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To cite this article: Shu Zhu & Joanna K. Elfving-Hwang (05 Feb 2024): “My wife made me”: motivations for body and beauty work among older Korean and Chinese migrant adults in Australia, *Journal of Women & Aging*, DOI: [10.1080/08952841.2024.2307180](https://doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2024.2307180)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2024.2307180>



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Published online: 05 Feb 2024.



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“My wife made me”: motivations for body and beauty work among older Korean and Chinese migrant adults in Australia

Shu Zhu^a and Joanna K. Elfving-Hwang^b

^aSchool of Human Sciences, The University of Western Australia, Crawley, Western Australia, Australia;

^bKorea Research Centre of Western Australia, School of Media Creative Arts and Social Inquiry, Curtin University, Bentley, Western Australia, Australia

ABSTRACT



This article examines how older Korean and Chinese migrants living in Perth, Australia, engage in various beauty, grooming and fitness practices to negotiate “successful ageing” in transnational contexts. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 30 men and women aged between 60 and 89, we examine what social meanings are attached to these practices, and how the transnational context of living in Australia has influenced the participants’ perceptions of ageing and presentation of self in later life. Migration in later life is often considered in relation to the ‘host’ countries values and social practices, which can make it difficult for individuals to settle and feel a sense of belonging especially in later life. In this article, we will illustrate how gender, class, and cultural dispositions intersect and link with possibilities for defining and redefining successful ageing in migrant contexts. This study illustrates how successful ageing emerges as a malleable concept that draws on ideas of an ideal ageing body from the cultural values of the ‘home’ country, rather than the ‘host’ country. The findings illustrate how in everyday lived experience, the transnational habitus does not always necessarily result in a ‘divided habitus’ where the values of the ‘home’ country and that of the ‘host’ country are in conflict – even when the migration experience is relatively recent. Quite the contrary, the way the participants utilise everyday beauty, fitness and grooming practices to maintain a future-focused self in the context of ‘home’ country’s age-appropriate body ideals to perform signifiers of ‘successful migrant living’ point to the positive aspects that appearance management can have on an individual in later life, particularly in migrant contexts.

KEYWORDS

ageing; body work; embodiment; migration; successful ageing

Introduction

In recent years, a growing number of studies have examined older adults’ perceptions and experiences of ageing appearance and anti-ageing or beauty practices in Western countries such as the US, Canada and Europe (Hurd-Clarke & Lefkovich, 2018; Ojala et al., 2016; Rahbari & De Blaere, 2020). However, literature on this aspect of older Asian migrants’ experience after having settled in Western countries is less examined. To date, most studies focusing on the ageing experiences of older migrants in Western countries have focused on topics such as social

CONTACT Shu Zhu  shuzhuxx6368@gmail.com  School of Human Sciences, The University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley 6009, Western Australia, Australia.

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connectedness (Tran et al., 2022), social support (Burholt et al., 2018), mobility and migration (Buffel, 2017; Zontini, 2014) and transnational care (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Sadarangani & Jun, 2015). Given that in almost all Western industrial societies migration and ageing are considered as two of the most pressing social and economic issues for governments to tackle, both scholars and policy makers have been keen to understand how migrant communities can work alongside service providers to support successful ageing and healthy living (Repetti et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2022). It is within this context that the everyday social lives of older migrants emerge as an important area of inquiry, especially as positively utilising everyday beauty and fitness practices can play an important role in building inclusive and age-friendly communities in multicultural societies such as Australia.

A number of studies have suggested that physical appearance and maintaining a positive connection with the ageing body is central to how people experience the process of ageing itself (Hurd-Clarke, 2010; Hurd-Clarke & Griffin, 2008; Hurd-Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011). Even in later life, aspiring for a youthful, trim, healthy and attractive body is typically seen as evidence of taking responsibility for one's body as it ages, as well as displaying ability to take control of the 'unruly' physical aspects of ageing. Conversely, appearing overweight and unkempt can be interpreted as lack of self-control or even moral laxity as the individual is seen to 'let go' and thus become a potential burden of care to others (Featherstone, 1982, 2010; Slevin, 2010). The ageist ideologies and attitudes that construct ageing bodies as 'lacking' or 'out of control' typically treat the process of growing old as a preventable disease that needs to be controlled, contained and resisted rather than accepted (Brooks, 2010; Furman, 1997; Tulle, 2015). Consequently, a successfully ageing body is typically understood as a body that is successful in resisting the physical aspects of ageing as long as possible.

