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The Ontological Turn in Later Life: Reframing Successful Aging in Taiwan

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Abstract

This article examines emerging phenomena of aging among middle-class older adults in Taiwan, reinterpreting “successful” or “active” aging as a process of ontological exploration. These mid-to-late-life adults engage in diverse activities previously unfamiliar to them, ranging from community-based and institutional involvements to inquiries at the experiential and cosmic levels. However, empirical observations reveal that the capacity for such reinvention is constrained by structural barriers and stratified markets. Moreover, as universities adapt to a super-aging society, the potential relaxation of academic standards raises concerns regarding intellectual rigor. These tensions highlight a critical question: will the egalitarian aspiration for ontological exploration be subsumed by established class distinctions, and will market-driven policies risk reinforcing stratification? This study advocates for an epistemological shift—moving beyond mere functional care to actively support the ontological agency of a diverse older population. The quest for social equity requires a “gerontological imagination” that democratizes the right of all older adults to pursue existential meaning in later life.

Keywords: successful aging, ontological turn, third-age education, gerontological imagination, Taiwan

This article examines emergent “elderscapes” among Taiwan’s middle class, characterized by a lifestyle of self-reinvention that challenges entrenched stereotypes of aging. To complement the prevailing “successful” or “active” aging model that overemphasizes productivity and vitality, this study redirects attention to the existential dimension of later life. By viewing aging as a process of navigating various forms of connectivity, I conceptualize this journey as an act of “ontological exploration.”

By the end of 2025, Taiwan officially transitioned into a super-aged society with the proportion of the population aged 65 and over reaching 20.06%.[1] Taiwan is notable for having one of the fastest aging rates globally, taking only approximately seven years (2018–2025) to shift from an “aged society” (where those aged 65 and over exceed 14%) to a “super-aged society” (exceeding 20%). This demographic acceleration is primarily driven by two synergistic factors: a critical decline in the total fertility rate, which has stayed below 0.9 since 2022 and was 0.886 in 2024, and a consistently prolonged life expectancy, which averaged 80.77 years in 2024 (male: 77.42 years; female: 84.30 years).[2]

While macro-level statistics center on the 65-and-over threshold, the social and existential implications of longevity invite a broader life-course vision. Accordingly, this study adopts terms such as “older adults,” individuals in “mid-to-late-life,” and those in “later life” interchangeably to encompass individuals aged 50 and above, thereby capturing the diverse and evolving facets of the aging experience. Furthermore, the research centers on the middle class, a crucial demographic that serves as a pivotal nexus for emergent social trends. Exploring their shifting lifestyles is thus instrumental in understanding broader social phenomena related to aging.

In this shifting demographic landscape, Taiwanese older adults have exercised remarkable ontological agency, reimagining later life through novel activities to seek meaning far beyond mere health preservation or social utility. As history’s longest-lived cohort,

today's older adults are experimenting with new modes of living for an unprecedented post-retirement span, positioning them as pioneers of a "creative later life" for all generations. However, despite timely initiatives from universities, government bodies, and private enterprises, these efforts remain confined to conventional frameworks that fail to embrace a fundamental ontological shift. These institutional approaches continue to reflect established social norms and stratification, driven largely by the market logic of the "silver economy" and productivity-centered or vitality-performing models of aging. Hence, the existential pursuits commonly seen in later life—likely a universal human experience—risk being confined within physical or socioeconomic boundaries rather than transcending them.

Furthermore, in contrast to the emergent pursuits of older adults, aging in Taiwan—as in many global contexts—is still often characterized by negative stereotypes. The aging process is pathologized, with physical decline and chronic illnesses construed as the defining features of this life stage. Consequently, the medical, financial, and human resources required for care have become the primary focus of social concern and government policy. Aging populations are thus framed as a socioeconomic burden, a sentiment reflected in public discourse, such as the heated debates over pension reform and its implications for intergenerational inequality.[3]

Such discourse on generational justice has, in turn, occasionally incited intergenerational conflict as a phenomenon manifested in everyday life. For example, Taiwan has traditionally maintained a culture of yielding priority seats to the elderly on public transportation. In recent years, however, reported conflicts have emerged where older adults demand that young individuals vacate priority seats, sparking heated debates on social media. Commentators have suggested that these disputes are merely the tip of the iceberg, reflecting deeper generational distrust, as young people project their frustrations over economic pressure and resource allocation onto the struggle for a seat in Taiwan's rapidly aging society.[4]

While the prevailing discourse on aging often views older adults as a "social burden"—even if such portrayals carry some empirical weight—it offers a reductionist lens on the human life course. Older generations provide the essential material and institutional scaffolding upon which the success of younger generations is constructed. To categorize older adults mainly as a demographic burden is, therefore, not only an injustice—one that discounts the complexity of intergenerational reciprocity—but also a profound failure of the gerontological imagination for society as a whole.

