

# What Constitutes “Successful Aging” in a Tibetan Context?



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**Abstract** Successful aging is a concept deployed in gerontological research to assess people’s ability to remain healthy, physically active, cognitively functional, socially engaged, and independent for as long as possible. Anthropological critiques of the concept point out that its core tenets are rooted in North American and European notions that lose salience in other settings. This paper describes successful aging in contemporary Tibetan societies by discussing social and cultural factors that shape a normative aging process. These include the recognition that, ideally, old age should be spent reducing the impacts of previous sins and generating merit to benefit future lives, and support from family members so an elderly person can concentrate on culturally appropriate end of life activities. The two cases discussed are from rural villages in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China and Nubri in the highlands of Nepal. The first case explores an “efficacious mindset” (*samlo gochöpa*) that many retirees adopt as a rationale for diverting time and energy away from worldly affairs so they can concentrate on prayer and pilgrimage. The second case discusses a retirement process and spatial ontology that elderly people rely on to focus on future lives, but that is being undermined by diminishing household support due to education and outmigration. The cases are used to reflect on the suitability of deploying the successful aging paradigm in non-Western settings.

**Keywords** Successful aging · Gerontology · Anthropology · Tibet · Nepal

To this day Tibet is one of a few countries that have not been influenced by the Western conception of death as an enemy, as something that has to be postponed at any cost or feared. Rather, these admirable, highly spiritual people look on death as a threshold, as an entrance to a different existence. And for centuries they have taught people to conduct their

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229

lives so as to be prepared for this most important and significant transition (Kübler-Ross, 1998, p.11).

In the above quote the late Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, a renowned specialist in near-death studies, refers to a Buddhist perspective on death that became popularized in the West through translations of and commentaries on the *Bardo Tödrol*, commonly called in English *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. A more direct translation of *Bardo Tödrol* is “Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate State.”<sup>1</sup> Studies of Tibetan ecclesiastical writings on end of life issues reveal a rich metaphysical tradition that can help people approach aging and the inevitability of death with clarity and dignity, as Kübler-Ross suggests. However, clerical ruminations are not necessarily a reliable guide for how ordinary Tibetans interpret and navigate the aging process. As anthropologists, we appreciate the influence Buddhist concepts have on the way lay people comprehend the cycle of life, but also acknowledge that a range of social and economic factors also affect how Tibetans approach aging and end of life issues. The goal of this chapter is to investigate what it means to age successfully in Tibetan societies.

As defined in the field of gerontology, successful aging is an individual’s ability to remain healthy, physically active, cognitively functional, socially engaged, and independent for as long as possible. In a seminal article on successful aging, Rowe and Kahn call for research that supports the goal of attaining, “the maintenance of full function as nearly as possible to the end of life” (1987, p. 149). Since then, evaluating successful aging has generally involved research on health, physical abilities, cognitive skills, social functioning (Rowe & Kahn, 1997), and the capacity to adapt to aging-associated changes (Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). Although scholars developed similar concepts such as ‘productive aging,’ ‘aging well’ (Depp & Jeste, 2006), and more recently ‘harmonious aging’ (Liang & Luo, 2012), successful aging remains the dominant paradigm for assessing the aging process. As a public health discourse, the concept implies that everyone has the capability to age successfully by planning carefully and making the right lifestyle choices (Lamb et al., 2017).

Criticism of successful aging highlights the concept’s vagueness and lack of consensus on its definition (Depp & Jeste, 2006; Martin et al., 2015). Others mention insufficient attention to elderly people’s views on what constitutes successful aging (Bowling, 2007; Knight & Ricciardelli, 2003). Some studies show how a focus on

