therefore, cultural translation is always already an interpretive process that is oriented to the problem of signification and cultural identification. And to treat translation as a simple act of communication between an I and the Other undermines the postcolonial view of culture as a political struggle (p. 207). In my research, I acknowledge the poststructuralist and postcolonial critique of the traditional model of translation, and resist the interpretation of culture as either a unitary composition of customs, values, traditions, and ways of life, or a plurality of equal differences in the discourse of multiculturalism. Instead, I situate my analysis in the interpretive process of cultural translation as a method of revealing the *hybridity* of cultural narratives. Bhabha (1995) describes such a pursuit in the following way:

For a willingness to descend into that alien territory—where I have led you—may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism or multi-culturalism of the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between*, the space of the *entre* that Derrida has opened up in writing itself—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. (p. 209)

Benjamin (1968), in his seminal essay *The Task of the Translator*, offers another perspective on cultural translation. He theorizes the fundamental difference between languages as a “pure language,” which describes the essential yet impossible kinship among all languages. Claimed by many as the beginning of the concept of cultural translation, Benjamin’s theory also offers a critique of the binary structure of traditional translation (Buden, 2006). Benjamin moves

our attention from the hierarchy between the original and translated text to the fundamental relation between languages that bestows any text its translatability. He is not interested in thinking of translation as a process of communication or a derivative of the original, but rather as a concept that captures the “central reciprocal relationship between languages” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 74).

Expanding on Benjamin’s concept of pure language, Derrida redefines this reciprocal relationship as a mutual indebtedness between the translator and the original (Derrida, 1985). The translator is assumed to be indebted to the original and the original pleads for a translation for its own survival and growth. The debt binds the translator and the original together, but at the same time, it is also a debt that can never be repaid. Referring back to the metaphor of the Tower of Babel, Derrida (1985) suggests that this debt is both a gift and a curse by God—a kingdom which is at once “promised and forbidden where the languages will be reconciled and fulfilled” (p.191). Derrida identifies this indebtedness as the impasse that characterizes both the necessity and impossibility of translation. To Derrida, the impasse expresses itself in the form of a marriage contract that “promises to produce a child whose seed will give rise to history and growth” (p. 191). However, the promise is marked by its lack, its intactness, and its “virginity” (p. 192). The pure language described by Benjamin (1968) can only be promised but never obtained. This “untouchable” and “only promised” relationship between languages drives the desire and desirability of translation (Derrida, 1985, p. 191).

Derrida’s reading of Benjamin’s text echoes his own relation to language. In a similar way as Bhabha (1995), Derrida (1998) condemns any essentialist rendering of language and universalization of differences as “a subservience and hegemony” (p. 23). Through a painful recounting of his personal relation to linguistic oppression and colonial expropriation, Derrida

(1998) reminds us of the “essential alienation in language” and the “invisible yet powerful Other” in our cultural identity (p. 30). Evoking a psychoanalytical view of language, Derrida claims that every language is a separation from the mother, nature, and therefore truth:

The language called maternal is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable. To inhabit: this is a value that is quite disconcerting and equivocal; one never inhabits what one is in the habit of calling inhabiting. There is no possible habitat without the difference of this exile and this nostalgia. (p. 58)

The only way to return home from the “essential alienation in language” is to *promise*—to promise a language that precedes all language as a deconstruction of *Self* and *Other*:

This appeal to come gathers language together in advance. It welcomes it, collects it, not in its identity or its unity, not even in its ipseity, but in the uniqueness or singularity of a gathering together of its difference to itself; in difference *with itself* [avec soi] rather than difference *from itself* [d’avec soi]. (Derrida, 1998, p. 68-9).

By treating cultural difference as natural and given, the conventional model of cross-cultural studies conceals the impasse of translation characterized by its necessity and impossibility. Yet it is such an impossibility that makes the translation process a necessary and worthy pursuit. Derrida (1998) describes this necessary yet impossible pursuit as a quest for justice and search for *a* language that is not colonial or hegemonic. However, such a quest can only be *promised* and never *resolved*—“a desire without a horizon” and “a promise that no longer expects what it waits for” (p, 73). All of these theorists acknowledge the notion of language and culture as a continuous struggle, and highlight the importance of cultural translation as a responsibility and an important means to unsettle meanings and resist the essentialization of cultural differences. In this dissertation, I strive to do justice to the stories that

I collected in my research through an interpretive method that is responsible to this view of cultural translation. In other words, my desire to interpret the meaning of others' narratives is not driven by a pursuit of truth, but rather by a quest for justice in what Fanon (1963) describes as "the zone of *occult instability* where the people [postcolonial subjects] dwell" (p. 227).

Reflexive Sociology: The *Plenum* and the Lost Phenomenon

My view of culture and translation is oriented toward a resistance of the homogenization and standardization of cultural identities. Such an orientation requires an interpretive and reflexive approach to the nuances and richness of the phenomenon under study. However, many empirical studies on the transnational family as I mentioned earlier in the chapter tend to adopt a quantitative methodology that reduces rather than engages the ambiguity of the phenomenon in an attempt to map out the diversity of lived experiences under the statistically defined category of "Chinese Canadians." The methodological difference between quantitative and qualitative research continues to raise the question of how to reconcile, if possible, particularity and universality. In this section, I will introduce the school of reflexive sociology as a complementary method to quantitative research for capturing the phenomenological nuances of social inquiry.

The significance of reflexivity is emphasized by many social theorists as a critique of positivist research paradigms. Bourdieu (1992) points out the weakness of un-reflexive research in the following way:

How artificial the ordinary oppositions between theory and research, between quantitative and qualitative methods, between statistical recording and ethnographic observation, between the grasping of structures and the construction of individuals can be. These alternatives have no function other than to provide a justification for the

vacuous and resounding abstractions of theoreticism and for the falsely rigorous observations of positivism, or, as the divisions between economists, anthropologists, historians and sociologists, to legitimize the limits of competency: this is to say that they function in the manner of a social censorship, liable to forbid us to grasp a truth which resides precisely in the relations between realms of practice thus arbitrarily separated. (p. 27-8)

On the surface, Bourdieu's warning encourages interdisciplinary research that seeks to overcome conventional disciplinary boundaries. With a closer reading, Bourdieu's message challenges the very belief that social science could somehow help us obtain the truth of our social reality. He seems to claim that such truth essentially resides in-between realms of practice, but that in-betweenness is and should always be called into question with critique and reflection, in the same way as what Benjamin (1968) and Derrida (1998) suggest for cultural translation. In Bourdieu's words, the real problem for social science research is the opposition between "methodologism" and "theoreticism", both of which are inclined to exclude a reflexive relation to their own constitutive frameworks, such as a lack of reflection and the critique of the methodology itself. Bourdieu's warning should not stop us from choosing any particular methodology, but it serves as a reminder of the need to be accountable for our own research. He urges us to pay attention to and become reflexive about the impasse in any research problem that is often concealed in the discourse. Echoing his view, I consider this element of reflexivity and the engagement with the problem as a foundational theoretical pillar of my research method.

To address the gap between "methodologism" and "theoreticism", I turn now to insights from Garfinkel's (1991, 1996) ethnomethodology, which believes that the phenomenon being studied should take precedence over any pre-established social theory. I will begin with a

critique of what Garfinkel calls formal analysis in order to show what gets lost when research fails to engage the impasse of the phenomenon.

Garfinkel's ethnomethodology conceives of each individual as a social actor who is oriented to a set of norms, but whose action always reveals phenomenological details that are lost in formal analysis. He positions ethnomethodology as a challenge and complement to the enterprise of social science and all the "great achievements" of "formal analysis" (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 5-6). Formal analysis demonstrates the reductive positivist approach that I described in the Introduction, which conceives of social phenomenon as "describable recognizable recurrences, of generality, and of comparability of these productions of ordinary activities" (Garfinkel, 1996, p.6). Referencing Durkheim, Garfinkel says that immortal and ordinary society after all consists of "hopelessly circumstantial overwhelming details of everyday activities—the plenum, the plenty, the plenilunium" (p. 7). However, the orderly analytic devices of formal analysis invariably lose grip on these phenomenological details:

Just-in-any-actual-case immortal ordinary society is a wonderful beast. Evidently and just in any actual case, God knows how it is put together. The principal formal analytic devices currently in hand, of paying careful attention to the use, the design, and administration of generic representational theorizing—models, for example, get a job done that with the same technical skills in administering them lose the very phenomenon that they profess. (p. 7)

Garfinkel (1996) describes the lost phenomenon as "elusive", adding that it can only be discovered, but not imagined (p. 8). These discoverable and observable procedures—the impasse and the "What More" of any representations—are the objects of ethnomethodological studies. Aligning my method with his view, I begin my analysis with what formal analysis has

achieved— “the witnessably recurrent details of ordinary everyday practice,” and learn from them to discover the procedures, tensions, and problems that underline and constitute the subjects’ lived realities “only in and as lived doings” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 9).

Arendt (1998) also points out the lost phenomenon in our understanding of the human condition. In response to the rising enterprise of liberal economists and their accompanying scientific and statistical tools, Arendt (1998) criticizes such an approach to studying human phenomenon as a “communistic fiction” with “one interest of society as a whole in economics,” which devours the sphere of intimacy (p. 43). In a similar way as Garfinkel, Arendt (1998) calls for a return to the sphere of intimacy with all of its unruly details, specificities and “rare deeds” (p. 42).

The school of reflexive sociology consists of a small group of sociologists whose works respond to the method of ethnomethodology, and are driven by the quest for a deeper and stronger method to study social phenomenon (Raffel & Sandywell, 2016). These scholars have proposed a reflexive method, under the name *theorizing* or *analysis*, to examine how individuals orient to and respond to various social phenomenon as “problem-solving situations” (Blum, 2003). In particular, the body of works under this influence are deeply indebted to the method of social inquiry developed by McHugh, Stanley, Foss, and Blum (1974) in their seminal work *On the Beginning of Social Inquiry* and Blum’s (2003, 2010, 2016a) later works on the notion of ethical collision, Grey Zone, and impasse analysis. The social theory developed by these thinkers offers a unique integration of interests in social phenomena and continental philosophy. Bonner (2016) offers a vivid explanation of this school of thought in the following way:

Good troublesome company⁹ made it possible for Blum, McHugh, and colleagues to recognize that the inadequacy of all beginning (to speak, inquire) can be transformed by a commitment to conversation, a commitment that makes it possible to address impossible first questions. Taking seriously the question of reflexive integrity did not have to mean a denial of the inadequacy of speaking. What was begun was a way of making ‘fundamental scholarly inquiry, such as “what are we and how should we live”’ (McHugh, 1992: 108), an ever-present, local and necessary aspect of inquiry. (p. 258)

Such a reflexive inquiry regards conversations and narratives as speech acts and collective representations that reveal different relationships that the subjects establish to the question of truth and meaning. An impasse, therefore, represents the enigma that is concealed and hidden in any speech act, practice, and conduct that makes possible a conversation and a discursive situation as a problem to solve. The goal of this type of interpretive method is not to reduce the impasse, but to reveal it for further inquiry. Blum (2003) traces this tradition of theorizing to Plato and says:

In this world of images and beliefs, when the object in its various guises is apprehended by persons with their varying beliefs, ethical collisions appear (to the theorists in contrast to the believer) as actual and palpable figures that mark the fundamental ambiguity of the scene of representation (Plato, chapter XXIV, VI, 510, 225). Plato’s metaphor of the Divided Line advises us that the ascent to theorizing only begins when we are able to

⁹In the original article, Bonner (2016) describes this term: “While their topic is collaboration, the chapter shows that the taken for granted resource is good troublesome company, a resource developed as a way to respond to the impossible problem of reflexive integrity” (p. 241).

conceive of the collisions between different beliefs as themselves material images of the discourse of the object, and so, as material for further inquiry. (p. 49)

By being reflexive, the theorist examines both the symptoms of the situations (what the subjects do) and looks for the impasse that exposes the structure of ambiguity (what the subjects desire) as a way to develop a relation to the imaginary and interpretive regime to which the subject is oriented. In Simmel's later works (2010), he formulates this desire as both what conditions the subject and what drives the subject for more:

We are continually orienting ourselves, even when we do not employ abstract concepts, to an "over us" and an "under us," to a right and a left, to a more or less, a tighter or looser, a better or worse. The boundary, above and below, is our means for finding direction in the infinite space of our worlds. Along with the fact that we have boundaries always and everywhere, so also we are the boundaries. For insofar as every content of life—every feeling, experience, deed, or thought—possesses a specific intensity, a specific hue, a specific quantity, and a specific position in some order of things, there proceeds from each content a continuum in two directions, towards its two poles; content itself thus participates in each of these two continua, which collide in it and which delimits. (p. 1)

Thus, the desire for transcending the boundary that conditions the subject reveals itself in an ethical collision that grounds the subject's particularity. Simmel's theorizing of the subject helps us move from treating aging as an external condition to formulating it as an oriented action. This perspective permits us to conceive the subject not only as someone who is limited by his or her condition, but also as one who possesses the capacity and desire to challenge, negotiate, and

transcend the limit. This formulation of the subject brings us to the third theoretical pillar of my dissertation—the phenomenon of the divided self.

The Topology of the Self: The Problem of the Divided Self

The subject is always already a dialectical relation. Departing from its Enlightenment meaning as the Cartesian *cogito* which presupposes self-consciousness as a unified agent, many theorists have come to construct the subject as an ontologically divided phenomenon, in the way of doubling into two perspectives such as Mead (1934) distinguished between the “I” and a “me”. According to Mead (1934), the self is a social structure that is formed by both an “I” — the subject’s orientation to others—and a “me” —the subject’s orientation to others’ orientation to the “I” (p. 174). How to reconcile the two parts of the self? Mead points to memory—the remembrance of what a subject has said and done—as the “simplest way of handling the problem” of this division of the self (p. 175). In other words, the “I” and the “me” cannot co-exist in the present. There is a fundamental time lag between the two parts of the self, which is described by Mead as “I cannot turn around quick enough to catch myself” (p. 175). Therefore, the “I” could only enter the present through memory and in the form of a “me” who is being remembered, thought of, and spoken about.

So that the "I" in memory is there as the spokesman of the self of the second, or minute, or day ago. As given, it is a "me," but it is a "me" which was the "I" at the earlier time. (p. 175)

Since the “I” is not directly given in our present experience and can only be accessed in the form of the “me” in memory as “a historical figure,” narratives of one’s past become the only way to recover the subject’s “present experience” (p. 174). To Mead, the problem between past and present seems to lie in the subject-object divide. If the self is conceived of as both the subject

and the object, how can one comprehend the entirety of the self without overcoming this ontological divide?

Bataille (1992) offers a version of the divided self by formulating it as a topological unity, both divided and connected at the same time. We can only know ourselves (subjects) as we see ourselves “from the outside as another” (p.31). To put it in Mead’s words, we can only understand the “I” through the “me” and vice versa. Both Mead and Bataille describe the self as both a subject and an object. Such a notion of self can be best explained through the structure of topological unity, in which the inside and the outside remain divided yet connected at the same time as in the figure of a Möbius strip. Deleuze (1988) uses the concept of *folding* to describe this topological self. He translates the figure of subjectivization as the creation of an inner space interior to the person where the outside is folded back inside in a way that creates a doubling. This doubling allows a relation to oneself to emerge and to constitute an inside in which the folding of the outside forms an absolute meaning.

The access to the *co-extensive inside* can only be gained through memory, narrative, and stories. Why do storytelling and narratives have the power for such a reconciliation? How can we orient to language and narrative as an inquiry into the impasse of the divided self? In the mid-1970s, Lacan further theorizes the topological self with the more advanced topological structure of a Borromean knot. He situates the self in the Symbolic-Imaginary-Real triad as a way to illustrate the interrelation of the three registers as well as the fundamental lack in the subject. In his seminal essay on the mirror stage, Lacan (1977) describes the emergence of subjectivity in a child as the moment when the child sees the reflection of the self in a mirror. Based on this phenomenon, he claims that the subject has no subjectivity before the Freudian Oedipal stage. Born into the world, the child is immersed in his or her relation to the mother without a sense of

separation of subject and object. However, the moment the child sees his or her own image as a reflection in a mirror, a complete image of the self emerges, which also exposes the child to the fragmentation of his or her body and experience. Lacan (1977) says, “The mirror stage...manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality” (p .4).

This moment is critical in the development of subjectivity as it not only offers the subject an image of unity, it also exposes the subject to the sense of fragmentation and alienation that he or she immediately experiences. This lack of totality and wholeness is compensated by its mirror image, but also remains in the subject’s mind as a persistent lack. The fulfillment of this lack can only come from outside, therefore the fundamental otherness of the self. In this way, Lacan formulates the subject as the discourse of the Other (Barnard, 2000, p.72). The reflection in the mirror fulfills the lack of the subject and continues to govern the “subject’s entire mental development” as the imaginary (Lacan, 1977, p. 4).

As the child matures, she enters the symbolic order with the hope that she can one day find her completeness as reflected in the mirror. The system of language, culture, and social norms gives the subject the illusion and identification that resembles the imaginary self, but the very fact that the symbolic order is always other than the self betrays the subject’s pursuit of completeness. The lack in the subject is not created by the loss of something. Rather, the lack is created in the subject’s imaginary conceived as a whole and complete. This fundamental lack manifests itself in the form of desire that reflects both the subject’s pursuit of completion in the imaginary and the inherent otherness, alienation, and incompleteness of the symbolic order. Therefore, the paradox of insatiable desire is the fundamental problem of the divided self.

Lacan's conception of language as the symbolic system that is always other to the self is similar to Derrida's (1998) description of language as essentially alienating. The subject uses the symbolic order as a means to satisfy the lack in her subjectivity. Therefore, storytelling creates a center of narrative gravity to fulfill the lack of the subject. The subject is always already a discursive relation that reveals the dialectics between the symbolic and the imaginary.

In Lacanian language, Blum (2010) describes the divided self as assuming two roles at the same time—an insider of the symbolic order who is limited by speech and language, and an outsider who is conditioned by the imaginary order in the form of a desire for the *Real*. According to Blum (2010), such a pursuit will always remain irresolute and split. Self-knowledge is only achieved in the form of the subject's desire for such knowledge.

Here, we begin to appreciate the elementary form of the symbolic order in the desire of the insider for an exteriority that cannot be satisfied empirically, needing the artifice of simulation, the imaginary of an outside position by the insider reflecting the desire of the subject for the self-knowledge whose realization must always remain irresolute. (p. 36)

In this way, the narrator is always already split between “one who speaks and the one who observes this speech” (p. 36). The *ideal speaker*, who personifies the imaginary desire for the collectivization of discourse, serves as a necessary reference to whom the speaker desires to orient to as a reflexive subject. The *ideal speaker* represents our desire for recognition and affirmation that our point of view belongs to a collective discourse as if it were universal. In Blum's (2010) words, possessing such a desire for self-knowledge already constitutes the speaker as a reflexive subject:

The ideal speaker then becomes not necessarily reflective in fact, but one personifying the desire to orient and speak reflectively rather than as something other. In other words, the human can only be reflective by imitating the desire to be reflective. (p. 36)

If the subject is forever split in topological form and the pursuit of self-knowledge is always limited by the symbolic order, how can we ground our interpretation of these narratives in a meaningful way? How can we use self-narrated accounts to reveal the divided self and to conceive the speaker as a reflexive subject? I turn now to the method of interpretive narrative analysis and clarify my position on the role of narratives in relation to the subject's sense of self.

Interpretive Narrative Analysis: Speech as a Problem-Solving Situation

Based on the three theoretical pillars, I conceive speech and narrative in the form of storytelling as a pathway to understanding how a subject makes sense, justifies, takes a stand, and rationalizes his or her actions. As theorized by Arendt (1961), speech is an act that makes coherent and intelligible one's self as both an internal subject and an oriented actor to an external social order (p. 8). The act of storytelling serves two purposes: first, it helps the subject to reconcile with the otherwise fragmentary realities of the past and the future; second, through collective remembrance of the past, it carries strong political implications for inheritance and the continuity of history. In this way, interpretive narrative analysis treats narrative as the subject's attempt to reconcile the divided self, and aims to make observable his or her orientation to values and idealization in search for the best solution. This method of analysis does not concern *what is said* or the *surface meaning* of the narrative. Rather, it seeks to analyze the "grounds of whatever is said—the foundations that make what is said possible, sensible, conceivable" (McHugh et al., 1974, p. 2), and the "modes of intention" as the ground of meaning (Benjamin, 1968, p. 74). With this method, all of the participants in my research can be seen as struggling to understand

their life situations in their speech. Their stories and narratives become “equipment for living” (Burke, 1973) and “tactics” (de Certeau, 1984) for dealing with the sticky ambiguity of aging, elder care, and family relationships. The method will then help me make visible their formulation of and engagement with the problem. Such an inquiry will reveal the hidden struggles, conflicts, and tensions that are often concealed in the individuals’ speech as they search for a good way of representing the problem.

Data and Secondary Analysis

This dissertation will be a secondary analysis of the qualitative data collected during my research project with the CCNCTO. The title of the original research project is *Understanding Tensions in Elder Care among Chinese Canadian Families in Toronto*. It was supported by the Community Investment Funding Program of the City of Toronto and coordinated by the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter (CCNCTO). I worked on the project as the Principal Investigator with two Co-Investigators—Weijia Tan from the University of Toronto and Shunxian Ou from York University.

Using Heaton (2008) as a guide, secondary analysis is defined as “the re-use of pre-existing qualitative data derived from previous research studies. These data include material such as semi-structured interviews, responses to open-ended questions in questionnaires, field notes and research diaries” (p. 34). In his words, the purpose of secondary analysis is to “investigate new or additional research questions” or to “verify the findings of previous research” (Heaton, 2008, p. 35). One of the key criteria for determining the quality of secondary analysis is the researchers’ involvement in collecting the data. In explaining different modes of secondary analysis, Heaton (2008) distinguishes three kinds based on the nature of the data used in the research—public, independently collected data, informal shared data, and researchers’ self-

collected data (p. 35). In this research, the data I use for secondary analysis was collected by me as part of a research team. Therefore, I have direct and close involvement with the research planning and data collection.

Another key criterion for assessing secondary analysis is the degree to which “the aims of the primary and secondary work converge or diverge” (Heaton, 2008, p. 39). In my case, the secondary analysis that I carry out is considered as “supplementary analysis,” in which “a more in-depth analysis of an emergent issue or aspect of the data, that was not addressed or was only partially addressed in the primary study, is undertaken” (Heaton, 2008, p. 39). Given the relationship I had with the community organization under which the project was carried out as described earlier, I do not consider the analysis provided for the purpose of the project sufficient and thoughtful. Even though I was responsible for planning, designing, and carrying out the research, the scope of the data analysis was limited because of its collaborative nature and a limited project timeline. Therefore, a more in-depth and comprehensive secondary analysis of the primary data is necessary, meaningful, and timely.

The issues concerning secondary analysis mainly focus on the “problem of data fit,” the “problem of not having been there,” and the “problem of verification” (Heaton, 2008, p. 40). The first two issues are not relevant to my research as I was directly involved in the primary research. The last issue mainly concerns research with a positivist orientation. In terms of ethics, the permission for secondary analysis by member(s) of the research team was included in both the ethics protocol and the informed consent forms signed by all the participants. Therefore, there is no ethical issue regarding my usage of the primary data for secondary analysis.

In this project, convenience and purposive sampling strategies were used to recruit participants with the assistance of a number of community partners and local media. In total, 24

participants were recruited and interviewed. Twelve of them were elders who identified themselves as Chinese, 65 years old or above, who lived with their adult children. The other 12 were adult children who identified themselves as Chinese, and lived with at least one elder who was 65 years old or above at the time of the interview. Among the 12 elders, six were male and the other six were female. Among the 12 adult children, four were male and the other eight were female. The participants represented five districts in the Greater Toronto Area and its suburbs—Downtown, North York, Scarborough, Toronto East, and Richmond Hill.

The project was approved and supervised by the Human Participants Review Subcommittee (HPRC) at York University. All identifiable information was removed during the transcription stage. Therefore, all names and places used in the transcripts are pseudonyms of the real participants. All of the audio recordings were phonetically transcribed into written Chinese, including simplified Chinese and traditional Cantonese spelling. The transcription was conducted by trained research assistants who followed strict guidelines for phonetic transcription.

My team and I have already conducted a detailed analysis of all the interviews with the conventional method of content analysis and critical discourse analysis. All of the empirical findings can be found in the project report¹⁰. Therefore, the secondary analysis in this dissertation will not repeat the same analytical process. The goal of the secondary analysis is to take the empirical findings as the beginning of a deeper phenomenological inquiry with the interpretive method I have described in this chapter. We can consider the following three chapters as in-depth case studies of a few stories that exemplify the problem-solving situation of a particular theme. The selection of these problem-solving situations is based on a thematic understanding of the narratives. After analyzing all the interviews, I have observed a few

¹⁰ Download the full report at <http://www.ccnctoronto.ca/projects/elder-care-research-project/>

recurrent themes that underlie the experience of most participants, such as the question of ambivalence, inheritance, memory, adjustment, loss, death, autonomy, and dependency. These themes are fundamentally complex and ambiguous. Each participant demonstrates his or her unique understanding of and orientation to the theme. The different stories together form an interesting conversation about what constitutes the experience of transnational elder care and the various tensions and conflicts in the relationship. In each of the following three chapters, I introduce a theme in further detail and note how it is often interpreted in empirical literature. I then use two to three stories to demonstrate how my method attempts to take a conclusion already made in the empirical literature as the beginning of a new type of inquiry.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STRUGGLE WITH AMBIVALENCE

The feeling of ambivalence is a well-documented phenomenon in both parent-child and transnational relationships. The struggle with ambivalence is also a recurring theme among all the interviews despite the participants' different life situations. The study of ambivalence has a much longer academic history in psychology than social science. In some research on transnational and diasporic family relationships, such a phenomenon is often treated as an empirical conclusion, rather than a problem that invites further theorizing and critical inquiry. The goal of this chapter is to analyze narratives about the feeling of ambivalence in different situations, and to create a dialogue that treats this common phenomenon as an occasion that reveals the subject's desire and idealization about aging, family, and care. Such an inquiry treats ambivalence not only as an empirical observation, but also as a response to the sticky ambiguity of aging and diasporic consciousness among transnational elders. My analysis situates the feeling of ambivalence in the diasporic space of in-between-ness, and reveals a process of meaning-making and cultural formation.

The Ambivalent Theoretical Pursuit of Ambivalence

The theoretical pursuit of ambivalence yields an ambivalent result. I will highlight two major paradigms in the literature on ambivalence, and lay out the theoretical framework for my analysis of two cases that illustrate the participants' struggle with ambivalence. One of the most prevalent themes in research on aging family relations in the last decade is emotional complexity. Such complexity gives rise to the development of two major conceptual paradigms—one based on *solidarity* and the other on *ambivalence* (Silverstein and Giarrusso, 2010). As aging families become more diverse, global, fluid, and unpredictable as a result of different kinship structures,

reduced fertility, and increased rates of divorce, how to represent aging families becomes a more challenging question. This conceptual challenge invites diverse empirical approaches, all of which seek to find an overarching structure or framework to capture the complexity of the phenomenon.

The development of the *solidarity* paradigm in intergenerational relationships dates back to the last several decades. The central idea posits that an intergenerational family functions as a tie that binds members together with shared sentiments, values, attitudes, and behaviors (Bengtson, Biblarz, & Roberts, 2002). The belief that a good and functioning family should be tight-knit, harmonious, and conflict-free still circulates in the public imaginary as a cliché. However, most of us can relate to the reality that few intimate relationships can be completely conflict-free. Conflicting emotions, attitudes, and feelings often co-exist, resulting in a state of ambivalence. Therefore, the more contemporary *ambivalence* paradigm has become increasingly prevalent due to how it complements the solidarity paradigm. Social and behavioral researchers often use the notion of ambivalence to conceptualize and measure the complexities of family relationships (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010, p. 1040). In their review of several research projects, Silverstein and Giarrusso (2010) found that the concept of ambivalence functions more like a quantitative metric than a theoretical framework. Ambivalence is used as an indicator of *how complex* family relations are, and most studies focus on identifying *factors* that can *predict* adult children's ambivalence towards their parents and in-laws. In other words, ambivalence is conceptualized as an emotional indicator that describes the simultaneity of positive and negative feelings and emotions. The study of ambivalence thus represents, at best, "a quantitative analysis that provides an empirical assessment of the issues at hand" (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010, p. 1055). Such an approach echoes my mention of Bourdieu's (1992), Garfinkel's (1991, 1996),

and Arendt's (1998) critique of *formal analysis* at the expense of a phenomenological understanding of the *inherently* complex, ambiguous, and paradoxical human condition. This explains why the concept of *ambivalence* has a long history in psychology, psychiatry, and social psychology (Raulin, 1984; Weigert, 1991; Smelser, 1998; Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Brown & Farber, 1951; Kaplan, 1972), which tend to treat the phenomenon as a problem that pertains to the individual psyche.

Sociologists often criticize the lack of social context in the psychological analysis of ambivalence. As a result, they try to formulate a notion of sociological ambivalence by emphasizing the link between the individual and society. Developed in the 1960s (Coser, 1966; Merton & Barber, 1963), the sociological approach positions an ambivalent subject in a “simultaneous experience of incompatible normative expectations, which often specify obligatory thoughts or behavior” (Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003, p. 1056). Most of the studies under this paradigm look at issues that link individual sentiments to their root causes in sociologically structured norms and arrangements—such as role conflicts, cross-pressures, role strain, and conflicting demands. These social causes are often discussed in relation to other sociological situations, such as gender, in-law relationships, interdependence, and caregiving practices.

Both the psychological and sociological paradigms treat ambivalence as a *symptom* of the simultaneous existence of conflicting feelings, emotions, and attitudes, and both try to answer the question of what *causes* such ambivalence. As I will mention in my first case study, some research on transnational families also tends to use ambivalence as an empirical conclusion to describe the observed complexity of individual experiences. However, what makes ambivalence interesting and stimulating as an inherent human condition and an impasse that conditions most

intimate relationships requires further reflection. How do we engage ambivalence as an integral part of the lived experience of the transnational and elderly subject? How can we move beyond the interpretation of ambivalence as a description of contradiction and conflicting emotions to treat it as a phenomenological lived experience that has to be oriented to by subjects in any intimate relationship? In the following two case studies, I seek to demonstrate my approach to these questions. Instead of looking for the root cause of the symptom of ambivalence, my analysis focuses on the effect of ambivalence on the elderly subject's lived experience with their family members as a source of anxiety and melancholy, often evoked by a deep sense of displacement, the lure of nostalgia, and the haunting idealization of an intimate family.