Embracing the inherent complexity of aging demands a gerontological imagination that integrates objective and subjective understanding of older adults by various disciplines.[5] Nevertheless, the dominant conceptual frameworks for international and local policies are influenced by the model of "successful aging," traditionally defined by the maintenance of physical and cognitive functioning and an active engagement with life, ideally in the absence of major disease.[6] Another similar concept, "active aging," also emphasizes continuing opportunities for health, participation, and security.[7] These concepts are often used interchangeably with "healthy" or "productive" aging.[8] While the term "successful aging" has engendered various definitions in academic literature, its usage typically centers on vitality and productivity, with a preponderant emphasis on the preservation of functional capacity.[9]

This framework is criticized for reductively conceptualizing "success" as a static outcome rather than a dynamic, ongoing process.[10] Critical gerontologists argue that prevailing models are framed through a biomedical and neoliberal lens that prioritizes vigor and productivity, thereby marginalizing those who cannot meet these normative standards.[11] Consequently, older adults with health deficits are potentially precluded from achieving any recognized form of "success."[12] Furthermore, although researchers such as Bowling and Dieppe have incorporated psychosocial elements, mainstream discourse still neglects the multifaceted nature of aging—particularly

its existential engagement.[13] As scholars like Crowther et al. have noted, for instance, spirituality remains a "forgotten factor" in the successful aging paradigm.[14]

While health remains vital, physical decline does not inherently preclude existential fulfillment or a subjective sense of "success."[15] In the aging trajectory of later life, the primary impetus is often the quest for self-review and reinvention, regardless of physical condition. From this perspective, maintaining health is a welcome byproduct rather than the definitive objective of existence.

Against this backdrop, this study is theoretically grounded in critical and humanist gerontology, emphasizing the existential dimensions of aging that are often overlooked by functionalist concepts. Rather than abandoning these prevailing terms, this study calls for an epistemological shift—one that seeks a more nuanced perspective of later life to transcend traditional policy frameworks and social stereotypes.

Ontological Exploration in Later Life

In my recent observations of mid-to-late-life transitions in Taiwan, I have identified striking commonalities among older adults. Although these individuals may not employ formal philosophical terminology to frame their aging journey as an "ontological exploration," I contend that this concept of existential transformation is indispensable for capturing the essence of this shared phenomenon. My findings resonate with Tornstam's thesis of gerotranscendence, which defines positive aging as a qualitative shift in one's meta-perspective on time and space.[16] This shift facilitates a redefinition of reality—one that transcends the constraints of social discipline and moves beyond the purely functional or materialistic lens that often characterizes earlier life stages.

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Taiwan since 2020, this study argues that the lived experiences of older adults

necessitate a shift from prevailing functional aging models toward a deeper ontological perspective. This approach emerges from extensive fieldwork, interviews, and daily dialogues in diverse social and care settings. The analysis is based on broader observations of a wide demographic of mid-to-late-life adults, as well as on the specific narratives and experiences of approximately twenty key interlocutors. The older adults I encountered in the study range from those nearing or in early retirement (aged 55 to 64) to the formally retired (aged 65 to over 80). Most belong to a broad middle-class stratum, defined here by their access to stable socioeconomic resources—ranging from the relatively affluent to those with previous or current incomes above the national median. This relative socioeconomic security serves as a buffer, enabling a pivot from survival-oriented concerns toward existential exploration. Often, the onset of illness or significant life events catalyzes a confrontation with fundamental questions: "What kind of person have I become?," "Where do I stand?," and "How shall I face the unknown endpoint?" In this way, their daily lives become a site of active ontological exploration.

To them, aging is not merely a stage of decline to be mitigated, but a passage into novel modes of existential connection. I observe that even amidst the challenges of physical decline or chronic illness, their yearning transcends the preservation of physical health. This life stage can unveil emergent existential vistas; they actively seek self-actualization by embracing the "here-and-now," anchoring their lives in both the physical and spiritual realms. The three vignettes that follow offer a glimpse into the ontological explorations unfolding in this aging process.