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<sup>1</sup>Translations and commentaries on Bardo Tödrol include Evans-Wentz (1927), Fremantle and Trungpa (1975), Sogyal Rinpoche (1993), Thurman (1994), and Coleman et al. (2005). On the history of this text see Cuevas (2003). Notable studies of Tibetan perspectives on death and dying include Lopez (1997) on mindfulness of death, Germano (1997) and Mullin (1998) on awareness of and preparations for death, Gehlek Rinpoche’s perspectives on life, death, and rebirth (2001), and Tsomo (2006) on how Buddhist concepts of death relate to contemporary bioethics. On ‘*das log* (returning from death) see Epstein (1982), Pommaret (1989), Drolma (1995), Bailey (2001), and Cuevas (2008). On death rituals, funeral practices, and grieving see Ramble (1982), Skorupski (1982), Sangay (1984), Kvaerne (1985), Gouin (2010), Sangay and Kilty (2011), and Desjarlais (2016).

individual choice obscures structural and socioeconomic factors that affect aging outcomes (Baker et al., 2015; Katz & Calasanti, 2015; Martinson & Berridge, 2015; Stowe & Cooney, 2015). And some point to even how research terminology may contribute to ageism (Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009). Meanwhile, anthropologists point out that the core tenets of successful aging are rooted in North American notions of personhood that lose salience in other settings (Lamb, 2014, 2017; Liang & Luo, 2012; Torres, 2006).

Although scholars studying the elderly in Tibetan societies have not directly addressed the successful aging paradigm, several touch on resonant points. For example, in a comparative study of Tibetan exiles living in India and Switzerland, Wangmo reports that elderly people associate open-mindedness with good health because it decreases stress and feel that religious practices benefit health and wellbeing (2011, pp. 338, 341–342). Gerke analyzes aging related beliefs and practices in a Tibetan community in Sikkim, highlighting concepts that affect how Tibetans view the life course and try to influence longevity (2012a, 2012b). Childs, Goldstein, and Wangdai’s research in Central Tibet underscores the importance of family relations and financial resources that enable the elderly to engage in activities they consider essential for happiness in old age, such as prayer and pilgrimage outings with peers (2011). Goldstein and Beall argue that, although many elderly people in Yolmo, Nepal, maintained good health and high levels of social engagement, outmigration left many alone in the village without the presence of a son who they consider a prerequisite for receiving proper care in old age (Beall & Goldstein, 1982; Goldstein & Beall, 1982). Choedup’s analysis of a Tibetan exile settlement in India also draws attention to outmigration. Losing family members through migration negatively affects elderly Tibetans’ ability to live their final years in an ideal manner and increases their anxiety over dying without the presence of a son or daughter who are crucial for ensuring smooth passage to the next life through rituals (Choedup, 2018; see also Wangmo, 2011).

The following generalizations on aging and preparing for death among lay Tibetans are derived from the literature review and our own research. We present these to highlight some factors that are critical for understanding what constitutes successful aging from a Tibetan perspective. First is the Buddhist philosophy that life is an endless cycle of suffering characterized by birth, death, and rebirth. The only way to escape the cycle is to attain enlightenment. Although enlightenment is unattainable for all but the most highly accomplished Buddhist practitioners, lay people can positively affect future lives through the accumulation of *gewa* (*dge ba*; merit) and the avoidance of and atonement for *dikpa* (*sdig pa*; sin). Second is a process for retiring in a culturally appropriate manner. Parents in rural communities, usually when in their 60s, pass the household assets and household management responsibilities to one or more sons and begin withdrawing from everyday economic engagements so they can dedicate more time to religious practices. The relationship between cause and effect (i.e., karma) is foremost on the minds of elderly people who recognize that a lifetime of committing morally errant acts can catalyze an unfavorable rebirth. Tibetan elders do not simply resign themselves to an unalterable fate, or as Goldstein and Beall note, they do not, “sit around waiting for death.

They actively engaged in activities they considered critically important and meaningful” (Goldstein & Beall, 1997, p. 163). Activities include reciting mantras, visiting temples and sacred sites and cultivating a compassionate mindset to mitigate the negative effects of past actions.

With this sketch as a backdrop, we present details from two Tibetan societies to shed light on a Tibetan version of successful aging, and to pinpoint how contemporary developments may diminish rather than enhance the ability of some Tibetans to age in a culturally ideal manner.