Case One: The Struggle between Staying and Going Back

In this case, we examine a common phenomenon that is often observed in transnational family studies from the perspectives of two participants—the struggle between staying in the immigrant country and going back to the homeland. We look at both how the literature formulates the problem, and how two participants formulate the notion of ambivalence as a problem to solve. My analysis of their narratives reveals that ambivalence not only originates from a choice between two places, as implied by the literature, but also points to a lack of intimate relationship to place, family, and the present. I hope to demonstrate how this analysis makes observable the problem that is often under-developed in empirical analysis. I also provide some references to diaspora studies to further frame my orientation to ambivalence.

In transnational family research, the elderly immigrant often ponders the question: Shall I stay in this foreign country or go back to my homeland? Bhabha (1992) describes this feeling of the diasporic uncanny as “unhomely” (p. 141). The desire for the homeland also reminds us of Safran's (1991) description of diasporic consciousness and the myth of return. Despite the

ambiguous character of this struggle, some studies that examine this tension in the transnational family often treat the struggle as a functional one, assuming it to be driven primarily by changes in external conditions. For example, a recent study by Mandell and her colleagues (2015) conducted focus groups with 91 immigrant seniors from mixed ethnic backgrounds in Toronto and found similar expressions of ambivalence. The elderly parents in the research often offered their adult children as much help as they could in terms of financial assistance, child care, and domestic housekeeping, for as long as they could. These elders also rejected the idea of treating care as a form of labor or work that deserved any kind of compensation. According to Mandell et al. (2015), caring for the family entails a “family-first” ethic, intimate relationships, “an expression of love, nurturing, affection, and commitment rather than a set of tasks and responsibilities” (p. 87). However, these elders often struggle with the mixed feelings of loneliness and isolation due to social conditions, on the one hand, and pride and happiness due to their love of the family, on the other. The researchers conclude that these mixed feelings cause the seniors to feel ambivalent when they assess their own lives (p. 93).

It is common to find studies like this that often try to look for the “cause” and “factors” that lead to the symptom of ambivalence, such as conflicting values in the cultural system and tensions in normative role expectations (Morawska, 1987), differences in gender roles and conceptualizations of motherhood (Segura, 1991), and opposing family norms (Grzywacz et al., 2006). In other words, these studies tend to treat the spatial, social, and cultural boundaries between two or more nation-states as a central site for generating those conflicting, contradictory and mixed emotions that characterize the feeling of ambivalence. However, transnational experience is not an either/or relationship between separate places and nation-states. Rather, it encompasses a simultaneity of separateness and connectedness (Simmel, 1994). It is also

inherently resistant to “fixed binaries” and always remains “in a perpetual state of flux, related to and yet not originating from or causing other movements, spaces, or entities” (Mitchell, 1997, p. 536). Yet studies that hope to delineate a *typology* of ambivalence (Kivisto & Vecchia-Mikkola, 2013) often fail to recognize the “de-territorialization” of transnational subjectivity, therefore leaving the dialectical and sticky relationship among the sites of the homeland, country of emigration, and family unexamined.

On the other hand, diaspora studies and theories about diasporic subjectivity orient to the notion of ambivalence differently. Diasporic scholars treat ambivalence not as a symptom of transnational migration, but rather as an inherent character of diasporic consciousness, and a “culturally inscribed” site for the production and negotiation of diasporic subjectivities, meanings and resistance to the narratives of the nation-state (Bhabha, 1990; Clifford, 1994; Mitchell, 1997). Bhabha (1990) describes diasporic narration as a form of resistance and a process of cultural production:

In this sense, then, the ambivalent, antagonistic perspective of nation as narration will establish the cultural boundaries of the nation so that they may be acknowledged as ‘containing’ thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased, and translated in the process of cultural production. (p.4)

What I hope to recognize in the following case studies is that the ambivalent subject always already occupies two spaces at one and the same time. The struggle between staying here and going back does not merely concern the separation between “here” and “there,” but also points to the question of how de-territorialized subjectivity grounds itself in the highly localized space of the family. To many transnational subjects, such a question manifests in the expression of ambivalence, which I would like to treat as a symptom of a deeper problem that the subjects

are trying to solve and work through. By examining the various ways in which the subjects represent ambivalence as a problem to solve, we can attempt to open the *door* to a “richer and livelier” significance of the phenomenon of the transnational family (Simmel, 1994).¹¹

The Story of Mrs. Jin: Home and the Aura of Family

This is Canada. First of all, this is other’s home, other’s home, other’s home, do you remember? This is not your home!¹² (Jin, L., interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

Mrs. Jin is an elderly woman who immigrated to Toronto from Beijing, China in 2000 under the sponsorship of her son. She now lives with her son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren in Scarborough. To Mrs. Jin, a home can only be where a person originally comes from. The quotation above reveals her belief that Canada is the home of Canadians, and China is the home of the Chinese. How can a Chinese person find a home in Canada? Her idea of home suggests that there is something unique and essential about the quality of the place of origin—*the original*—that cannot be replaced by anything other to it. The original home connotes a sense of authenticity, heritage, and history that is peculiar to the place, and therefore to the individuals and families who come from that place. Furthermore, no matter how good, bad, different, or similar another place is to the original (be it Canada or anywhere else), the *aura of the original place* is grounded in a deep and intimate relationship with the family. For Mrs. Jin, the

¹¹Simmel (1994) compares the metaphors of the bridge and the door by saying that the door has a much “richer and livelier significance” compared to the bridge (p. 8). He formulates the door as an essential relationship to life, uniting and separating the inner and outer space simultaneously. Simmel says, “Life on the earthly plane, however, as at every moment it throws a bridge between the unconnectedness of things, likewise stands in every moment inside or outside the door through which it will lead from its separate existence into the world, or from the world into its separate existence” (p. 9).

¹² 这是加拿大，首先是人家的家，人家的家，人家的家你记住。这不是你的家。

experience of migrating from the place of origin to a foreign land feels more like a *transplantation* than a *translation*. The entire family was *transplanted* and *physically moved* to Canada, but she knew on the first day of landing that she would never find a home here.

Mrs. Jin's idealization of the *original* as a desirable image of home is interesting and could serve as an opener to our inquiry into the various ways in which people represent the *loss* of the *original image* as a problem to solve. Mrs. Jin seems to believe that only the original home can be called home, therefore, an immigrant family is at best a *copy* or *reproduction* of the original home. To her, the family was transferred from one place to another, but something essential about the family—*the aura of the original*—got lost. Her immigration experience feels like what Benjamin (1968) would call a bad translation: a transmitting of information that fails to capture the essential quality of the original (p. 69), and a mechanical relationship that that only retains the image of the original but never its aura.

Let us take a look at another narrative by Mrs. Jin in which she described her perception of the subtle changes in the family:

When I first came to Canada, I couldn't get used to a lot of things. I tried to adapt to the [new home] really slowly, slowly and slowly. For example, at the beginning, my son would ask me, "Mom, we are going to Niagara Fall tomorrow." Tomorrow, we are going to the fall. Tomorrow, "we" are going to the fall. Do you understand what it implies? This "we" includes "me." However, after a while, the question changed to "Tomorrow

we are going to somewhere, do you want to come?” That means, I am not going.

[Laughing]¹³ (Jin, L., interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

Reflecting on the past ten years living with her son’s family in Canada, Mrs. Jin recalled the ways in which this very specific question was asked. She tried to show that her role in the family had changed subtly over time. At the beginning of the relationship, she was considered a member of the family by her children. Therefore, she believed that her children were truly invested in nurturing this relationship by doing things and adjusting to the new home together. The “we” in her narrative included every member in the family. However, as time went by, Mrs. Jin felt that she was being excluded from the “we.” She was sensitive enough to observe the subtle changes in the use of pronoun, which implied a clear distinction between the nuclear family and herself as an extra. Mrs. Jin interpreted the second way her children asked the question as merely a considerate, polite, and impersonal way of symbolically “including” her in the family decision. The children were believed to be merely *performing* a functional and diplomatic gesture to maintain a social relationship. In a similar way as the tacit social ritual of the greeting in Simmel’s analysis, the second way of asking the question fulfills a routine in Mrs. Jin’s family as the adult children’s tacit way of showing respect and consideration to the elderly, rather than a gesture of genuine invitation. In other words, to Mrs. Jin, her children were merely committed to following the impersonal rules that govern the “tacit caveat of the ‘usually’” as a way to maintain the relationship with their mother, rather than investing in including her as a *close and intimate member* of family.

¹³你刚开始，好多都是你适应不了的。我是慢慢慢慢的去适应。刚开始是“妈，我们明天去大瀑布”。明天我们去大瀑布。明天“我们”去大瀑布，这你听懂了么？这里有我。后来慢慢就变成这个了。“明天我们去哪儿哪儿，你去不？那就不去【笑】

Mrs. Jin was very ambivalent about her life situation in Canada. She hoped to stay close to her children, but was dissatisfied with the lack of family intimacy. She also desired to return to Beijing and age on her own, but was afraid of missing her family in distant Canada. Recalling memories from the times when she was still in China, apart from her children in Canada, Mrs. Jin reminisced about the days when both sides of the family dreamt about reuniting in Canada. She reflected on the ironic sense of closeness and intimacy that she felt when the family was actually physically apart. That closeness disappeared after she joined the family in Canada, and was gradually transformed into a sense of impersonalism and diplomatic estrangement. What Mrs. Jin described points to the illusory relationship between intimacy and proximity. Before Mrs. Jin immigrated to Canada, her imaginary home was based on the idea of proximity, driving her desire for the day when she could be reunited with her children. At that time, her sense of distance from the family was grounded in physical separation. However, after the reunion, she realized that even proximity failed to promise intimacy. What puzzled her was not a choice between China and Canada, but rather the question of how to maintain an intimate relationship to any place when the notion of family disappears. After realizing that the imaginary intimacy of the family was available neither in China nor Canada, Mrs. Jin was struck by a sense of unspeakable loss—the lack of something that she longed for before she immigrated, and something that she was not to find after immigration.

What is hidden in her speech is an ideal speaker who is oriented to an imaginary structure of a family that is characterized by intimacy and togetherness, or what others call “solidarity.” Initially, she thought that geographical proximity would help her fulfill this longing, but actual closeness also failed to realize this relationship. The impersonal and diplomatic attitude expressed by her children gradually eroded the aura of her idealization of family. Similar to

people's desire for the perfect literal translation, such an orientation to representation often loses grip on the essential quality of the phenomenon and its meaning. Mrs. Jin's dilemma between staying here or going back exemplifies the hidden problem that confronts any transnational family—that what is under migration is a social relationship that involves people as subjects who are committed to the family not just as a functional social structure, but also as an imaginary and interpretive place invested with meaning and affect. Thus we can conceive Mrs. Jin's ambivalence between the original home and the foreign country as a struggle with the *translation* of the meaning of the transnational family, rather than the *transplantation* of places. The original homeland has the lure of authenticity, heritage, and history, which carry an aura in the form of a utopian-nostalgia with a promise to fulfill our longings for a home before the separation. Yet the aura animates the subject to look for a good translation of his or her experience in the new language, culture, and country. The ambivalence can only be overcome when a subject begins to engage the impasse and translates its meaning, forming an after-life of the original, and a new commitment to the present.

Mourning and Melancholia

How did Mrs. Jin translate the meaning of her ambivalence between an impersonal proximity and an (imagined) intimate distance? I argue that her approach to dealing with ambivalence resembles a mourning process in which she tries to work through the loss of the intimate object that exists neither in Canada nor China. Mrs. Jin finally recognized that the seemingly functional family in Canada no longer treated her as an intimate member. And the intimacy she felt before the migration was simply an ironic illusion. Through Mrs. Jin's narrative, we can detect the significance of the family as an important site where two places of the transnational process become localized and meaningful for the subject. However, when the

commitment to family becomes destabilized and de-territorialized affectively, the accompanying sense of loss and ambivalence redirects Mrs. Jin to the question about the commitment to place.

During the rest of the interview, Mrs. Jin described her way of coming to terms with this loss of aura and her attempt to regain a sense of commitment to place and to the present. Freud (1917) describes mourning and melancholia as two ways of dealing with loss. In Mrs. Jin's case, she recognizes the intimacy and affection in her relationship with her children as the object of loss, and tries to deal with the grief and despair of this specific love object. She began to invest more meaning in her social life with other Chinese elders in the community who were experiencing similar problems. The common problems shared among these seniors gave Mrs. Jin a new sense of purposefulness, connectedness, and commitment to the present. When her son bought a big house in a different neighborhood and asked her to move with the family, Mrs. Jin realized that the small social circle she had formed over ten years was far more important than her family. She told her son that she would rather rent a place and live on her own in the same neighborhood than move to a luxurious room with her children, far away from her elderly friends.

The Story of Mr. Li: Melancholia and the Affect of Sadness

Mr. Li is an elderly man who expressed a similar experience of ambivalence between staying here and going back, but the way in which he dealt with this struggle was different. Mr. Li immigrated to Canada from Shanghai with his wife more than ten years ago in order to reunite with his son's family. At that time, his son was newly married and immigrated to Canada as a skilled worker. In order to give his son a better future, Mr. Li decided to sell their property in Shanghai and use the money to purchase a house in Canada. When his son first arrived in Canada, Mr. Li's daughter-in-law could not find a job. Mr. Li also guided her career development and financially supported his daughter-in-law to earn another degree from a university in Canada.

After a few years, both his son and daughter-in-law were settled with stable jobs and had their first and second child. They sponsored Mr. Li and his wife for immigration. The family lived together for a few years in Canada, but a lot of changes happened during those years. Mr. Li's wife was diagnosed with dementia, and her condition worsened quickly. Not only was she exhibiting behavioral problems, she also suffered from memory loss and failure to recognize her own family members. According to Mr. Li's narrative, told while sobbing, his wife was abused and bullied by her own son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren. The grandchildren were never made aware of the condition of their grandmother's disease. They often made fun of her, and even beat her up when she behaved in ways that deviated from the norm. Mr. Li's son, whom we also interviewed, also considered sending his mother to a seniors' home in China. He argued that since his mother no longer remembered the family, there was no moral guilt about violating any filial duty for this decision. Mr. Li's wife passed away shortly after the onset of dementia. Speaking through tears, Mr. Li recalled how ungrateful and abusive his children were to their own mother. Soon after the death of Mr. Li's wife, his daughter-in-law filed for divorce. Mr. Li's son lost both the custody of the grandchildren and ownership of the house. At the time of the interview, Mr. Li lived with his son in a small rental apartment in the suburbs, and only got to see his grandchildren once a month. The moment I sat down with Mr. Li for our interview, he said the following:

Sigh...very ambivalent. I feel very ambivalent. This place (Canada) is not bad. The food is good and the environment is good. But...my mood is not good. I feel very down.

I realized that after my children moved to Canada, the sense of family intimacy is gone.¹⁴

(Li, J.G., interview transcript, May 8th, 2015)

According to this narrative, Mr. Li seemed to be translating the ambivalence between staying here or going back to China as conditioned by the external difference between the two countries. Throughout the interview, he tried to look for reasons that would help him commit to this place and to the present—be it the quality of the environment, the food, or the hope that his son would look after him when he becomes frail. Despite all the assessment and comparison, he still found it difficult to translate the external qualities of the place into a meaningful relationship with his living situation. He painstakingly recalled sad memories of his wife, and the lack of affection from his family. However, his narrative also revealed a strong desire to continue to care for the family, no matter how broken it became. In other words, similar to Mrs. Jin, Mr. Li displayed an idealization of family as a unit that is characterized by a strong sense of intimacy and vitality. It should be a family that aspires to become better. Mr. Li devoted most of his life to achieving this ideal—investing in his daughter-in-law’s education, selling and buying assets, and raising his grandchildren. After the family fell apart, the sense of intimacy disappeared, and the ambivalence between staying here and going back to China struck. Even then, Mr. Li still decided to cope with the struggle by *reaffirming* his responsibility and commitment to care for the family:

I think, after all, I still cannot go back to China. I have to stay here. My son is here, so this is what I want. I’ll wait and see, maybe after he re-marries. If possible, if it is possible for us to still live together, care for each other, I’ll still stay. But if that doesn’t

¹⁴哎...很矛盾，心里很矛盾。地方倒是很不错。吃的也好，环境也好。就是心情不好。心情很烦...我发现，孩子到了加拿大以后，亲情没了。

happen, I'll then consider going back...But I still cannot let go of my concern. I cannot let go of my concern [for my son and grandchildren]. Sometimes, I ponder [pause]. Maybe till the day when my grandson and granddaughter could strive a path for themselves, maybe then I would feel better¹⁵. (Li, J.G., interview transcript, May 8th, 2015)

It seems like Mr. Li eventually settled the feeling of ambivalence with a decision to stay with the family in Canada, but this decision did not necessarily offer him any sense of assurance. In other words, I would like to treat his decision to stay as a *response* rather than a *resolution* to the sense of ambivalence he expressed at the beginning of the interview. Mr. Li sobbed throughout the interview, even when he recalled happy and positive memories from the past. We had to pause the interview twice, as his long silence indicated profound sadness and the inability to put into words what he felt. According to Freud's description of melancholia, we can say that Mr. Li was struck by the loss of intimacy in his family, but this loss was more of an ideal kind. Mr. Li might be aware of the loss "which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him" (Freud, 1917, p. 245). In his narrative, ambivalence became a problem to solve, but the problem was translated as a struggle with the choice between going back to China alone and staying in Canada with his son, despite the lack of intimacy. Without being able to ground himself in either place, and without realizing

¹⁵看最后啊，还回不去。我估计我回不去，还得在这儿待。儿子在，我想那样。看他在结了婚以后，我再看一下吧。假如能够，能够相互在一起，相互有个照顾，让他在一起待着吧，实在不行，再回去吧.....还是有点放不下。还放不下。所以有时候想呢，等两个孙子孙女他们自己能走出去了，那可能会好一点吧。

what the *lost object* actually was, Mr. Li expressed symptoms of melancholia and a profound sadness as his orientation to ambivalence.

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva (1989) builds upon Freud's theory of melancholia by extending the phenomenon to the field of art, literature, and psychoanalysis, and re-conceptualizing melancholia as "a linguistic malady whose primary symptom is chronic asymbolia or loss of speech and meaning" (Su, 2005, p. 164). Kristeva departs from the classic psychoanalytic theory of Abraham, Freud, and Melanie Klein, which theorizes depression as a concealment of an *object loss* that is characterized by paradoxical oscillation between hate and love (p. 11). She further proposes another form of depression in what she calls a "depressed narcissist," whose mourning is not directed at an Object, but the Thing (p. 12-3). Invoking the Lacanian concept of the *real*, Kristeva (1989) theorizes the Thing as an "unsymbolizable" and "unnameable" loss that escapes signification and language:

Knowingly disinherited of the Thing, the depressed person wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves; or else retreats, disconsolate and aphasic, alone with the unnamed Thing. (p. 13)

Kristeva also resists the Kleinian notion of splitting that hypothesizes melancholia's orientation to self-destruction and disintegration. She proposes a new hypothesis that the melancholic can actually protect herself from disintegration with a shield of sadness:

Following upon the deflection of the death drive, the *depressive affect* can be interpreted as a defense against parceling. Indeed, sadness reconstitutes as affective cohesion of the self, which restores its unity within the framework of affect. The depressive mood constitutes itself as a narcissistic support, negative to be sure, but nevertheless presenting the self with an integrity, nonverbal though it might be. (p. 19)

Without delving too deeply into the psychoanalytic aspects of Kristeva's work, we can still use her framework to re-interpret Mr. Li's expression of melancholia. Instead of conceiving his response as an incomplete mourning of an unconscious lost object, we can read Mr. Li's inability to put into words his emotions, and his display of sadness, as his way of *representing* ambivalence. Kristeva (1989) points to sadness as the "fundamental mood of depression" and a unique affect of melancholia:

Sadness leads us into the enigmatic realm of *affects*—anguish, fear, or joy. Irreducible to its verbal or semiological expressions, sadness (like all affect) is the *psychic representation of energy displacements* caused by external and internal traumas. (p. 21)

From Migration to Translation

I have tried to formulate ambivalence as a problem that the subjects have to orient to and work through as they translate the meaning of their lived experiences. To resist the understanding of the migratory process as a series of changes in the external and material conditions of the subject's homeland and destination country, I try to evoke the diasporic interpretation of in-between-ness and ambivalence as *essential* rather than *symptomatic*. Through the narrative of Mrs. Jin, I show that the struggle between staying here and going back is less of a concern for the difference between two places than a problem of finding an intimate relationship to place and a commitment to the present. Her narrative reveals an idealization of an intimate family as contingent upon an aura that existed in the form of a longing for proximity before migration, but was then lost despite physical proximity. The ironic juxtaposition of her imaginary home before and after migration made her realize that the family no longer treated her as an intimate member, compelling her to translate her ambivalence into a new meaningful commitment to the present. She was able to find a new sense of intimacy in a community of

elders who were able to connect to her story. On the contrary, struck by a similar kind of loss, Mr. Li displayed a different orientation to ambivalence that resembles Kristeva's characterization of the melancholic. In both cases, I try to treat ambivalence not only as an expression of emotion or an empirical conclusion about the status of these transnational elders, but rather as a problem-solving situation and an integral part of their lived experiences that have to be oriented to by the subjects. Through analyzing the different ways in which the subjects *translate* and *represent* the problem, we are able to produce a dialogue about the meaning of family, intimacy, diasporic consciousness, and the affect of sadness.

Case Two: The Struggle between a Mother and Daughter-in-law

Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are born to be enemies.¹⁶ (Dong, Q, interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

This case study allows us to examine an aspect of the in-law relationship in a transnational family that may not be readily available in empirical studies with a big sample size. We look at narratives from an elderly mother and her daughter-in-law. Both women express their dilemmas in the form of a dissonance between their intolerable inner emotions and a strong desire to influence the other. Their narratives are based on moral reasoning around who they *ought* to be and how they *ought* to feel and act. The case also provides an opportunity to explore the concept of the divided self, the power dynamics of an in-law relationship, and the notion of ambivalence as a problem-solving situation. In addition, what is hidden in the fights between the women is the historical and social context of the transnational family. My analysis probes further into their expression of a struggle for power in society and a pursuit of self-agency in the face of aging and increasing dependency.

¹⁶儿媳妇和婆婆之间那是天敌。

The phenomenon of in-law conflicts is prevalent in many societies in the world. It is also used as a clichéd metaphor to describe any relationship that is inherently conflictual or doomed to fail. The contemporary rhetoric of such an interpersonal conflict continues to circulate in the public imaginary and popular culture as a signifier of the perceived irreconcilability of the in-law relationship. If we turn to the TV scene in modern China in the past few decades, the irreconcilability of in-law conflict has also served as a persistent source of creativity for comedy and soap operas. The contemporary solution to the conflict, as observed in the media and many urban cities in China, lies in the separation of residences between the married couple and their parents. However, even under those conditions, in-law conflicts continue to haunt urban Chinese families as parents from both sides continue to exert influence over their only child (Logan, Bian, & Bian, 1998; Gallin, 1994).

Such conflict is often dramatized in intergenerational immigrant families in which the daughter-in-law has to live with the husband's family (Shih & Pyke, 2010). The participant quoted at the beginning of this section described mothers and daughter-in-laws as innate enemies. Such a metaphor is further affirmed by some scholars who attribute the inherently conflictual relationship to the Confucian value of filial piety and its implied gender hierarchy. They believe that the Confucian value oppresses women and leads them to fight against each other for individual agency (Gallin, 1994; Kung, 1999a, 1999b, 2001). Some also argue that the mother-in-law has more power in the family than the daughter-in-law because she serves as a cultural gatekeeper who is obliged to enforce patriarchal traditions in the family (Lan, 2002). I consider both arguments to be culturally deterministic as they unreflectively engage the Confucian value as a normative guide for individual action. Women in both cases are portrayed as struggling for

power in a patriarchal system. However, both arguments conceptualize power in a very simplistic way as a form of authority and dominance.

Many studies of in-law conflict focus on identifying factors that motivate female subjects to engage in conflictual situations (Marotz-Baden & Cowan, 1987; Chan, Brownridge, Tiwari, Fong, & Leung, 2008). These situations are believed to leave the subjects in a state of ambivalence due to oppositional forces between individual desires and external expectations (normative obligations), authority and subordination, or traditional and modern values. In this case study, I take the often conflictual in-law relationship as another occasion where subjects are exposed to ambivalence as a problem that forces them to develop a relationship to it through reflecting on and negotiating with their circumstances and conditions. Instead of looking for an explanation as to why conflicts occur, I'm interested in learning how the lived experience of an elderly mother with her son and daughter-in-law complicates the in-law relationship. How do both women relate to ambivalence by orienting to it as a problem of power, relevance, influence and authority, all of which are considered here as integral, rather than external, to the relationship?

Parenting as a Relation of Power

In order to understand the in-law relationship in an intergenerational family, we need to first situate the subjects in a parent-child relationship. There will not be an in-law relationship if the elderly person is not first and foremost a parent of his or her child. I would like to make reference to the concept of power developed in Bonner's (1998) book *Power and Parenting*, in which he vividly illustrates the paradox of the human longing for power and fear of powerlessness. Contemporary parenting, therefore, becomes a topic that will help us understand how we overcome powerlessness and come to terms with the limits of power. Bonner (1998)

states, “It is this very structuring which makes it appear both obvious and strange that the parenting relation should be addressed in terms of power rather than, say, love” (p. 4).

Bonner (1998) formulates a concept of power that goes beyond control and subordination, violence and force. Under the framework of Aristotle’s idea of praxis, Bonner argues that power implies a deep need and desire to influence both the self and the other. He criticizes the production model of power, which renders it as a practical means to an end. Such a model eventually limits the discourse on parenting as a matter of practice conditioned by the availability of socioeconomic, technological, and material resources. A model built on the idea of praxis, on the contrary, embraces power’s inherent paradox—that “having power means being oriented to being responsible for its exercise” (Bonner, 1998, p. 11). Here, Bonner calls for a renewed definition of power that is accountable for its own conditions and consequences. In the case of parenting, these conditions and consequences may refer to the irreversibility of birth, the uncertainty of the future, and the limits of technological interventions into reproduction. Power, in Bonner’s analysis, becomes problem-solving because the subject who possesses it has to develop a relation to its influence and limit. My analysis of the in-law relationship becomes an interesting extension of Bonner’s analysis of contemporary parenting, in which the “parent,” as the person who holds the balance of power, is forced to confront the consequences of his/her own creation.

The literature I mentioned earlier seems to describe the in-law conflict as a battle for power, which is understood as a binary relation between dominance and subordination. Such a relation is further argued to be influenced by the cultural construction of gender norms. Even in studies that advocate for more “gender-egalitarian arrangements,” conflicts occur in the unfair division of household labor and the battle for individual power that is otherwise compromised by

male privilege (Zhou, 1998; Tam & Detzner, 1998). In both cases, the understanding of power is linked to the production model described by Bonner (1998), which often assumes a one-sided dimension. According to Simmel (1950), there is no one-sided power and dominance. The battle for power does not necessarily lead to a practical result of dominance, but rather entails a *desire* for it. Simmel (1950) claims that the “practical function of this desire for domination...is not so much the exploitation of the other as the mere consciousness of this possibility” (p. 181). He further formulates the relationship between the leader and the led as a highly complex social interaction, the impasse of which often gets concealed by the appearance of an absolute influence:

Thus here, too, appearance shows an absolute influence, on the one side, and an absolute being-influenced, on the other; but it conceals an interaction, an exchange of influences, which transforms the pure one-sidedness of super ordination and subordination into a sociological form. (Simmel, 1950, p. 186)

If we approach the in-law battle for power in this way, the analytical focus shifts from who gets power over the other, to a social relationship and ethical collision that expose the subject’s desire for influence and impact. In this case, in-law conflict dramatizes an occasion in which the subjects have to come to terms with the paradox of their desire to influence and the fear of losing influence. As they look for the best solution to the problem, we as analysts can detect from the narratives of this problematic dyad their idealization of power, control, influence, and authority.

The Story

Of the 24 interviews, half were conducted with elders and the other half with adult offspring mostly from different families. To our surprise, two families offered to participate in the project together. As a result, I was able to collect a story from the perspectives of both an

elderly woman and her daughter-in-law. It was a very problematic relationship with frequent quarrels, fights, and long-lasting conflicts. Both of them seemed to treat the interview as a rare opportunity to vent their emotions to me—a stranger who promised to keep their stories anonymous. What is noteworthy is that I do not have access to a complete story and there is no metanarrative or any consistent context for character development. In other words, I only collected two unique sets of self-narrated accounts about the same relationship, with both interview subjects trying to create a story of their own. One story is from Wendy, a mother of two children who lives with her husband and parents-in-law. The other story is from Mrs. Dong, the mother-in-law of Wendy.

Wendy immigrated to Canada in 2001 as a skilled worker. At that time, she was still single. She met her husband, who was also a newcomer at that time, through a community-based Christian church in Scarborough, Toronto. Before they got married, their families had already expressed dissatisfaction with each other. Wendy was born in Xinjiang, China, a province in the northwest of the country that is home to a number of ethnic minority groups. Even though Wendy belongs to the majority ethnicity of Han, her parents-in-law still exhibited strong prejudice towards her background. In other words, they discriminated against people from Xinjiang, perceiving them as less educated, cultured, and poor. Wendy's husband was born in Shanghai in a highly educated and prosperous family. Both of his parents obtained university degrees and were considered upper class in their city. Their disapproval of Wendy was mainly driven by classism and ethnic discrimination. Wendy's mother also reacted to her in-laws' attitudes with anger and contempt for their snobbishness. In short, Wendy and her husband's marriage had a rough beginning. After their marriage and two children, the couple was under pressure from both sides of the family to undertake immigration sponsorship. Wendy came from

a single-parent family and there were no other relatives in China who could take care of her mother. Therefore, she sponsored her mother to immigrate to Canada a few years ago. Wendy's husband had a sister in Shanghai, but she was mentally ill and could not live independently. His parents also wanted to stay close to their son, so they rotated their stay between Canada and China on a six-month basis. In other words, the day his mother would land in Canada, his father would fly out from Canada to Shanghai. They interchanged their stay with both children every six months. At the time of the interview, Wendy's mother-in-law was living with the family. Wendy had a busy day-time job and her husband had a night-time job. However, Wendy still performed most of the household chores and childcare duties at home.

Both Wendy and Mrs. Dong narrated their problematic relationship with vivid examples from their past, dating back to the time before her marriage. They also tried to rationalize why these conflicts occurred, how they coped with them and what remained unresolved. The central character of their story—Wendy's husband and Mrs. Dong's son—was never fully developed in their narratives. Both described him as a hard-working man who had a very tough night-time job. He left home for work before the kid came home from school and returned home in the early mornings. Because of this unique work schedule, most of the childcare and domestic care duties “naturally” fell to his wife and parents. Furthermore, the other male character in the family—the father-in-law—was also rarely mentioned, even though he was always present. Wendy complained about her father-in-law a few times, saying “He just sits down and eat. After he finishes eating, he'll leave the table. That's it. Going upstairs¹⁷” (Wendy, interview transcript, April 25th, 2015). Mrs. Dong, however, thinks it is the wife's job to keep all the housework away from the husband, and certainly projects this gender expectation onto Wendy.