Within this context, managing appearances through beauty and fitness has been understood as central to successful ageing, and resisting the visible signs of ageing as a moral imperative (Bordo, 2003; Slevin, 2010). In many Western societies such as the US, Australia, the UK and Europe, individual responsibility and personal control to resist ageing through self-improvement regimens such as diet, beauty management and exercise is taken for granted (Laliberte Rudman, 2006, 2015; Pack et al., 2019; Slevin, 2010). As a result, visible signs of ageing can lead to incidences of ageism and social exclusion as they are seen to signal lack of effort (Holstein, 2015; Hurd-Clarke & Bennett, 2015; Hurd-Clarke & Griffin, 2008). Despite a general perception outside Asia that older people in Asian societies are venerated because of their age, maintaining neat and presentable appearances in old age is also considered important in Asian countries such as South Korea (hereafter, Korea) and China. In Korea, presenting an attractive or pleasant appearance goes beyond individual vanity, and is closely associated with displaying social status, social etiquette, concern for others, and even cosmopolitan modernity (Elfving-Hwang, 2016; Elfving-Hwang, 2021; Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012). In China, the rapid development of the beauty industries and consumer capitalism in the post-Mao era was largely dependent on female consumers, and thus various technologies of beauty have been marketed as the "economic multipliers and guarantors of success and freedom" (Yang, 2011, p. 352). In this sense, the development of contemporary beauty cultures in China has also developed as a marker of cosmopolitanism and wealth. Given the centrality of appearance as a signifier of successful ageing in China and Korea because of its links to wealth and status, the experiences of how older migrants from China and Korea negotiate appearances and ageing in a Western cultural context such as Australia provide important insights into how the transnational context affects individuals who migrate into a new sociocultural setting that may not always be welcoming of them. As Asian-Australians have increasingly become a target of negative identity politics in Australia in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic, migration scholars have recently called for "mobilities researchers [to] engage[s] sensitively with traditions outside the Anglo-Euro mobilities cannon to destabilise and pluralise these now-hegemonic ways of thinking about mobilities" (Bissell et al., 2023, p. 16). It is within

this context that this article seeks to shed light on the multiple ways in which gender, class and cultural backgrounds intersect with definitions of successful ageing among older Chinese and Korean migrants in Australia.

Considering the importance of everyday lives and appearance management among older Asian migrant in Australia is also important because of the significant increase in the numbers of older migrants settling in Australia. The 2016 Census of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported that 1.2 million older Australians were born overseas, representing over one-third (37%) of all Australians aged 65 and over (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2017; Australian Institute of Health & Welfare [AIHW], 2023). Among those who were born overseas, the Asian-born proportion of the older population overall is projected to increase from 6 per cent in 2016 to 19 per cent in 2056 (Wilson et al., 2022). A recent study by Wilson et al. also projects that the most substantial growth in the over-65 population will occur among the Asian-born population (Wilson et al., 2020). In 2016, both China and Korea were among Australia's top 20 countries of birth by state and territory (Table 1) (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022b). Moreover, Western Australia ranked first place in Australia's Percentage of Overseas-born Population—State and Territory, 2016 (Table 2) (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022a). This article thus makes an important contribution to existing literature on ageing and migration through focusing

Table 1. Australia's top 20 countries of birth—2021.

Ranking	State
1	England
2	India
3	China
4	New Zealand
5	Philippines
6	Vietnam
7	South Africa
8	Malaysia
9	Italy
10	Sri Lanka
11	Scotland
12	Nepal
13	USA
14	Germany
15	South Korea
16	Hong Kong
17	Greece
18	Iraq
19	Lebanon
20	Pakistan

Source: ABS, Australia's overseas-born population by country of birth—top 20, 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/australias-population-country-birth/latest-release#country-of-birth-state-and-territory>

Table 2. Australia's percentage of overseas-born population—state and territory, 2016.

Ranking	State	Percentage
1	Western Australia	35
2	Victoria	31
3	New South Wales	30
4	The Australian Capital Territory	28
5	South Australia	24
6	Queensland	24
7	The North Territory	23
8	Tasmania	13

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] (2022a), Country of birth – state and territory, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/australias-population-country-birth/latest-release>

on the significance of everyday life experiences of some the most rapidly growing, yet less studied minority groups in Australia.

Methods

Sampling

We recruited 30 participants, consisting of 15 elderly Korean migrants (nine women and six men) and 15 older Chinese migrants (seven women and eight men) living in Perth, Australia, in order to achieve a broad cross section of how cultural background, gender, and class influence individuals' perceptions of successful ageing in transnational contexts. The inclusion criteria required all participants to be at least 60 years old, be of Korean or mainland Chinese origin, and to have been living in Australia for a minimum of five years - the latter criterion being considered a marker of having migrated on a long term basis. Participants with significant cognitive illnesses such as advanced-stage Alzheimer's disease were excluded from the study. We utilised snowball sampling method through personal introductions as the main recruitment method for two reasons. Firstly, both communities are relatively close-knit and not particularly engaged in social media, which made it difficult to recruit through social media or conventional media. Secondly, both communities are 'hard to reach' and often potentially suspicious of researchers external to their community. All the ethnic Chinese participants were recruited from a local community centre with the initial assistance of the Centre, and a Korean assistant with connections to the local Korean community was hired to help recruit the Korean participants. Overall, the Korean participants were on average 66.9 years old, and had lived on average for 32.5 years in Australia (Table 3). The average age of the Chinese participants was 69.9 years old, and their average length of time since migration was 11.4 years (Table 4).

The migration journey of most of the participants centred around their children's choice to move to Australia or a desire to offer better future for their children, rather than having been motivated by a desire to retire overseas. Many of the Chinese participants came to Australia to support their adult children by looking after their grandchildren so that their adult children could concentrate on building successful careers in Australia. Many their children had come to

Table 3. Participant demographics of the Korean Sample (n = 15).

	60–69 years	70–79 years	80–89 years
Male	3	3	0
Female	8	1	0
Length of stay in Australia			
5–9 years	0	0	0
10–19 years	0	0	0
20–29 years	3	1	0
30–39 years	6	2	0
>40 years	2	1	0

Table 4. Participants characteristics of the Chinese sample (n = 15).