## A Mindset

In our study in Tibet’s Shigatse Prefecture on aging, economic change, and family-based care for the elderly, we were interested in understanding intergenerational tensions that arise with the aging process. We therefore analyzed household dynamics, focusing on the transition when elderly people pass the *kyimdag* (*khyim bdag*; head of household) position to the eldest son who is often involved in a polyandrous marriage. Polyandry, the marital practice where two or more brothers take a common wife, is common throughout the Tibetan world where it is valued as a successful strategy to expand household wealth in a rapidly changing economy (see Goldstein et al., 2008). For the elderly, this is a time fraught with uncertainty. Declining physical abilities and the ceding of command over the household budget and decision-making renders them dependent on the younger generation for basic needs.

Not all households had harmonious relations, which became evident by using a person-centered interviewing technique (see Levy & Hollan, 1998). We first asked each interlocutor (151 men and women aged 60 and above) about generally accepted principles and practices, that is, what people are expected to do (cultural ideals). We followed that by asking about each person’s own experiences. Specifically, when we asked how adult children should treat their elderly parents, a consensus emerged: they should encourage them to eat and drink, refrain from asking them to do work they are physically incapable of doing, speak to them respectfully and in a soft voice, and give them pocket money. When we followed by asking if their own children treat them that way, mixed reactions ranged from poignant stories of loving care to a few heart-rending narratives of neglect or abuse. It became clear that conflicts arose when cultural expectations were not met.

For example, although pocket money may seem trivial, it is essential for successful aging in rural Tibet because it allows elderly people to go on pilgrimage and socialize with peers. By circumambulating temples, reciting mantras, and giving alms to beggars, they generate merit in preparation for death and reincarnation. As one man explained, “It is a rare chance to be human, and I’m old, so it is time to find the correct path toward the next life. [While on pilgrimage] I do rituals and give food to beggars. I am trying to attain a better next life, to be reborn a human.” An important social dimension of these activities is spending time with other elderly

people. As one man put it, “I can meet acquaintances from other villages. We converse, which makes me happy.”

A religious outing requires bus fare, alms for beggars, and cash for tea and lunch. Several people expressed a desire to accompany friends on monastery visits, but their families were too poor to spare the necessary pocket money. As one woman explained, “After visiting the temples the elderly like to have food in a restaurant. If I went together with others, I would have no money to pay for it. If I remained alone, without a partner, that would be shameful.” In a few cases older people were prohibited from engaging in these activities because their children, who controlled the household’s budget, would not relinquish the required funds.

Not surprisingly, most elderly people consider the maintenance of good relations within the household to be critical for their wellbeing. While probing why members of some households succeed while others fail to sustain positive inter-generation relations, we encountered the term *samlo gochöpa* (*bsam blo go chod pa*). We translate the term as “efficacious mindset” because it is a proactive strategy with the dual goals of creating the opportunity to prepare for death while maintaining harmonious relations within the household. Here is how an elderly householder lama explained the term.

Some old people continue to do a lot of physical work and continue to criticize family members. They are *samlo go machöpa* (“inefficacious mindset,” the opposite of *samlo gochöpa*). Some old people do just the bit of work they can do or are physically able to work but withdraw [from working]. They bear in mind that they will die, so they repeat prayers, spin prayer wheels, and don’t get involved in many family decisions except, for example, if the family wants to do a sinful action like butcher an animal. In that case they may advise against it. That is *samlo gochöpa*.

In this village most elders have difficulty reading scripture, but they all know how to recite common mantras. They can just eat what the young serve them, refrain from criticizing people inside and outside the home, and don’t have to do much labor. That is *samlo gochöpa*. Some elders become physically weak and cannot do labor but continue feeling envy and competition, which causes them to say a lot. People refer to such a person as being *samlo go machöpa*.

Scriptures do not directly refer to [the concept of *samlo gochöpa*]. But scriptures do recommend cleansing karmic obstructions and sinful contaminations and avoiding the ten non-virtues. The ten non-virtues are the opposite of the ten virtues, which are not destroying life, not taking what has not been given, refraining from improper sexual practices, not telling falsehoods, not using abusive language, not slandering others, not indulging in irrelevant talk, not being covetous, not being malicious, and not holding destructive beliefs (Rangjung Yeshe Dictionary <http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/>).