¹⁷他就坐下来吃饭，吃完饭就走，这样子。就上楼了。

On the surface of their stories, the conflicts seem to be caused by an obvious difference in their notions of gender roles and an unfair distribution of domestic labor (with Wendy doing most of the household chores). The idea of the cultural keeper seems to be a good yet somewhat superficial explanation of the pressure Mrs. Dong exerts onto Wendy. However, if we take a closer look at the narrative, we can uncover more hidden nuances, which reveal their orientation to a more complex problem in relation to the sense of self, the desire for power, and the frustration with lack of power outside the domestic space.

“A Wife is the Female Master of the Home”¹⁸

Let us unpack Wendy’s narrative first and see how she expresses her dilemma as a dissonance between her repressed inner emotions and the idealization of “Western” individualism. In order to detect such a dilemma, we need to treat her narrative as more than just an expression of discontent with traditional gender roles. She began her story by describing a long-lasting conflict between her own mother and her parents-in-law. Growing up in a single-parent family as the only child, Wendy had a very troubled history with her mother. She described her mother as a victim of long-term abuse. Not only was Wendy’s mother abused by her own father, she was also abandoned by her husband when she was pregnant with Wendy. As a result, Wendy described her mother as mentally disabled, bad-tempered, and very difficult to live with. Her dilemma began with such an inheritance. She was very aware of her mother’s problem, but as a daughter, she also felt obliged to respect and take care of her, despite the difficulties:

Every time my mom met my husband’s parents, she kept saying how bad their son is.

You can imagine how badly she has ruined my relationship with my in-laws! It is like...

¹⁸妻子是这边的女主人。

my mother only had an elementary school degree. Compounded with her bad temper, she made my parents-in-law think that my husband and I are not compatible at all! In comparison, my parents-in-law both have university degrees. They were considered intellectuals. They are very civilized and polished in their manners. Because of this, my marriage was almost destroyed [by my mother].¹⁹ (Wendy, interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

With this admission, Wendy seemed to be setting the stage for her story by saying that her troubled inheritance (the circumstances of her birth, her mother's condition, her family background) had undermined and continued to influence her marriage and relationship with her in-laws. Her ambivalent and deeply troubled relation with her mother served as a central thread in her interview. On one hand, she was empathetic toward her mother and tried to rationalize her mother's behavioral problems as a consequence of her difficult past. "She is a victim,"²⁰ said Wendy many times when she found her mother's behavior unbearable yet demanding of forgiveness from at least her daughter. On the other hand, Wendy also felt like a victim of her mother's dependence on her and excessive involvement in her marriage. In other words, Wendy's empathy towards her mother's condition became problematic when she found herself in a situation that reminded her of her own inheritance. The fact that she grew up in a single-parent family with little education and low social status came back to haunt her and undermined her ability to attain happiness in light of the prejudice of her husband's parents.

¹⁹我妈妈每次见到他们就说他们儿子好不好。所以你想，就这个关系搞得很僵。就搞得我们，他的父母就觉得我们，我妈妈小学初中文化嘛，再加上这样的性格，他们觉得好像不般配啊，他们相对来说，他的父母都是大学毕业，算知识分子。表面上都是比较有修养的。所以，差点我们就闹翻了。

²⁰她是受害者

Wendy seldom discussed her marriage and the relationship with her husband in the interview. But most of the narratives were built upon the idea that such a marriage needed to be protected and defended from her mother and her parents-in-law's involvement. Looking at the narrative from this angle, we can start to shift the focus from the in-law conflict to Wendy's struggle to exert some control and power over her life, despite the many occasions in which her inheritance worked against such efforts.

Looking back at Wendy's life trajectory reveals a strong and independent woman who believes that one needs to work hard to earn a good future, as it is something she does not inherit. Even though she had a tough childhood growing up in Xinjiang, a relatively remote and marginalized city, she managed to achieve great academic standing and earned multiple opportunities to study abroad. She immigrated to Canada on her own and settled in Toronto with a stable income. Wendy also grew up in a single-parent family without much parental guidance. Through her narrative, she constructed herself as a very strong, resilient, and independent woman. She often made reference to "Western values" or the "Western way" to describe how she understood her sense of self, her gender role, and the autonomy of her marriage. It is worth noting that according to her interpretation, so-called "Western values" refer to a set of cultural stereotypes about North American and European identities as rooted in individualism, freedom, autonomy, independence, gender equality, and a nuclear family structure. Based on such an idealization, Wendy continued to delineate a clear boundary between the nuclear family and the relationship with their parents. She claimed that the family was built by herself and her husband, therefore it only belonged to them, rather than their parents. For example, there was one occasion in which her husband's family made an important decision without consulting Wendy. She considered that incident as a violation of familial boundaries:

They [my parents-in-law] did not consider me. They didn't think I exist in this family. I don't think the seniors have any idea of the role of a wife here [in Western society]—A wife is the female master of the home. They still think the husband is the decision-maker. They really respect their son. They love their son. Every expression unleashes their love for him. They probably want to love me too, but they do not pay attention to me, nor do they respect my feeling. For example, when my mother-in-law made some wontons, she would always serve her son first. That's what I mean.²¹ (Wendy, interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

Wendy first recognized her anger with the way in which she was marginalized and excluded by her husband's family. Then she tried to rationalize and explain her in-laws' behavior as hurtful but unintentional. By describing her in-laws' attitudes as an expression of patriarchal, traditional Chinese values, she was able to provide a moral reasoning and an answer to the conflict. Her rationalization of her in-laws' prejudice was built upon the perceived value difference between the Chinese and Western family, with Chinese family essentialized as patriarchal and Western family as gender-neutral. Such a simplistic and binary version of cultural difference seemed to help Wendy *externalize* her anger, as if the problem were not *interpersonal* or *class-based*, but rather *intercultural*. By externalizing her in-laws' intentions as their failure to recognize cultural difference, Wendy was able to cope with her ambivalent emotions towards her in-laws.

²¹我就说好像他们没有考虑我，就是我在这个家。但是，好像老人家也没有这边的观念觉得妻子是这边的女主人，好像丈夫一般都是说的算。他们很尊重自己的儿子。但是我的感受常常就是说他们很尊重自己的儿子很爱自己的儿子，流露出来都是对儿子的爱，可能也想对我好。但是有时候没有考虑到我，不会考虑我的感受。比如说我婆婆混沌煮好了，先端给儿子吃，就是这样。

A surface reading of the narrative seems to position Wendy as torn between traditional gender roles, which are secondary to her husband's family, and a Western feminist ideal of gender equality and justice. However, based on Wendy's previous narratives, we can also read her as a subject who has always oriented to defining herself against her inheritance and all the discriminatory, externally-oriented forces that try to frame who she is based on her family background, upbringing, and social class. The traditional gender expectations held by her mother-in-law, in a domestic space that Wendy thinks she owns and masters, almost functions as a threat to *condition* and *define* who she is while undermining what she *desires* to be. We can then treat Wendy's moral reasoning of perceived cultural difference as her way of dealing with the anger, the prejudice, and the fear of losing control over her sense of self. I observe this as a pattern in Wendy's moral reasoning. Every time she brought up a conflictual situation with her mother-in-law, she first reacted to it angrily in a very personal way. Then, she began to rationalize her mother-in-law's intention as externally driven, rather than intentional as in a personal attack. This strategy seems to function as a defense mechanism for Wendy to prevent other people from undermining who she is. In other words, she always tried to adopt the perspective of her mother-in-law to rationalize why she did this and said that to her, as if *externalizing* and *impersonalizing* her mother-in-law's intentions would provide a cultural basis for her prejudice and bias, therefore protecting Wendy from interpersonal conflict. Therefore, Wendy came to understand her in-laws' prejudice towards her as externally and culturally driven and less personal.

I try to develop a different and more reflexive reading of Wendy's narrative that treats her speech as oriented to a moral reasoning that is more complex than dichotomous, and to an ideal speaker that makes reference to an external set of values to reduce ambivalent emotions. By

reflecting on the personal history and the peculiarities of the family at hand, I am able to situate the in-law conflict in a more multifaceted situation that weaves together cultural prejudices, personal desires, gender dynamics, class discrimination, etc. In Wendy's case, the conflictual relationship with her in-laws also reveals her constant struggle with her own inheritance and the desire to re-define her heritage—be it as a daughter, a woman, or a wife. The in-laws' prejudice towards Wendy and her mother, and the “cultural keeping” of patriarchal gender roles, threaten Wendy's pursuit of self-agency, justice, and fairness. Now, let us turn to Mrs. Dong and see how she formulates the in-law conflict as a problem to solve that pertains to her own struggle with power and self-agency in the face of aging and increasing dependency.

Acting Out of Powerlessness

Even though Wendy had a hard time growing up, her description treated her own past more like a fact than a narrative of self-pity. However, Mrs. Dong chose to begin her story by picturing a very pitiful childhood for Wendy:

I always try to look at the problem [in-law conflict] from her [Wendy's] perspective. If you can think about why she said this and that, then the problem becomes easy. She is not trying to attack me. She just expressed her own opinion, her own perspective.

Unfortunately, her family background is different from ours...different degree of education, background and family situations...For me, I grew up in a big and perfect family, all the way to my grandgrandparents. But Wendy grew up in a small, single-family. Her father left her and her mom when she was an infant. Her mother...how can I describe this...according to her father, her mother had very bad temper and was impossible to live with. After her father married her, he couldn't spend a single day at home...I wonder, how can you leave her when she was still in her mother's womb?...At

the end, her mother cannot raise the kid alone, and had to give her to the grandmother. As a result, she [Wendy] has never been loved since she was a kid, no father's love. She also told me, when she was young, she was bullied all the time. Why? Because people rumored that this kid had no parents, therefore, she must be an illegitimate child. But she was not. Nobody understood her. She was so lonely. She became so lonely in school. Nobody talked to her. She could only study, and study... That's why she was very good at studying.²² (Dong, Q, interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

One might wonder why Mrs. Dong began her story by picturing Wendy as such a poor child. As we will see later in her narrative, Wendy's poor childhood, family background, and "lack of love" have been the central moral reasoning Mrs. Dong used to deal with her own anxiety of losing potency and individual influence. Throughout the interview, Mrs. Dong proudly mentioned her own upbringing in a well-groomed, highly-educated, traditional, and

²²我站在她的位置、她的那个角度去考虑问题的话，哦你就理解。了她为什么这么说。事情就很简单了。她不是针对我，她是有一些她的观点、她的看法、她的家庭背景不一样。因为儿媳的家庭背景跟我们家庭背景肯定不会...教育程度、教育背景、家庭情况肯定都不大相同。我的家来说呢，我从小就是父母双全，上面有外婆有祖母。而我儿媳呢，她就是从小、就是单亲家庭。她妈妈，她不到一岁她爸爸就出去了，离开她妈妈了。她妈妈，我也说不上反正说，就是听她爸爸说呢，脾气很难与人相处，很难与人相处。她爸爸结婚以后呢，就说，简直没办法待下去在家.....那我们觉得很奇怪，小孩那么小，你怎么，还在肚子里就离开这小孩呢.....结果她妈妈就上班没办法抚养小孩，就把她带外婆家。那么她从小呢就没有爱，也没有父爱。而且据我媳妇告诉我，她说在小时候呢，她呢好像很受人欺负。因为什么呢？人家说这小孩没爸没妈的，因为她是私生子，其实不是私生子。就不理她，那么她很孤独。所以呢她在学校里呢孤独，没人睬她，就自己念书嘛，自己念书。所以她书念得很好。

upper-class Shanghai family several times. Even though she never explicitly criticized Wendy's failure to adhere to traditional gender roles, she always used the differences in family background and social class to frame Wendy's problem.

It is undeniable that Mrs. Dong's narrative appears elitist and prejudice-driven. She constantly rationalized Wendy's behavior based on bias towards her social class and family background as a way to validate her own sense of cultural and social superiority. Mrs. Dong carried strong gender-based values and tried to impose her expectations on Wendy. For example, Mrs. Dong did not want any men in the family to do any household chores. When Wendy asked her husband to help take out the garbage one day, Mrs. Dong became very upset. Mrs. Dong was also very proud of her career as a teacher in Shanghai, and she always used her role as teacher to demonstrate her capacity for empathy. According to Mrs. Dong, being a teacher taught her how to think from another person's perspective. This explains why she always grounded her judgment of Wendy in an analysis of her intentions.

She has never been loved since she was a kid, never received any love from her father...Ever since she was a kid, she always felt being looked down upon [because of her broken family background]. As a result, she always tries to win favor from the outsiders. It seems like she always wants to please people outside the family...She lacks love, therefore, she needs love.²³ (Dong, Q, interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

Based on Mrs. Dong's description of Wendy, her relationship with Wendy should not have been so conflictual. If she was as empathetic and understanding as she said she was, why would conflict occur? Interestingly, the conflicts described by Wendy and Mrs. Dong were of

²³那么她从小呢就没有爱，也没有父爱。她从小就是一种，好像被人家瞧不起的这种。所以她对外面的人特别巴结，好像讨好人家。你懂我的意思吗？她缺少爱，正需要爱。

very different kinds. For Wendy, her mother-in-law's gender expectations, neglect of her opinion, and excessive involvement in family decisions were the main sources of conflict, even though these factors were not acknowledged by Mrs. Dong. For Mrs. Dong, however, conflicts often occurred about very mundane things which Wendy barely remembered.

For example, one day, Mrs. Dong found that some cucumbers in the fridge were starting to rot, so she chopped off the rotten parts and made a salad for the family. Her granddaughter was still very young, so Wendy said to her: "Don't give the salad to the kid because it might make her sick"²⁴ (Dong, Q, interview transcript, April 25th, 2015). Upon hearing this, Mrs. Dong became furious. She stopped eating, went upstairs, and did not talk to anyone for the entire night. The tension lasted for a few days, until she confronted Wendy and said, "Look, I ate the cucumbers and I didn't become sick"²⁵ as if this could prove her wrong. Another incident like this happened when Wendy told her not to worry about watering a flower. Wendy said she would do it instead. Mrs. Dong thought the reason Wendy asked her not to water the flower was because she didn't trust her ability to do so. Wendy's words made her upset for a few days.

The most serious incident, which was brought up in both interviews, happened when Wendy asked Mrs. Dong how much savings she had in China. According to Wendy, she asked this question out of curiosity over a very casual conversation. For Mrs. Dong, Wendy's question came out as calculating and manipulative. As a result, Mrs. Dong was offended by her question, thinking that all Wendy cared about was her money and how much she would inherit after she died. Mrs. Dong became so angry that she decided to fly back to China immediately after the incident to avoid further confrontation. The anger lasted over six months until Wendy called and

²⁴这个别给她吃，吃了会拉肚子。

²⁵我就吃这个黄瓜，我没有拉肚子。

apologized during Christmas. According to Wendy, she apologized out of courtesy because her priest asked her to do so, rather than for something she thought she did wrong. When she apologized, Mrs. Dong responded: “Hm, you made some progress”²⁶ (Wendy, interview transcript, April 25th, 2015). Mrs. Dong really meant to appreciate Wendy’s apology and recalled a strong sense of relief afterwards. But according to Wendy, Mrs. Dong’s response made Wendy more furious and bitter. She said: “Of course I felt very uncomfortable! I hope after I apologized to her, she would also apologize to me. But she never did. Ever since we met, she has never apologized once”²⁷ (Wendy, interview transcript, April 25th, 2015). She never told Mrs. Dong how she felt, but the response to her apology caused her more pain than the actual conflict.

In the interview, Mrs. Dong reflected on the cause of her anger. She thought that it was not what Wendy said, but the “tone and manner” in which she said things that always offended her. Let us pause and think about what exactly triggered Mrs. Dong’s anger and how she used Wendy’s background as a moral reasoning to cope with her emotion. Was her anger directed at Wendy and her “tone and manner,” or was it directed at her own anxiety over dependency and the loss of power? I would like to suggest the possibility that in all the incidents in which Wendy “offended” or “insulted” Mrs. Dong, be it intentional or not, what really triggered Mrs. Dong’s anger was her own interpretation of Wendy’s “tone and manner” as a threat to her sense of power, control, and authority. Going back to the analysis of Wendy’s narrative, we can also interpret Wendy’s “tone and manner” as an expression of her discontent with the lack of

²⁶嗯，那你有进步。

²⁷当然不是很舒服啦！我希望我跟她道歉，她也能跟我道一下歉，这样就。但是她没有跟我道歉。我们认识到现在她没有跟我说过一句道歉的话。

recognition from Mrs. Dong. In both cases, we can conceive of the subjects as acting out of frustration with their own sense of self and their sense of powerlessness in the in-law relationship for different reasons. Wendy's negativity was directed at Mrs. Dong's prejudice, but was evoked by a sense of ambivalence towards the burden of her inheritance, her mother, and her responsibility for the family. Mrs. Dong's negativity was directed at Wendy's "tone and manner," but was also evoked by her own sense of anxiety with mortality (her imagination of Wendy's desire for her money), dependency, and the loss of power, authority, and privilege.

Mrs. Dong revealed such anxiety in her interview as she recalled the good old days in China where she was treated as a respected authority in school, where her family was well regarded and highly privileged, and where she was wealthy enough not to depend on anyone for anything. These descriptions of herself as powerful were put in sharp contrast with her sense of self when her ability to water the flower was questioned by her daughter-in-law. Therefore, we can read the insult and hatred provoked by such a small incident as a reflection of Mrs. Dong's anxiety about the loss of power, an undermined social identity, and increasing dependence resulting from aging and the immigration process.

The Pursuit of Potency

As a very proud woman, Mrs. Dong never declared any fear or sense of powerlessness in her narrative. However, after more than ten years of living in Canada, she rarely participated in any social or community activities. Even her participation in this interview was encouraged by her son.

My son drove me here. I don't know where everything is. I have no idea. I normally do not participate in any activity. Because there are two young children in the family. I need to take care of them. My daughter-in-law...is busy. My son is also busy. What if there is

some emergency in the family when I'm away? When they [my son] ask me to do something, I will do it. But when they don't ask me for it, I won't do anything outside²⁸.

(Dong, Q, interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

This passage resembles many other narratives I collected in this project where the elders chose to isolate themselves from the community for reasons of childcare. Sometimes, it is easy to interpret the burden of childcare for elderly subjects as the cause of social isolation, which is true in many cases. However, we also heard complaints from adult offspring about their elderly parents' over-involvement with childcare duties, denying their own ability to be parents. Sometimes, adult offspring have to fight for childcare duties from their own parents. The description of Wendy's need for parental love, and her strong need for childcare, seem to help affirm Mrs. Dong value as a parent and a grandparent. At the same time, childcare becomes a desirable excuse to isolate and remove herself from the unfamiliar outside world.

Citing a quote by psychologist Jerome Kagen (1977), Bonner (1998) describes contemporary parenting as a means to pursue a sense of potency in modern life:

As modern environments make a sense of potency and individual effectiveness more difficult to attain, freedom from all affective involvements becomes more and more intolerable. Involvement with a family is the only viable mechanism available to satisfy that hunger. (p.15)

Can we interpret Mrs. Dong's desire to be needed as a parent and grandparent as her pursuit of a sense of potency and individual effectiveness in a foreign society devoid of any other

²⁸我儿子骑车出来送我。我自己也不晓得在哪个方向，也不晓得。我一般不太会去参加。因为家里有俩小孩，我要看着。媳妇。。忙，儿子上班也很忙。家里有什么事情。他们要我去了我就去，他们没说我自己去找的什么事情。

meaningful social connections, as well as an active form of isolation to protect her sense of security from unfamiliar social environments? In other words, Mrs. Dong needs Wendy and her children to *need* her love, care, and understanding as a way to validate her value, which is otherwise difficult to attain outside the domestic space. This argument echoes some scholars' analysis of the in-law relationship as a battle for individual agency, but my analysis tries to move beyond the concept of power as dominance and subordination. The pursuit of power, in the case of Wendy and Mrs. Dong, takes on different forms and expressions, but reveals a strong desire for potency, individual effectiveness, and validation. Such a desire is dialectical as it is directed at the other and also at the other's orientation to the self.

Through my analysis of the problematic dyad's narratives, we are able to formulate the in-law conflict as an interaction and an "exchange of influences" that is animated by a desire for individual power and potency. The conflict is masked by a perpetual impasse that reminds both subjects of the irresolution of the divided self. Expressed in the form of a dilemma, the dissonance between inner feeling and rational moral reasoning continues to function as a problem-solving situation to which each subject has to develop his or her own response. Be it an externalization of cultural difference or a desire to be needed, the responses of the subjects provide us with a pathway to understanding conflict and ambivalence in the context of intimate relationships, cultural ideology, class-based prejudice, and individual agency.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the lived experiences and self-narrated accounts of a few research participants as a way to treat ambivalence as a topic for reflexive inquiry. In both case studies, I began my analysis by treating ambivalence as an occasion that provokes subjects to orient to it as a problem-solving situation and to look for the best solution to reduce its ambiguity.

By interpreting the subjects' narratives as their attempts to form an understanding of and moral reasoning for the situation at hand, I am able to detect their orientations to beliefs, values, and sense of self in various affective modes and registers—mourning, melancholia, impersonality, anxiety, and the pursuit of potency. In the next chapter, I will look deeper into the topic of death and mortality as a fundamental impasse that evokes different responses to the limit of human life as a pursuit of meaning, value, and power. As we continue to interpret individual narratives in a reflexive manner, I hope to achieve a collection of responses to the topic of aging, the transnational family, and elder care as my contribution to a reflexive depiction of lived experience.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DEATH METAPHOR

Introduction

This chapter inquires into a fundamental condition of aging and elder care—the impending reality of the inevitable mortality of human life. Intangible, enigmatic, and inherently unknown to any human being, death is a topic that is both impenetrable and ingrained in our everyday life. Without any prompts in the interviews, more than half of the participants mentioned stories, beliefs, anecdotes, metaphors, and even jokes about death, dying, and mortality in the context of their elder care and family experiences in Canada. Not only is the topic of death and mortality an important theme in the collection of stories from this research project, it also serves as a crucial theoretical foundation for the analysis of aging and elder care. Therefore, this chapter takes up the topic of death as an occasion to engage this fundamental human condition as an impasse that has to be oriented to and reflected upon by any living subject. However, for such a vast topic, my analysis will stay focused on demonstrating the methodological approach of this dissertation, that is, to formulate the subject’s narrative as a problem-solving situation and to develop an interpretive and reflexive understanding of “the grounds of whatever is said—the foundations that make what is said possible, sensible, conceivable” (McHugh et al. 1974, p. 2). With this approach, the goal of the analysis is not to look for a solution or a definite answer to the question of death, but to examine how death is “spoken about,” “put into discourse,” and how it is embedded in values, ideals, and discursive power (Foucault, 1978, p.11-8). Narrative, therefore, becomes a rhetorical mediation that helps the subject reconcile its dualistic identification with the sticky ambiguity of aging and death,

through which we can discover how different subjects engage with and integrate such an impasse into their lived experiences.

Furthermore, most of the narratives on death collected in this research exemplify a kind of “metaphorical language” and “analogical or correlative thinking” (Ames, 2008, p. 41) that are theorized by some scholars as “a uniquely Chinese mode of discourse and argumentation” (Slingerland, 2011, p. 3). Even though these arguments are criticized as expressions of “cultural essentialization” and “intellectual imperialism” (Slingerland, 2011, p. 8), they point to the unique structure of metaphor as a rhetorical device and a way of representing otherwise elusive meaning. This chapter further develops the usage of metaphor as a rhetorical lens through which we can view the subjects’ narratives as responses to the enigma of death and mortality.

Life over Death

There is a four-word phrase in the Chinese language that sums up the meaning of mortality and the cycle of life—sheng lao bing si²⁹. These four words literally mean *birth, aging, illness, death*. Originating from early Buddhist and Taoist writings, this phrase is still used by many to capture the complexity and universality of human mortality, reminding us of the inescapable fate of all mortals. Everybody has to go through the cycle of life captured in this phrase—a natural curse that binds us all together without exception. The universality of death is written about by philosophers of all times and places as the beginning of all beginnings. Yet, the answer to the question remains ungraspable because no living being can ascertain the truth of death. All we can contemplate is life, and it is against life that any knowledge of death and mortality can withstand its truth.

²⁹ 生老病死

Because death also stands for the end of life, it has assumed formidable power in human history. We as mortals should all fear death's power as it negates all knowledge, meaning, and value of the living. However, as Foucault argues, the power of death in modernity has gradually given rise to a bio-politics that values life more than death. The reversal of power from death to life has given ground to biomedical and neoliberal discourses on aging as I discussed in chapter one, and continues to foreclose a reflexive engagement with the topic of death as an integral part of our lived experience (Blum, 2016b). I will review Foucault's discussion of bio-politics and then introduce Blum's (2016b) phenomenological approach to the enigma of death as the theoretical thread of this chapter.

Let us turn to Foucault's (1978) writing again and see how the notion of death conditions his argument about power over life:

But this formidable power of death—and this is perhaps what accounts for part of its force and the cynicism with which it has so greatly expanded its limits—now presents itself as the counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations. (p. 137)

To develop his argument on bio-politics, Foucault (1978) identifies a critical shift in the sovereign power over life and death. In primitive cultures, the right to decide one's life and death is considered the privilege of sovereign power, which exercises "absolute" and "unconditional" control over the subject (p. 135). In the classical age, power over life and death has evolved and can only be legitimated and conditioned by an external threat and in "defense of the sovereign, and his own survival" (p. 135). In both cases, death is considered powerful only to the sovereign who has direct or indirect power over its right. However, what is interesting about this statement

is that death is powerful precisely because *it stands for the absolute limit of power*. Only in this way can death become the absolute way to take power away from any subject. Thus, the death of the other becomes a legitimized way to defend the life of oneself or the sovereign because such power can only be exercised by a living being. Foucault describes this stage of power as “a right of seizure” (p. 136). The sovereign has to first possess things, bodies, and life in order to exercise power over them. With the nineteenth century, Foucault identifies another transformation in the mechanisms of power from the form of “deduction” to a bio-politics that relies not on the “seizure” of life, but on the *administration* of it. With the rise of population study and the modern state, Foucault claims:

The existence in question is no longer the juridical existence of sovereignty; at stake is the biological existence of a population...Now it is over life, throughout its unfolding, that power establishes its dominance; death is power’s limit, the moment that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most “private.” (p. 137-8)

The paradoxical relation between death and power is crucial in understanding this transformation from the “formidable power of death” to the administration of life. *Death signifies both absolute power and absolute powerlessness*. Thus, the absolute power of death drives one to flourish and develop his or her life. And as a result, the administration of life becomes a way to escape the limit of power in death. The most subversive action that challenges the power of life, for Foucault, is the act of suicide, which he considers as situated at “the borders and in the interstices of power that was exercised over life” (p. 139).

Bio-politics entails a transition from using the power of death to control life to leveraging the fear of death to motivate the administration of life. In this case, the orientation to death becomes a primary source of anxiety, fear, and terror for its ultimate negation of meaning,

knowledge, and control of the self and body. Under this influence, death is considered an object of the abject that needs to be managed, coped with, forgotten, and defended against. Such thinking invites various approaches in psychology (Bromberg & Schilder, 1933; Collett & Lester, 1969), social psychology (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997), and cultural anthropology (Becker, 1973), both theoretical and empirical, to investigate *why* and *how* people cope with the fear of death and dying. In formulating a terror management theory (TMT), some scholars (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004) claim that TMT explains why people need self-esteem and faith in their conceptions of reality, and how the need for these psychological structures affect a wide range of human thought and behaviour.

In these cases, the inevitability of death is conceptualized as an object of fear and terror that solicits defensive responses from subjects. However, the effects of these responses are often restricted to the cognitive, behavioral, or religious level. In Jonas and Fischer's (2006) study on the relation between terror management and religion, and their effects on the perception of mortality, the authors argue, "Terror management theory suggests that people cope with awareness of death by investing in some kind of literal or symbolic immortality," and "religious beliefs play a protective role in managing terror of death" (p. 553). Therefore, religious beliefs are theorized to function as a protective mechanism that shelters subjects from the terror of death. Becker (1973) describes, "Religion solves the problem of death. Full transcendence of the human condition means limitless possibility unimaginable to us" (p. 204-5).

In empirical research on the effect of religion, there is mounting evidence that links a higher level of religious involvement to better outcomes in physical and mental wellbeing for elderly subjects (Koenig, 1995; Levin, 1996; Idler & Kasl, 1997; Levin, Chatters, & Taylor,

2011). According to Krause (1997), what is common among the different perspectives on why such a positive link exists is “the notion that deriving a sense of meaning and coherence is a key developmental task in late life” (p. S292). Again, the terror of death is believed to be destabilizing for the aging subject, evoking fear of the loss of meaning and power. The religious discourse on aging thus orients to a binary understanding of life and death, mortality and immortality, and seeks to examine *how* and *why* religion as “a complex and multidimensional domain of human life comprising behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, thoughts, experiences, and values” (Levin, Chatters, & Taylor, 2011, p. 396) can help reduce the terror of death, infuse life with meaning, and improve the quality of wellbeing.

I would like to introduce Blum’s (2016) latest writings on death as an example of moving beyond the binary between life and death to formulate the dying body as a normal phenomenon and an affective force of our lived experience. Such an orientation opens up additional discursive possibilities for engaging the phenomenology of death as a topic of everyday life, and helps us re-conceive of narratives about death as more than just expressions of a defensive mechanism, but also as aesthetic responses to its perpetual enigma.

Towards a Phenomenological Approach to the Enigma of Death

Arendt (1998) describes death as the “law of mortality” and “the only reliable law of a life spent between birth and death” (p. 246). She implies that our knowledge will always be bounded by the limit of death. At the same time, the ungraspability of death also means that any contemplation about it has to be built upon an inherently reflexive relationship to life because any thought directed at death could only be suspended in the living being’s “imagining being dead” (Blum, 2011, p. 24). What does it mean to imagine being dead when no one knows what it means to be dead? By posing this question, Blum (2011) directs our attention from a dichotomy

between the known life and the unknown death separated by the abyss of knowledge, to a reconceptualization of death as a fundamental impasse that forces us to reflect on the meaning and value of life:

It is the ambiguity of this border between life and death that fertilizes questions for the living as the obscure and riveting enigma of life and death: how to keep the dead alive, and how to keep those who live from being dead (the living dead). (p. 29)

In *The Dying Body as a Lived Experience*, Blum (2016b) conceptualizes death itself as a “foreign intruder” that often appears in the guise of “normal” everyday affects, such as “loneliness, demoralization, desperation, settings of rehabilitation, and propensities for acting-out on many occasions” (p. x). The objective of his analysis is to “penetrate and lay out such mundane (dis)guises of anxiety over mortality” through detailed case studies, debates, and everyday situations (p. x). Moving beyond treating death as either an abstract notion or an object of fear, Blum proposes to study death as an impasse that conditions mundane, normal, and everyday lived experiences as an implicit yet forceful reminder of our mortality, vulnerability, and limited power, adding an affective and phenomenological dimension to the topic.