	60–69 years	70–79 years	80–89 years
Male	6	1	1
Female	4	3	0
Length of migration			
5–9 years	4	2	0
10–19 years	6	1	0
20–29 years	0	1	1
30–39 years	0	0	0
>40 years	0	0	0

Australia as international students or temporary workers. The migration experiences of the Chinese participants had often been quite challenging as most were from working-class backgrounds and had worked as factory workers, farmers, or ordinary employees prior to migrating to Australia and only one was able to communicate in English. As a result, none felt a sense of belonging in Australia. In contrast, most of the Korean participants came to Australia during the 1980s and 1990s as skilled migrants seeking greater economic opportunity, and also to ensure that their children had access to educational opportunities in Australia's less competitive schooling environment. Many had built successful businesses and were able to communicate in English. Nevertheless, they still considered Korea as their 'home' country, and Australia was seen more as a land of opportunity in which they had succeeded through their own hard work. Because most of their children had been either born in Australia or migrated with their parents in early age, the adult children tended to expect less support with child-rearing than their Chinese counterparts. Similarly to the Chinese participants, the Korean participants also tended to maintain close connection with their families back in Korea, despite the longer length of time lived in Australia.

Design

We adopted the conventional semi-structured qualitative interview method, and the project was approved by the University of Western Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee before the interviews commenced. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed. The participants had the option of conducting the interview in Chinese, Korean or English. While the interviews were conducted by one of the researchers fluent in English, Chinese and proficient in Korean, for the Korean interviews, a Korean-speaking assistant was present to assist with interpreting where required. $N=9$ of the participants chose to conduct the interview in English, $n=6$ in Korean, while all the Chinese participants were interviewed in Chinese by the first author of this study. Most of the questions focused on exploring how the participants understood successful ageing in the context of body and beauty work. The interview questions were designed to allow the participants to explore open-ended questions, and to provide their own definitions of "ageing well" or "successful ageing" in diasporic or transnational contexts, their perceptions and engagement with maintaining pleasant and healthy appearances, the diverse meanings they attached to everyday beauty work, how the context of growing old as a migrant impacted their perceptions of successful ageing, and the role that various technologies of the body played in allowing them to 'design' successful ageing. We also asked the participants to reflect on their own perceived differences between how older people relate to their ageing bodies, beauty practices in Korea, China and Australia in order to solicit narratives that might add to understanding of how their cultural traditions and practices intersected with ideas of successful ageing in primarily Anglo-European Australia.

Data analysis

After collecting all interview data, each interview was transcribed verbatim. A Korean assistant transcribed all Korean interviews to ensure language accuracy. Multiple checks against the original recordings were conducted to make sure nothing was missed, and field notes were also made during and after each interview. All identifying information was removed and pseudonyms used to protect participants' privacy. For this study, all Chinese participants chose a pseudonym with a title 'Mr' or 'Mrs', while the Korean participants chose an English first name pseudonym. Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase guide for thematic analysis provided the framework for data analysis. The trustworthiness of the research process is determined by its use of rich data to support the main arguments, and the credibility of the analysis depends on whether the researcher discusses all relevant results (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017). An audit trail was

used to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of our analysis by employing the rich descriptions in the findings.

In this study we have utilised the concept of ‘transnational habitus’ as a lens to analyse what social and cultural meanings the participants attach to the body and various forms of body work in transnational contexts (Mau, 2010). The idea of transnational habitus draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as a configuration of dispositions, and a structuring structure that internalises the field within which the habitus is located (Bourdieu, 1990). Given that individuals are increasingly geographically mobile, the transnational habitus “implies that, throughout their lives, people are increasingly part of and move within fields that are likely to vary in their degree and mode of transnationalisation (Carlson & Schneickert, 2021, p. 1126). Similarly in analysing the interview data, conceptualising the transnational habitus as series of dispositions was useful because it allowed us “to assume that some dispositions may be more transnationalised than others” (Carlson et al., 2021, p. 1131), including attitudes toward ageing and the body. We will return to this notion later in the analysis section of this article.

Results: Defining successful ageing and ideal appearance in migrant contexts

The participants described a complex attitude towards their ageing appearance and engagement with beauty and fitness practices. In the sections that follows, we have organised our findings into four overarching themes: healthy looks and how the pursuit of health intersects with appearances; gender and the ideal ageing appearance; performing class status; and performing successful migrant status through beauty and grooming practices.

‘Healthy looks’ and how the pursuit of health intersects with desirable appearances

The notion of fitness was a significant theme in the participants’ interviews and nearly all participants saw staying physically functional and healthy as their priority in life, claiming that overall physical health and functionality were more significant than appearance. Alice (60, Korean) described the importance of maintaining good health in later life as follows: “[...] Grey hair is not a problem for me. Appearance is not important to me. But health, mental health and body health are [important to me]”. Unsurprisingly, the use of certain practices such as maintaining a healthy diet, regular exercise, and taking nutritional supplements to maintain physical health reported in other studies (e.g., Bennett et al., 2017) were also important to the participants. All engaged in various health-promoting activities to maintain their health, and a daily health management regime was often the most essential part of their daily routine. For example, Mrs Yu (65, Chinese), who lives with her husband, described her successful hours-long self-care morning routine to relieve her stomach discomfort as follows:

Because of all the ailments brought by ageing, after I wake up in the morning, I lie in bed to do an acupoint massage all over my body. I used to have stomach acid reflux, but I no longer have this issue after keeping the daily habit of massage! So every morning I have to do it by myself.