It is difficult for commoners to follow those, but if they can then they are living a life similar to the meaning of *samlo gochöpa*. Old people should know that sins accumulate through certain actions, while virtues accumulate through other actions. Those elderly who are *samlo go machöpa* will experience many sufferings in this life and the next. Corresponding to the sins they have accumulated they will pass through the hot and cold hells. One should be cognizant of that, always keep a pure mind, and try to be *samlo gochöpa*.

Similarly, the abbot of a monastery explained,

In this village some old people just eat their food and do what jobs they can. They mainly spend time repeating mantras and doing circumambulations and prostrations. They do not get involved much in managing family issues, but spend more time doing religious activities. But others cannot follow that. They are already old enough; it is their retirement time. Their children respect and serve them as is their duty. Although they should spend more time in religious activities, they are still greedy. They can't help but pick up small pieces of wood for fuel and carry them home when it would be more meaningful if they spent that time practicing religion. Those elderly who collect small pieces of wood are always criticizing their children and pushing them to work harder. Through that they lose the love between parents and children. When the love is lost, then the respect from the children is lost. When people are getting old, it is time for them to give more duties or power to the younger ones and trust them to do well. Old people should withdraw from management of the household and practice more religion. Those who do so are samlo gochöpa.

When we asked lay people about what it means to be samlo gochöpa, they typically framed their explanations around household duties and relationships. For example,

Samlo gochöpa is when the elderly don't get involved in household issues, but just eat the food they are given, control their mouths, don't scold anybody, do circumambulations and pray. If one does like that, people say he is samlo gochöpa. He who is samlo go machöpa cannot control his mouth. He is incapable of working, but still bosses his children around.

Another opined,

Samlo gochöpa is sort of a psychological issue. Some old people recognize that they are old. All the work they do and advice they give is in accordance with their age and health condition. Others don't recognize that they are old. They are incapable of working but continue to imagine they are young and capable. Because of that they want to do all the jobs they did when young. That can cause difficulties.

One elderly woman explained, "If old people criticize or scold the young people it is samlo go machöpa. My husband is that kind. He is incapable of working; he can't do anything. But he keeps giving orders. I tell him, 'Keep quiet, you are incapable. You'll annoy the younger ones.'"

Although most people concur about the meaning and importance of samlo gochöpa, some are incapable or unwilling to act in such a manner – especially during a time of economic opportunity. As one elderly man observed,

The nation has stimulated people to compete with each other. This makes some people envious. If you are samlo gochöpa, then you should think that what you have now is enough. If your children can maintain the household's condition, then you should be satisfied. Other people, like me, are not like that. If a neighbor has a truck, I think we should have one also. In this way the elderly demand too much of the younger generation.

Another man appeared at first glance to be adhering to samlo gochöpa principles when he stated, "I'm incapable of doing a lot, so I just take care of the animals in the yard. The rest of the time I spend in the prayer room practicing religion." But when we probed, "Are you acting in a samlo gochöpa manner?", he responded,

I'm completely samlo go machöpa because I'm involved in household decisions. Until now I've been working to improve the household, and I hope our condition will continue to



improve. I hope we get better than our neighbors. Therefore, I must say a lot to other household members. Other elders in the village are *samlo gochöpa*. They do circumambulations at Tashilhunpo [a large monastery nearby], go on pilgrimage, and don't get involved in family issues. When we three elders [he, his brother, and their common wife] talk, we encourage each other to be *samlo gochöpa*. But sometimes I can't control myself. When I see something wrong, I need to criticize my son. My wife says, “You just scolded your son. It is his job, he should decide. You don't need to worry about it. You should be more *samlo gochöpa*.” Now I'm trying to be more *samlo gochöpa*, but it's difficult to stop being *samlo go machöpa*. These days we have a chance to improve our household, and I know how to do it. I want to advise my son, but he doesn't listen. I have only thoughts that I cannot act upon, so I am *samlo go machöpa*.