Blum (2016b) makes reference to Simmel on the effect of infraction that brings to our attention otherwise unnoticed customs to describe our “desire to continue at life” in an almost “forceful,” “automated,” and “seen-but-unnoticed” way (p. 1). In this way, Blum diverts the conception of life from a drive to defend our fear of death to a possible appeal of this automated and habitual character in the fashion of addiction. He further conceives of life as a problem-solving situation to which we need to come up with strategies to handle our commitment to its ambiguity between “constraint” (automation) and “freedom” (self-reflexivity).

That life casts such a spell tells us something about the seen-but-unnoticed character of our “background” in between constraint and freedom as a zone of ambiguity that mixes compulsion and attraction, always suggesting that we seem connected to ourselves as both autonomous and self-affective intimate beings and as things subject to the force of automation. (p. 2-3)

To engage this conception of life as a pathway to understanding our mortality, Blum’s project consists of a collection of various strategies, opinions, and beliefs that subjects express as their equipment for living and conceptions of mortality. Such an orientation to life always already encompasses its orientation to death even when it is forgotten, repressed, unspoken, or denied. The task of the analyst, therefore, is to penetrate and uncover the guises of death in its phenomenological and affective manifestations *in life*. According to Blum, death is phenomenological because we need to commit to life at any present moment as both *eternal* and *perishing*. The inevitability of death problematizes this commitment to the present and dramatizes the duality of the living subject who suffers from both life’s absolute vitality and relative ephemerality. Blum writes at the end of the book:

...to live knowing this, to live in the manner of such a subject, invites us to rethink death as a relationship embodied in practice, in oriented action that we can reveal as the way(s) the relationship to death is to be lived and suffered. (p. 197)

One common expression of the duality of the lived experience of death is the feeling of fear. In Blum’s work, the fear of death is acknowledged, but he refuses to objectify it as a source of anxiety in the same way that terror management theory does. Instead, Blum develops a method to look at death as a topic and the fear of it as an “aesthetic force” and “a catalyst in the life of the dying body as equipment for living in order to deal with the fear of death as a problem

in this situation” (12). Death, therefore, is also a problem-solving situation because people need to develop a relationship to address how to solve the problem of their fear of it (12). This gives us a chance to look at subjects’ narratives as responses to fear as an “aesthetic force.” In this way, narratives about death, mortality, and the lived experience of the dying body provide a pathway for us to unmask subjects’ conception of and orientation to death.

Metaphor as a Method and an Aesthetic Response to Sticky Ambiguity

In this chapter, I specifically look at the metaphorical structure of narratives about death that were collected in the research project. Not only is the state of being dead impossible to describe, the inexpressibility of death also forces subjects to intimate their responses in reference to their lived experiences. In describing death, metaphor becomes an effective rhetorical device to put into words otherwise inaccessible experiences. Ricoeur (1978) describes this unique function of metaphor as “not the enigma but the solution of the enigma” (p. 146). He alludes to the structure of metaphor as having the aesthetic potential to uncover the otherwise concealed essence of things. Derrida (1982) describes metaphor in a similar way:

Metaphors can manifest properties, can relate properties from the essence of different things to each other, can make them known on the basis of their resemblance, but nonetheless without directly, fully, and properly stating essence itself, without bringing to light the truth of the thing itself. (p. 249)

Derrida makes a distinction between metaphor and truth. By stating that metaphor relates to the essence of things indirectly and only on the basis of resemblance, he already posits a distance between metaphor and truth. In his words, metaphor can only tell us what the thing is *like*, but not what it *is*. Such a distinction also serves as the basis for classical theorists’

questioning of the legitimacy of metaphorical language, dating all the way back to Aristotle.

According to Ricoeur (1978), Aristotle considers metaphor as figurative and deviant:

Instead of giving a thing its usual common *name*, one designates it by means of a borrowed name, a “foreign” name is Aristotle’s terminology. The rationale of this transfer of name was understood as the objective similarity between the things themselves or the subject similarity between the attitudes linked to the grasping of these things. (p. 145)

Even though metaphor is not taken seriously in classical thought and is only considered as poetic rather than ordinary language, contemporary theories of metaphor recognize its aesthetic and phenomenological potential (Lakoff, 1993, Ricoeur, 2003, Raffel, 2013). Ricoeur (1978) recognizes metaphor’s potential to express otherwise “untranslatable information” (p. 143) and describes the maker of metaphors as a “craftsman” who can generate a new interpretation that is considered “acceptable” (p. 146) rather than deviant. In other words, metaphor provides access to the speaker’s imagination and interpretation of literal incongruence in the form of what Lakoff (1993) calls “conceptual mapping” and what Turner (1996) calls “blended space.” All of them believe that metaphor “reveals a generic kinship between heterogeneous ideas” (Ricoeur, 1978, p. 147). Raffel (2013) further develops the usage of metaphor as an aesthetic tool that can be used to exercise judgment:

We began by suggesting that the standard way of arriving at judgments, by syllogism, has not fulfilled its promise. The alternative, judging by making comparisons, comes to seem viable once it is appreciated that interpreting the identity of any phenomenon is, contrary to the assumption as to the nature of being that goes back to Aristotle and others, a matter

of what differentiates that phenomenon. Metaphors therefore become potential tools for exercising judgments. (p. 41)

Such potential to treat metaphor as an alternative and viable method for logical reasoning and interpretation also gives rise to the phenomenological approach to metaphorical language. In Barker's (2000) article that tries to defend the lived experiences of mentally ill subjects against the scientific language (treated as literal meaning) of clinical medicine, he proposes a metaphorical approach to studying the phenomenology of life, death, and illness. Barker describes clinical medicine as "one form of organized response to people in great human distress" and "a function of self deceit" (p. 99). He calls for a metaphorical response to health and illness, which treats madness not as a clinical category, but as a metaphor to help us understand such illness in a phenomenological way. Barker also highlights the aesthetic nature of metaphor—getting close to the essence while keeping a critical distance—echoing what Ricoeur (1978) calls the preservation of remoteness within proximity (p. 148). Such an aesthetic distance lies in the subject's imagination and conceptual mapping of the logical structure of likeness, and provides a pathway to understanding their individual reflections about who and what they are in their life world.

The post-structuralist tradition further problematizes the idea of a signifier-signified dyad and any stable and literal destination of language. Both Lacan (1977) and Derrida (1982) talk about the chain of signifiers as irresolute and unstable. Lacan (1977) says, "no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification" (p. 498). At the same time, many sinologists argue that such an unstable yet fluid understanding of language characterizes early Chinese thought and much traditional Chinese philosophy. There is a widely agreed-upon

claim³⁰ that metaphors and allegorical language play an important and foundational role in early Chinese thought (Allinson, 1989). Whether or not metaphor is characteristic of the Chinese mode of thinking is not the focus of my discussion. The goal of this chapter is not to treat metaphor as a lens of cultural specificity, but rather as an aesthetic tool and a phenomenological pathway to the speaker's imagination, thinking, and interpretation of inexpressible thoughts. My analysis of metaphor centers on understanding how it works in the production of meaning and the subject's imagination of lived experiences. As there is no literal meaning of death and mortality, metaphor becomes an effective and viable lens to access the speaker's conception of these topics. In the second case, I will also examine the usage of suicide as a metaphorical joke by an elderly woman to describe her sense of powerlessness. She used suicide both as a powerful metaphor for self-validation as well as to illustrate her feelings of powerlessness in her daily experience.

Case One: The Doubling of Intimate and Impersonal Death

It is common for the elderly immigrant to lose his or her spouse at some point during life in Canada. The experience of single immigrant elders is well documented in the literature, which tends to focus on the issues of social isolation, burdens to the caregiver, reduction in the quality of life, and the sense of autonomy (Vega, Kolody, & Valle, 1986; Basavarajappa, 1998; Hays, 2002; Treas & Mazumdar, 2002). How does the death of an intimate partner affect the elderly? The complexity of this question seems to go far beyond the practical consequences for family arrangements and individual wellbeing.

Nothing is as unimaginable as death. It can at best be experienced through the death of the other. But when it happens to an elder's intimate partner, one is often forced to orient to such a loss. The occasion of mourning often reveals the paradoxical nature of death—its impersonality

³⁰ See the critique of such a claim in Slingerland, 2011.

and intimacy, universality, and particularity. According to Williams (2011), Deleuze (1968) describes this as the double meaning of life and ultimate paradox of death—one implies an impersonal death as in dying as a universal phenomenon; the other relates to a personal death as in the loss of a singular person. This doubling of death is vividly apparent in the following narrative. As a case study, it illustrates the struggle expressed by an elderly man in the process of mourning his wife. On the surface, the elder's response to the loss of his wife is very clear, determined, and consistent. But a closer analysis of the narrative reveals an unspoken struggle. Confronting the death of his wife exposes the subject to the irresolute yet provocative doubling of death, forcing him to orient to its sticky ambiguity as a problem to solve and to reflect on its significance. In this case, the subject dealt with the death of his wife by orienting to an impersonal representation of loss as an effective tactic of blocking personal and affective memories. In my analysis of his narrative, I try to reveal the subject's orientation to impersonality as his way of dealing with the sticky ambiguity of mortality.

The Story Opener

Mr. Xu and his wife moved to Canada to live with their daughter and son-in-law 27 years ago and helped raise their two grandchildren. During the interview, he expressed great pride in his intelligent grandchildren, both of whom were attending medical school to become doctors. There were already many doctors in Mr. Xu's family, and what he liked the most about Canada was its quality health care and universal health care plan. At the beginning of the interview, Mr. Xu was asked to describe his family life in Canada, and he opened his story like this:

My wife died on February 1st. Sigh. February 1st of this year. Died... She suffered from many illnesses—diabetes, heart disease, she also had an operation on her brain before. She hadn't enjoyed any good health, for four to five years...so many years. So, this year,

at a hospital here, one that's called St. Mary's Hospital, on February 1st...died. She had a good death, no pain, nothing uncomfortable, just sleep, sleep, sleep...good, and gone.

From the evening of January 30th to 3pm of February 1st afternoon, she was dying. The IV fluid cannot go into her body. She was bloated. The fluid only went underneath her skin, it didn't work, it meant something bad...passed away on February 1st. On April 27th, after she died, I took her ash with me back, back to mainland China. No burying here. The ash was burnt here, but I took it back. I went back for twenty days, between April 26th to May 17th. We just got back, only got back a week ago, from Shanghai.³¹

(Xu, S., interview transcript, June 1st, 2015)

One might be surprised by both the event Mr. Xu chose to open the interview with, as well as how he described such an event. The death of his wife certainly carried a lot of weight in his overall narrative, yet his description of the loss seemed to skim over its significance. From this short paragraph, we can see that Mr. Xu was struggling with the personal character of loss. In other words, Mr. Xu was trying to orient to, contest, and work out the solution to the question of death and the ambiguity it evokes. How to overcome such a personal loss, therefore, becomes a problem-solving situation for Mr. Xu. Let us unpack his narrative further and see how he dealt with this problem, or what Deleuze (1968) describes as the doubling of death.

³¹我太太 2 月 1 号死掉了，她本来的病就很多，有糖尿病，有心脏病，以前头这个脑子开过刀，一直身体差，都四五年了，很多年了。那么今年，在这里的医院，叫圣玛丽医院，2 月 1 号死的。她死得很好，没有什么痛苦，也没有觉得什么不舒服，就是睡觉睡觉睡觉，好，没有了。1 月 30 号晚上到 2 月 1 号下午三点钟，死的。这个盐水接不进，肿起来了，到这个皮肤里去了，没有用了，说明这个不好了，2 月 1 号去世的。4 月 27 号，她死掉后骨灰我们带回去，带到大陆去，不在这里葬。这里烧的骨灰，把它带回去。去了二十天，4 月 26 号到 5 月 17 号。我们回来，刚刚来了一个多星期，上海去的。

When Mr. Xu was asked to describe his current family life, he began with a difficult description of his wife's death. Instead of using the most common and polite word *qu shi*³² (pass away) to describe death, he chose to describe it more blatantly, repeating the word *si le*³³ (died). The word *si le* not only conveys the objective and factual phenomenon of death, it also implies permanent loss in the sense that someone is gone forever. The first meaning of *si le* refers to the universal phenomenon of death that nobody can escape. The universality of death is an undeniable truth that ties all human beings together. Such an inevitable "togetherness" expressed by Mr. Xu not only conveys his acceptance of this truth, but also implies his belief that mourning such a fact is futile and unnecessary. The second meaning of *si le*, however, evokes a deep and intimate sense of loss that only belongs to the singular individual. In this case, the death of his wife took the form of the most personal, intimate, permanent, and irreversible loss, conditioning the necessity for mourning. However, we can see a paradox at play in Mr. Xu's speech: the death of his wife is both *together with* the universality of death—a partial loss in the circulation of life—and also *apart from* all other individual deaths—an absolute loss for Mr. Xu.³⁴ Mr. Xu's difficulty in grasping the death of his wife revealed such a paradox as an occasion for problem-solving.

Calendar Time and Narrated Time

As he struggled to represent the loss, Mr. Xu began to describe it as a series of "events"—from his wife's worsening condition in the hospital, to the final moment of her life, and eventually to the burial of her ashes. The date "February 1st" was repeated several times

³² 去世

³³ 死了

³⁴ See the paradoxical relation between togetherness and apartness in Rancière (2008, p. 4).

during his speech, in a manner similar to what Kristeva (1989) describes as “many sign systems distant from the site of pain” (p. 42). Drawing insights from Kristeva’s (1989) description of the melancholic, we can seek to read the repetition of this impersonal date as Mr. Xu’s way of negating the intimacy of his loss. Kristeva (1989) says,

The negation of that fundamental loss opens up the realm of signs for us, but the mourning is often incomplete. It drives out negation and revives the memory of signs by drawing them out of their signifying neutrality. It loads them with affects, and this results in making them ambiguous, repetitive or simply alliterative, musical or sometimes nonsensical...Melancholia then ends up in asymbolia, in loss of meaning... (p. 42)

Mr. Xu attempted to reduce the sticky ambiguity of loss and grief by orienting to an impersonal representation of death with a calendar date, but the repetition of the sign masked his deeper struggle with personal pain. It was a date that marked his loss, yet it also belonged to universal calendar time. We can see that Mr. Xu’s narrative conspicuously perceived time as a measure of distance between events. He constructed his response to the loss as a linear and ordinary representation of time, characterized by what Ricoeur (1991) describes as a relation of simultaneity and succession between abstract nows and thens. In other words, Mr. Xu’s narrative intentionally precluded a phenomenological and personal experience of the loss as a site of tension between the continuity of calendar time and the discontinuity of personal, narrated time.

In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur (1984) makes the claim that there is a correlation between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience. He tries to show how the narration of a story pre-figures, configures, and refigures the temporal features of the world through a three-staged process of mimesis.

The world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world. Or, as will often be repeated in the course of this study: time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience. (p. 3)

In Mr. Xu's narrative, the experience of loss was described as a singular event that followed factual and objective calendar time. Ricoeur (1984) describes calendar time as an objectification of a universal chronicle time (p. 105). Such a linear representation of time served as the framework of reference for Mr. Xu's narrative. At the same time, Mr. Xu's narrative became a mediation between calendar time and what Ricoeur (1984) calls "a configured time." Such a configured time reveals a double temporality that mediates between an individual event as a singular occurrence and a story that is taken as a whole. It bridges the aporia between a socialized and historical temporality that follows the linear representation of time, and an intimated and phenomenological temporality that is embedded in a structure of values and beliefs.

Such a rhetorical strategy shows that Mr. Xu was trying to relate to his personal loss as an objective and past event, stripping away any emotional ripples. In his description of what his wife went through before the final moment—the hospital, the blockage of IV fluid, the long suffering night—Mr. Xu portrayed her as merely a sick and dying body, rather than a beloved individual, as if such an objectification of the individual could help him overcome the personal character of loss and block his access to memory. To Mr. Xu, death might be the final termination of a singular life, but comparing it to the unceasing and permanent concept of time makes it nothing but an event and an occurrence. Therefore, we can treat Mr. Xu's narrative and storytelling as his intelligible organization of a series of events. From this *totem simul* of

occurrences, we can detect his orientation to the best representation of such a personal loss as an impersonal occurrence. In this case, Mr. Xu tried to overcome his personal loss with *impersonality*. Such a depersonalization of personal loss is grounded in his belief in the universal, objective, scientific representation of illness and mortality. He readily accepted the phenomenon of aging and mortality as inevitable, absolute, and true. Therefore, he believed that any attempt to intimate, personalize, and sentimentalize it would only result in futile grieving.

Medicine as Bad Faith

We can also hypothesize that such an orientation to impersonality has to do with Mr. Xu's firm belief in medical science. When he recalled his wife's health condition, he felt lucky that they were able to seek medical help in Canada:

Shanghai doesn't have the medical equipment. China doesn't have any of such equipment. According to my grandson, Canada is better and has better medical equipment. Therefore, she went to St. Mary's Hospital and had an operation on her brain. That was the first time she had an operation in a Western hospital. The first surgical operation was done on the brain, and later she had another brain surgery. I'm glad she had the surgeries. Dementia was nothing scary as long as she had the operation.³⁵ (Xu, S., interview transcript, June 1st, 2015)

Without knowing much context surrounding his wife's dementia, we can still see that Mr. Xu was trying to overcome the "scariness" of the disease with his strong faith in medical intervention. The ambiguous and perplexing nature of dementia was never mentioned by Mr. Xu.

³⁵上海没有这个设备，中国没有这个设备，那我外孙什么的就讲，快点到加拿大来，加拿大设备好，就到这儿的圣玛丽医院开刀。头一次在西方医院开刀，先开头上一刀，后来又再开一刀。开了也蛮好，老年痴呆症也没什么，开了蛮好。

Here, we observe again how Mr. Xu tried to preclude and overcome the phenomenological and personal character often associated with dementia. Ironically, his interpretation of dementia as nothing but a problem of the brain exemplifies the pervasive biomedical interpretation of the disease. Such a biomedical and neurological understanding of dementia is often used as teaching material for self-help, targeting dementia patients and caregivers as a way to provide them with an objective and impersonal defense against the disease's ambiguous and unsettling character. Mr. Xu's orientation to impersonality epitomizes such a medical imaginary, which functions as a defense against the intimate, personalized, and ambiguous nature of dementia.

In chapter one, I formulate aging, illness, and death as a situation of sticky ambiguity that animates the subjects to search for the best solution to and representation of the problem. In the struggle to overcome the personal character of loss and the perplexing symptoms of dementia of his wife, Mr. Xu oriented to the grammar of impersonality grounded in the objective interpretation offered by medicine. In this case, in his personal imaginary the aura of medicine and science becomes the best representation of the human condition of *sheng lao bing si*. After all, Mr. Xu believes that he is yet another body who cannot escape the cycle of birth, aging, illness, and death. Only medicine can offer him a sense of relief, helping him to conquer any anxiety released by the sticky ambiguity of mortality. The following narrative vividly illustrates his "solution" to the problem:

There was one time when my grandson detected a minor crooking of my mouth. He told me that it might be a minor stroke and asked me to go to the hospital. So I went to the hospital last week. I have a CT scan scheduled for tomorrow, and some testing on my neck. He said it must be a minor stroke, because my mouth was just slightly crooked. If

my mouth was severely crooked, then it might be a big stroke.³⁶ [laughing] (Xu, S., interview transcript, June 1st, 2015)

Treating Mr. Xu's narrative as a search for the best solution to the problem of overcoming loss and death, my analysis makes observable his orientation to impersonality and objective science as a defense against the ambiguity of aging and mortality. For Mr. Xu, overcoming the death of an intimate partner becomes a problem to solve, and an inclination to impersonality and science becomes one way of handling the problem, providing him with an effective defense against the personal character of loss and the ambiguity of mortality.

Case Two: Chicken Ribs and Suicide Jokes

If Mr. Xu's case exemplifies a factual representation of death, the subject in this case offers us a more imaginative relation to mortality. This case looks at the narrative of an elderly woman who has lived with her son's family in Canada for more than ten years. Mrs. Luo chose to begin her story with the following passage:

Those days [in the Cultural Revolution] were very different from the period after the Reform and Opening Up.³⁷ It was a very conservative time. I cannot stand it anymore. I felt mentally ill. My child was only two years old at that time. I felt mentally shocked.³⁸

(Luo, L. interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

³⁶这里的大外孙有次看我嘴巴有点歪，说是小中风，快点要医院里去看，上个礼拜去医院看了，明天做 CT，查查颈椎啊，他说肯定是小中风，因为嘴巴小歪，要是大歪就不对了，大歪就是大中风了。

³⁷ 改革开放

³⁸在那个年代时候，不像现在改革开放了，那个年代很传统的哪种，就有点受不了。就像精神病一样的。孩子刚两岁啊，那会。就受刺激那种感觉。

At the time of the interview, Mrs. Luo's son and daughter were already well established, with their careers and families in Canada and Germany respectively. However, Mrs. Luo still chose to begin her life story with those traumatic years. For the first one-third of the interview, Mrs. Luo detailed the history of her problematic marriage before she immigrated to Canada, as if that history needed to be told in order for me to comprehend her lived experience in Canada. This kind of storytelling structure is common among most of our interview subjects. Even when the participants were asked about their life in Canada, many chose to begin their narratives with difficult and complex family histories that happened before their arrival. These family and personal histories are believed to have shaped their present living situations. The past is also discussed in a causal relation to the present.

The chronological storytelling and causalization between the past and the present resemble the life course theory developed in the 1960s for analyzing a subject's life trajectory within different social and cultural contexts. Underlying this approach is the clichéd metaphor of life as a journey with birth as the beginning and death as the end. Life events become turning points in one's journey, leading to different paths that are irreversible. The metaphor of life as a journey is so widely used that it almost becomes the literal meaning of life. Based on this metaphor of life, the use of calendar time (Ricoeur, 1991) becomes a natural framework that gives our lived experience a sense of coherence. However, when we speak of life as a journey, we also become travelers. Shouldn't travelers have some kind of control over which path to take? What happens when the journey of life spirals out of the traveler's control? What if one cannot choose his or her own path but is forced to bear its consequences? Let us take a look at how Mrs. Luo recalled her life journey as a path chosen for her, and how her past continues to influence her sense of self in the present.

“During that Period of Time...”

Let us return to the beginning of Mrs. Luo’s story. She was born in a family of “good political composition.”³⁹ She also worked as a doctor in one of Beijing’s biggest national hospitals. During the early phase of the Cultural Revolution, an “anti-revolutionary category” and bad “compositions” were often used blindly and forcefully as external judgements and designations of an individual’s political position regardless of the subject’s innocence and own opinion. In a ruthless revolution that is founded on an anti-rightist movement, many intellectuals were purged as rightists because of these arbitrary “compositions.” They were exposed to forced self-criticism, public humiliation, violence, stripping of their careers, tortures, murders, and suicides. In just two months, from August to September 1966, 1772 people were murdered in Beijing. 704 suicides and 534 deaths were related to the Revolution in Shanghai (Schoenhals & MacFarquhar, 2006, p. 124). Most of the Chinese elders who immigrated to Canada from mainland China after the revolution have witnessed and experienced those 10 years of tumultuous history. Even though it is still banned in public discussion in mainland China, the Cultural Revolution has undoubtedly shaped the collective memory of this generation of elderly Chinese immigrants. Because of my age, Mrs. Luo felt the need to contextualize her story by providing historical background in order for me to comprehend the significance of this tumultuous period.

During the onset of the Cultural Revolution and before Mrs. Luo’s marriage, her then husband was also a doctor, but he was purged as a rightist because of his family background. Her friend introduced her to him with the hope that their marriage could “correct” his “composition” and political background. People at that time used the metaphor “putting a hat onto someone” as

³⁹ 成分

a way to describe how individuals were designated with different political labels. What this metaphor implies is the idea that you are not determined by *who* you are, but solely by what other people *designate* you to be. Such designation was often determined by the fanatical political ideology appropriated by the revolutionist Red Guards in a full denial of subjectivity. Such an externally sanctioned and violently imposed designation, at that time, was described as the inevitable fate of individuals. Millions of people sacrificed their families, careers, and lives to these unjust hats, resulting in irreversible turning points in their life trajectories. Mrs. Luo considered herself to be one of the many helpless victims of that generation. Even today, she still cannot fully come to terms with the impact of that historical period on her life journey, including her problematic marriage. The metaphor that life is a journey and time is a river was also used by Mrs. Luo to express her sense of resignation to the forces that shaped her fate. Towards the end of the interview, Mrs. Luo sighed and said:

The problem of aging is fearful. With one blink, I was 40 years old and still young, but with another blink, I am already 75, almost 76. Stroke (sounds of swimming in the river of life)...stroke...stroke...how many strokes are left in [the river of] my life and how would I end it?⁴⁰ (Luo, L. interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

Because of her family background, she was introduced to her husband in order to correct his political label so that he could continue to practice medicine. As a young woman, Mrs. Luo was proud that her marriage was able to rescue her husband from the loss of career, freedom, and innocence. However, two years into the marriage, she found out that her husband was engaged in

⁴⁰还有一个考虑到年龄问题，很可怕。一眨眼 40 多岁挺年轻的，现在一看都 75 了，76 了。在扑通扑通扑通怎么结束这生命啊？

extramarital affairs. According to Mrs. Luo, they lived in a time of “Big-character Poster⁴¹” (a method of public humiliation), and an overly conservative period where any private matter could be exposed to public humiliation, when “the public’s saliva” (a metaphor for public rumor and opinion) could drown an innocent individual. Not only was infidelity condemned by the public, it also came as a shock to Mrs. Luo. She used words like “insane,” “mentally mad,” and “shocking” to describe the impact it had on her mental wellbeing. She still blamed her ex-husband’s infidelity as causing irrevocable damage to her personality, making her a permanent pessimist. When she found out about the affair, not only was she forbidden to complain or ask for a divorce, her boss even gave her a promotion as a way to shut her up. As a result, her husband’s infidelity continued and did not stop until their much later divorce. She described her experience of marriage as “living dead”. The metaphor of “living dead” alluded to her sense of helplessness and powerlessness over her life against all the forceful and unjust external forces—the “hat” that she was made to wear.

During the Revolution, millions of urban intellectuals were dispatched to the countryside to engage in laborious activities during the *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside*. Mrs. Luo and her husband were dispatched to a mine in a very poor province. With two children to feed and four elderly parents to care for, she had no choice but to fulfill all the care duties, as her husband continued to ignore the family. Mrs. Luo kept delaying her filing of divorce because she simply had no choice. She said, “We still lived together because above me, I have to take care of the elders, and below me, I have to take care of my children”⁴² (Luo, L. interview transcript, April 25th, 2015).

⁴¹ 大字报

⁴² 还住在一起，因为我上有老下有小么。

She simply couldn't consider herself when she was obliged to care for the other family members. According to Mrs. Luo, sacrificing her happiness was the only choice she had. Looking at her life from another perspective, she perceived the forces that shaped her life as almost all external, leaving her in a constant state of impotency. Because of the Revolution, she could not escape her broken marriage. Because of elder care and child care, she could not leave her husband. Her life resembles what Blum describes as an automated and habitual process, forcing her forward as if there are no choices, only the need to fulfill responsibilities and obligations.

Life as an Automated Commitment

Even though Mrs. Luo was born in a good family, few people were really free at that historical moment. She described herself as being married to a “toxic serpent” who strangled her life and made her suffer. She often used “my time”—referring to the 10-year Revolution—as an expression of a state of oppression, conservatism and complete denial of freedom and autonomy. She did not choose her marriage. She was forced to give up divorce and tolerate her husband's infidelity. The only choice she made was to give up her own happiness for her children and the “completion” of the family. She tolerated and accumulated all the emotions of helplessness and impotency for so many years until the end of the Revolution and the *Open Reform*. However, it was her ex-husband who filed for the divorce. Mrs. Luo reflected on her reaction, saying that he finally didn't “need” her anymore. She had no more value to him.

The opening of China released a lot of political oppression from individuals. It was a time that Mrs. Luo had longed for. She was finally divorced from her husband. She was freed from elder care obligation as her parents passed away. She was also freed from childcare duties as both her son and daughter decided to leave China and study abroad. All the people who needed

her care or demanded her responsibilities were gone. She should have finally felt free and liberated. However, that was not how she felt.

At that time, out of a sudden, my father passed away, and my son decided to go to Canada. At that moment, I thought my family disappeared. First, I faced a divorce. Then, my children left for abroad. Then, my father was gone. My entire family was gone. [crying]⁴³ (Luo, L. interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

People who “needed” her and “strangled” her were no longer her responsibilities. Not until this moment of liberation did she realize that she had nothing to live for. Who was she without her marriage, her children, and her elderly parents? What was the purpose of her life and how was she going to live? These questions never crossed her mind until all the “hats” (wife, mother, daughter) were removed from her. This sudden liberation came as what Simmel would call an infraction, throwing her out of the automated and habitual zone of life, and forcing her to reflect on her commitments, and *why* she chose to continue her life. This question puzzled her, but the enigma of the question has a more philosophical origin. Is life a choice? If so, how can we choose life before we are born? If coming to life was not our choice, how can we choose to live and continue to be committed to life?

Blum (2016b) makes reference to both Simmel and Durkheim’s conceptions of life to describe such an enigma. According to Blum (2016b), Simmel conceptualizes life as “an unreflected given, automated and habitual,” and Durkheim sees it as “indicative of a choice or commitment, in some way, to live” (p. 1). Such a commitment is grounded in the general sense that life is good only because “the great mass of men prefer it to death” (as cited in Blum, 2016b,

⁴³ 那会儿呢，突然间我爸去世以后他就决定来加拿大。我当时我就想一下子这个家就没有了。我面临着离婚，然后呢，就是孩子出国。然后父亲没有了，亲人都没有了。[哭]

p. 1). Following these conceptions, Blum (2016b) further develops the life metaphor as a “spontaneous desire”:

The subject seems in this view as an automaton, living out routines as if under the spell of sociality in the shape of codes and a normative order. The automated tone of the human condition, its repetitive and compulsory commitment to doing as it does and must do, seems not only to account for life itself but for many of the devices and technologies that we develop for living as in our customs, language, and formulae, and even the interpretive constructions and models we use to represent “reality” as in the invention of codes and clichés that we honor. (p. 2)

Using this metaphorical conception of life, we can then seek to interpret Mrs. Luo’s commitment to life during the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution not just as being victimized and compelled by ruthless external conditions, but also as honoring a set of codes and traditions that defined her value as an active self. In other words, her commitment to life, despite her sense of vulnerability, sacrifice and impotency against social forces, was also driven by a desire to preserve who she *ought* to be as a wife, mother, and daughter. The spell of these social roles and hats shaped the routines and commitments of her everyday life for over a decade until it was broken by the appearance of a sudden liberation.