Managing to control her symptoms through self-care was a great source of satisfaction for Mrs Yu, indicating how investing time and effort in her body afforded her a sense of independence and control over undesirable signs of ageing. Similarly, in describing his everyday morning walk, a 69-year-old man Mr Pan (Chinese) was unable to hide his pride in being able to maintain a regular health and fitness routine:

Every morning I get up at 6 am and take a morning stroll outside. I usually go to the park near my house, and it takes typically 90 minutes to 120 minutes for me to exercise [...]. Our generation needs to have the self-discipline to stay active and healthy.

The theme of self-discipline in order to stay healthy was also echoed by other participants, with emphasis placed on the effort it took to maintain the levels of exercise to stay healthy. Olivia (61, Korean) recounted how she had been disciplined enough to attend the gym two or three times a week. Diet was another commonly mentioned health-promoting activity by the participants, and that too required a great deal of self-discipline and continuous management of eating habits. Unlike Higgs et al. (2009, pp. 696–697) assertion that “normal ageing sets up an imperative for health maintenance behaviour in later life that aims for a prolongation of youthfulness”, the participants did not equate beauty and grooming and attractiveness with a desire to simply look youthful. Instead, they were focused more on ideas of staying in control: “As long as you want to stay healthy, you will take action” (Charlie, 73, Korean). This illustrates how the individual’s personal responsibility was internalised as a fundamental requirement of good citizenship.

Furthermore, the migrant context was the key reason and added further momentum to the necessity to take care of one’s health. However, the participants’ motivations were also highly other-oriented despite the interview questions focusing on the care of self. Some participants were concerned about what they saw as the ‘complicated’ Australian healthcare system, and that “it takes ages to see a specialist.” Mr Su (65) felt that the system compared negatively with the Chinese health care system:

“[...] I think seeing a doctor here is really inconvenient! Really! When we were still in China, it took only five minutes to walk to many hospitals [...] private or public, Chinese medicine hospitals or Western hospitals, all within walking distance. You walk in and register, and you can receive treatment very quickly [...] Here, if you need to see the GP [first]. Let’s say if you want to have a heart check-up, it takes a long wait! Sometimes the waiting time takes up to one year!”

Chung (2020) argues that ageing older migrants are not intrinsically disadvantaged compared with non-migrants but rather that the perceived lack of access to facilities and services in their own language discourages migrants from accessing available services. Similarly, the participants’ responses demonstrate how the lack of confidence in being able to navigate the health system and perceptions of poor levels of care made them hyper-vigilant in managing their bodies to avoid burdening their families with requests of help and support to navigate the complicated health system.

Some mentioned how limited English language skills made them worried that they would not get sufficient care at a nursing home. Comments such as “I might not be able to articulate my needs” or “they do not serve Asian food that suits my appetite” reflected concerns specific to a migrant background. Being healthy and independent was thus seen as a prerequisite for successful ageing as an older migrant, particularly as the alternative meant becoming a burden on their families. Mr Su, who had migrated after his adult children, expressed his concerns as follows:

“[...] we have to maintain health starting from now [...] because we do not want to be a burden for our adult children. They have their careers to work for. So, in the future, if our health deteriorates to the point that we must have someone to take care of us, I will move to a nursing home. So, I need to take action now to either prevent or delay the coming of that day!”

In this sense, loss of physical independence in later life was not seen as a failure at an individual level, but an other-focused concern tinged with fear of impacting their adult children’s ability to succeed in the new country. While most participants acknowledged that the physical changes brought on by ageing were inevitable, they nonetheless felt it was not easy to accept them. For this reason, maintaining a positive attitude toward ageing and future-focus was also seen as a way to counter negative aspects of ageing, including depression. For example, a 68-year-old retired civil servant from China, Mr Niu, while repeatedly noting that “ageing is a natural path that everybody will experience”, also claimed that he did not *feel* that he was old and that this attitude was central to ageing well:

“I feel like I am still a young boy. Not only myself but also my family think [that I am young]. I believe age is only a number, and I respect that number. [...] So, the most important thing is to face yourself, to be positive, [and] not let the ageing body trap your mind. Although we have come a long way in the past and experienced untold hardships, we are all hopeful for the future. So I’m still like a kid!”

In the above quote, Mr Niu relates his perception of ‘ageing well’ to a mindset that is future-focused. His notion of being “like a kid” is juxtaposed with lived experiences of “untold hardship” and suggests not an ‘end’ of a journey, but a beginning of one.

Gender and the ideal appearance in later life

All the participants were somewhat ambivalent about the physical aspects of ageing, and a closer analysis of the participants’ narratives also revealed a gendered and cultural dimension to these attitudes. Most of the older female participants in this research were concerned with what were seen as undesirable physical changes to their appearance such as wrinkles, grey hair, flabby arms, and dull skin tone. Lily (61, Korean) disclosed that she had constantly been reminding herself to apply lipstick before going out since her 50s because “otherwise I look tired, listless and in low spirits.” Likewise, Grace (65, Korean) stated that she is “depressed” about her “body getting fatter and fatter, belly getting bigger and bigger and also becoming flabby”. When talking about her general perception of her ageing body, Mrs Ding (65, Chinese) was ambivalent: “I know [appearance changes] are normal, but sometimes when I look into the mirror, I just feel a sense of loss and regret”. While loss of physical mobility was an area of concern for the female participants, all of them also expressed regret over the loss of youthful appearance. These concerns were also other-focused and related to displaying signifiers of health. For example, some of the female participants recounted how they paid attention to choosing a lipstick colour that would make them look “healthier”. Lily (61, Korean) noted that her preference was for hot pink lipstick because it made her look “energetic”. Similar to the female participants in Elfving-Hwang (2016) study, the female participants often noted that they were concerned that an “unhealthy” appearance might become a source of concern for their families because it might signal to the younger generations that their physical strength too was diminishing.