Case 1: A middle-aged salaried employee and stroke survivor had long adhered to a worldview rooted in scientism, dismissing the humanities and social sciences as secondary to positivist logic. At age 60, she found the courage to dissolve her marriage and embark on a comprehensive restructuring of her

life. This transition precipitated a dramatic reorientation: she began volunteering for a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) focused on prison counseling. Furthermore, setting aside her lifelong skepticism toward the supernatural, she began accepting prayers from friends and integrated spiritual narratives with religious undertones into her nightly routine via smartphone apps. Just before her formal retirement at 65, she enrolled in the Social Science program at the National Open University, majoring in psychology. This academic pursuit serves as a critical pathway for reflecting on her past and exploring new horizons of meaning in later life.

Case 2: A man who had managed diabetes for many years grew up in a rural village in southern Taiwan before pursuing an urban career. Upon retirement, he returned to his hometown to volunteer at a nursing home. During a green therapy activity, he shared a poignant realization: despite his agricultural upbringing, he had never fully engaged his five senses in perceiving the presence of trees. The simple experience of lying on the grass and gazing up at the tree canopy was genuinely novel to him, signaling a shift in meta-perspective from a utilitarian view of nature to an ontological perception of his environment. This practice of intentional connectivity, coupled with the vivid psychosomatic sensations it evoked, unveiled an unexpected existential vista and filled him with wonder at a perspective he had previously overlooked.

Case 3: A man in his mid-70s, a former successful entrepreneur had long maintained a persona defined by rationality, gravity, and strict efficiency. His post-retirement journey into spirituality began tentatively three years ago when he started volunteering at a temple at a friend's invitation. Initially, his involvement was a mere gesture; as a steadfast believer in science, he

> remained skeptical of the supernatural. However, after two years of regular participation at the temple and surviving severe complications from the post-COVID condition, his perspective shifted profoundly. While he remains hesitant to discuss this shift with old friends—a reluctance that reflects the nuances of his changing identity—he has embraced the deity and now shares testimonies of divine power with trusted confidants. As a devoted believer, he has integrated his faith into a broader aesthetic and spiritual lifestyle: crafting and playing the *Guqin* (Chinese zither), performing tea and incense rituals, and practicing *Qigong*. He has even returned to university to study traditional history and culture, subjects he had previously dismissed.

These cases jointly illustrate an emerging lifestyle that stands in marked contrast to the participants' past pursuits. They cultivate novel ways of world-making through the acquisition of new knowledge, engagement in unfamiliar practices, and the contemplation of embodied spiritualities. This newfound connectivity involves re-establishing ties with the self, the surrounding world, and the spiritual realm—whether known or imagined. Regardless of whether the impetus for change arises internally or is triggered by external activities, these experiences add new dimensions to their life trajectories, signaling an ontological turn.

The ontology of aging involves a philosophical inquiry into the nature of "being" that addresses fundamental questions of human existence, meaning, and purpose.[17] Viewed through this lens, ontological exploration emerges as an internal process of meaning-making that empowers older adults to proactively navigate the challenges and opportunities of later life. This perspective enables them to transcend reductive social labels—such as being "retired," "socially unproductive," or a "burden" on welfare systems—and instead redefine their place in a shifting world through reflection on

the temporal and spatial dimensions of existence.

While aging is traditionally discussed in terms of time, it is often simplistically viewed as a linear path divided into discrete stages, such as the period following age 65. In reality, aging is a complex interplay of biological facts and biocultural heterogeneity, shaped by the accumulation and assemblage of experiences over a lifetime without a fixed sequence. Framing aging as an ontological exploration must also incorporate the dimension of space. The contemplation of "being-in-the-world" is a continuous process of infusing meaning, structure, and culture into one's constructed world. This process of "new worlding" within ostensibly familiar environments catalyzes an existential mobility, enabling older adults to shift from passive figures withdrawing from the social sphere to active agents navigating a newly perceived reality.

This intricate trajectory creates a liminal state—wherein the self is imbued with past wisdom yet faces an unfamiliar future—opening a unique threshold for self-review and reinvention. My observations suggest that the temporal and spatial dimensions of being in later life are far from linear or fixed. This complexity is manifested in how older adults respond to new sensations, perceiving time and space as fluid resources that allow them to freely reconfigure cherished habits and experiences from across different life stages. For instance, by reclaiming childhood impulses—such as playing, sitting on the ground, walking barefoot, or stretching and laughing—and by reassembling objects and memories related to positionality and place-making, older adults can gradually shed the social discipline imposed on their bodies and minds since adulthood. This process enables them to reinvent their preferred selves, potentially achieving a sense of life fulfillment.