We can also say that her will to live during those difficult years was driven by two forces. The first force was grounded in a hope for liberation as something to live for and the *imaginary order* of life. And the other force was driven by a need to preserve a sense of self as a valuable social actor in the form of *who she ought to be* and *what she ought to do*. Such a way of coping with the spell of a “repetitive and compulsory commitment” to life as the lived experience *here and now* points to the *symbolic order* of life that is often “seen-but-unnoticed.” When the

liberation she desired for so long finally arrived, it disrupted the “background expectancies” in her life and stopped its automated forces. The clash between the imaginary and symbolic order created a *lack* and void in Mrs. Luo, making her ponder who she was again. Such a conflict cast a shadow of abandonment over Mrs. Luo’s narrative. As ironic as it sounds, it also affirms a conception of life as an unreflected choice and commitment by the subject, but the source of such a commitment often remains obscure and continues to haunt the subject with a quest for meaning.

“Chicken Ribs”: Parenting as Debt and Elder Care as Paying Back

When she was lost and felt abandoned by her family, Mrs. Luo’s son invited her to move to Canada to live with his wife and two children. According to Mrs. Luo, her son was a filial and considerate child. Not only did he buy a big house in a neighborhood populated with Chinese immigrant elders, he also provided the best possible material and economic conditions for Mrs. Luo. However, during her ten years in Canada, Mrs. Luo never felt happy. First, she described herself as the “outsider” in the family and then as “chicken ribs” with little use value:

We are now the chicken ribs. Being the chicken ribs means there is still a little bit of meat left on the bones, so it is a waste to throw it away. If you don’t throw it away, you can probably take a couple of more bites. When you still have some use value, like looking after the grandchildren, doing some cooking, even then you could be blamed.⁴⁴(Luo, L. interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

The metaphor of “chicken ribs” describes a common experience of many Chinese elders. As I discussed in chapter two, the sense of powerlessness and ambiguity in relation to the family

⁴⁴ 我们现在还是鸡肋。这鸡肋就是，这骨头里头还有点肉，扔了怪可惜的，不扔还能啃两下。当你有用的时候，就这帮看孩子，做饭的就说还挨次的呢。

is often a result of a conflict between the desire to influence others and the shame of over-dependency. However, given Mrs. Luo's narrative about her early life, the metaphorical description of her self value as "chicken ribs" also points to a different interpretation. During her reflections on the period of the Cultural Revolution, she described her own value as the equivalent of use value to other people. She described her marriage as use value to correct her ex-husband's political background, and her own dedication to childcare and elder care as self-sacrifice for the sake of preserving her use value as a mother. There seems to be a parallel between her lived experiences during the Revolution and her stay in Canada. During both phases in her life, she was oriented to an understanding of self as defined by use value to others in a very materialist manner. In other words, her own self value was often defined by whether other people *needed* her in any utilitarian or materialist way, whether in the form of obligation, labor, or the practice of care.

This conception of self was made more clear when Mrs. Luo expressed a sense of guilt towards her own son after living with him for ten years. Under the current immigration policy, family members need to financially sponsor elderly immigrants for ten years before they can receive the Old Age Security (OAS)—a monthly stipend offered to elders in support of their living expenses. Therefore, Mrs. Luo was hoping that she could use the OAS to rent a senior housing unit and live independently after ten years. Unfortunately, during these years, Mrs. Luo developed age-related blindness and her eyesight was deteriorating day by day. When she finally started to receive OAS from the government, her near blindness once again destroyed her hope of independent living.

Think about it. My son grew up under my unhappiness for the first half of his life. After that, he became independent. He can take care of himself. Now he has to come back to

take care of me. He has done that for 10 years. This 10-year was such a waste [of time] for him. Finally, I got my OAS, but then my body (eyesight) became a problem. As I get older, this will only become more troubling.⁴⁵ (Luo, L. interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

She expressed a strong sense of guilt towards her son because she was not able to give him a happy childhood. To Mrs. Luo, it was her who brought her son into this world and into her broken marriage. Even though she tried her best to sacrifice her own happiness for the children, hoping to give them a so-called “complete family,” she still felt helpless and guilty when her son told her, “I grew up in your [marriage] war”⁴⁶ (Luo, L. interview transcript, April 25th, 2015). By describing her son’s ten-year elder care for her as a waste of time, Mrs. Luo was making a comparison between her own parenting and her son’s care for her. Mrs. Luo also conceptualized care as a fair exchange. Only when she could provide good parenting and childcare to her own son would she deserve her son’s elder care. Parenting, therefore, becomes a kind of exchange in the form of a gift, which implicitly demands loyalty and obligation from the receiver. In the same way as Mauss’s (1990) conception of gift exchange, care becomes an exchange of power for negotiating obligation and indebtedness. Mauss (1990) says, “What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back” (p.3)?

Mrs. Luo sees parenting as possessing the power to bring justice and fairness to the exchange of care. In other words, if she was not able to provide proper care to her son, what

⁴⁵ 你想，从小儿子跟我们不幸福这整个前半部分的经过。完了以后人家靠自立，自己养自己。然后过来以后再养我，养了我 10 年。这 10 年等于是白养我了，好不容易有了这个养老金了，完了以后身体又出状况，这个年龄以后越来越麻烦。

⁴⁶ 我是一个在你们战争中长大的。

power did she have to negotiate and solicit her son's elder care? What is interesting to note is that Mrs. Luo's narrative was in sharp contrast to the common understanding of parenting in Chinese society and the conception of filial piety advocated by Confucianism. According to traditional Chinese values, parenting is one of the *four debts of gratitude* that an individual needs to pay back as part of self-cultivation and learning to be a human. It is commonly believed that parents make big sacrifices to protect the well-being of their children; therefore, the children are obliged to return their sacrifices with care and respect. However, in the case of Mrs. Luo, she reversed this cultural norm and perceives herself as the indebted one. According to her narrative, she owed her children a good childhood, and her blindness and dependency made her more indebted. We can argue that her sense of guilt was evoked by the ideal speaker that resembles the Confucian version of filial piety. However, having failed to live up to that exchange of care, she felt guilty, unworthy, and useless when she received care from her children. She was not able to recognize her children's care as more than fulfilling an obligation or payback. Seeing her sense of self as use value and treating her relationship with her son as an unjust exchange of care eventually instilled in her a deep sense of guilt. The metaphor of chicken ribs vividly captures this emotion.

The Metaphor of Death: The No-Man Zone and Shared Life

Coming back to the conceptual framework of this dissertation, Mrs. Luo's orientation to aging and elder care was heavily colored by her constant "failure" to live up to her idealized version of life—a complete family, good parenting, independent old age, etc. But the "reality" of life, conditioned by historical trauma, unfortunate marriage, or declining health, always put her in a state of sticky ambiguity characterized by a sense of helplessness and guilt. She felt betrayed and victimized by the historical period she had to live through, by her unfaithful husband, and

eventually by her own blindness. The struggle to validate herself beyond her use value to others has been a central thread of her life story. Life becomes a problem-solving situation for Mrs. Luo as she struggles to define its meaning and her value. Mrs. Luo (2015) said, “To me, living is no longer meaningful.” Provoked by a number of unfortunate infractions of the automated machine of life, she began to reflect on its meaning. Such a reflection was conducted against the backdrop of an imaginary death. Let us unpack a number of metaphors of death that Mrs. Luo used in her narrative as her way of reflecting on the question of value and the meaning of life.

Recognizing that her eyesight was not curable, Mrs. Luo’s son decided to take her to a community gathering for blind elders, hoping she could find some common ground. However, Mrs. Luo described the experience as an encounter with death:

Those people were born to be blind, not something like having weak eyesight. They can still do something with the stick (walking cane). I went there once, I felt something that I cannot express. It’s not like I was born to be blind. My eyesight faded over time. After the event, I felt like, I am not dead yet, but I felt like I am already looking at my grave pit and cinerary casket already. I felt that I was stepping into that no-man zone.⁴⁷ (Luo, L. interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

During the interviews, Mrs. Luo made a number of comparisons between her late onset of blindness and people who were born blind, or became blind at an early age, as a way to stress her misery. According to her logic, if one was born with such a condition or had to live with such a condition for one’s entire life, it was not as unfortunate as if one lost such ability in old age. She

⁴⁷ 都是有什么先天的，什么眼睛视力不好，那个棍扑棱扑棱在一起活动以后。去了一次嘛，当时我内心就说不出来内种感觉。不是说你先天看不见，你是后来一点点视力不行的。完了后感觉你说也没死呢，就天天看着墓坑和骨灰盒那种感觉。就已经进入无人区了那种感觉。

is trying to point out the different degrees of misery between an inherited condition and a loss in old age. It seems like what makes blindness miserable and unbearable for Mrs. Luo is not the condition itself, but its timing.

[Death] is what I face now. I think about death at any given moment. I think about the problem with my eyes. How can I live in the future? I cannot see anything, who is going to help me? How do I live?⁴⁸ (Luo, L. interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

Mrs. Luo described herself as approaching the end of life's journey. Becoming blind at this stage was deeply disabling and depressing because there was not much time left for her to learn to live with such a condition. She used death here as a way to express the loss of hope and a future, as death implies loss and the negation of all possibilities. As a result, blindness triggered her imagination of dying as a disabling experience.

Another reason why she compared her blindness to innate blindness was the idea of autonomy. According to Mrs. Luo, if blindness was an inheritance, by learning to live with it, one could still achieve autonomy. One can learn to use a walking cane and “touch the phone and call someone” (Luo, L. interview transcript, April 25th, 2015). In other words, even blind people can be in control of their own blindness. However, her blindness was treated not just as a loss of sight, but also as a loss of ability, autonomy, and independence. For her entire life, she struggled with the desire for autonomy, control, and independence, but her blindness came as a death sentence to her, stripping away her last hope of remaining in control of her own life. As a result, becoming blind becomes a metaphor for aging and death—a process of gradually losing what you used to have, be it power, hope, control, or autonomy; and a state of “definitive impotence

⁴⁸ 因为现在已经面临着，现在就是时时刻刻想到死。我想到的问题就是眼睛的问题。将来我怎么活。看不见，谁帮？怎么活？

and absence” (Bataille, 1992, p. 40). Blindness takes away her eyesight in the same way death would eventually take away her life. Having experienced this loss enabled Mrs. Luo to generate this visual, phenomenological, and visceral metaphor of death as a no-man’s zone.

Mrs. Luo’s metaphor of death echoes Bataille’s description of death as a betrayal of life. According to Bataille (1992), what human beings take as the real order of life is nothing but a lie against the truth of death. Just as what Durkheim describes, people prefer life to death as the real thing not because of its truth, but of its duration and promise of hope, future, and possibility. However, Bataille (1992) describes this deceitful duration as being “there only in order to produce the morbid delectation of anguish” (p. 45-6). He continues to criticize the common view of death as “superficial” because we tend to treat it as unreal against the real order of life:

As a matter of fact, that is a superficial view. What has no place in the world of things, what is unreal in the real world is not exactly death. Death actually discloses the imposture of reality, not only in that the absence of duration gives the lie to it, but above all because death is the great affirmer, the wonder-struck cry of life...No one knew it was there when it was; it was overlooked in favor of real things: death was one real thing among others. But death suddenly shows that the real society was lying. Then it is not the loss of the thing, of the useful member, that is taken into consideration. What the real society has lost is not a member but rather its truth. (p. 46-7)

Taking up Bataille’s conception of death as a betrayal of life, Blum (2016b) further develops this betrayal as a problem-solving situation in which one has to “deal with the anger and sadness that ensues from the abandonment of meaning and the inevitable melancholic sense of helplessness and hopelessness” (p. 3). The enigma of mortality lies in the irony that even if we are aware of the truth of death, we still need to manage our frustration and work towards

committing to life in a meaningful way. In our search for such a meaningful commitment, we need to develop solutions, or what Lacan calls “gimmicks” (as cited in Blum, 2016b, p. 86), to deal with the symptoms as we “fall apart” towards the truth of death:

Perhaps what is thought is that others are responsible for misleading us to believe in life as mattering and now the betrayal exposes the lie as theirs. Whatever the account, Falling Apart makes manifest the experience of the abandonment of meaning in life as what Durkheim would call a social fact and how the kinds of “solutions” members develop to deal with such a problem must reveal the phenomenon as more than attributable to having a bad day, a bad life, a bad upbringing, poverty, or any list of social determinants as *eo ipso* adequate, but as a value-added effect implicated in a complex rather than complicated system. (Blum, 2016b, p. 86)

In the same fashion, we can treat Mrs. Luo’s narratives as attributing her frustration with life to a series of “social facts” that occurred to her—political history, broken marriage, blindness, etc. These facts thus became grounds of anger and the locus of meaning in Mrs. Luo’s storytelling. However, Blum (2016b) suggests that we need to look at these “facts” as solutions under the guise of “socially constructed paths of escape or ‘adjustments’ to the experience of mortality as a burden” (p. 4). What he means is that these social facts are not just definitive or personal, but rather constitutive parts of our “collective relationship to the life of dying and conceptions of mortality” (p. 4). Linking back to Bataille’s call for a more integrated view of life and death, Blum says that these individual opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards our mortality make up for the “expression of a keen awareness of shared life grasped in its intimacy” (p. 48). Therefore, our analysis of Mrs. Luo’s story and her metaphorical description of life and death

provides us with an opportunity to formulate a sense of intimate shared life as the basis of our humanity.

The Suicide Joke as Coping with Abandonment

Triggered by an embodied experience of disabling blindness and a deep loss of potency and autonomy, Mrs. Luo imagined death to be a no-man's zone and a lifeless state of abandonment. Her frustration and anguish with late onset blindness can be read as a projection of her imagination and fear of death. However, such fear did not yield any defensive responses from Mrs. Luo, as theorized by terror management theory. Instead, it provoked her to further imagine being dead by expressing a desire for suicide. I will unpack her narrative and propose a different reading of her contemplation of suicide. Instead of seeing it as an expression of despair, I will argue that Mrs. Luo's imaginative and humorous usage of suicide expresses her struggle with a sense of abandonment and loss of intimacy in her family. Her conception of death and selfhood also echoes some elements of the dominant cultural understanding of mortality rooted in classical Chinese thought.

If I were in Beijing [away from my children], I would be dead alone in my house until the government pulled my body out. I would have simply spent all my savings till then. But this could only happen if I had no children to worry about. I am already at this age...how can I end this life? It's like what my friend says, all we think about now is what is the best way to die. Rat poison? This and that...Death to us is the best liberation, but on the contrary, aren't we adding trouble [to our children]? After you die, the police will come investigate....So even if I wanted to commit suicide, I couldn't do it in Canada. The law in Canada was too troublesome. My suicide will add trouble to my children. I'm sure they'll investigate. What happened to your mom? Why did she kill herself? But to me,

living is no longer meaningful. I can't be happy anymore even if I am receiving OAS and living in a big house.⁴⁹ (Luo, L. interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

In this dense passage, Mrs. Luo is struggling with a number of scenarios in anticipation of her death—dying alone, suicide, police investigation, burdening her children, etc. It seems like in each scenario, Mrs. Luo was trying to decide *how* she would end her life. Not only did she imagine various ways of dying, her vivid visualization of what happened *after* she died further confirmed her strong desire to take control of this ending. However, as Derrida (1995) reminds us, no matter how much we try to appropriate and anticipate our death, it is something we simply cannot control.

The approach or apprehension of death signifies the experience of anticipation while indissociably referring to the meaning of death that is suggested in this apprehensive approach. It is always a matter of seeing coming what one can't see coming, of giving oneself that which one can probably never give oneself in a pure and simple way. Each time the self anticipates death by giving to it or conferring upon it a different value, giving itself or reappropriating what in fact it cannot simply appropriate. (p. 40)

Such a desire to anticipate death reflects our sense of temporality known to us only in life—that we as living beings can always exert some kind of influence upon a future. Therefore,

⁴⁹ 比如说我现在在北京，死活就一个人在屋里死了，政府反正给我拽出去。反正这点钱花光了为止。我如果没有儿女没有后顾之忧的话，现在我已经到这种地步了……怎么结束这生命啊？有个朋友说的，咱们现在想怎么死好，耗子药？这个那个的……死对我们来讲就是最好的解脱，但是反过来说不是不想找麻烦吗，你死了以后警察来调查了……但是呢如果真是想自杀也不能在加拿大。加拿大这个法律的东西太麻烦。还要给孩子添麻烦，肯定调查。你妈怎么了，怎么自杀了。但是对我来讲，活的没意义嘛。乐不起来。你看现在老年金也拿到了大房子也住着呢

Mrs. Luo's anticipation of her own death indicates her desire for influence—something she lacked most of her life and that which is often undermined by the diminishing of future time in old age. Let us examine Mrs. Luo's different anticipations of death separately and see how they reveal her conception of aging and mortality.

Dying Alone

According to Mrs. Luo, her ideal way of dying involves dying alone and independently. Such an ideal death imagines a life with no dependencies—children, family, or anyone who would grieve the loss. By visualizing herself as a dead body being cleaned up by the government, she was alluding to a materialist conception of life and a biological understanding of body. Once the body is dead, the person disappears. If that person has no dependents, he or she will be gone forever, leaving no trace behind because a dead person can only be alive in someone else's memories. Why is it an ideal death for Mrs. Luo? What was she responding to by picturing such a lonely and solitary ending?

The materialist conception of death in this scenario points to a scientific and corporeal understanding of life as nothing but a living and perishing body. Death as the final negation of life renders any thoughts about a meaningful death a delusion at best. However, the objectification of a universal subject always clashes with his or her expression of singularity as a social being—integrated into the sociability of family, community, and other intersubjective relationships. One person's death is both universal and particular. And the particularity of one person's death only comes alive in another person's remembering of his or her stories. As Blum (2016b) reminds us of the “inconclusiveness” of our story beyond our death, the structure of a life story is never fully enclosed between a beginning and an end (p. 27). Such an inconclusive ending to our story also points to the ambiguity of how such story will be told, retold, and

renewed without our own participation in it; beyond our control, it can only be possible if we are remembered.

As a result, Mrs. Luo's orientation to a lonely death without any dependents to worry about reflects a desire to be forgotten. But is it truly a desire for an ideal death? Mrs. Luo quickly realized that such an ideal was impossible, at least for her, because she still had children and a family to *worry about*. In other words, her imagination of a lonely death is not an appeal to an ideal, but rather functions as an interlocutor that evokes her ambivalence towards the ethical collision between the materialist notion of death and a conception of death as a social phenomenon—the doubling of death as both universal and particular.

Death as an Escape from Becoming Burdensome to Others

As Mrs. Luo pondered the duality of death, she was struck again by the materialist understanding of life as needing to have some kind of intrinsic and economic value. She kept referring to “this age” and her condition of blindness as a way to express the sense of hopelessness evoked by the state of being in-between a past that no longer matters and a future that she cannot influence. Blum (2016b) describes such a common pathos as “living under the shadow of mortality” and a “melancholic adjustment to loss” (p. 45) often observed in old age. “At this age” Mrs. Luo was forced to reflect upon the unhappy truth of her inevitable mortality and re-orient to life as something that was worth living for. In this case, we can invert her narrative from a melancholic anticipation of death to an active reflection on what makes life worth living. Given that Mrs. Luo described death as the best liberation, we could pause and ask what makes her life so unbearable, meaningless, and unworthy of living. Such a question will point us to her idealization of a good life.

Going back to Mrs. Luo's narrative earlier, she described herself as "chicken ribs" to express her self-identification as lacking value to her family. Not only did she consider her ten years of living with her son as burdensome, she also considered her late onset of blindness as reinforcing her burden upon her son. By describing her own suicide as "trouble" for her children, she was evoking, again, the sense of indebtedness and guilt towards her son and her notion of herself as burden. There is a dark irony, if not humour, in her narrative. In other words, regardless of whether she is living or dead, Mrs. Luo considers herself as a liability and burden to her children. Seeing her living self as a blind body that is deprived of basic autonomy and mobility, she perceived her dependency on her son as burdensome and undeserving. What is noteworthy is the fact that, in imagining the scenario of burdening her children with her suicide, Mrs. Luo did not anticipate any affect of loss, grief, or sadness, but rather the legal complications for her innocent children. The imagined legal implications of her suicide are in sharp contrast to any emotional repercussions for her family. We can also interpret this imagined scenario as an exaggerated reaction to her son's impersonality and indifference to her death, as if ending her life will only trouble her son with a legal burden rather than an emotional one.

What is worth living for at this stage of her life? This is the fundamental problem that Mrs. Luo was trying to comprehend in her narrative on death. If we treat her narrated fictional event of suicide and its consequences as a response to such a question, we can read the metaphor of suicide as addressing two problems. First, Mrs. Luo perceives her son's care for her as impersonal and materialist, lacking an intimate and affective dimension. This is related to her earlier conception of elder care as a just exchange of parenting, making her feel indebted and undeserving of her son's care. Second, we can read Mrs. Luo's imagination of suicide as a sacrifice of herself as a means of redeeming her sense of indebtedness and guilt regarding her

son's elder care. Her death will not only end her own suffering as a blind and dependent senior, but also end her son's obligation to take care of her. In other words, when she considers her life as nothing but a burden to her son, her death can at least be *useful* for removing the burden of care from him. Suicide as the most private choice, therefore, becomes a signifier of power, influence, and self-validation in response to a current feeling of complete dependency and powerlessness. Her idealization of dying alone also reflects a strong desire for autonomy and her orientation to self-worth as a relational notion. Her sense of self is always oriented to her value to others. Thus, when her suffering becomes a burden to others, she chooses to sacrifice herself as a last chance to validate her value.

Suicide among the elderly is not an uncommon phenomenon. In recent years, it has become an urgent social crisis in rural areas of China, with rural rates three times that of urban rates (Pritchard, 1996; Kwan, 1988). Scholars have linked the high suicide rates in Hong Kong and China to rapid modernization, urbanization, industrialization, and other social changes since the economic reforms that started in 1978 (Phillips, Liu, & Zhang, 1999). It has also been argued that suicide was used by elders as a strategy to protest their powerlessness (Ikels, 1983), as a result of the gradual loss of a sense of importance in the family (Chow, 1983; Chow & Kwan, 1986) and the feeling of being unwanted (Tao, 1982), and as a way of escaping from unbearable lives (Wolf, 1975) and the burden of worries and expenses associated with medical costs (Kwan, 1988). With the rising expenses of elder care and health care, keeping the elderly alive comes at a costly price. Sometimes, these elders struggle to find a practical reason to keep themselves alive when their understanding of self becomes framed as an economic burden to their children. These suicides are often described as self-sacrifice to ease the burden of younger generations.

Unfortunately, the economic rendering of such burden often precludes any meaningful and humanistic reflection on the part of these elders.

In the case of Mrs. Luo, her narrative of suicide is often taken practically and clinically as an attempt to end her life in exchange for a less burdensome future for her children. Such a reductionist perspective of elder care often misses the more affective dimensions of the family and the nuances of the intersubjective relationship, foreclosing a deeper understanding of elder care as intersubjective and phenomenological beyond its economic value. With a detailed analysis of Mrs. Luo's life story and her metaphorical usage of suicide, we can interpret her narrative as responding to a more fundamental question about the value of life and the sense of self. Suicide as a last resort for exercising power and influence over one's life becomes a signifier of power, influence, and autonomy. It also reflects a materialist conception of life as needing to be productive and meaningful, knowing fully that it will all end sooner or later. The struggle with the drive to live when a person is deprived of a healthy body, a productive value, and a meaningful social relationship reflects the pervasive impact of the pressures of so-called "successful aging." Mrs. Luo's story can provoke us to read her desire for death not simply as a desire for escape from a meaningless life or a cry of despair, but rather as a response to the loss of her autonomy, control, and power over a good life that is worth living. Her narrative of death and suicide, with all its vivid imaginative and visual detail, becomes her equipment for living and her way of coping with a sense of indebtedness, powerlessness, and hopelessness at odds with her conception of a good life.

Wang: Suicide and the Double Meaning of Death in Chinese Mortality

Not losing one's place is to be long enduring;

Dying and yet not perishing [or “not being forgotten”] is to be long-lived.⁵⁰

(*Daodejing* 33, as cited in Ames, 2011, p. 131)

This famous passage from *Daodejing*—a classical text of Daoism and a philosophical foundation of classical Chinese thought—captures a common conception of mortality expressed in traditional Chinese thought. The idea that the life of a person does not end with physical death is closely related to the tradition of ancestor worship in ancient Chinese society. According to Ames (2011), David Keightley even argues that the topic of death and mortality was not as problematic in the classical Chinese tradition than in classical Greek and Western philosophy (p. 118). The cosmological assumption of most major schools of classical Chinese thought is that mortality is natural rather than tragic. The teachings also tend to focus on how to live a good life and be an exemplary citizen. Ames (2011) says:

Rather than a gruesome portrayal of death, there seems to be a Chinese tolerance of the end of life as an inevitable and relatively unremarkable aspect of the human experience. (p. 118)

This unremarkable aspect of our experience is further incorporated as a philosophy of life in the Confucian tradition of ancestor worship and funeral rituals, the Buddhist belief of an afterlife, and the Daoist belief in the constancy of change and natural cycle of life, echoing a phrase in the *Daodejing*—“Returning to the source is stillness, which is the way of nature.”⁵¹

In all cases, death is not the end of life nor does it signify a negation of meaning and things. Instead, it entails an idea of continuity, whether in the form of ancestor continuity,

⁵⁰不失其所者久

死而不亡（忘）者寿。

⁵¹归根曰静，静曰复命

reincarnation, or a return to nothingness. However, according to Ames (2011), such a continuation of life often depends on the living being who will continue to remember the dead (p. 130). If a living person is deprived of such a lineage to either family or society, he or she can become the living dead. At the same time, a dead person can continue to live if their life is remembered and celebrated by “generations of both ancestors and progeny” (p. 131). In the Chinese language, the word for “forgetting”⁵² shares the same root as the word for “dying” and “perishing.”⁵³ Furthermore, the character for “forgetting/forgotten” literally consists of two parts which mean “the death of the heart-mind.” Therefore, being forgotten is closer to being dead than the actual perishing of the living body. Ames (2011) explains:

There is a strong sense that death occurs not when one dies but when one is forgotten. In a cultural tradition in which persons are understood to be constituted by the pattern of roles and relationships configured throughout the narrative of their lives, the answer to the question of what is lost and what is left is an important one. (p. 131)

The double meaning of death in classical Chinese thought helps us understand Mrs. Luo’s narrative better. In desiring an end to her life, Mrs. Luo seems to acknowledge that her living self is already being “forgotten” and “perishing” in her family relationship. What is left in her life for celebration and remembering for her family? Did she bring distinction to her family that will make her death memorable, grievable, and tragic? Her imagined lonely death confirms her belief that she is left with nothing but a sickening body. And the metaphor of the legal trouble of her suicide further dramatizes her sad belief that even her death will not be meaningful for her family.

⁵² 忘

⁵³ 亡

But her struggle to live continues. At the end of the interview, she tried to convince me that she was not suicidal and that all of the death talk was just the vocalization of frequent thoughts that occurred to her when she became anxious about her deteriorating eyesight. It was all imaginative and metaphorical. Speaking of how she coped with such thoughts, Mrs. Luo said:

The group I hang out with, we are all aging. When we first met, all of us were in our 60s, but now we are all above 70. How many ten-years can we afford to live? It all started now...this person and that person just dies. I started to think, can't we all be a little bit happier? Now every day can be the end of the world. Every day, someone can just disappear. Why do we even think about it (death)? There is no use. Sometimes, I think to myself, a big earthquake can easily kill that many young talents in the US, why do I need to think about [my own death]? Just live. Our life is so much better than those difficult years. It all depends on what you want from life, slowly, you will open your mind.⁵⁴

(Luo, L. interview transcript, April 25th, 2015)

The realization that death is omnipresent and can occur to anyone, anywhere, and anytime seems to help Mrs. Luo cope with her own fear of mortality. After all, death is universal and inevitable; in order to be “a little bit happier,” we must learn to forget about death. Blum (2016b) describes this tactic of forgetting death as a way of discarding truth as a common expression of what Freud and Lacan would call repression. In Blum's project, he asks a

⁵⁴ 现在随着年龄增长大家聚在一起，来的时候我们都 60 几岁现在这帮人都 70 以上了，都想还能活几个十啊，都开始啦，有那个谁谁谁没有了。就开始就感觉生活这个，原来大家都开心一点么，现在这都世界末日，每天都是，那天人就没有了。想它干嘛，没用。有时候我自己就想，大地震就没了，那美国那些精英都年轻就没了，你想这有什么用啊，就这样活呗。你比那困难年头时候好多了。看你怎么要求这个，慢慢的就想开了。

fundamental question, “Must we forget death or integrate it in some way in life?” In other words, evoking Simmel’s writing on the relation of life to death, Blum (2016b) tries to formulate a stronger relationship to the impasse of how to “live under the shadow of our mortality” so that we do not “forget that we forget” (p. 62). Such an inquiry calls for an aesthetic and innovative relation to the self that can renovate the materialist discourse of mortality, which proclaims that happiness can only be achieved by discarding the experience of the subjectivity of the self (p. 38).

Mrs. Luo’s answer of “just live” reveals the fundamental tension between the illusion of happiness and the truth of death. Blum (2016b) concludes his book by formulating a comedic relation of life to death in the figure of a clown:

The drive of the clown to exist while wanting to escape, that is, to live in ignorance while knowing this and this alone, is human material for travesty as a gesture that exaggerates absorption in the incidentals of life, demonstrating theatrically how what we most want to do is simultaneously that from which we want to escape; this tension between concentration and flight reveals the clown as the performer whose use of the grave incidentals of life has to entertain both oneself and the others, intending to show the lightness of being in which the performer absorbs oneself and tries to give pleasure to the other. (p. 189)

Such a formulation of the tension between life and death transcends the binary position described by Terror Management Theory, biological discourse, and Foucault. Neither is the lived experience of death objectified as a source of fear, terror, and anxiety, nor is it simply forgotten, denied, or repressed. The metaphor of a clown captures both life’s vitality and its ephemerality, making the sticky ambiguity of mortality an aesthetic force that compels subjects to develop various relationships to it as a problem-solving situation.