The older men in our sample were less concerned about whether their appearance would cause their own family members to worry about them and for most their concern was to appear socially powerful to people outside their immediate family. Maintaining physical strength to face future challenges was important for the male participants of this study, and men from both countries emphasised the impact ageing had had on their overall physical performance rather than their aesthetic appearance. However, a muscular body was still seen as ideal in later life. For example, Sam (73, Korean) noted how one particularly older Korean actor embodied his ideal because he “exercises very nicely [*sic*], and his body looks strong and nice. Looks like [...] Mr Korea Bodybuilder. Like a bodybuilder.” Participants also engaged in a variety of appearance-related practices, ranging from everyday beauty practices such as skincare to cosmetic surgical interventions. However, most participants associated an attractive and healthy appearance with overall health and also identified it as a public signifier evidencing self-control. For example, Alex (75, Korean) noted that controlling his weight through a healthy diet and exercise was not only about keeping healthy, but also to “help [to] shape my body and show people that I have self-discipline [...] If you are too fat, it means you are indifferent to yourself!” Alex was keen to emphasise how well he had maintained his physical fitness until a sudden illness (prostate cancer) struck, but that other than that he was “as fit as anyone”. Having had a career as a successful businessman, Alex repeatedly stressed how well he had managed his body until then and expressed irritation toward the inevitability of bodily decline: something that even financial success could not ward off. For him, his physical appearance signified his social and economic position and therefore any decline in his physical appearance or functionality was seen as the loss of such status.

Here body weight that is seen as unhealthy reflects current attitudes in Korea where a trim male body is associated with industriousness and thus being a productive member of society (see also Elfving-Hwang, 2021). Conversely, for Charlie (74, Korean) successful ageing was connected to his sense of responsibility to provide future guidance and life lessons to the next generation even if his physical mobility declined:

“[...] People see me as an old man, but [for] myself, I do not see [myself as an old man]. I still feel this strong duty to teach and educate the young people about the past, and to share our lessons and experiences [...] I am still in that role [of an educator], so still, I am as passionate as young people, and this sense of duty makes me look forward to [the] future”.

Many participants felt that their appearance management was about aligning the ways they felt about their bodies and continuing habitual routine. Sophia (68, Korean) believed that applying makeup and skincare was “necessary” in her life since she had been doing this for many decades and it was therefore part of her daily routine as a woman. During the interview, she was confused as to why others might interpret the act of applying makeup as being in denial of getting old: “[...] I don’t understand. I’ve been doing these practices my whole life. I feel happy about doing them. Why can’t I continue doing them now? Is it because I am old now?”

Contrary to associating beauty practices such as applying makeup with evidence of resisting ageing, she associated this habitual routine with self-care and happiness. Moreover, undertaking certain practices to present a neat appearance was considered a sign of respect to others, particularly by Korean female participants. Julia (67, Korean) was anxious to present a neat, organised, and ordered image when going out:

“[...] I feel uncomfortable when going out without paying attention to what I wear. It is impolite. Imag[in]e if I appear in [...] public with [a] stain on my clothes, or dirt on my face... [it is] too embarrassing to even think about it.”

Like the Korean female participants, many Chinese participants also talked about how engaging with beauty practices to manage their appearance was about conforming to a cultural social etiquette. Mrs Ding (65, Chinese), for example, talked about how inconsiderate and unpleasant it would be to show up with an unkempt appearance because it would cause others to feel awkward. Both Chinese and Korean participants expressed a traditional Confucian-influenced view that a clean and tidy appearance is the signifier of an “orderly” inner self, whereas an unkempt and untidy appearance signifies an unruly inner self (see also Elfving-Hwang, 2017).

Yet, while confirming the importance of an appropriate appearance as important for showing respect to others, the male participants tended to justify their beauty practices engagement as performed in consideration for, or under pressure from, others. Lucas (69, Korean) admitted his enjoyment of grooming practices to look after his appearance but stated that his adherence to a skincare regime was entirely because his wife had ‘ordered’ him to do so: “If I don’t do so, she keeps on gabbling”. Similarly, Mr Xi (69, Chinese) claimed “my grown-up children required me to do it. Otherwise, I would have never thought of doing such things”. By claiming to engage in appearance management because their wives or other family members instructed them to do so, the older men rationalised and justified grooming practices to avoid being thought of as “effeminate”. Thus being ‘told’ to do beauty practices permitted engagement with appearance management in socially acceptable ways. In other words, while both men and women engaged in similar beauty and health techniques, their justifications of why they did so revealed clear gendered differences, even if their motivations were essentially very similar.