One man even disagrees that *samlo gochöpa* is the best course of action in old age. He argued,

In this village people define *samlo gochöpa* as a person who doesn't take any responsibility for the household. He is clear minded about not getting involved in household issues. He just tries to find happiness. We say that such a person is *samlo gochöpa*. Some elderly still take responsibility, so people say, “He is *samlo go machöpa*; he is suffering.” But I think that if you don't care for your household, it's probably not right to say that you are *samlo gochöpa*. That's not the correct way to live.

*Samlo gochöpa* represents a way of thinking and acting according to one's stage in the life cycle and status in the household. Adopting an efficacious mindset is a way to maintain relationships with household members one must depend on for support in old age and a rationale for diverting time and energy away from worldly affairs so one can concentrate on end of life preparations. To be *samlo gochöpa* is to withdraw from household decision-making, refrain from criticizing the work and management decisions of others, and engage in more religious than worldly activities. *Samlo gochöpa* is therefore associated with a Tibetan vision of successful aging when success includes the ability to devote time to cleansing sins and generating merit in preparation for future lives. That ability is dependent on familial support and is therefore best achieved by maintaining harmonious relationships within the household.

## A Spatial Ontology

Nubri is a Buddhist enclave in the highlands of Nepal. In writing about the impacts that educational outmigration is having on Nubri society, we were struck by the incongruity of Lee and Reher's assessment that the demographic transition (from high to low fertility and mortality) brings about “the invention of retirement as the third stage of life” (2011, p. 1). Perhaps this is true in many of the economically advanced nations that were first to experience the demographic transition. But in Nubri, rapid population changes are exerting the opposite effect; the demographic transition is threatening the ability of the elderly to retire in a culturally appropriate manner.

Like the first example from rural Tibet, people in Nubri envision old age as a time that should be spent preparing for death and reincarnation through prayer and contemplation. The gradual diminishing of worldly engagement is even institutionalized in the village tax system. A few years after passing the *kyimdag* (head of household) position to one's son, an elderly couple shifts to a smaller, independent residence. The son assumes his father's *drongchen* (*grong chen*; large household) taxation status while the father's tax obligation is halved because he is relegated to *porang morang* (*pho hrang mo hrang*; solitary male and female) status. Should he live to age 70, he is relieved from all tax obligations. The reduction of tax requirements is a structural means to afford the elderly more time for religious practice. According to a lama from Nubri,

The elderly must spend their time in prayer because by doing work in the village [while younger] they committed a lot of sin. While doing agricultural work, like plowing, you kill a lot of insects. When your wife gives birth, you want meat, so you kill a chicken – that is sinful. All this work is filled with sin. Most elderly people can't do many religious practices because they don't know how [i.e., illiterate or untrained]. But if you repeat mantras, the lamas say you have a religious mind. It is equivalent to receiving oral teachings from a lama. If you are able to repeat mantras, then for future lives you can reduce the negative impacts of your earlier sins. After death things will be better.

Nubri's residents distinguish between *jigtenpey yul* (*'jig rten pa'i yul*; the Realm of Worldly Sufferers) and *chöpey yul* (*mchod pa'i yul*; the Realm of Religious Practitioners). The latter is usually a temple complex physically separated from the village where special religious laws prohibit sinful activities. Oong is one such Realm of Religious Practitioners, a settlement perched high above the village of Trok where temples owned by married lamas sit alongside small houses where elderly retirees can dedicate their waning days to spiritual endeavors. One man in his early 60s who still lives in the village explained Oong's role in the retirement process.

In the past some people built their own homes in Oong where they could recite mantras, while others rented houses there. According to the village regulations a son and his wife get [through inheritance] the agricultural land and plant the crops. Then the mother and father stay in Oong to recite mantras. The only work they would do is fetching wood and water and grinding barley into *tsampa* [roasted barley flour] with help from their sons. The elderly did not plant fields other than the garlic and onions they planted at Oong. They didn't go out to work; they stayed home and recited mantras. That was our old custom.

A man in his 50s who spent much of his youth at Oong in the service of his lama recalls what the settlement was like 30 years ago.