In the first case of this chapter, we saw Mr. Xu's struggle with intimating and personalizing his mourning of his wife. Even though he tried to orient to the loss through the logic of scientific truth and universal death, the sticky ambiguity of melancholia and grief slipped out of his narrative repetition of dates and corporeal descriptions—in a state of what Kristeva describes as *asymbolia*, loaded with affect but short of words. In the second case, we saw Mrs. Luo's rather imaginative relationship to death with her usage of a number of metaphors for aging, mortality, isolation, and the feeling of impotency. We traveled from her living self to an imagined death, and eventually arrived at a response to life as a commitment to "just live." Her reflections on death, suicide, and the implications for her children all serve as attempts to reconcile the tension between the drive to exist and the desire to escape. Using an interpretive approach to analyze Mrs. Luo's narrative of suicide offers us a different perspective on how she makes sense of such a decision. In her case, the imagination of suicide and its potential legal consequences for her son reflects, through dark humor, her conception of her son's indifference and impersonality, as if ending her life will only trouble him with a legal burden rather than an emotional one. Roen, Scourfield, and McDermott (2008) say in the beginning of their study on suicidal subjecthood, "Suicide only becomes possible insofar as it is imaginable, insofar as it is meaningful, insofar as one can make sense of it, whether as a decision, as a last resort, or as a statement of desperation" (p. 2089). Analyzing metaphor as an aesthetic tool, we are able to detect how Mrs. Luo imagines and makes sense of a relationship to death that helps her cope with living the sticky ambiguity of aging overshadowed by blindness, dependency, and a materialist relation to her son. As no one has a way to solve the impasse of death, we can only hope to keep alive the dialectical relation between life and death through a reflexive interpretation of the subject's narrative.

CHAPTER FOUR
RE-INTERPRETING FILIAL PIETY: INHERITANCE, MORAL REASONING, AND THE
HETEROGENEITY OF CAREGIVING

Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to examine the concept of filial piety in the narratives of the adult participants in this research project. Using three case studies, I seek to interpret filial piety as a cultural practice, a process of moral reasoning, and a heritage in transition in relation to the question of inheritance. I use interpretive narrative analysis to analyze the stories in order to produce a conversation about the meaning of filial piety, which cannot be settled but is always open to view as a way to understand the quality of the concept. Such an analysis also aims to resist the homogenous understanding of filial piety as either an external cultural norm or an internal, affection-based model of family solidarity.

The previous two chapters focus on the lived experience of aging and elder care from the perspective of the elderly participants in the research project. The adult children or children-in-law of these elderly participants were frequently referred to in their stories, serving as contextual references in their moral reasoning and construction of self. Therefore, it is worthwhile to look at the relationship from the perspective of the adult children as a way to bring another dimension to our understanding of the elderly participants' stories. In the research project, half of the participants are adults over the age of 18 who currently live with at least one elderly parent in the same household. They were also asked to openly share their lived experiences with their parent(s) or parents(s)-in-law, with an emphasis on stories involving conflicts and tensions.

In most of the 12 interviews, participants voluntarily reflected on the question "Why do I need to take care of my elderly parent(s)?" Even though the question was not asked by the

researcher, it seemed to serve as a common starting point for their narratives. The question points to a discourse on moral reasoning (Gilligan, 1982) that helps to shape the subject's conception of the responsibility of caregiving in a parent-child relationship. Such a moral question is also discussed under the concept of filial piety (*xiao*) in literature on the cultural practice of elder care in different Asian societies, including mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Chinese diasporas in North America. Filial piety has been a widely studied topic both in empirical studies on family relationships and in philosophical discussions of classical Chinese texts. However, it is also a loaded, culturally specific, and controversial concept that attracts both criticism and praise from scholars of different disciplinary and theoretical backgrounds. The concept is sometimes used in a highly essentializing way to represent the so-called family culture of the "Confucian world" of "East Asian society" (Johnson, 2009, p. 39). At the same time, there are scholars who try to do justice to the nuances of the concept and the diversity of "Chinese society" by bringing new meanings and interpretations to this cultural influence.

To bring more clarity to this often loosely defined concept, I first introduce the original writings on filial piety in classical Confucian texts and lay out some common interpretations of the concept. Based on a literature review, I also outline three dominant ways in which filial piety is problematized and used in research, and highlight a common problem these views share. I then introduce my interpretation of filial piety as a cultural practice, followed by three case studies to illustrate how filial piety functions as an interpretive process of moral reasoning in relation to the problem of inheritance.

Common Views of Filial Piety

The original Chinese character *xiao* 孝, which stands for filial piety or familial reverence, depicts an image of an old person (老 upper part) and a young child (子 lower part). According

to Rosemont and Ames's (2009) philosophical reading of filial piety, the concept connotes an ideal form of family harmony that is founded on the basis of generational deference and reverence.

Ideally, each generation instructs and inculcates in the succeeding generation a reverence for the family by modelling the appropriate conduct toward the generation that preceded them, thus suffusing the family with unconditional love and a sense of belonging. (p. 1)

Hamilton (1990) suggests that the worldview of classical Confucianism is influenced by the Chinese view of the cosmos, in which each part—heaven, earth, human beings—is “distinct” but “has its own function in maintaining the whole, and each interacts in such a way as to harmonize the whole” (p. 94). He believes that Confucianism is founded on the basis of this role-based relationship, which is fashioned in the image of a family. Therefore, all of these scholars argue that family is the fundamental unit in ancient Chinese society and is considered the first place for any individual to learn about his or her proper role.

Xiao is the foundation of all Confucian teachings, for without feeling reverence for and within one's family, the moral and spiritual cultivation necessary for becoming “a consummate human being” (ren 仁) and a socially and politically engaged “exemplary person” (junzi 君子) would not be possible. (Rosemont & Ames, 2009, p. 1)

As a general concept that describes an ideal form of familial and societal relationship, filial piety is often criticized as a romantic claim made by traditional and conservative scholars who praise family solidarity as the foundation for political harmony and economic prosperity (Lew, Choi, & Wang, 2011; Xiao, 1997). Due to its emphasis on family hierarchy and obedience to authority, the concept is also criticized as gendered, biologically deterministic, and patriarchal (Salaff, 1981; Hamilton, 1990; Zhan & Montgomery, 2003; Tsai, 2006; Chappell & Kusch,

2007). These critiques of a concept that was developed in the feudal Qin Han Dynasty centuries ago reflect a general confusion between two interpretive orientations to Confucianism. Rosemont and Ames (2009) describe the first orientation as viewing Confucianism as a “philosophical and religious belief system that serves the culture as a source of inspiration” and the second one as “invoked Confucianism as it was practiced in many Chinese homes and by the government” (p.4). Without a clear distinction between these two ways of interpreting Confucian thinking, the concept of filial piety also risks being misunderstood, simplified, or objectified.

Confucianism as a philosophical and religious belief system is considered a common cultural origin of many Asian societies today. In particular, it has influenced pre-modern Chinese society for centuries as a dominant cultural tradition. However, with the rapid changes in the social, cultural, and political conditions in mainland China and other Asian countries, and the increasing hybridity, diasporization, migration, and multiplicity of “Chineseness” in a globalizing and postcolonial world, it is immensely difficult, if not impossible, to trace the changing cultural influences of Confucian thought. But some scholars still believe that after all the social and political changes in China’s recent history, a ten-year denial of Confucianism during the Cultural Revolution, and a decade of rapid modernization and globalization, people in mainland China still haven’t given up the “2000 years of culturally valuable Confucian teachings” (Pohl, 2009, p. 87). Let us return to classical Confucian texts as a starting point to look at the ways in which filial piety functions as such a cultural influence.

Philosophical Origins

Confucius’ original writings on the concept of filial piety appear in the *Classic of Filial Piety*:

Your physical person with its hair and skin are received from your parents. Vigilance in not allowing anything to do injury to your person is where family reverence begins; distinguishing yourself and walking the proper way (dao) in the world; raising your name high for posterity and thereby bringing esteem to your father and mother—it is in these things that family reverence finds its consummation. This family reverence, then, begins in service to your parents, continues in service to your lord, and culminates in distinguishing yourself in the world.⁵⁵ (Confucius, *Classic of Filial Piety*)

Despite the fact that Confucius' conception of birth might sound biologically deterministic, what he tries to say is that humans are conditioned beings. The conditions of our birth imply the pre-given-ness of the world that we enter. We are also conditioned by an inheritance that is beyond our control or choices. Therefore, the central philosophical idea behind Confucius' notion of filial piety is related to the question of inheritance. How do the conditions of our birth *condition* our being in the world? How shall we respect and honor this inheritance and learn to become “a consummate human being” and “socially and political engaged exemplary person”? These questions frame Confucius' teachings on filial piety as a pursuit of an ethical framework that is oriented to the good, the excellent, and the virtuous both for oneself and for the collective (family, state, humanity). In *Analects 1.2*, Confucius says, “the root having taken hold, the proper way (dao) will grow therefrom.” Filial piety, therefore, is a concept that recognizes and honors the conditions of one's birth as “the root of excellence (de)” and the beginning of all other teachings.

⁵⁵身体发肤，受之父母，不敢毁伤，孝之始也。立身行道，扬名于后世，以显父母，孝之终也。夫孝，始于事亲，中于事君，终于立身。《孝经》

The emphasis on birth as an essential condition of humanness, self-cultivation, and political agency in Confucius' writing reminds us of Arendt's (1998) concept of natality:

Action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. (p. 9)

Birth is a central category in both Confucius' and Arendt's philosophy as it reveals a paradox about our inheritance. The world we enter is both pre-given to us but also radically open to pluralities and new possibilities. Both Confucius and Arendt recognize that humans are conditioned beings but they differ in their view on the potential for political freedom. For Confucius, we are conditioned by our birth because the way in which we enter the world is pre-given by our parents, the state, and historical time. Given this inheritance, Confucius emphasizes *political harmony* more than *political freedom*. For him, to achieve ultimate harmony in humanity requires one to adhere to a set of rituals and principles that defines each member's proper role in the family, in the state, and in the world. Therefore, familial reverence becomes the first step in learning how to live harmoniously.

On the contrary, Arendt believes that even though we are conditioned by birth, our insertion into the world also implies an endless potential to modify the world that we live in through *action*.

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our physical appearance. (Arendt, 1998, p. 176-7)

The notion of inheritance is crucial in Confucius' original writings on filial piety. However, as we will see in the dominant definitions of filial piety, the problem of inheritance

and the idea of ethical reflection are often lost. Instead, the influence of filial piety is often interpreted narrowly as a practice that is oriented to translating this philosophical concept into some cognitive and behavioral equivalents. Such an approach resembles the definition of *practice* by psychologists like Scribner and Cole (1981) as “a recurrent goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge” (p. 235). Let us now turn to the three dominant problematics of filial piety that I identify and see how this concept as a system of knowledge is conceptualized and used for research.

De-ritualization

I consider the first problematic of filial piety as a concern for de-ritualization due to forces like modernity, urbanization, and the rise of individualism. In other words, filial piety, conceptualized as a cultural norm for achieving an ideal and harmonious form of family solidarity, is believed to be subject to the influences of modernization, globalization, and changes in sociocultural contexts, political systems, and specific state policies. The problematic here tends to focus on studying *how* and *if* modernity, postmodernity, and globalization change the way in which filial piety functions in the familial, parent-child, and elder care relationship.

In North America, scholars have also dedicated much theoretical exploration to the problem of family solidarity, with a focus on examining how solidarity changes under the influence of modernity and postmodernity (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Bengtson, 2001; Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002). Many scholars blame modernization and the rise of nuclear family living as causes of the erosion of family solidarity (Leach, 1968; Laing & Esterson, 1970). This argument is also made by scholars in mainland China who view modernity of causing a declining level of commitment to elder care obligations (Cheung & Kwan, 2009). At the same time, we can find studies that argue the erosion of filial piety is less of a degree, but

more of a kind (Ng, Phillips, & Lee 2002; Feng et al., 2011). Yeh, Yi, Tsao and Wan (2013) in their comparative study on the changing concept of filial piety in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong say:

Filial piety has not been eroded by modernization and democratization. Its core essence in Taiwan and Hong Kong has shifted from absolute submission and parental authority to mutual affection and equality in the parent-child relationship. (p. 292)

Whether filial piety has been eroded or not, one common assumption underlying these studies is that filial piety is a private and individual responsibility. Such a personal quality is perceived to be in conflict with external social forces that are believed to undermine the individual's ability and motivation to adhere to the tradition. Therefore, the debate on whether modernization has eroded the tradition points to a clash between the individual and the social. The quality of filial piety is often put in contrast to the notion of individualism, as if being an autonomous self inevitably undermines the possibility for achieving such excellence.

The claim for the erosion of filial piety shares Weber's (1993) notion of the "disenchantment of the world," and Arendt's (1998) critique of the rise of the social. All of these concerns criticize the rise of modernity and its accompanying celebration of science, intellectualism, and bureaucracy for depreciating the quality of the traditional, the ritual, the familial, and the individual. In this case, filial piety connotes a *quality* of care that is grounded in an authentic, spiritual, and affective concern for the family, the community, and the state that is believed to be undermined with the rise of modernity.

However, as we will see in the second problematic, the attempt to preserve the heritage of filial piety by the state in mainland China far from recognizes the quality of the concept. Best described as a process of mechanical reproduction, the original value of the concept as a pursuit

of the good and the root of excellence is lost in official discourse. Filial piety changes from a form of self-cultivation and intersubjective relation to become what Arendt (1998) would call “the no longer secret political ideal of a society” (p. 43).

Back to the studies that concern the de-ritualization of filial piety, the concept is also treated as a measurable quantifier of an individual’s loyalty, attitude, and willingness to care for his or her family members (Cheung & Kwan, 2009; Zhan, 2004a; Lai, 2010). As a result, research findings from these studies often speculate on whether filial piety has *increased*, *declined*, or *remained the same* due to structural changes, such as education, family income, social mobility, and exposure to “Western culture,” which is often essentialized and believed to encourage individualism (Zhan, 2004a; Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). Some scholars (Wang, Laidlaw, Power, & Shen, 2009) also aim to develop a set of attributes and correlations to assess an individual’s attitude towards filial responsibility. These examples show that the problematic of filial piety points to a common interest in the study of heritage on how to preserve the tradition against the forces of modernity, and how to make the past relevant to the present and the future. Often regarded as an intangible cultural heritage, filial piety also brings up a common methodological question of how to best study an intangible heritage without simply converting it into quantitative measurements of its tangible manifestations.

The de-ritualization of the Confucian influence as part of the moral fabric of mainland China’s community has also undergone a series of dramatic phases in China’s recent history. Ever since the 1920s, the People’s Republic of China has been ruled by a totalitarian Communist Party founded on a leftist Marxist ideology with a materialist worldview. All three major traditions—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism—were officially negated and condemned as superstition and old school thinking during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. At that

time, children were encouraged to openly disobey these old-school traditions and rebel against their parents and the elderly. Such an upheaval around the tradition is believed to have severely harmed the ethical foundation of intergenerational solidarity. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Communist Party has continued to demand ultimate loyalty to the nation state. According to Whyte (1997), filial piety and other traditional Confucian values related to the family were integrated into the totalitarian regime of modern China through a process of commercialization rather than democratization. This commercialization process is linked to an objectification of Confucian values, as the state reinforces filial piety as a private and primarily economic responsibility.

China went through rapid economic reform and modernization immediately after the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) exacted a huge toll in terms of human lives and even today it is still a very sensitive topic in the public discourse of mainland China. The revival of Confucianism and the acceptance of other schools of traditional thought took a mysterious turn from completely taboo to a source of national pride over a short period of time. Decades after China's Cultural Revolution, the same values, such as respect for the elderly and familial reverence, that were blamed by the modernizers during the Revolution as the cause of China's backwardness are being praised again in the official discourse as China's virtuous traditional foundation. This brings us back to the problem of de-ritualization. What makes filial piety susceptible to the forces of modernity, the nuclear family, the one-child policy, or commercialized social values? What is so significant about this cultural heritage that it invokes the critique of modernization and the desire for preservation? This leads us to the second problematic of filial piety, in which the quality of this cultural heritage is often objectified as a

system of knowledge that belongs to the past, giving rise to demands for safeguarding and preservation.

Objectification

In recent decades, mainland China's one-child policy and its legislation of elder care duties have further problematized the way in which filial piety has been appropriated in the apparatus of state interventions in family solidarity. Since the opening of China, the Communist Party of China has continued to enforce the importance of family as the primary care domain for the elderly, in a way that demonstrates a strong adherence to the Confucian value of filial piety. Elder care as an individual responsibility was legislated and the *Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly* was promulgated in 1996 to define the respective roles of the state, the community, and the family in providing elder care. Under the legislation, husbands and wives are legally responsible for supporting their parents and parents-in-law. The state's effort to delineate the boundary between elder care as a private and public responsibility further reduces the notion of filial piety to an indisputable private and individual responsibility.

Article 10. The elderly shall be provided for mainly by their families, and their family members shall care for and look after them.

Article 11. Supporters of the elderly shall perform duties of providing for the elderly, taking care of them and comforting them, and cater to their special needs. (Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly, 1996).⁵⁶

⁵⁶第十条，老年人养老主要依靠家庭，家庭成员应当关心和照料老年人。第十一条，赡养人应当履行对老年人经济上供养、生活上照料和精神上慰藉的义务，照顾老年人的特殊需要。

Note how the duty of providing elder care in the legislation remains vague, with no reference to any notion of what constitutes good and ethical elder care. The legislation certainly indicates the state's intention to preserve the cultural heritage of filial piety as a way to restore the moral basis of society. However, such legislation also fails to address the quality of filial piety. Instead, it works to objectify and commercialize the elder care relationship based on the principles of commercial and economic exchange. Even under such legislation, the young generation under the one-child policy continues to be the subject of criticism for their detachment from the tradition. The problem here is not about the opposition between the traditional and the modern, or the preservation and loss of traditional values, as many seem to be claiming. Rather, it lies in the tension between the *privatization* of filial piety as an individual responsibility, and the *impersonalization* and enforcement of the concept by the state as an external and economic obligation. Therefore, this view of filial piety points to a contested field where individual responsibility and social justice are put into conflict.

Such conflict is often left unexamined in research that blames modernization, urbanization, and economic prosperity as the cause of a weakened social foundation of family care for the elderly (Sheng & Settles 2006; Cai, Song, Luo, & Jiang 1994; Jia, 1988; Kwong & Cai, 1992). To put it in a simple way, if we conceptualize filial piety as a private responsibility, one that belongs to the individual, society starts to incorporate the ideology that it will only be responsible for elder care when the individual fails to be. In this case, if the individual defers the responsibility to society, he or she runs the risk of being stigmatized as irresponsible. Hence, the failure of elder care is and will always be the individual's fault. Only within the context of such

logic does the burden and pressure on society for elder care result from the erosion and weakening of the foundation of familial solidarity.

The problem of treating filial piety and elder care as a private responsibility always returns to the question of who is responsible and why, as a problem of social justice. But in ruling conceptions of the tradition, filial piety, as seen in studies that try to measure its level, is often reduced to a calculation of the number of people available to take up this responsibility, rather than treated as a question about the quality of care:

With the one-child policy reducing family size, more working wives and rapidly growing divorce rates, the pool of potential caregivers has shrunk, affecting both the capacity and the willingness of the family to provide care and support to the elderly (Sheng & Settles, 2006, p. 298).

The objectification of filial piety can be seen in studies that link the “quality” of filial piety to the “quantity” of the population. Zhan (2004a) claims that if the number of individuals who are supposed to be responsible decline due to the one-child policy, the responsibility will at some point fall out of the individual’s hands and become a public problem.

This new family structure threatens a rupture of the tradition of filial piety crucial to familial elder care, imposes a daunting array of obligations upon the one-child generation, and raises questions even about the character and filial piety (xiao) of “only children.” (p. 176)

The problematization of elder care as a social issue continues to frame the significance of filial piety as a good old tradition that needs to be preserved and as a potential antidote to the public burden of care. In this case, the cultural heritage of filial piety is seen as a definite category that acquires certain significance and value from the past, which is believed to be

meaningful in the present. In other words, filial piety becomes an indicator of the ideal quality of intergenerational relationship and elder care in the present. The discourse on how to preserve such a cultural heritage points to the question of how to make the past significant to the present without simply objectifying it as a system of knowledge or standardized practices to be enforced on a general population. The dominant view on safeguarding filial piety is driven by a desire to look at the influence of the past in the present, but such an inquiry requires a methodological approach that is oriented to the quality of the heritage in transition. The next problematic of filial piety tries to address this question of quality and aims to reveal the nuances and diversity of meanings such a heritage holds.

Quantification and Mapping

This group of studies recognizes the highly diverse and multifaceted nature of the concept of filial piety in a postcolonial and globalized world. It also shares a similar approach with orientations to statistical analysis and quantitative methodology. Such a methodological trend can be traced to early studies on family solidarity in North America in the 1980s. Most of the seminal studies at that time tended to rely on large quantifiable data as a way to define and distinguish the complexity and multidimensionality of family patterns. They were interested in understanding the heterogeneous ways that intergenerational relations function, and believed that statistical mapping had the potential to accurately represent the different types and patterns of family relations that exist in a given society. In other words, quantification and mapping became ideal methods for studying and translating the quality of family relations.

For example, for decades, Mangen, Bengtson, and Landry (1988) were trying to refine their statistical modeling of family types, and eventually ended up with 13 family models to describe the way in which functional social exchange works in the family setting. Even though

they recognize intergenerational relations as complex and multi-dimensional, the premise of their paradigm only works to “measure” different levels of solidarities. The empirical tradition in family research has inspired more scholars to use similar statistical methods to study factors that lead to these varying degrees of commitment. Social determinants, such as diverse patterns, physical proximity, marital status, degree of affectual closeness (Chatters & Taylor, 1993), destiny, and clustering in kinship networks (Wellman & Wortley, 1989), are commonly acknowledged factors that help explain the differences in the degree of family commitment.

I argue that some empirical studies on filial piety that are conducted in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan share similar methodological approaches (Sung, 1999; Zhan & Montgomery, 2003; Zhan, 2004b; Yeh, Yi, Tsao & Wan, 2013). One explanation could be the large population and complexity of regional differences in the study sites, which expect a large sample size to justify the validity of the research. As a result, findings from these studies often yield an empirical description of what social, economic, political and cultural *factors* influence the way in which functional social exchange and intergenerational transfer occur and change.

In the context of transnational elder care, the concept of filial piety is studied in relation to both external changes in the cultural and social contexts, and internal changes in an individual’s identity, acculturation, and social identification. Research on transnational filial piety also tries to identify patterns of care in terms of exchange and transfer of economic and emotional resources as a way to examine how filial piety is disrupted, changed, renewed, or re-appropriated by new forms of families and diasporic identities (Kim, Kim, & Hurh, 1990; Liu, Ng, Weatherall & Loong, 2000; Lan, 2002; Lieber, Nihira, & Mink, 2004).

Quantitative methods are often used to define filial piety as a measurable indicator of family solidarity. For example, Yeh and Bedford (2003) develop a popular survey model, titled

short-form dual filial piety scale, which is widely used in empirical research on filial piety. This model is claimed to combine both the “reciprocal” and “authoritarian” motives to explain an individual’s attitude towards filial piety. Here is a list of sample statements displayed on the survey for participants to indicate their level of agreement:

1. Be grateful to parents for raising me
2. No matter what my parents do, I’ll still treat them well
3. Support parents to make them more comfortable
4. To continue the family line, one must have at least one son
5. One should give up personal interests to fulfill parental expectations
6. Children must do something to honor their parents

(Yeh, Yi, Tsao & Wan, 2013, p. 283)

It is not difficult to note the level of authoritarianism and moral determinism in the expression of these statements. Research participants were asked to indicate their agreement with these statements on a 7-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The variations in the scores were used to measure the level of filial piety, but did not reveal any details about the participants’ moral ambiguity and reasoning. What we see here is an attempt to quantify moral reasoning for empirical purposes, as if a clear mapping of different moral propensities can elucidate the relevance and meaning of filial piety in a given context. However, as we will see in the case studies, the way in which people orient to the concept of filial piety is often *mosaic-like*, *multifaceted*, and *evolving* in the form of moral reasoning that can be both determined and ambiguous. Quantitative mapping can only delineate the different forms of interpretive process, but not the quality or the meaning of these interpretations. I will turn now to

the qualitative and interpretive method in this dissertation and elaborate my interpretation of filial piety as a cultural practice.

Capturing the Mosaic through Qualitative Research

Despite my critique of the three problematics and the limits of quantitative methods above, there are still many excellent qualitative and ethnographic studies from anthropology, diaspora studies, and other disciplines in the humanities that exemplify an interpretive approach to the complex phenomenon of filial piety and family experiences. For example, Salaff's (1981) book *Working Daughters of Hong Kong: Filial Piety or Power in the Family?* documents a five-year micro and longitudinal ethnography study of 28 young and unmarried women who were refugees from China during the early phase of Hong Kong's industrialization period from 1970 to 1976. The study looks at the multi-layered relationships among these working women, their factories, family members, and the changing social and political conditions of Hong Kong at large. Filial piety is interpreted as a bond of loyalty and obligation between the women and their families that is both fragile and resilient against the forces of the gendered labor economy and patriarchal family norms. Salaff's study demonstrates that the influence on family relationships from external social determinants is never simple or one-dimensional, neither is an individual's understanding and commitment to filial piety stable and fixed. The relation to the family and to one's lived reality is a constant problem-solving situation and a process of moral reasoning that is embedded in the tension between the personal and the familial, the traditional and the modern, the industrial and the domestic, the past and the future, etc. The detailed context and intimate personal narratives unsettle any articulate interpretation of filial piety and care, revealing the ambiguity of the concept through the rich nuances of phenomenological writing.

In my research, I also try to adopt a more qualitative and micro lens to examine family issues with the recognition that moral idealization and pragmatic rationalization of economic, social, and cultural practices are often complex, multifaceted, and mixed in a subject's orientation to action. For example, departing from Gilligan's (1982) two models of moral reasoning—justice-based and care-based—Bartlett et al.'s (1993) in-depth analysis of fictional narratives by caregivers for people with Alzheimer's disease also shows a mosaic mapping of the subjects' moral reasoning and ethical reflections. The narratives often weave together “family history, social position, bargains struck...the moral hues of intimate love, religion, class-based mores and social ideology” (p. 418). In other words, the study demonstrates the dilemma that is often experienced by individuals in the caring situation, and how they treat it as a problem to solve. In this case, moral idealization is no longer a fixed guideline, nor do social determinants assume any absolute influence. An analysis of what the subjects display in their narratives and thinking becomes a pathway to understanding the heterogeneity of how these internal and external factors are put into action and practice. In order to align and orient my analysis to this kind of qualitative and reflexive research, I seek now to give a working interpretation of filial piety that captures the complexity and interaction between the moral and pragmatic paradigms.

I propose to interpret filial piety as a *cultural practice* that is grounded in a definition of *culture* and *practice* as reflexive, phenomenological, and interpretive. Treating filial piety as a cultural practice means first recognizing the subjects' activities pertaining to any filial responsibility as socially and culturally constructed rather than natural and automatic. Culture, in this case, is dialectical and reflexive, driven by both internal and external forces. It acknowledges the postcolonial struggle and the hybridity of diasporic consciousness that most of the research participants share (see Chapter 1). Culture also manifests as an interpretive process that is

animated by a desire to reconcile the divided self between the “I” and the “Me” (Mead, 1934), but is always caught in an in-between-ness that invites translation and interpretation. Culture is problem-solving in both thinking and practice as the socially and culturally mediated subject engages everyday experience with meaningful action. Filial piety, defined as a cultural practice, not only refers to the moral and theoretical frameworks that are influenced by Confucianism, but also points to how these influences *appear as* and *manifest through* an individual’s oriented action that takes place in various situated contexts.

Such a conceptualization of filial piety as a cultural practice introduces an open and interpretive approach that seeks to investigate the complex orientations that drive an individual’s meaningful action. Filial piety as a cultural practice is also phenomenological, as it “operates in the space of the formative relations between who we are and who we may become, between how we think or feel and how we act” (van Manen, 2007, p. 26). With this approach, we can seek to unpack the nuances of an individual’s narrative on filial piety as an occasion to reflect on how this century-old heritage gives form and meaning to the present practice of elder care in a parent-child relationship.

The complexity of the topic is captured in the dense narratives of the individuals, providing us with an opportunity to interpret the hidden values, beliefs, and meanings behind the subject’s thoughts and actions. This method also recognizes that filial piety points to a discourse on moral reasoning in relation to the subject’s inheritance and the historical context of the parent-child relationship. The analysis of their stories and narratives aims to move beyond a surface reading of what they said to examine the motivations and orientations behind their self-reflexive and dialectical moral reasoning. Furthermore, I intend to use these narratives to produce a conversation about the meaning of filial piety. Such meaning cannot be simply

generalized through quantitative mapping, nor can it be settled with any articulate interpretation. It is always open to view, to revision, and to new interpretations.

In order to capture the mosaic of cultural practices observed in this research, I have selected three cases from the interviews with the hope that each case offers a unique proposition or provocation on this topic. These cases are by no means representative of any general population or community, nor are they too particular to be taken seriously in our discussion. Instead, I hope to use these cases to animate a conversation that centers on the subjects' moral reasoning about why they need to care for their elderly parents in order to reveal a heterogeneity of cultural practices of filial piety.

Case One: Filial Piety as a Relation to Inheritance

In this case study, we will trace the story of Mrs. Chan as she reflects on her problematic relationship with her parents. From her narratives, we can detect an *evolving* orientation to the concept of care and filial piety, from an idealization of care as a reciprocal relationship and a fair exchange, to a realization of a fundamental lack of quality in her caregiving experience. Mrs. Chan's moral reasoning of why and how she should care for her parents also reveals the impasse of family as a pre-given inheritance that needs to be oriented to, but always poses an open question that might never be settled. No matter what articulate form of filial piety she chooses to settle on, there are always indefinite residues of meaning and action, making such an orientation a case of sticky ambiguity. Yet it is our goal to recognize the subject's orientation and see how it is internalized and acted on. In Mrs. Chan's case, the sticky ambiguity of filial piety as a relation to inheritance continued to compel her to search for a stronger way to commit to an impersonal relationship with her mother.