By synthesizing both temporal and spatial perspectives, aging can be redefined as a journey of ontological exploration. This framework facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the aging process, wherein "ontological well-being" can be conceptualized and researched

as a vital, yet often overlooked, component of successful or active aging.[18]

Emerging "Elderscapes" in Taiwan

To expand upon these observations, I categorize recent activities into three emergent elderscapes in Taiwan. These categories capture a spectrum of engagements, ranging from informal sociality to formal institutional participation, each representing novel experiences for the older adults involved. In doing so, this study acknowledges the structural barriers often highlighted by critics of successful or active aging models; that is, socio-material conditions are crucial in shaping opportunities for ontological exploration. Analyzing the interplay between existential possibilities and structural constraints provides the nuanced perspective necessary to inform future policy development. These three categories of elderscapes comprise: (1) community-based sociality and learning; (2) returning to campus; and (3) the commodification of nature-inspired healing and spirituality.

Community-Based Sociality and Learning

In Taiwan, local governments and civic groups often organize activities tailored to the mid-to-late-life demographic. In recent years, a diverse array of community-based programs—ranging from physical fitness training to horticultural and art therapy—has surged in popularity. These initiatives are typically managed by Borough Chiefs (the most grassroots level of Taiwan's administrative hierarchy) and various non-profits, largely subsidized by the national Long-Term Care 2.0 policy. This support makes the programs highly accessible—typically free of charge or requiring only nominal fees—yet their capacity remains limited.

Beyond public initiatives, the private sector and self-organized groups facilitate fee-based activities, such as excursions where

participants cover costs for transportation and supplies. A prominent trend in Taipei is the rise of organized hiking tours; it is increasingly common to observe groups of older adults, equipped with hiking attire and trekking poles, exploring the city's bordering trails. Other popular pursuits include group dancing, traditional opera, and nature-based engagement. While these active endeavors are typically self-funded, local networks also provide access to sedentary activities, such as lectures and exhibitions, which are often free.

Regarding mobilization, participants are usually recruited via social media platforms such as Facebook or private messaging apps including Line to circulate information within pre-existing social networks, notably alumni or neighborhood circles. Supported by these robust peer networks, older adults engage in diverse activities that were often inaccessible during their primary working years.

One interviewee, a former high-tech engineer, offered a compelling perspective on his post-retirement journey. He utilizes Taipei's integrated public transit network and the TPASS (monthly pass) to explore the Greater Taipei Metropolis, attending free lectures and visiting museums to immerse himself in the humanities and aesthetics—intellectual fields previously unfamiliar to him. He emphasized that this pursuit is not merely a way to "pass the time," which he noted can easily be done at home. Instead, this deliberate engagement represents the exploration of a "second life." This active lifestyle, he noted, has been immensely motivating, leading to a profound transformation in his mindset and cognitive orientation.

Returning to Campus

Returning to campus represents a burgeoning trend characterized by a renewed intellectual identity among mid-to-late-life adults in Taiwan. This phenomenon is driven by a push-pull dynamic between supply and demand. In recent years, due to steadily declining birth rates, Taiwanese higher education has encountered significant recruitment

challenges. Since 2022, the number of freshmen has fallen below 200,000 and is projected to drop precipitously to 158,000 by 2028. For over 100 universities and colleges competing for this shrinking pool of students, targeting non-traditional enrollment has become an imperative.[19]

In recent years, certain universities have offered opportunities for older learners to pursue long-deferred knowledge within formal, systematic environments. This academic approach distinguishes itself from the lifelong education traditionally provided by community colleges.[20] Since the early 2020s, the integration of older learners into the mainstream higher education system has gained considerable momentum, evolving from a policy initiative into a notable social phenomenon. A prime example is National Tsing Hua University's (NTHU) "Senior Colleges" program, established in 2011. To fulfill their social mandate, NTHU and other national universities offer non-degree programs for retirees, typically administered through centers for continuing education and subsidized by the Ministry of Education (MOE). Over the years, NTHU has refined its program by raising the minimum age to 55 and diversifying its curriculum. In alignment with 2025 MOE policy goals, the university now stipulates that new students must comprise at least half of each intake, with an emphasis on encouraging enrollment among male seniors.[21] These regulations underscore the significant interest in such programs—particularly among women—necessitating policy interventions to ensure balanced enrollment. This gender disparity mirrors international trends in later-life learning, in which women consistently outnumber their male peers despite often facing greater familial barriers to participation.[22]