In the past many lamas lived in Oong, it was a place of many blessings. People would not quarrel. It was a place to meditate and recite mantras; one's thoughts would become free. It was a place of blessings, where one's inherent nature came forth. People would do religious practices and would not even see worldly work. Religious thoughts would arise spontaneously. If you think about it, it was very good back then. People would even provide food for the wild animals. In those days there were many elderly people, many houses, many people reciting mantras, and many lamas staying in retreat.



Bear in mind that there is diversity in every society, so not everyone followed the ideal pathway in those days. When an elderly retiree passed away unexpectedly in the 1990s, a Buddhist lama remarked that the deceased man misspent his waning years because he refused to disengage from economic activities. He did not properly prepare for death, an event which can come unexpectedly at any time. The lama’s assessment reflects Buddhist viewpoints on mindfulness of death (Lopez, 1997; Sogyal Rinpoche, 1993), advice from luminaries including Tsongkhapa and Tibet’s Seventh and Thirteenth Dalai Lamas that one must not delay religious practice because the timing of death is unpredictable (Lopez, 1997; Mullin, 1998a, 1998b), and a poignant entreaty to commence diligent religious practice before growing too old as expressed in Lama Gungtang Konchok Dronme’s (1762–1823) *Conversation with an Old Man* (Mullin, 1998c).

The man who gave the above recollection of Oong 30 years ago also provided a reminder that not everyone could retire in the ideal manner. He said,

When I was young most elderly people did not do agricultural work, I did not see much of that. A good son would make *tsampa* and send it to his parents every month. Most elderly people had enough food and drink so they could recite mantras at Oong. But for poor people, food was a problem. If they stayed at Oong they wouldn’t get food from others, they would have to provide for themselves. Staying there to recite mantras was a bit difficult for them. The elderly people who did agricultural work were the ones without children or relatives. They didn’t have an opportunity to do something else. Without doing agricultural work they would have nothing to eat. They would have to work until death; they were unable to practice religion. It was difficult for them.

For example, my mother never stayed at Oong. She struggled a lot. My father died when I was young. My mother took on a lot of debt and was unable to procure food and drink. We only ate twice a day; we were poor. She had many children, so I didn’t stay at home. I would stay at Oong for a month or two to work. Later I became a monk in Kathmandu. As I grew older, I felt my mother should practice religion, she should recite mantras, do circumambulations, and give up working. She died at age seventy-seven in the village.

To summarize, the ideal process of aging in Nubri involves a belief that reincarnation is influenced by the tally of positive and negative actions, a gradual cessation of subsistence activities so one can devote time and energy to religious practices that positively affect future rebirths, a place of residence removed from the bustle of village life so one can concentrate on religious practices, and caretakers who can provide the types of support, like food and physical assistance, that enables withdrawal from village life.

Today Oong is nearly deserted. Many elderly people, even some who are categorically infirm, are working in the fields during peak agricultural seasons. Under normal circumstances old folks working the fields rather than practicing religion would be inexplicable, a direct contradiction of the ideal way to spend the twilight years. But circumstances are far from normal; educational migration has diminished household labor forces to the extent that providing for the elderly in a retirement home is now unfeasible for even those who are not poor. One man nearing retirement age explained,

These days so many children have gone away for education; some have gone to learn religion in India, some have gone to schools in [Kathmandu], a few have gone abroad. Those

who go abroad can send money to their parents, so they have things to eat and drink. Those who study religion aren't in a position to help, and for those who go to school parents have to find fees. They don't send money up here; parents have to send money down there. These are the types of difficulties we face. Some elderly people are able to find someone to plant their fields, so they can get some grain which they can grind into tsampa. It is very difficult for those who can't find someone to plant their fields. In order to plant the fields, first you must carry loads of fertilizer [from the animal pen beneath the house to the fields], second you must plow and plant the seeds, third you must weed, then fourth you must harvest. It is very difficult for the elderly who have a desire to recite mantras but cannot find someone to plant their fields. If they can't find someone to plant their fields then they have nothing to eat. That gives them problems.

These days even when one gives the inheritance to a son, he often doesn't plant the fields because he knows different languages and how to write [i.e., he has secular education]. Some sons have salaried jobs, build hotels, or do all sorts of business. Parents have a problem. What to do if your son doesn't plant the fields? We don't know how to write or speak other languages. We only know how to plant fields and eat the food. This is causing us suffering.