“She is Your Mother; You Cannot Choose her”⁵⁷: Mrs. Chan’s Moral Dilemma

Mrs. Chan immigrated to Canada ten years ago from Shanghai. She and her husband currently live in the suburbs of Toronto with two young children. A few years ago, Mrs. Chan’s parents decided to move to Canada with the intention of spending the rest of their lives in the country. As the only daughter, Mrs. Chan felt obliged to obey her parents’ request and eventually sponsored them to live with her family. When her parents first moved to Canada, her children were still young and the childcare duties were heavy. However, Mrs. Chan’s parents openly told her that they would not help her with any childcare duties. Recalling her parents’ intention to immigrate, Mrs. Chan said:

Like you said, many elderly parents come here to help take care of their grandchildren. Or at least many use this reason as an excuse to immigrate. But my parents didn’t even bother to use it as an excuse. Before they came, they already made it really clear to me that “we are not coming to help you take care of your kids. We are here to enjoy our life.”⁵⁸ (Chan, J., interview transcript, August 29th, 2016)

None of the elderly parents we interviewed expressed anything similar to Mrs. Chan’s parents. Most of the elderly participants showed profound understanding of their children’s hard work and strong intentions to help their children as long as they were able to. Mrs. Chan’s narrative introduces a new motivation, at least from the adult children’s perspective, for why some seniors choose to immigrate to Canada and how childcare could be used as an *excuse* for their migration. More importantly, we can detect from Mrs. Chan’s complaints that her

⁵⁷这是你妈，你选不了。

⁵⁸像你说的很多老人来是要来带孩子，很多老人其实是拿这一个借口，像我父母甚至不用拿这个东西当借口，来的时候就说的很清楚我们不是来带孩子的，我们是来 enjoy our life.

idealization of care was based on a mutual and reciprocal relationship. Her narratives reflected an expectation that her parents would offer some form of help in exchange for her fulfillment of elder care duties. To Mrs. Chan, the offer to share the family's childcare duties seems like a common way in which elderly parents express and reciprocate their children's caregiving responsibilities. The fact that her parents did not offer to help or even bother to use such an offer as a rhetorical "excuse" made Mrs. Chan feel that her obedience to filial piety was taken for granted. Mrs. Chan continued to explain her parents' intention:

Their motivation [in immigrating] was never completely clear to me. But from what I can see, it is mainly because I am the only child. I am the only daughter of them. And we are all Shanghaiese. I don't know about other places, but there is a social custom in Shanghai...the social custom is like this: "ah...your family has a daughter and my family has a son...they are here and there. Ah, look at me, I can go live with my child...I can become a Canadian [because of my child]." It becomes a great way to show off. When they say the air is better here, the water is better here, and the food is safer here, yes, those are all solid facts and reasons. However, from the perspective of motivation, coming here will give them something to brag about when they compare their life to others.⁵⁹ (Chan, J., interview transcript, August 29th, 2016)

⁵⁹他们的动机我一直都不是特别的明确。但是在我看来，这个更多的因素是我是独生子女嘛，就我一个，我是唯一的女儿。那我们都是上海人，从上海过来的，我不知道其他地方，但是在上海的话呢，这个风气啊，这个风气是这个样子的，啊你家有女儿我家有儿子，在外面怎么样怎么样，啊你看我就可以去，去作为加拿大人怎么怎么样，就更多的是一种炫耀吧。那这里说这里的空气好啊，水质好啊食品安全啊，确实是都是理由，都是确切的有真凭实据的理由。但是更多的，motivation 的角度上来说还是一个跟更多的谈资。

There is certainly a high level of cynicism in Mrs. Chan's reading of her parents' intention. A close reading of her narrative further confirms her dissatisfaction with this one-directional care. She perceived her role as the only child as the primary factor motivating her parents' immigration. However, Mrs. Chan understood this motivation as externally driven and selfish, rather than an expression of love and concern for the family. Her interpretation of her parents' motivation further exacerbated her feeling that her obedience was being taken for granted. Her narrative also posited a sharp moral divide between the elders' self-interested motivation to come here and an altruistic motivation to come for their children. To Mrs. Chan, the concept of care implied an inherently reciprocal relationship in the form of fair exchange. To demand care without the willingness to reciprocate was therefore considered selfish. However, she also oriented to filial piety as an absolute obligation, obeying her parents' request for immigration without any negotiation. But the idealization of filial piety as a fair exchange exposed her to the sticky ambiguity of such an obligation, and continued to undermine her act and experience of caregiving.

On the other hand, the fact that Mrs. Chan is the only child of the family plays an important role in both her and her parents' moral reasoning. Both Mrs. Chan and her parents perceived filial piety as a commonly accepted cultural and social norm, but their orientations to the norm differed. Mrs. Chan felt obliged to fulfill her parents' wish even though she was unhappy about it. She treated filial piety as an unquestionable obligation and followed it without much reflection on its ethical implications. Her moral reasoning of how to care for her parents was oriented more to the *consequences* of her action than its *conditions*. Thus, she was driven by a desire to find the best way to manage the relationship.

We can also see from Mrs. Chan's narrative that her parents view filial piety as an important element of an ideal senior life and a desirable quality of the parent-child relationship. In "showing off," Mrs. Chan's parents display an orientation to filial piety as a socially constructed and mediated judgment of the quality of senior living. In other words, if they could not reunite with their daughter, they would be considered pitiful and exposed to criticism by others attacking their daughter's failure to adhere to her filial duties. Therefore, her parents' desire to show off their immigration was also driven by the fear and pressure that are rooted in the social imagery of filial piety as an indicator of harmonious and quality living. In both cases, filial piety functions as a silent yet ideal speaker that represents an ideal form of the parent-child relationship in old age and the best practice of elder care for adult children.

Family as a Pre-Given Inheritance

Adhering to this "best practice" unmindfully eventually exposed Mrs. Chan to a kind of cacophony that revealed the sticky ambiguity of the elder care relationship. Even though Mrs. Chan and her parents lived under the same roof, she still described their life as "a lark and an owl living in the same forest"⁶⁰ (Chan, J., interview transcript, August 29th, 2016). Mrs. Chan's own family and her parents had completely different lifestyles and daily schedules. They got up and went to sleep at different times. They cooked for themselves and dined at different times. Her parents never offered to take care of the grandchildren, but always verbally criticized Mrs. Chan's parenting style. Later in the interview, we learned more about Mrs. Chan's childhood:

I don't know them [my parents]. Even though I was the only child, I didn't grow up with my parents. My parents didn't raise me. I was raised by my grandparents...If you give your kid to someone else at such an early time, it is very difficult to fit together later in

⁶⁰你是百灵鸟我是猫头鹰嘛，就是这样子。虽然都住在同一森林里。

life, especially when there are a lot of expectations from each other. It is very difficult to adjust my own portion.⁶¹ (Chan, J., interview transcript, August 29th, 2016)

Mrs. Chan's reflection on her relationship with her parents reveals a deep moral dilemma. Even though she was born as the only child of her parents, without receiving parenting from them her parents appeared to be strangers to her. How can she take care of two people whom she barely knows even though they are her parents? Is their status as her biological parents sufficient to motivate her to provide caregiving? Furthermore, when her offer to assume elder care responsibility received no reciprocity from her parents, it became more difficult for Mrs. Chan to justify her willingness to provide care. Mrs. Chan's moral dilemma questioned Confucius' claim that the condition of birth shall serve as the moral basis for one's filial behavior towards one's parents. At least, the condition of the parent-child relationship seems to be too weak to ground a reciprocal caring relationship.

Mrs. Chan did not offer an answer to this question, but all of her narratives were oriented to addressing this moral dilemma in search of a stronger commitment to her inheritance and filial duty. After living with her for years, Mrs. Chan came to know her mother as a "selfish and negative" individual. The following description aligned with her overall dissatisfaction with her parents and her notion of filial piety as a reciprocal relationship. In describing her mother, Mrs. Chan said:

I see this person [my mother] as selfish and negative. And she never even bothers to hide this horrible side of her, at least, not in front of me. She is like a peacock, facing her ass

⁶¹ 不了解对方嘛。因为我虽然是唯一的小孩，我也不是我父母带大的，我是从小由爷爷奶奶带大的……就是那个年代把小孩给别人去带的人，是很难再 fit together，尤其是在互相对对方有更多的 expectation 的时候，那很难去 adjust 自己的那个 portion。

towards me. Do you understand what I mean? It makes me feel so bad. I don't want to see your back. What I mean is, in front of other people, she acts very properly. But the moment she turns to her family, she starts to point fingers at those people, saying how bad they are. She thinks the entire world is against her without realizing that she is the only one against the world.⁶² (Chan, J., interview transcript, August 29th, 2016)

Her description might sound harsh, but the process of getting to know her mother as an individual seemed to bring more clarity to her relationship with her parents. We can treat her interpretation of who her mother is as a way of comprehending this one-directional relationship—a strategy of dealing with her moral dilemma by bringing more reason to this unfair exchange of care. Mrs. Chan then recalled something her father said whenever she was in conflict with her mother.

She is your mother. You cannot choose it. What do you want to do with her?⁶³ (Chan, J., interview transcript, August 29th, 2016)

This question anchored her thinking throughout the interview and framed her understanding of filial piety.

Regarding so-called filial piety, how much do we really know? How much do we know about the difference between just doing the surface work and truly loving our parents?⁶⁴

(Chan, J., interview transcript, August 29th, 2016)

⁶² So I see this person as selfish and negative.而且最最恶劣的是她从来都不隐藏，至少在我面前，就像那个 peacock，屁股对着我，你明白我的意思吗？那个 feeling so bad. I don't wanna see your back.就是她在人前会很人模狗样的说白了就是这样子，但是她转过来哎呀在家里面，这个人怎么怎么恶劣，那个人怎么怎么样，全世界都是 against her，不知道就是她一个人走在逆行道上。

⁶³这是你妈，你选不了，你要怎么样？

Even though she didn't settle on a definition of filial piety, her narratives brought up an interesting point about the concept of care. Her reflections on her own action made her wonder what filial piety really means. Sponsoring her parents' immigration, accommodating their lifestyles, providing living space for them—all of these practices were considered by Mrs. Chan to be “doing the surface work” rather than “truly loving [her] parents.” However, fulfilling the responsibilities of filial piety without any true affection and concern made Mrs. Chan feel inauthentic. The essential quality of filial piety was still lacking. By questioning what filial piety actually means, Mrs. Chan seemed to be searching for the aura of the original that was lost in her mechanical reproduction of the surface work. She also realized that “truly loving our parents” requires a much stronger rationale than the existence of the parent-child relationship. Going back to her earlier idealization of care as a reciprocal relationship, her moral reasoning of why she cannot personalize and intimate her care for her parents was grounded in the lack of love and care she received from them.

The division of care into definitive categories is common in empirical research on caregiving. But none of the categories can reconcile the moral dilemma Mrs. Chan felt. Carol Thomas (1993) even claims that care has no theoretical status. It is “a descriptive concept like ‘housework’ or ‘manufacturing work’ ... The unified concept of care describes the totality of society's people-centered work” (p. 666). The personal and impersonal nature of care, as experienced by Mrs. Chan, is also documented in research that tries to define care as both objective and subjective. According to Montgomery and her colleagues (1985), the objective dimension identifies care as an impersonal and objective activity that requires labor and resources that are external to the subject of care, echoing what Mrs. Chan described as “doing the

⁶⁴对于所谓的孝道了解多少，对于做出表面的工作和真正地去爱对方又知道多少。

surface work.” At the same time, “truly loving our parents” corresponds to the subjective dimension of care as a feeling, which refers to the emotional and affective reactions to the caregiving experience (Montgomery, Gonyea, & Hooyman, 1985).

What is problematic with this subjective-objective split is that it always considers care as something external, practical, and descriptive that can be given or taken by one person in relation to another, so that the notion of care itself still remains ambiguous. As Blum (2003) suggests in his work on the imaginative structure of the city, such representations of a problem, be they objective or subjective, always “sacrifice the temptation to treat the cliché as a matter which we must decide factually or argumentatively in order to treat it as the surface of an implicit discourse in relation to a problem which remains to be explored” (p. 193). The problem of filial piety does not manifest itself through the subjective-objective division of care, but rather through the moral dilemma that is oriented to its ambiguity.

The real impasse that was revealed through Mrs. Chan’s reflection on filial piety was the problem of inheritance. We can never choose our family, but it is a given-ness that we all have to orient to. The question then becomes how to orient to this inheritance in a stronger way beyond simply doing the surface work. The conventional understanding of filial piety offers one answer to the question by providing us with moral guidance on how to *practice* filial duties. However, the interpretation of filial piety as a relation to our inheritance always poses an open question that we might never answer definitively but still need to engage. Mrs. Chan’s moral reasoning was driven by this open question as she continued to look for a stronger commitment to her inheritance.

Case Two: Filial Piety as a Living Heritage

In this case study, we will see how family as a pre-given inheritance also becomes a problem-solving situation for Mr. Du. Comparing his experience with that of Mrs. Chan, we will also see how they oriented to such an inheritance differently. While Mrs. Chan treated filial piety as an unquestionable obligation to follow, Mr. Du began by questioning the ethical foundation of the concept. His moral reasoning behind a conscious choice to follow filial piety was driven by a mix of justice-based and care-based ethics. At the same time, his narrative also obscured the voice of his wife, who was the actual caregiver to his elderly mother. The split conceptualization of filial piety between a moral domain and an actual caregiving practice reveals a highly gendered and patriarchal orientation. Filial piety was also regarded by Mr. Du as a virtuous cultural heritage that needs to be safeguarded through tangible practices and embodied pedagogy. In both Mrs. Chan's and Mr. Du's cases, filial piety was not only considered an external norm that prescribes a person's proper role and duties, it was also viewed as an internalized process in which the subject learns to harmonize the relationship between the self and the other.

“Can't Go Against My Conscience”: Mr. Du's Moral Choice

Mr. Du immigrated to Canada in 1995 from Shanghai and currently lives with his wife and two children in Toronto. He has one younger brother who immigrated to Canada in 2010 and lives with his wife and children in Mississauga. Mr. Du also has a younger sister who lives in Toronto as a single mother with a young child. Their mother was widowed in China and did not have any other relatives to rely on. Therefore, Mr. Du and his siblings all decided to move their mother to Canada to be closer to the family. However, according to Mr. Du, his brother refused to take care of their mother. Mr. Du did not know why, but he said that even when they were still in China, his brother never took care of his parents. Mr. Du also asked his younger sister to help

take care of their mother. He thought that since his sister lived by herself with only one child, she would not mind. However, his sister used the hardship of single parenting as an excuse to refuse his request. As the oldest son of the family, Mr. Du felt the obligation to accept the elder care duty. Therefore, his mother has been living with Mr. Du's family since arriving in Canada. However, Mr. Du's wife was strongly against the decision, describing her mother-in-law as a burden to the family and an interference in their marriage. Even though Mr. Du criticized his wife as selfish and unfilial, he still tried very hard to save the marriage by mitigating any in-law conflicts. When asked how he felt about the situation, he replied:

I am fully aware that living together [with my mom] will bring a lot of trouble to my family. But what can I do? I cannot let this trouble affect my current family [with my wife], but I also cannot not take care of my mother. It all depends on your personal understanding [of filial piety] and how you arrange everything. Some people have a better understanding...I think my wife is not that bad, at least she is better than my brother and his wife. They never bother to think about their parents. I believe there are many people like them. Why do I care? When we were young, our mother never cared for us. At that time, both of my parents worked. In China, we call them Shuang Zhi Gong (a term that describes a family with two working parents). They were very busy. We grew up with our grandparents. However, no matter if my parents educated us or not, they are already at this old age. You have to make some arrangements for them, and take care of them.⁶⁵ (Du, W., interview transcript, May 15th, 2015)

⁶⁵那么我知道到现在住在一起的话呢就是有很多的麻烦。那怎么办呢？又不可能就是说是因为这个麻烦而影响到我现在这个家庭，但是呢你又不可能不去照顾，这个东西就是说看你的个人的这种理念吧，理念和安排，有的人理念要是好一点……其实我觉得我太太其实还算好，起码比我弟弟弟媳妇要好，我弟弟

The circumstances of growing up with his grandparents and being the oldest son were both factors influencing Mr. Du's moral reasoning of why he *needs* and *should be the one* to take care of his mother. In addition, Mr. Du also faced pressure from his wife, who blamed his action as damaging to their marriage. Struggling with pressure from both sides, Mr. Du concluded that the problem was not about choices, but how to harmonize the consequences of his choices. Knowing that the current situation would inevitably cause conflicts in his family, he still insisted that there was no other morally acceptable way:

There is no other way. I don't have to take care of her (my mother), but leaving her alone in China violates my conscience. I will never feel at peace here. Why? She will be alone in China. All of her children are in North America. This is not right. What if she has an accident and none of us can make it back in time?⁶⁶ (Du, W., interview transcript, May 15th, 2015)

Mr. Du's narrative showed that he did not consider filial piety as an obligation that *had to be* obeyed, but rather as a conscientious choice that aligned with his moral values. "It all depends on your understanding [of filial piety]," by which Mr. Du meant that the concept of filial piety does not come with an inherent moral agency that prescribes whether one's action is right or wrong. Rather, one has to orient to the concept with one's own interpretation and align one's

他们干脆就是不闻不问的，我相信这种人也是很多的。我为什么要去管呢，因为我们小的时候就是说是没有我母亲的照顾的话，当然我父母那时候也是，职工嘛，都是职工，国内叫双职工，都很忙，其实我们小的时候也是爷爷奶奶带了很多，但是我妈我爸的话呢，不管教育还是，他们也是到了这个年纪了吧你总得帮他们安排，照顾照顾。

⁶⁶但是没有办法啊，我可以不管她，把她放在国内，但是我良心上过不去。我在这边也不会心安的，因为啥呢，她一个人在国内，子女全部都在北美，这不太好，她万一有什么事情我也赶不回去。

action with it in order to be considered morally acceptable. In this case, filial piety did not stand for any static concept, but rather functioned as an interpretive process that guides a person's moral reasoning. However, what is problematic about his moral reasoning is the obscuration of his wife's voice and lived experience. In other words, he interpreted his wife's resistance to his decision as a matter of different moral inclinations, rather than an expression of injustice and unfair distribution of caregiving tasks. While Mr. Du fulfills his filial duty to his mother morally, his wife has to perform and cope with the actual caregiving tasks and stress. In interpreting his wife's dissatisfaction as an expression of a different "understanding" of filial piety, Mr. Du completely overlooked the gendered practice of filial piety and the burden and stress experienced by his wife. In this case, moral reasoning became easy for Mr. Du when his wife sheltered him from experiencing the sticky ambiguity of such an obligation.

Parenting as Safeguarding a Heritage

Apart from treating filial piety as a moral choice, Mr. Du also emphasized the importance of safeguarding filial piety as a cultural heritage through parenting.

At least, speaking from my heart, I will not be able to live with the idea of leaving her in China alone. I think, as Chinese, we still need those virtues, we need to adhere to filial piety. This is also better for our next generation, otherwise, what's the point of having children? Objectively speaking, not taking care of them saves you a lot of energy and time. But, emotionally I simply can't accept that.⁶⁷ (Du, W., interview transcript, May 15th, 2015)

⁶⁷起码从我内心来讲，她在国内我要是不管的话我也做不好自己的工作。我觉得这个中国人的美德还是要有，就是说孝顺一些，对我们下一代也是一个好的教育，要不然我们养子女有什么意思呢。这个东西从客观上来讲你省心了，你也不花时间不花精力，但是，这个东西，就是说感情上我接受不了。

This dense narrative revealed some new insights into Mr. Du's understanding of heritage and filial piety. Not only did Mr. Du praise the adherence to filial piety as a virtue of the Chinese culture, he also emphasized the importance of setting a good example for the next generation. In addition, Mr. Du emphasized the role of filial piety in representing the Chinese identity as an important heritage that needed to be preserved and safeguarded. To Mr. Du, having children played a crucial role in preserving this cultural heritage since he believed that parenting was a link between the past and the future. By asking "what's the point of having children?" Mr. Du pointed to the idea that heritage was more than a record of history, rules, and rites. Rather, to preserve a heritage required keeping it alive and making it meaningful to the present. In this case, having children and teaching them about these virtues symbolize a way of bringing the past to the present and the future. Even though Mr. Du praised filial piety as a virtue that needed to be adhered to, his moral reasoning of why it was important and meaningful showed that he considered filial piety as more than an intangible heritage that only belongs to the past, but rather as something that needs to be re-interpreted and brought into tangible cultural practice. Therefore, performing, embodying, and teaching a pedagogy of filial piety to his children became Mr. Du's way of actualizing and safeguarding this cultural heritage.

The Mosaic of Care Ethics

Mr. Du also projected the experience of his elderly parent and young children into his personal future. It was morally unacceptable for him to leave his mother alone because he did not want his children to do this to him. Complaining about his wife's moral reasoning, Mr. Du said:

What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others. What my wife doesn't want others to do to her, she still imposes on other people. And she thinks it's alright. I guess this is the difference between how you are educated to think about this, how you are

educated in your family...Some people are like...For example, China has an emperor who cannot think from other people's perspective. One of his chancellors reports to him saying that people are starving because there is not enough rice to feed everyone. The emperor responds: if there is not enough rice, why don't they just eat meat? He simply cannot think about the problem from the perspective of the other because he always looks at the world from his own perspective. He doesn't know how to think from your perspective. My wife often argues with me, saying "Look at your mother's bad temper. It's all her fault." She is actually wrong. If you cannot change other people, you have to change yourself.⁶⁸ (Du, W., interview transcript, May 15th, 2015)

The first sentence was a quote by Confucius in *Analects 12:2*. Chenyang Li (1994), a contemporary Chinese philosopher, claims that despite the patriarchal nature of early Confucianist thought, there are many similarities in terms of moral orientation between Confucianism and a feminist ethics of care. Citing writings by early feminist scholars who advocate for a care ethics, such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984), Li argues that the Confucian concept of *ren* has a similar moral foundation as the feminist concept of care, both of which center on empathic human connectedness, sustaining relationships, and caring for others. It is important to note that the comparison between a Confucian and feminist ethics of care in Li's work focuses more on a discussion of moral philosophy rather than on gender politics. Both Li (1994) and Gilligan (1982) note a difference between justice-based ethics and

⁶⁸人家起码己所不欲勿施于人嘛，己所不欲她还要施在你身上，她还觉得没啥，这就是教育，家庭教育。有些人就是怎么呢，中国有个皇帝，他体会不到别人，下面的大臣向他报告老百姓没有饭吃了，他说没饭吃为什么不吃肉，他根本体会不到另一方的体会，因为他永远是站在自己的角度，他不会站在你的角度想。她跟我 argue，你看你妈的脾气不好，就是她的原因。其实不是，你人改变不了别人，只能改变自己。

care-based ethics. Gilligan describes justice-based ethics as characteristic of a masculine paradigm that focuses on autonomy and independence, but instead of positing care-based ethics as a gender-based concept, she proposes to treat it as *an alternative form of moral reasoning* to the justice model. According to Gilligan (1982), an ethics based on justice is relatively abstract and centered on the universality of individual rights. A care-based ethics, on the other hand, emphasizes a relatively concrete way of thinking that carries a “very strong sense of being responsible to the world” (p. 21). Gilligan (1982) defines the ideal of care as “an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone” (p. 62). Furthermore, both Li and Gilligan argue that caring for the other is not only an ideal moral form, but also a pre-condition for moral judgment.

To categorize Mr. Du’s moral reasoning on filial piety as either care- or justice-based seems too dichotomous. From Mr. Du’s earlier narratives, we can see that his belief revealed a mix of both ethical orientations, making filial piety a much more mosaic-like ethical framework. Arguing from a utilitarian perspective, he claimed that the functional practice of filial piety certainly implied burden and an expenditure of time, but whether such an effort is worthwhile or not depends on the person’s free choice. When his wife opposed his choice, Mr. Du did not accuse her of being immoral, but rather pointed out the difference in “the way in which we are educated to think” (Du, W., interview transcript, May 15th, 2015). Therefore, he believed that filial piety implied a more abstract way of thinking about justice, responsibility, and individual rights which is highly dependent on the person’s values and way of thinking. Caring for the other was not an innate and pre-reflexive condition for moral judgment, but rather a choice that one makes based on one’s beliefs. However, his moral reasoning of why filial piety was important

reflected care-based ethics, which emphasized empathy, the sustaining of a web of relationships, and responding to the needs of others.

That being said, Mr. Du's moral reasoning was still problematic in that it obscured the gendered aspect of caregiving. As previously mentioned, Mr. Du chose to take up the obligation of filial piety as the moral duty of the oldest son, but the laborious tasks of elder care fell to his wife. Not only did he fail to recognize his wife's resistance, his interpretation of it as selfish and inconsiderate further reinforced the gender norms of caregiving. Many studies have shown that the performance of caregiving tasks under the influence of filial piety can be highly gendered, where women provide the majority of care work (Zhan, 2004; Chappel & Kusch, 2007). Therefore, it is important for us to recognize the resistance and dissatisfaction of Mr. Du's wife not only as a different form of moral reasoning, but also as a reminder of the many obscured and silenced voices of women caregivers in the domestic space.

In Bartlett et al.'s (1993) study of moral reasoning based on fictional narratives about the moral dilemmas that shape the experience of caregiving, they find similar patterns of mixing both justice-based ethics and care-based ethics. Analyzing the subjects' moral reasoning from their often layered narratives indicates that the experience and decision of caregiving often "revolves around either justice or care" and that "the story includes but transcends logical rational understanding" (p. 418). In the cases of Mrs. Chan and Mr. Du, filial piety sometimes functions as an abstract moral framework that guides their decision-making; it also frequently manifests in their concrete negotiation of the tasks and obligations of caring in the interpersonal context. Therefore, their moral reasoning around filial piety was driven by a mosaic of reflections on the contextual nuances of the relationship, the utilitarian value of care, empathy, justice, love, and morality.

Filial Piety as Self-Cultivation

Both Mrs. Chan and Mr. Du realized that if one cannot change one's circumstances and people around oneself, one should begin to change the self. They also emphasized the importance of mitigating conflicts and making compromises to sustain the harmony of the relationship, be it with their parents or spouses. Their narratives pointed to a discourse of self-cultivation and a concept of selfhood that centers on harmonizing conflicts in any relationship. It seems to both of them that only by focusing on self-cultivation can one become capable of managing the elder care relationship despite of its difficulty and ambiguity.

As an attempt to renew the interpretation of Confucian selfhood, Tu (1985) describes self-cultivation as a creative process and a strong interpretation of filial piety:

To take one's situatedness in a particular network of dyadic relationships as the given is not total submission to the prescribed social roles but a recognition of the most immediate and fruitful way of initiating and completing one's task of learning to be human. After all, in the Confucian view, the ultimate meaning of life is never found in a radical otherness, for it is inseparable from our ordinary daily existence. (p. 15)

In Neo-Confucianist thought, reflective thinking is formulated as caring for oneself in the form of self-cultivation, which is an integral part of a person's quest for spiritual fulfillment. Tu (1985) explains that "learning to be human ... centers on the self, not the self as an abstract idea but the self as the person living here and now" (p. 57). The notion of Confucian self-cultivation conceives the subject as both "a thinker engaged in philosophizing" (p. 21) and a concrete person embedded in ordinary daily existence. And it is because of one's "situatedness in a particular network of dyadic relationships" that self-cultivation becomes a social and communal act (p. 15). Before a person can establish and take care of a family or a state, he or she has to learn to care

for himself or herself. At the same time, the development of oneself involves socializing with others and harmonizing various kinds of relationships. The social aspect of the subject is integral to self-transformation and his or her inner experience. Therefore, caring for oneself, in Confucian ethics, is an unceasing dialectical process of “self-transformation as a communal act” (p. 67).

Both Mrs. Chan and Mr. Du demonstrate an orientation to the self and the other as two sides of the same coin. To transcend oneself is to harmonize human relatedness for the purpose of self-care and self-cultivation. The Neo-Confucianist concept of self-cultivation offers a perspective from traditional Chinese thought on the importance of selfhood and self-reflection in any caring relationship with the other. The self is constructed as always orienting to an *other* in the form of a social and communal identity. Only through self-cultivation—a process that requires thinking, reflection, and moral reasoning—can one become truly capable of caring for the other, or, in Mrs. Chan’s and Mr. Du’s cases, of coping with the disharmony caused by their choice of care. At the same time, self-cultivation carries different gender implications for Mrs. Chan and Mr. Du. Mrs. Chan oriented to filial piety as an absolute obligation, and the notion of self-cultivation only functioned as a strategy to deal with the sticky ambiguity of her actual caregiving experience. However, Mr. Du oriented to filial piety as a moral choice. His advocacy for self-cultivation centered more on the moral achievement and patriarchal ideal of a filial son than the sticky ambiguity of the caregiving experience, which was expressed by his wife.

Case Three: Filial Piety as an Imagined Future

In this case study, we depart from Mr. Du’s concern for safeguarding the heritage of filial piety and his desire to pass this virtue onto his children, to look at a case in which such preservation becomes impossible. The story of Mrs. Kong was traumatic and personal, yet it was situated in a shared collective memory—the Cultural Revolution. Born into a chaotic time in

China's recent history was not a choice, but an inheritance that Mrs. Kong had to live with. Told from the perspective of her own life story, filial piety becomes a particular way of orienting to one's inheritance, with the timelessness of trauma evoking a sense of anxiety that is beyond the concern of aging and elder care.

“Who Will Take Care of Me?” Mrs. Kong's Trauma

Mrs. Kong's story spanned the most tumultuous period in China's recent history, including many significant events such as the Great Leap Forward, the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution. It was a powerful story that intertwined an individual's memory with ruthless changes in political and social conditions. How can one individual endure so much suffering and trauma without giving up the hope to live? Her story reflects both the powerlessness of individuals against the force of history and the resilience of life against an inheritance of trauma.

Mrs. Kong recalled a period of tragic history and social memory that is widely shared among Chinese elders living both in China and abroad today. However, public documentation of these historical events through first-person narratives is still often restricted in Mainland China. Official censorship, as well as self-censorship, of many events or commentaries related to the Cultural Revolution, both online is still very common. Interestingly, most of the elderly participants we interviewed for our research voluntarily mentioned stories related to the period of the Cultural Revolution. Whether it was mentioned as an anchor of time or as a condition of personal trauma, the backdrop of this cultural memory seeped through their life stories from the past to the present. Mrs. Kong is an elderly woman but she also lives with her 90-year-old mother. In the scope of the research project, she embodies both the role of an elder and an adult caregiver. Reflecting on her life experience, she sighed and said:

Sometimes, thinking about those things makes me very sad. Very sad. At that time, none of us were born into a good period in history. At that time, there was no university for you to go to. Later on, we all had to go work in the countryside. My mother was not very healthy at that time and wanted me to stay by her side. So all of my family members went down to the countryside, leaving me behind, alone, to take care of my mother. I was not very healthy either, so they applied for the *Sick or Disabled Educated Youth* status, so that I did not have to go work in the countryside. But once I had this status, it followed me and affected my career for the rest of my life. I could not find a job because of this status. When those who went down to the countryside came back to the city, they may be able to find a job depending on their performance. But there were no such opportunities in my neighborhood. So, later on...sigh...It's a long story. This affected all my life...like my own marriage problem. My friends always tell me: your experience is rich enough to write a book.⁶⁹ (Kong, X.Z., interview transcript, April 28th, 2015)

Mrs. Kong grew up in the most treacherous period of China's recent history. She applied for the *Sick or Disabled Educated Youth* status in order to avoid the mandatory duty to work in the countryside and took care of her sick mother during the ten years. After the Cultural Revolution, with no experience in the countryside and the stigmatizing status of a disabled youth,

⁶⁹有些时候我伤心会想这些事情来。伤心，就是说。那个时候，我们都没有遇到好年代就是，那个时候。想上大学没有的考。没有机会了后来，就跟着下乡。当时我妈身体不好，说着也想把我留在身边。他们当时都下去了，就留下我一个人当时我也是身体不好，所以办了一个病残知青。你办了个这个呢，影响到我一直都没有工作。下乡的后来找回来的时候还能有机会凭着表现来有工作安排。我们街道就是完全没有这种机会。所以说我啊，后来。哎。说这些事情就长啦。一直到解决自己个人问题。我的朋友那些人都说你经历都可以写本书了。

she could not find any job. At that time, the government asked her to volunteer for a neighborhood committee⁷⁰ and promised to arrange a job for her afterwards. She spent ten years working on the committee in the hope that the government would reward her with a job. However, the government official who promised to arrange a job for her was long gone. People with more money, connections⁷¹ (*guan xi*), and work experience took the job that was promised to her. Recalling this experience, Mrs. Kong said that relying on other people would only yield disappointment. At that time, Mrs. Kong was already 29 and was considered too old to be married. The matchmaker told her that only divorced men would be interested in women her age. She was eventually married to a divorced man, gaining two stepchildren.