More recently, some universities have reoriented their regular degree-granting programs toward older adults, particularly within departments facing dwindling enrollment of traditional students. Huafan University, founded by a Buddhist organization, exemplifies this shift. Facing a potential closure crisis, the university leveraged its institutional niche to pioneer an "All-Age University" model, gaining

MOE approval around 2019 to implement independent undergraduate enrollment. The Department of Buddhist Arts became the flagship for this initiative, as its curriculum resonates with the spiritual pursuits common among older learners. By 2024, the average age of freshmen in this department reached 55, with 25% aged 60 and above. Using age 40 as the university-defined "mature-age" benchmark, "mature" students constitute 76% of this specific department and 28% of all undergraduates, university-wide. When all graduate programs are included, learners over age 40 account for nearly half (48%) of the entire student body.[23] This strategic pivot successfully stabilized the university's enrollment rate at nearly 80%, effectively averting the risk of closure.[24]

Unlike undergraduate enrollment, which is centrally regulated for most Taiwanese universities, graduate recruitment offers greater autonomy. This flexibility allows institutions to pilot diverse approaches, such as recommendation-based admissions tailored for older adults. A specialized arts university in southern Taiwan has harnessed this institutional freedom to open its graduate institutes to mid-to-late-life learners. The Ethnomusicology program serves as a representative case. One interviewee, who joined the program in 2024, offered a colorful perspective on the academic atmosphere and the specific experiences of older learners in this setting:

This institute is quite fascinating, with such a large number of people over middle age coming here to study; it's practically "Long-Term Care through Art!". . . The Instrument Making track attracts the most older adults, due to its specialized workshops and equipment. For us, the workshop is essentially a "super-large toy room." . . . One senior student, an emeritus professor of Engineering from another university, retired early to pursue a Master's degree here and is ecstatically happy making stringed instruments. Currently (Fall 2025), out of 32 students in the institute, 11 are over the age of 50, and students in their twenties are less than one-third—the youngest aged 24, and the oldest 71.

The trend of mid-to-late-life adults returning to campus has evolved from a burgeoning phenomenon into an aspirational cultural ethos among the elite and middle classes, as well as a cornerstone of national policy. A compelling indicator of this cultural endorsement appeared in mid-2025, when *Commonwealth Magazine*—a premier news journal influential among Taiwan's entrepreneurs and professionals—featured a cover story titled "Living an Ageless Life."

Recognizing this momentum, the MOE has sought to formalize and support the trend through evolving policy frameworks. While the Ministry's approach initially focused on regulating university enrollment—stipulating in 2024 that no further applications for independent undergraduate recruitment would be permitted beyond Huafan University and two other authorized institutions—it has since adopted a more proactive stance. By early 2025, the MOE launched the "University of the Third Age (U3A) Pilot Program." This initiative aims to leverage higher education resources to "dismantle societal stereotypes of aging and foster intergenerational inclusion," marking the definitive integration of older learners into the mainstream academic system.[25]

The Commodification of Nature-Inspired Healing and Spirituality

The third category of activities embodies the concept of the "silver economy." My research examines the burgeoning market for "healing" and "body-mind-spirit wellness" activities specifically tailored for the mid-to-late-life demographic. These initiatives frequently employ marketing narratives drawn from ecology and cosmology, revolving around evocative terms such as "nature," "greenery," and "all beings." Notably, many practices now marketed as "therapy" or "healing" are secularized adaptations of rituals once associated with religious traditions or clinical interventions for the frail; these have been recently rebranded as lifestyle wellness options for active older adults.

A prime example is the rise of Tibetan singing bowl courses in Taiwan over the past decade. By tapping into a primordial imaginary of Tibet and Buddhism, these courses promote "healing sounds" as an exotic form of vibroacoustic therapy.