Social class, professionalism and body work

Although the older men from both countries sought to distance themselves from being seen as actively concerned about their appearances, they were highly cognisant of how they appeared to

others. However, they drew a clear line between acts that were seen to enhance their outward appearance only, and ones that were seen to enhance their physical abilities and performance. For example, Mr Zhang (65, Chinese) referred to his engagement in table tennis and badminton, but seemed visibly bothered when talking about dyeing his hair:

“[...] not many men do [it] like me. Whenever I dye, they tease me. They do not do this [teasing] on purpose, but they just feel like this is not a common thing to do for us. Every time I have to explain to them that it was my wife and sister [who made me dye my hair].”

Mr Bai (76, Chinese), a retired factory worker, put it in a more direct way: “Men should not be fussed about [aesthetic] appearances.” Older men from higher socioeconomic backgrounds revealed a more nuanced picture of appearance-related practices. George, a 60-year-old Korean man who runs an export company expressed concern that grey hair would make him look “incapable”. What he meant by this was that he was concerned that an unpolished appearance might be taken as evidence of unprofessionalism, which in turn would hurt his business. Alex (75, Korean), who also runs a successful business, noted that “We need to make sure our appearance matches our identity [...] my clothes express my taste, so I carefully pair [sic] my outfit.”

For the female participants, however, looking after appearances assumed a slightly different social meaning even in the context of professional life. Lydia (66, Korean), the owner of a food factory, was concerned about developing new wrinkles too fast: “I know these are natural [...] [but] they make me look like a failure”. Appearance maintenance was therefore seen as particularly important for women from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, as a signifier of self-care and successful ageing. These participants were more concerned about, and willing to allocate resources to, what they saw as a pleasant-looking appearance (Åberg et al., 2020; Slevin, 2010). Conversely, women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to spend on non-essential appearance-related products or treatments. This was quite simply because they had limited access to the resources required by continuous practices to resist signs of ageing, or to present an appearance that signalled a higher socioeconomic status. Although the women were more eager to discuss their personal beauty practices than the men, many remarked how appearance-related practices was a “luxury”, “far [removed] from real life”, and “only for the privileged”. For example, Mrs Gao (70) described how she followed channels on TikTok to learn some DIY beauty tips for older adults, such as making homemade masks and techniques for facial or body massage at home.

Approaching his 70s, Mr Pan (Chinese) described how he kept doing odd paid jobs until a few years previously to provide additional income for his family. To him, a healthy body signified a productive body that was able to work and bring economic benefits to the family. The tendency to view their bodies as a means to an end (Bourdieu, 1984) was reflective of their past histories and personal experiences living and working in China (most of the participants in this social-economic group were Chinese), where the value of productivity and working for the greater national good was valued throughout their working lives. These cultural values which endorse “hard work” and ability to maintain economic independence were combined with a material need in migrant contexts that required many to continue to work until older age and caused worry about potential medical costs. However, participants also acknowledged that beauty was a concern for those who could afford to have the luxury of free time. While those from a higher socioeconomic background were concerned both with being healthy and appearing healthy, health was the dominant primary concern for others. Mr Pan compared himself with his better-off peers by noting:

“[...] Every morning, I urge my wife to do morning exercise with me. I told her that we are not rich people; we are not like those who have nutritionists to manage their diet. We also don't have a personal trainer to teach us how to exercise. So, we must rely on ourselves to be healthy. I urge her to take a morning stroll with me at the park nearby our place.”

For Mr Pan the lack of economic resources thus meant that both he and his wife felt the need to be extra vigilant about making the “right” choices to maintain their health and reduce the risk

of falling ill, and he emphasised the responsibility of each individual to do so. The “duty to age well” in the context of their specific circumstances emerged as the most significant issue, one which was seen to depend on individuals’ willpower and responsibility. Looking good for the sake of looking good, however, was seen as the domain of the wealthy.

Beauty work as a signifier of successful migration

While migrants are often made invisible through the process of migration the participants’ transnational habitus reinforced their perceptions of the social significance of maintaining neat appearances, particularly in relation to forging an identity as a *successful* ageing migrant. When prompted to describe what they perceived as the sociocultural differences in beauty ideals in Australia and their home country, the Chinese and Korean participants were remarkably uniform in their observations of their respective ‘home’ countries, while the results differed quite significantly in relation to what they saw as Australian beauty ideals. The Chinese participants perceived Australian beauty ideals as “more constraining” and “uniform” than those in China, with a view that older Australians are expected to manage their appearance more than their Chinese counterparts. Several Chinese participants described how they were surprised to see older Australians dress up when running errands, noting that “they look fashionable even if they only go to the post office”, and “they care about how they look regardless of their age”. Conversely, Korean participants described how Australian older people appear relatively relaxed about appearance management. This suggests that these two cultures have very different attitudes toward expectations of self-presentation in old age, and that those expectations persist even in the diaspora.

These differences were made even more visible when the participants travelled to their countries of origin for visits. Some of the Chinese participants described how appearing healthy and well-presented became only important when they visited family and friends ‘back home’, because a well-managed appearance was seen as an indicator of successful life in Australia. Similar to the participants in Ong and Braun (2016) study, a healthy and pleasant appearance was seen as a signifier of migration success and therefore an extra effort had to be made before such visits. Similarly, Mrs Yu (65) described herself as an “ordinary factory worker” before migrating to Australia, and yet every time she returns to China for a family visit, she will carefully dress herself up to signal how the migrant experience had helped her to improve her social and economic status:

“[...] One week before my flight, I start intensive skincare regimen. My daughter also helps me in doing makeup as young people know many tricks in doing so. They know what is trendy. The old saying says, ‘return home gloriously (*yi jin huan xiang*)’, so I always wanted to show a good side of me to people when I return. Especially in China, which is developing very fast, older adults are also getting more and more fashionable. I do not want to look less fashionable when compared to my family and old friends back in China.”