Nowadays, many elderly people cannot realize a retirement dedicated to prayer and contemplation. The dearth of younger, economically productive community members diminishes the surplus labor required to support retirees. As a result, elderly people have no choice but to continue working well past their prime. Rather than the demographic transition leading to "the invention of retirement as the third stage of life" (Lee & Reher, 2011), population trends in Nubri impede the capacity for many people to grow old in a manner that represents successful aging according to their own cultural standards. Ironically, the ability to retire is being undermined by developments that are generally associated with societal modernization and progress – education and rural to urban migration.

## Successful Aging, Tibetan Style

The two examples show similarities and differences in how Tibetans approach aging. In both settings the relationship between future lives and volitional conduct encourages elderly Tibetans to mitigate consequences of past actions by generating merit through prayer and pilgrimage. In both cases family issues can help or hinder one's ability to transition toward a retirement dedicated to religious activities, but in different ways. The elders in Central Tibet reside with one or more adult sons (or a daughter if they have no sons) and a daughter-in-law, a living arrangement that requires careful management of interpersonal relationships. Acting in a samlo gochöpa manner does not guarantee successful aging because a household's economic stability and other factors also play roles. Nevertheless, it is a strategy many elders invoke because they see it as a means to dedicate time to end of life preparations while living in a multigenerational household. Old folks in Nubri, on the other hand, aspire to live apart from their adult children in a locale like Oong. Nevertheless, they also depend on younger, more productive members of the family to provide support. In their case the greatest impediment to successful aging is not

intra-household friction, but educational migration that is depleting the robust household labor force they need to cease farming activities and move to the Realm of Religious Practitioners.

These examples present an opportunity to reflect on the suitability of deploying the successful aging paradigm in non-Western settings. One problem identified in a review of successful aging is that, “There is no consensus about whether successful aging should be defined objectively by others or subjectively by older adults themselves” (Depp & Jeste, 2006, p. 7). Social scientists following the lead of the paradigm’s genitors, Rowe and Kahn, tend to fall into the former camp yet fail to agree on operational definitions of the most common measures such as disability, cognitive functioning, life satisfaction, and social engagement (Depp & Jeste, 2006, pp. 10–11). To complicate matters, any attempt to define successful aging objectively must assume that a measure like disability can be operationalized in a culturally neutral manner that isolates it from confounding variables. By doing so one risks deploying the measure in a way that generates misleading conclusions. For example, as an objective reality an elderly person either can or cannot walk without assistance. Thus, if a dimension of disability is operationalized as “the inability to walk without assistance,” then an elderly Tibetan person who cannot walk without assistance has aged less successfully than one who still can. But consider the following hypothetical comparison. One man cannot walk but his family has the means to house him in the family’s altar room and provide him with meals and other care-taking support. The disability does not disrupt his capacity to recite prayers in preparation for death, a key end-of-life activity. Another man can walk but lives in a poor household that still requires his labor, so he spends his days toiling in the fields. From a Tibetan cultural perspective, is it reasonable to conclude that the former has aged less successfully than the latter?

We concur with Lamb and colleagues that it is better to research the aging process through an emic lens, something Goldstein and Beall foreshadowed years ago by criticizing the exclusive use of etic (i.e., objective) measures such as health, economic productivity, physical activity, and social engagement to assess aging outcomes because it downplays elderly people’s subjective assessment of their circumstances (1982). Lamb and colleagues justify the emic approach by identifying several cultural-historical values embedded in the successful aging paradigm that do not hold up well to cross-cultural scrutiny. We deal with three of these below, namely, “individual agency and control,” “the value of maintaining independence and avoiding dependence,” and “a vision of permanent personhood or not aging at all, while pursuing goals of agelessness and avoiding oldness” (Lamb et al., 2017, p. 7).