Soon after the marriage, Mrs. Kong wanted to have her own child. However, there came the ruthless enforcement of the One Child Policy. If any family was found to have a second child, the entire family would lose their jobs and face a heavy financial penalty and public shaming. The rule also applied to Mrs. Kong's family because her husband had already brought two stepchildren into their marriage. Mrs. Kong was not allowed to have her own child. Already pregnant at that time, Mrs. Kong had to find some connection to help her hide the fact and find a way to register the illegal child. Tragically, she was betrayed by her connection who reported her pregnancy to the authorities. At eight months pregnant, she was forced to abort the child.

Trauma as a Living Present and an Imagined Future

Mrs. Kong was born at a bad time in history and had to live through a tragic period. According to her narratives and Mrs. Luo's story in the last chapter, individuals and families had no choice but to "follow" the wave of political upheaval and their inheritance (often interpreted

⁷⁰ 街道会

⁷¹ 关系

as fate or destiny). Their narratives showed that the influence of these historical events on individual destinies was irreversible. According to Mrs. Kong, she wasted the best time of her life in the worst time in history. Life is limited, but when the timelessness of trauma clashed with the temporality of human life, all she had left was a feeling of anxiety and helplessness.

Recalling the traumatic experience of her forced abortion in the interview brought her to tears and despair. She never thought she would recall this time of her life ever again, especially to a stranger. This story emerged towards the end of the interview, when she was anxious about who would take care of her when she got old.

I have a lot of worries. I mean, right now, I don't know what the future will be like for me. In my heart, I am always worried about this problem [of elder care].⁷² (Kong, X.Z., interview transcript, April 28th, 2015)

Both Mrs. Kong and Mr. Du expressed worries about the problem of elder care in the future. Mr. Du hoped that by investing in parenting and showing filial piety to his children, he would ensure that he would receive the same filial piety. However, without her own children, Mrs. Kong's worry was more profound and justified. She is already in her 60s and lives with her 90-year-old mother. Two of Mrs. Kong's brothers immigrated to Canada from Chongqing, China. Then they asked Mrs. Kong to move to Canada as well in order to take care of the elderly mother. When asked whether her brothers shared any elder care responsibilities with her, she said:

(sigh) All of her (my mother's) sons are like this...marriage...They can't even manage their own life...I mean, regarding elder care for my mother...they moved my mother here, but they couldn't even solve their own marriage problems. It seems like only I can

⁷²在这里说说还是有一些担忧。现在就是说没有一个结果。心里面有时候还是会对这些事情忧虑的。

take up the responsibility. I feel...neither of the sons are reliable.⁷³ (Kong, X.Z., interview transcript, April 28th, 2015)

Both of her brothers have marriage issues, but that does not mean they cannot share the responsibility of caring for their elderly mother. Mrs. Kong's moral reasoning of why she should be the person responsible for caregiving duties is better read in relation to her past experience. Throughout her early life, she always trusted people around her—family, government, friends—and did what she was advised to do. From getting the Sick and Disabled Educated Youth status (advised by her brothers), to volunteering on the neighbourhood committee (advised by the authorities), to taking the risk of conceiving a child (advised by her connection), Mrs. Kong had relied on other people for the important decisions in her life. However, she also suffered from the consequences of all of those decisions—unemployment, a late and undesirable marriage, and the loss of her child. It was at the traumatic moment when she was forced to abort her own child that she realized that the world seemed to go against her and no one could be trusted or relied upon anymore.

I don't think anyone is reliable. I have to rely on myself. So, all I hope is to have good health.⁷⁴ (Kong, X.Z., interview transcript, April 28th, 2015)

At this age, Mrs. Kong started to ponder who would take care of her in the future. Her husband had passed away a decade ago due to illness, and she was not close with her stepchildren. Taking care of her own elderly mother made her realize how fragile and dependent

⁷³ [叹气]他的儿子都是这样就是.....结婚.....他们一家人就是自己都搞不清楚，就是，为了这个事情。就你说，把妈妈搞过去又怎么办，他们问题都没解决。好像这个责任只有我来承担的起啊，心里面也是觉得。。几个儿子一个都靠不住。

⁷⁴我说，谁可能都靠不住，都要靠自己。所以说现在只能祈求自己身体很好。

an elderly person could be and how much care was needed. Projecting her mother's situation onto her own future, Mrs. Kong said, "I don't know what my future will be like." "I don't have children...who will take care of me when I need it?"⁷⁵ What an unfortunate life I have, she thought, that leaves me with no children. Given her personal history, we can try to understand her anxiety as more than a concern for elder care. Tracing the genealogy of trauma, Leys (2000) tries to clarify the definition of trauma over a long history of conflicting assumptions, concepts, and theories. Leys formulates the temporality of trauma as perpetual, timeless, and affectively present, as opposed to past, fixed, and frozen in time:

Post-traumatic stress disorder is fundamentally a disorder of memory. The idea is that, owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or dissociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As a result, the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories. The experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented *as* past, but is perpetually re-experienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present. (p. 2)

If we interpret the symptom of Mrs. Kong's anxiety as a reminder of her personal trauma and the potential end to her family lineage, we can then detect a strong fear of dependency and powerlessness in her narrative. Aging becomes fearful and anxious not only because of its anticipated fragility, atrophy, and temporality. It also arouses the haunting timelessness of trauma, transforming a past memory into a living phenomenon and an imagined future.

⁷⁵我自己没有亲身小孩...如果是到我需要人照顾的时候怎么办?

The Oblivion of Suffering

Mrs. Kong kept going back to her traumatic past to look for answers to the present and the future. The influence of her past was so vividly felt in the present and framed her imagination of the future. For various and complex reason, in mainland China an open discussion of the collective history of the Cultural Revolution is still at its preliminary stages. Mrs. Kong's personal trauma was just one of millions of people whose destinies were changed by the historical event. How does this kind of historical event affect the way in which Mrs. Kong understands and copes with her personal trauma?

In Weigelin-Schwiedrzik's (2003) research on the cultural particulars of trauma and memory, she claims that there is a unique way in which survivors of the Cultural Revolution handle traumatic experiences:

Traumatic experiences are normally neither part of individual life histories nor of collective histories. It is a widespread phenomenon that those who survive the disaster prefer not to talk about their experiences while at the same time being repeatedly haunted in their dreams by the memory of what they have gone through. (p. 46)

A number of novels that trace the traumatic experiences of survivors of the Cultural Revolution also stress the importance of family lineage, ancestor worship, and filial piety (in the sense that self-harm is considered disrespectful to the parents), reflecting a common phenomenon of keeping the suffering of the past from passing down to the next generation. According to Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (2003), the cultural particularity of ancestor worship "compels people to forget the suffering of the past if only enough people survive to preserve the continuity of the clan" (p. 2). At the end of the interview, Mrs. Kong also said that the past was

the past, and there was no use in thinking or talking about it. She believed that if one cannot choose one's past, at least one can learn to forget the past and enjoy the present.

The Problem of Inheritance

Even though Mrs. Kong was still vexed by anxiety towards her future, she seemed to find peace in dancing:

Sigh... What can I do? Even though I often think about this, but when I'm here, I just try to enjoy life. For example, when I dance, I stop thinking about everything. [laughing]⁷⁶
(Kong, X.Z., interview transcript, April 28th, 2015)

For Mrs. Kong, to dance is to forget about her past and future. To dance is to live in the present knowing that there is nothing she can do about her past and there is nothing she can know about the future. However, Mrs. Kong failed to recognize that the past, present, and future are not separate temporalities. She oriented to her past as a history of objective events, and to trauma as external suffering. Cognitively, she chose to forget about the suffering in order to live. However, through an analysis of her narrative, we can clearly see how her past life and trauma come to influence and frame the conditions of her present, and how these external events become internalized as ways of understanding her suffering, the meaning of life, and her relation to the world. The risk of treating trauma as an objective past and interpreting inheritance as an external fate allows the subject and the researcher to conceptualize memory and heritage as a representation of history rather than as a lived phenomenon in the present. Comprehending the totality of the present through the lens of history is always a difficult task and requires

⁷⁶[叹气] 怎么办呢。所以说我也是，想想怎么办呢。但是这里呢，有时候去玩嘛，比如说跳舞我都不想这些事。[笑]

interpretation and translation that might not always yield a good answer. Gadamer (1975) describes this process as a hermeneutical task:

Consciousness of being affected by history...is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation. To acquire awareness of a situation is...always a task of peculiar difficulty. The very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it. We always find ourselves within a situation, and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished. (p. 301)

In the *Book of Filial Piety*, Confucius tells us that we are always conditioned by our birth—a world that we enter and an inheritance that comes before us. The concept of filial piety, therefore, advocates honoring one's inheritance and safeguarding a heritage through family and intergenerational transmission. However, the concept does not recognize what Arendt describes as the true potential of birth and natality. Even though we are conditioned beings, with each birth, the world undergoes further modification.

In this case, an inheritance always stands for something beyond the past and history. A different interpretation of filial piety requires a notion of transition and the understanding of natality as radically open to change through individual temporalities, families, and generations. Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) describe an understanding of heritage as dissonant:

The present selects an inheritance from an imagined past for current use and decides what should be passed on to an imagined future. (p.6)

Even though the event of birth is universal, it manifests in each individual life in very unique ways. With this idea of inheritance and heritage, Mrs. Kong's anxiety can also be read as driven by a lack of succession of her own heritage. Being childless not only implies a potential lack of elder care for Mrs. Kong, it also symbolizes the impossibility of filial piety and the death

of her heritage, evoking a sense of mourning for her yet to be born child and future. Inheritance, therefore, became particularly problematic as she did not feel she had anything to pass on, and the anxiety over her future was a direct reflection of this traumatic inheritance. Mrs. Kong's resilient yet withdrawn attitude towards life became her way of coping with the lack of succession in her own family—an orientation to a future that rendered her past and present meaningless. Filial piety as a cultural practice becomes a *particular way of orienting to one's heritage*, in which case the death of a family heritage seems to be more tragic than the biological death of a person.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we had an opportunity to look at the elder care relationship from the perspective of the adult children. Even though most participants recognized elder care as a utilitarian burden, all of their narratives moved beyond the utilitarian definition of care and tried to address questions about responsibility and obligation, moral dilemma, self-cultivation, and the meaning of life. Filial piety was neither treated as a fixed set of rules and principles, nor was it negated as a heritage that was no longer relevant. The concept also does not simply connote a static level of commitment, loyalty, or willingness to care as described by some empirical studies I mentioned at the beginning. Rather, filial piety functions as an ideal speaker that initiates an interpretive process as the basis for each subject's moral reasoning about why they should care, how they should care, and how their oriented action reflects who they are, who they ought to be, and who they want to become. The three case studies also show that filial piety was recognized by some participants as an intangible cultural heritage that needed to be brought to life and into tangible practices in order to preserve it, safeguard it, and pass it to the next generation. Therefore, to keep the heritage alive also requires an internalized and reflexive process to make

this heritage meaningful to their own lived experience. However, such a desire to preserve the heritage also becomes particularly problematic for people without their own children. The notion of heritage is always in transition and is influenced by the subject's past and imagined future. Thus, I propose a concept of filial piety as a cultural practice that needs to be oriented to, internalized, and brought to action by the subject. This approach moves beyond Confucius' concept of the condition of birth and integrates Arendt's idea of natality to acknowledge the potential for plurality and change, revealing the cultural heritage of filial piety as a heterogeneity of cultural practices in transition.

Through the analysis of three unique stories and the moral reasoning of the participants, I tried to uncover different orientations to filial piety and the concept of care, and examined how the subjects internalized and acted on these orientations as a way of reducing its sticky ambiguity. From the first two case studies, we can see that both Mrs. Chan and Mr. Du oriented to filial piety as a kind of ideal and best practice of elder care and parent-child relations, but they also experienced the sticky ambiguity of committing to the inheritance of the family in different ways. Mrs. Chan had to navigate the tension between the symbolic order of filial piety as an absolute obligation and her imaginary of care as reciprocal and fair. Feeling her obedience being taken for granted by her mother, Mrs. Chan questioned whether a biological parent-child relationship was strong enough to sustain her commitment to filial piety. The sticky ambiguity of care manifests in her struggle with the lost aura of intimacy ("truly loving my parents") and the mechanical reproduction of care labor ("doing the surface work"). Mr. Du oriented to filial piety as a moral choice and an exhibition of a person's virtuous character. He projected the future of his own elder care onto his decision to care for his elderly mother. Through a pedagogy of embodying and performing this cultural heritage to his children, Mr. Du hoped not only to pass the virtue to

the next generation, but also to receive a reciprocal action from his children. The sticky ambiguity of care first appeared in the form of a moral choice against resistance from his wife, and the refusal to help from his brother and sister. However, while Mr. Du reflected on why he chose to take up the responsibility, the actual practice of care has fallen to his wife, whose performance of filial duty sheltered Mr. Du from experiencing the sticky ambiguity of his obligation. Mrs. Kong's story further problematized the Confucian notion of honoring one's inheritance and treating the condition of birth as an absolute moral obligation. Born into a chaotic history and suffering from numerous traumas, Mrs. Kong displayed an orientation to filial piety and inheritance through a complex weaving of the past, present, and future. The sticky ambiguity manifests in the clash between the timelessness of trauma and the temporality of individual life, which is exacerbated by a lack of succession of her personal heritage due to childlessness. Mrs. Kong's story offers us a unique case where the performance of reciprocity and preservation of heritage becomes impossible, compelling us to interpret filial piety differently by recognizing the plurality of orientations and cultural practices.

CONCLUSION

I can still remember those early spring afternoons I spent at Tim Hortons, community centres, and condo lobbies interviewing the research participants. Even though I only spent a short two-hour session with each individual, sitting across the table from a crying elder was still a very difficult experience. Half of the elders I interviewed shed tears during their storytelling, even though most of them began the interview with a little suspicion and reservation. As they warmed up and let down their guards, stories, memories, and emotions poured out naturally. What surprised me the most was that many elders thanked me at the end of their interviews. They expressed their gratitude for my attentive listening, and for giving them an opportunity to share their stories and feelings. Some of them told me that they seldom went outside the house, and they didn't feel comfortable sharing those feelings with their children. After I finished the data collection, I felt a peculiar sense of responsibility weighing upon myself. It seemed to me that most of the elders had hoped that their participation in this research project would help bring some kind of tangible positive change to their life. Their gratitude and open-hearted sharing compelled me to reflect on the meaning and impact of this research. More importantly, they made me question myself at all times: Am I doing justice to their stories? Do I really care about their narratives? These questions underpin some of the reflections in this conclusion, but will also continue to drive me forward in my future research.

Significance and Contribution

The Framework of Sticky Ambiguity

The root having taken hold, the proper way (dao) will grow therefrom.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Confucius, Analects 1.2

The title of this dissertation references the Confucian concept of *de*, often translated as the root of excellence and described as the beginning of all teachings, reflecting my desire to go deep into the root of any phenomenon with a profound degree of reflexivity. What I learned from my experience of this research is that such a root can never be singular. It leads you to different and unexpected places, paradigms, views, and opinions. But all of them together create, nourish, and grow the discourse, the teachings, and the Dao. It is to this rich, complex, and nuanced locus of collectivization that I orient my inquiry and dedicate my analysis. At the beginning of my research, I was fascinated by the indeterminacy of the concepts that I study—aging and elder care—as manifest in both community agencies’ fear of indeterminate research findings and research participants’ discomfort with indeterminate thoughts and feelings. The tendency to reduce such indeterminacy and to search for a definite and articulate representation of the problem makes me realize that indeterminacy itself can be a fruitful site for research.

I picture these nuances of indeterminacy as those invisible microorganisms, particles of dirt, and worms in the soil that hold, weave, and tangle the roots together. They are sticky and messy. They do not conform to any specific shape, path, or physicality of the roots. They are in-between roots and soil. Their materiality and sensation resemble Sartre’s (1969) description of the jar of honey and the stickiness it evokes as a contestation of categorical definition. This ambiguity and in-between-ness pierce through and bind together any articulate representation of forms, and reveal “the interrelation between self and other things” (Douglas, 1966, p. 39). Captivated by this unique position, I chose to use the aesthetic metaphor of sticky ambiguity as the theoretical framework and analytical lens of my dissertation. Since my research is highly interdisciplinary, I do not intend to confine my contribution to any particular field or discipline. However, I consider this theoretical framework as a unique contribution and insight for studies

dedicated to the topic of aging, elder care, mortality, and transnational family experiences. By situating my analysis in cultural in-between-ness, the topology of the divided self, and the collective desire for order, coherence, and definitive solutions, I am able to contribute to the field a reflexive dialogue about situations of sticky ambiguity that emerge in the subjects' narratives, which would otherwise be reduced in empirical research or abstracted in philosophical discussions.

Resistance to Essentialist Narrative

The framework of sticky ambiguity also contributes to the resistance to essentialist narratives in postcolonial scholarship and in cross-cultural research. The notion of ambiguity posits culture as a site of change, interpretation, and negotiation. In all of my analysis, I conceive culture as a dialectical process rather than an external determinant. By formulating a topology of self, I conceptualize culture as a mediation of the divided self and as a subjective orientation to norms and values that have to be internalized and acted on by the individual. In chapter four, I demonstrated how this understanding of culture informs my interpretation of filial piety as a dialectical cultural practice, and how this method offers a much more nuanced narrative of the understanding of filial piety.

This research also resists the prevalent statistical and demographical classifications of visible minorities, such as the so-called Chinese Canadian, and how such categories are often used in empirical research without further contextualization. Even though self-identification is often used as the recruitment strategy for visible minority subjects, identifying oneself as “Chinese Canadian” does not and shall not generate a homogenous cultural identity or experience. For example, in the recruitment stage of this research project, we also used self-identification as a screening criteria. However, our research participants ranged from second-

generation Vietnamese Chinese refugees to newcomers who arrived in Canada two years ago. Differences in the historical and cultural specificities of these participants are so salient and significant that any statistical or demographic categorization would not do justice to their stories. The desire to put research participants into neatly defined categories is understandable as certain types of macro, comparative, and statistical analysis depend on this type of operational measure. My critique is not intended to dismiss the significance of these studies, but rather to highlight the importance of qualitative and interpretive research like mine, which often has a small sample size, as a critical complement to existing empirical literature. Only through a more focused and micro analysis can we hope to resist essentialist narratives of cultural differences, and to recover the missing nuances and rich contexts in the representation of Chinese Canadian experiences.

Interpretive and Reflexive Approaches to Qualitative Data

The theoretical framework and research method in this dissertation are influenced by a number of theoretical perspectives, ranging from phenomenology, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and sociology. The main objective of my research is to propose an interdisciplinary, interpretive, and reflexive methodology to analyze qualitative data that seeks to move beyond the surface reading of the narrative. I consider this interpretive method a significant contribution to the field of qualitative research, adding a crucial dimension of reflexivity to the methodology of qualitative analysis. In chapter one, I introduced the three theoretical pillars that frame this methodology—cultural translation, reflexive sociology, and the topology of self. With the case studies, I demonstrated how this method is used to analyze narratives through uncovering the unspoken and hidden registers of motivations, orientations, idealizations, and beliefs in the subjects' speech.

In contrast to typical narrative analysis that aims to code, characterize, and thematize qualitative data, my research treats narrative as the subject's attempt to reconcile the divided self, and the analysis makes observable his or her orientation to values and idealization in the search for the best solution. The method begins by identifying common problem-solving situations among different participants. It then reveals the differences and tensions in their orientations and representations of the problem in order to produce a dialogue about the meaning and sticky ambiguities of those situations, acknowledging that the meaning can never settle conclusively, but is still worth engagement. I recognize that this type of inquiry always suffers from a sense of incompleteness, but the purpose of the analysis is precisely to acknowledge this irresolution in any interpretation of meaning and social inquiry. Such irresolution is always open to view, to revision, and to new inquiries. This pursuit can help us resist the tendency in what Garfinkel (1996) calls formal analysis to reduce the sticky ambiguity and contextual nuances of any social phenomenon.

Limitations and Further Research

Reflecting on the case studies in this dissertation, I identify the following limitations due to the scope of the data, the focus of the interview questions, and the priority of the research analysis. These limitations also evoke further research insights and ideas that are worth pursuing. Some of the ideas first emerged from the data analysis, but the limits of the data foreclose the opportunity to explore these ideas further in the scope of this research. Therefore, at the end of this section, I also lay out some observations and further research topics with the hope that future studies will be dedicated to subjects' stories.

Sacrificing Breadth for Depth

The analysis of the case studies in this dissertation is limited to a highly micro, interpersonal, and intersubjective scope. During the research planning stage, the team already decided to limit the sample size and increase the length of interviews in order to gain more details about each individual case. Each two-hour interview took a long time to transcribe, but we were rewarded with the richness of each subject's story. The limited sample size means that it will be difficult to make any general claims or comparative analysis among the cases. However, the aim of the research is to say something in detail about the lived experiences, conceptions, and understandings of a few particular individuals rather than to make any premature and general claims. Due to the reflexive dimension of the method, the analysis requires close reading and painstaking examination of each passage of the narrative. I believe that this type of inquiry can only be done with a small sample, thus the research sacrifices a certain level of breadth for depth. On the other hand, the limited sample size is necessary in order to demonstrate the dialectical usage of the interpretive method. By dwelling on one individual's story longer, we were able to detect the frequent oscillations, contradictions, and paradoxes expressed through the subject's own reflections on his or her narrative.

Historical and Socioeconomic Specificity

Data collected in this research consists mostly of narratives about conflicts and tensions with family members with whom the research participants co-reside. Due to the scope and focus of the data, most of the research participants provided few historical and socioeconomic details about their background. The topic under study is also considered a sensitive one, as some of the elders we interviewed had experienced elder abuse in various forms. Due to the nature of the research, we did not conduct any survey or screening of the participant's socioeconomic status or

detailed personal information, such as income, occupation, educational level, etc. If they did not voluntarily inform us about their socioeconomic status, we would not actively solicit this type of information. This limits the amount of historically and socioeconomically grounded analysis of their experiences.

Scholars in transnational studies have highlighted the importance of economic, political, religious, and sociocultural practices in shaping and forming the transnational subject's identity and lived experience (Basch, Schiller & Blanc, 2005). Levitt and Schiller (2004) also propose a social field approach to studying transnational experiences that re-conceptualizes society as a field of "simultaneity, or living lives that incorporate daily activities, routines, and institutions located both in a destination country and transnationally" (p. 1003). These approaches often analyze individual life in relation to a broader set of transnational conditions, such as historical specificities of the homeland and destination country, social processes, policies, institutions, and other socioeconomic determinants. Studies of the transnational family also tend to situate the family within a network of social, cultural, political, and economic conditions. I acknowledge the importance of these external conditions to both the practice of transnational kinship and the formation of transnational subjectivity. However, due to the limits of the data, the analytical focus is more on the micro, interpersonal, and intersubjective relations among family members. The intersection between social and personal history, the family and the state, the practical and the political, will generate important and interesting research topics for further research.

Gender and Class

From a number of the case studies in this research, it is evident that gender and class play an important role in the negotiation, moral reasoning, and distribution of caregiving responsibility. In their review of transnational literature, Levitt and Schiller's (2004) say:

Studies of transnational kinship document the ways in which family networks constituted across borders are marked by gendered differences in power and status. Kin networks can be used exploitatively, a process of transnational class differentiation in which the more prosperous extract labor from persons defined as kin. Kin networks maintained between people who send remittances and those who live on them can be fraught with tension. (p. 1006)

In chapter two, I briefly mentioned how an elderly woman's attitude towards her daughter-in-law was class-based. In chapter four, I also discussed the gendered phenomenon of filial piety as expressed by one male participant's narrative regarding his wife. However, the research in general does not incorporate a class- and gender-based theoretical framework. In other words, instead of beginning with a gendered conception of caregiving, I analyze issues of class and gender as they emerge from the subjects' narratives as their particular orientations and beliefs. That being said, I still acknowledge the problematic of gender and class in the study of elder care and transnational caregiving practice, and I believe a class- and gender-based theoretical framework will be significantly insightful for research like this.

Postmemory

One of the most interesting observations I identify from some of the interviews is the elderly subjects' unwillingness and determination not to share their feelings, stories, or even past memories with their children or grandchildren. In particular, elders who have experienced a painful and traumatic past, be it personal or historical, do not wish to recall the suffering or pass the memory to the next generation. I do not intend to make it a general claim, but this observation based on a small sample size, combined with my personal experience with elderly members of my family, makes me wonder if there is anything particular about traumatic memory

that prevents the elderly from passing the narrative history to their children, and especially their grandchildren. Most of the elders I interviewed live in a multigenerational family, and some are also heavily involved in taking care of their grandchildren. However, they seldom share their memories of the wars, social turmoil, and personal chaos of the Cultural Revolution with their grandchildren.

In portraying the second generation of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch (2008) uses the term “postmemory” to describe the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Postmemory describes the relationship between the second generation of Holocaust survivors, or survivors of any historical trauma, and a memory that preceded their births but was nevertheless transmitted to them (Hirsch, 2008, p. 103). Such intergenerational transmission designates the post-generation as the “guardians” of either a traumatic personal history or a generational past (p. 104). Hirsch (2008) highlights the theoretical significance of such a transmission:

At stake is not only a personal/familial/generational sense of ownership and protectiveness but also an evolving theoretical discussion about the workings of trauma, memory, and intergenerational acts of transfer, a discussion actively taking place in numerous important contexts outside of Holocaust studies. (p. 104)

Hirsch (2008) also describes postmemory as “a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience” (p. 106). I suggest that such a structure could be used for further research as an interesting theoretical framework to analyze how Cultural Revolution survivors transmit or conceal traumatic knowledge to the post-generation. However, what is unique about my observation of Chinese elders, especially those who suffered traumatic experiences during the Cultural Revolution, is that the intentional concealment of their memory from the next generation seems to contradict Hirsch’s (2008) definition of postmemory.

Postmemory has to bear the “experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (p. 106). But when these stories, images, and behaviours are intentionally concealed and made unavailable to members of the post-generation, how do they inherit the past? In other words, how will the un-doing of postmemory affect the way in which the post-generation relates to its cultural inheritance? I hope these questions can inspire further research projects on the topic of the Cultural Revolution from the perspective of intergenerational knowledge transmission, collective memory, and trauma theory. A comparative study of Holocaust and Cultural Revolution survivors or their post-generations would yield important insights as well.

Lessons for Knowledge Translation

This dissertation began as a community-based research project in collaboration with the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter (CCNCTO) and received funding from the City of Toronto. Knowledge translation has always been an important objective of the project. The sense of responsibility I feel towards the research participants’ stories has also been motivating me to find ways to share the knowledge to a wider audience outside academic circles. I will share my reflections on the challenges and rewards of an important and ongoing knowledge translation project.

I believe that systematic change at the policy level has the potential to affect individual lives in significant ways. But one of the greatest challenges of a knowledge translation project is to assert tangible influence. Since the research project began, I have tried to gain as much exposure as possible to important policy makers and service providers through media and other publicity measures. Fortunately, I was able to connect with a senior director of the City of

Toronto, who is in charge of leading the development of Toronto Senior Strategy⁷⁸—a key policy guide for making the city more age-friendly. After a number of in-person meetings and discussions with the director, I gained tremendous insight into how policy is researched, drafted, proposed, passed, and implemented, at least at the municipal level. At the same time, I also learned that the municipal government is extremely limited in the scope of policy it can implement due to jurisdictional authority and internal politics.

I presented my research to the director and other community stakeholders, such as long-term care centres, hospitals, and senior associations, on multiple occasions. Most of them appreciated the level of detail and the power of the individual stories in my research. At the end of each presentation, they always asked me, “Can you tell me specifically what we can do to improve the lives of elders like the participants in your research?” “What are some specific actions we can implement right away and in the long term?” I always found these questions difficult to answer. In other words, I found it difficult to translate my research into actionable, tangible, and specific policy or service improvement recommendations. It is ironic that even though the stakeholders showed so much understanding and appreciation of the nuances and diversity of Chinese Canadian experiences, at the end of the day, they still need an operational term to categorize the Chinese Canadian as a relatively homogenous community. They still refer to Statistics Canada’s conceptualization of Chinese Canadians as the common working definition. The municipal government still uses the World Health Organization’s definition of an age-friendly city as the benchmark for Toronto’s senior strategy. The director of the Toronto Seniors

⁷⁸Download the full report at

<https://www1.toronto.ca/City%20of%20Toronto/Social%20Development,%20Finance%20&%20Administration/Shared%20Content/Seniors/PDFs/seniors-strategy-fullreport.pdf>

Strategy commented on such irony. She was fully aware that the WHO framework does not reflect the ethnic and racial diversity and lived reality of the elderly population in Toronto, but it holds so much legitimacy and authority that it makes policy-making and consensus-building much easier. The designation of Toronto as an age-friendly city by the WHO in 2016 has also become a much-sought prize of the city in an age of globalization and city branding.

What impact can my research make on the policy level? It seems like there is no immediate, direct, and tangible impact, but I still believe that it is critical for policymakers to hear my voice, my stories, and my research. It is also important to participate in the policy-making process knowing that it can be limited, political, and stagnant. Ever since I became a volunteer community advisor for the Toronto Seniors Strategy in 2016, I have been exposed to a number of opportunities to provide insights into policy proposal, including literature review and best practice research of other cities in the world. I might not be translating this research directly into specific recommendations, but having embodied this knowledge and cultural sensibility, I am able to provide a critical perspective, no matter how limited it is, into the future direction of a key policy that will inevitably influence the life of Toronto elders. This humble experience broadens my understanding of knowledge translation. It does not have to be direct, immediate, high impact, and effective. What I value more now is the continuous participation in and advocacy for the cause that I care about, no matter how small a step I take each time. I want to end this dissertation with the quote I began with:

It never has been the case that what was of great importance has been slightly cared for, and, at the same time, that what was of slight importance has been greatly cared for.

(Confucius, 1861, p. 223)

To care deeply about a cause, a research topic, or an individual requires deep reflection about the significance of the relationship, and of our own relationship to ourselves. This is the lesson I learned from conducting and advocating for this research, and from the stories I collected from the participants. In this spirit, I hope this research will provide scholars, service providers, policy makers, and anyone who works with or takes care of the elderly a more reflexive and nuanced narrative of their lived experiences.

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