While many Chinese participants agreed with her, the Korean participants felt the opposite. Many criticised Korean older adults in Korea as excessive in their engagement with beauty practices, and noted that Korean society has a much stricter appearance management requirement for older adults than in Australia, and which they saw as personally constraining or negative. A 67-year-old Korean female participant talked about her experience of visiting Korea and finding her friend looking unexpectedly youthful:

“[...] She looks [sic] like a young girl! Actually, she is one year older than me! So, I asked her, ‘you are just playing golf, but why do you look like going to a party?’ And she said, ‘Oh, everybody is like this in Korea!’ [...] But I don’t like it that way. I like just the natural way so that everybody is different.”

For this participant then, while the general consensus was that Australian older adults are more relaxed in how they present themselves in public than the Koreans in Korea, for her the

migrant experience was also seen as an empowering one because her Korean-Australian identity allowed her to resist what she saw as excessive or negative forms of beauty maintenance. All other Korean participants agreed with this view. To them, the freedom to *not do* (excessive) beauty functions is a signifier of successful migration that bestowed the social agency to resist beauty discourses required of others in Korea. For many of the participants this was empowering and a way to signify discernible ‘outsidedness’. Olivia (61) for example, remarked proudly that by resisting conforming to beauty ideals in Korea, other Korean people “know that I am from elsewhere” when she is visiting Korea. So while in Australia they felt the need to pay more attention to their appearances than they felt other average non-Korean Australians did in order to conform to the expectations of their Korean community, they also felt that the choice of *not* doing beauty (or doing beauty in less visible ways) when in Korea was agentic because it meant that they were able to resist, or even should resist, common beauty regimes to which they felt their peers and family in Korea had no choice but to submit.

Discussion

The interview data focusing on beauty and body work presented here suggests that notions of successful ageing in diasporic contexts do not simply replicate the beauty and body discourses of the host country nor become beholden to its beauty ideals. While the ageing Asian migrant body is rendered simultaneously both hypervisible and invisible through race and age, using beauty work and the body as a lens to understand how the transnational habitus responds to or acquires new dispositions in relation to the body, ageing and appearances, emerges as a useful way to illustrate how older men and women negotiate everyday aspects of ageing in positive ways. Bourdieu conceptualises the habitus as a set of acquired dispositions, and ‘internalisation of externality’ such as existing social structures within which a person has grown up in (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). While the concept of transnational habitus in the context of migration studies has been used to explain why some migrants feel displaced as the learned set of dispositions seem out of place in the new host country, the findings of this study also suggest that transnationalisation did not necessarily have a negative impact on the participants’ perceptions of ageing. This is because their attitudes toward successful ageing were primarily driven by attitudes toward class and gender learned in the home country, rather than by race (that is, being a minority in Australia).

In fact, the definitions of successful ageing in the mainstream Australian society, which typically focuses on the experiences and ideals of the White (Caucasian) Anglo-European, were markedly irrelevant to the participants. While some observed how White Australians managed their bodies in public, none of the participants expressed a desire to emulate such practices as their main reference point for an ideal ageing body drew from the cultural values learned in China or Korea. The participants lengthy elaborations on fitness and staving off possible health risks through diligent engagement with fitness and health regimes resonated with similar findings of other studies which posit health and fitness in later life as a signifier of individual effort (Crawford, 2006) and the focus on individual responsibility forms a particular relationship with the body, one that posits the ageing body as “at risk” and requiring constant care (Laliberte Rudman, 2015). However, the motivations of these were other-oriented, rather than driven by a sense of pressure to postpone physical aspects of ageing. This was particularly marked in the narratives of the Chinese participants who felt that their main duty as migrant parents was to support their children’s successful integration and settlement in Australia through taking care of the next generation. The diligent focus on health managing practices were thus driven both by lack of trust in the Australian health services which they feared would cause them to become a burden to their adult children, as well inability to support their children and grandchildren through unpaid care labour. This aspect was likely to be more marked with the Chinese participants than the Korean participants because they had shorter period of settlement in Australia, and felt that

their children depended on them to ensure successful settlement. This illustrates how recent settlement in Australia as a migrant from lower socio-economic backgrounds places new older migrants under multiple stresses which may cause them to rely on self-help rather than seek professional medical help when needed.

Successful ageing was defined in diverging ways by both male and female participants, but there appeared to be no significant difference between the gendered ideas of successful ageing between the Chinese and Korean sample groups. Many of the older men described their ideas of ideal masculinity for their age in terms similar to what Connell (2005) observed in the context of Australian hegemonic masculinity, including physical strength and endurance, sexual prowess, control, independence, competence, and economic productivity. This is also in line with what Calasanti and Slevin (2001) observed when they argued that physical appearance bears different social significance for men and women in defining their self-worth, as men are socialised to perceive their body as a “dynamic process where function is of greater consequence than beauty” (Franzoi, 1995, p.417). Similarly for the participants their concerns were primarily centred around the idea of social influence and power both within their in-groups but also outside their immediate family. This demonstrates how Chinese and Korean men’s concerns about ageing are closely related to potential loss of symbolic capital of being the family patriarch. Drawing on the work of Seungsook Moon, Suh (2017) surmised that post-war South Korea has relied heavily on “supposedly traditional practices of patriarchy and gender segregation throughout its postcolonial nation-building process”, leading to the construction of gendered ideals that have stressed men’s roles regarding duty and nation-building, and as the providers for and protectors of their families (p.323). Similarly, in contemporary China, dominant hegemonic masculinity has also been restructured to stress men’s ability to earn money (Liu, 2019).