The first value, individual agency and control, cannot be assessed independently from socioeconomic factors and household dynamics. This is clear in the Tibet example where a few elderly men admitted that their desire to push the family’s upward mobility overrides their inclination to adopt a *samlo gochöpa* mindset. They chose to go against the culturally resonant model of aging and engage in the pursuit of prosperity during a time of economic growth. But even those who strive to be *samlo gochöpa* are not necessarily able to participate in age-appropriate activities

like pilgrimage because, as discussed above, they are dependent on the goodwill or good fortune of younger household members for pocket money. The Nubri example also illustrates the importance of economic factors in facilitating retirement to Oong. Some people were too poor to spend their waning years in the Realm of Religious Practitioners even at a previous time when the place was populated by a vibrant mixture of lamas and pious retirees. Nowadays, even the relatively wealthy cannot retire to Oong. If they did, there would be nobody to plant the fields and harvest the very crops they depend on to withdraw from worldly activities.

The second value, avoiding dependence on others, is a goal that varies cross-culturally. Maintaining a very high level of independence is desirable in some societies like the US where there is an entire industry dedicated to “independent living,” in part because many people do not want to become a burden on their children. In the Tibet research many elderly people also expressed a desire to avoid saddling their children with hardships. For example, one woman said, “I want to die while I can still take care of myself. I don’t want to be a burden to my step-daughter.” Another said, “If I cannot take care of myself, and cannot even control my bladder, then it will make big problems for me and my children. I will become a burden on the household and my children will lose their patience with me. I wish to die before that time.” A third explained, “I do not pray for a long life, but a life that is healthy and sufficiently long. If I have a long life but cannot care for myself, if my children need to dress me and provide nursing care for me, then I will be a big burden for them.” Although Tibetan elders concur with their US counterparts that they do not want to encumber their children with onerous caretaking responsibilities, segregating themselves from family members by moving into residential units where paid staff provide caretaking services is not a desirable option. In some Tibetan communities, homes for the elderly are disparaged because they imply a lack of familial support (Choedup, 2018). Living apart from family also contravenes an implicit inter-generational contract whereby caring for aging parents is expected and respected. In response to the Tibetan proverb, “After crossing the river, don’t forget the bridge. After gaining maturity, don’t forget your parents,” an elderly man from Nubri explained, “It is a disgrace to the entire community when [adult] children don’t help their [elderly] parents. We scold such individuals by saying, ‘Your parents helped you when you were too young to urinate or defecate on your own. Now your parents need help, and you cannot even give them a bit of food? Have you no shame?’” (Childs, 2004 p. 132). Even the concept of *samlo gochöpa* is inseparable from dependency that comes with intergenerational living. The efficacious mindset is geared toward ensuring harmonious relationships within the household so that the elderly can obtain the support they need to prepare for death and rebirth. On those occasions where it does not work out, parents form households apart from their adult children and express remorse that they must fare for themselves or depend on more distant relatives for support.

Finally, the value of “ageless permanent personhood” would strike a Tibetan as quite odd. In the US, a plethora of websites and popular literature promote notions such as “feeling young forever” through various anti-aging tips. Such advice may resonate among a US readership, but most Tibetan Buddhists accept that life is

transient, a philosophy promulgated through the Buddhist concepts of impermanence (*mi rtag pa nyid*) and cyclical existence (*srid pa'i khor lo*). Being mindful that death is inevitable and cognizant that future births are shaped by actions in this lifetime is precisely why so many Tibetan elders dedicate their waning years to religious practice. Although Tibetans regularly partake in various life prolonging rituals (Gerke, 2012a, 2012b), preventing a premature death is a very different objective from attempting to forestall the aging process.

The examples presented in this paper demonstrate that it is possible to outline some emic understandings of what constitutes successful aging in Tibetan societies, albeit one is bound to encounter some variation even within a single cultural area. The point here is not to suggest that the successful aging edifice is in danger of collapsing or should be nudged toward extinction. It certainly remains useful for assessing the aging process providing one accepts it as a flexible tool rather than a universal template. If successful aging is to be deployed cross-culturally, then it is best to adopt an inductive approach that builds hypotheses from observations rather than a deductive approach that is less capable of appreciating the diversity of approaches to aging found across human societies.

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