While the male participants were concerned about maintaining both physical strength and presenting a strong, well-groomed appearance, the extent to which they perceived ageing as a threat to their masculinity was less tied to sexual prowess or actual physical performance, and more to do with anxiety over the perceived loss of social standing signified by the well-groomed and fit body. Thus, the cultural capital that being a patriarch affords older well-to-do men in Korea and China are emphasised rather than diminished in the transnational context. The male participants showed a reciprocal relationship with the process of ageing by emphasising wisdom and experiences associated with older age, particularly in the Chinese and Korean cultural contexts, and their perceived responsibility to pass these on to the next generations. These narratives of future-focused aspects of ageing used to counter some of its less desirable physical impacts through focusing on the positive resources brought about by the ageing process (such as life experiences or even economic capital accumulation from investments) that can contribute to their roles of family protectors and patriarchs. Therefore, while they willingly subjected to their female relatives requests to participate in various forms of grooming and fashion, they simultaneously emphasised how body maintenance was not about succumbing to using ‘feminine’ products or appearance concerns but rather about maintaining the external appearances of hegemonic masculinity and signifiers of wealth and authority.

For the female participants class was an important consideration in the choice to engage in fitness and beauty practices, but in different ways. All were concerned about how signs of ageing made them feel a sense of loss, and this sense these concerns are no different to findings in studies with older women elsewhere (Anderson et al., 2010; Hurd-Clarke, 2018; Hurd-Clarke & Griffin, 2008). In some ways, it is possible to argue that some of the women experienced ageing as loss of social capital through lessening sexual desirability and lack of appeal to the male gaze. For women, this sense of loss is more palpable because maintaining attractive or pleasant appearances was seen as the only remaining aspect of social capital. This was felt more keenly by women who were not in regular contact with their children, or those who felt that their children had become too “Westernised” to conform to Korean or Chinese hierarchical notions of seniority

and respect for old age. An added concern for women was the fear of not being able to continue in supporting adult children with child care and worse, concerns about becoming objects of care themselves and therefore a burden. These considerations are driven by cultural values that position the mother as having responsibility over the corporeal aspects of the family unit, as well as responsibility for the mental wellbeing for the family members. Thus beauty work was not necessarily always seen as resisting ageing, but was also imbued with more other-oriented motivations. While applying makeup was considered as a social practice expected of the female participants in their younger years, discontinuing such practices were seen as a marked departure from previously learnt everyday social practices which might cause concern among the family members or close acquaintances about the state of their health.

Finally, the findings illustrate how beauty practices can be utilised positively as material proof of successful upward social mobility in later life. Selvin (2010) observes how class shapes individuals' ability to engage with the body work required to achieve an ideal body that is both functional and attractive in later life. For the participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, displaying signifiers of wealth through well-groomed appearance was used to signal upward social mobility through transnational migration, whereas the participants with more wealthy socio-economic background the choice *not to* engage with the 'home' country's restrictive beauty practices was presented as a form of cultural capital embodied through the transnational habitus. Particularly in the context of returning home for short visits, the migrant body was seen to have increased in value through displays of cultural capital inscribed on a visually cosmopolitan body. In this sense, while the migrant context was considered challenging in relation to the 'host' country, it also opened up new possibilities for the participants to create new forms of social and cultural capital in later life.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined how older Korean and Chinese migrants in Australia negotiate definitions of successful ageing and attach different social and cultural meanings to their beauty and grooming practices. The particular focus of this research was on the ways in which gender, class, and cultural backgrounds intersect with migration, as seen through the lens of beauty practices to shape the experience of ageing. The findings suggest that migration offers new possibilities for the participants to experience ageing and age-related appearance changes and to negotiate successful ageing in transnational contexts. The findings illustrate how in everyday lived experience, the transnational habitus does not always necessarily result in a 'divided habitus' where the values of the 'home' country and that of the 'host' country are in conflict - even when the migration experience is relatively recent. Quite the contrary, the way in which the participants utilise everyday beauty, fitness and grooming practices to maintain a future-focused self in the context of 'home' country's age-appropriate body ideals to perform signifiers 'successful migrant living' all point to the positive aspects that appearance management can have on an individual in later life. As such this study contributes to the call to "develop an attunement to the distinctiveness of mobilities in [Australia] from multiple starting points" (Bissell et al., 2023, p.10) in ways that do not presuppose a desire to Westernise or to emulate the host-country's values as a reference point. This calls for future research on small qualitative case studies such as this to further understand how older migrant communities negotiate successful ageing in everyday contexts.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all participants in this project, and Miyoung Kim for assisting with organising and transcribing the Korean interviews.

Human research ethics

This project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Western Australia (2019/RA/4/20/6052).

Informed consent statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was funded by the Core University Program for Korean Studies through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and Korean Studies Promotion Service of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2022-OLU-2250005).

Data availability statement

Data are available upon reasonable request by contacting the corresponding author.

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