The singing bowl exemplifies an invented tradition. While marketed as an ancient spiritual relic, it is, in fact, a modern commercial construct that emerged from the New Age movement. Tibetan studies scholar Robert Barnett notes that the "Tibetan singing bowl" was a product of the 1970s, created by Westerners and traders in Nepal.[26] Religion scholar Candy Brown further argues that traditional Tibetan music and religious literature contain no historical record of such instruments.[27] Fueled by a specific imaginary of Tibet and the rise of spiritual seeking, these bowls gained traction in the West as meditation tools and were even introduced into U.S. public schools to promote mindfulness. However, their perceived religious associations eventually sparked controversy, leading to their prohibition in U.S. schools during the 2010s.[28]

In contrast, the singing bowl—crafted out of Western "Orientalist fantasies"—has recently circulated back to the East, where it resonates deeply with local spiritual traditions. Local marketing, primarily for wellness courses, often employs a syncretic approach, blending disparate concepts such as Tibetan Buddhism and "cosmic consciousness" with Traditional Chinese Medicine theories, including Zang-Fu (visceral systems) and the meridian system. For instance, some practitioners have coined the term "acoustic acupuncture."

Through this synthesis of scientific and spiritual healing narratives, singing bowl practice has gained not only social traction but also validation within the academic community. One instance occurred in 2007, when the National Science Council (now the National Science and Technology Council) funded a research project where psychologists used singing bowls in cancer wards. This initiative was predicated on the presumed correlation between the bowls' acoustic properties and "internal experiential healing."[29] This acceptance

has since permeated graduate institutes specializing in music and alternative therapies, where an increasing number of Master's theses categorize singing bowls as "ancient ritual traditions" or "primordial music therapy media," largely bypassing historical archives and critical reflection.

Interestingly, this assumed history is contradicted not only by the aforementioned American scholars but also by a Tibetan religious authority—a Geshe (a high-level monastic scholar) from South India visiting Taiwan, whom I consulted in the spring of 2025. During our discussion, he expressed confusion regarding the widespread use of these bowls in Taiwan. His testimony further corroborates Brown's argument that singing bowls are absent from traditional Tibetan Buddhist practices.[30]

Singing bowl courses often carry a considerable price tag and primarily attract middle-aged and older women. A mindfulness studio in central Taiwan provides a vivid example: in September 2025, it offered a two-day workshop featuring singing bowls and gongs for NT $5,000 per person (approximately US $155), excluding travel and lodging. All eight attendees were mid-to-late-life adults, seven of whom were women. The participants categorized this activity as "training." The instructor, whose long braid and red attire evoked a shamanic aesthetic, led the group in spontaneous barefoot dancing on the grass while playing a massive gong. To illustrate the conceptualized therapeutic mechanism, the instructor demonstrated how sound vibrations create ripples in a large, water-filled singing bowl, explaining: "Applying these frequencies to the body activates the water molecules within your cells, . . . allowing negative energy to be swiftly expelled through this cellular resonance."

The singing bowl exemplifies how a healing spatio-temporality is co-constructed by both providers and recipients. When I shared the contested history of the singing bowl with practitioners, their affinity for the object remained undiminished despite their initial surprise. This suggests that within subjective experience, the biography of an

object can become decoupled from its sensory materiality, as long as the object offers immediate comfort and a sense of joyful engagement. This phenomenon underscores the various dimensions of fulfillment, which may operate independently of factual veracity.

Beyond sound healing, activities categorized as horticultural, forest, or “green” therapy have also proliferated. These offerings range from one-hour experiential workshops to multi-day retreats, with costs spanning from several thousand to tens of thousands of NT dollars. A significant step toward institutionalization occurred in 2023 when the Taiwanese government officially began certifying forest therapists. These professional training programs—commissioned by the Forestry and Nature Conservation Agency and conducted by the Taiwan Forest Therapy Society—have attracted older adults seeking both expertise and personal enrichment.

In addition, a burgeoning market for “forest therapy” and “ecotherapy” centered on leisure and ontological wellness has emerged. For instance, in the summer of 2025, a travel agency specializing in the older demographic began rebranding its standard Japanese scenic tours as a “Forest Therapy Series.” These tours, advertised as being curated by “Forest Therapy Designers,” were marketed as a “Journey of Five Senses Awakening.” The rapid sell-out of these itineraries demonstrates that nature-inspired healing has become a powerful thematic draw for mid-to-late-life adults. This surge in commercial opportunities, an embodiment of the silver economy, has fostered an ecosystem of private organizations, media platforms, and civic foundations. Through cross-sector partnerships, these entities bridge the business and wellness industries to introduce diverse programs that integrate social connectivity with a perceived sense of holistic well-being.

In summary, the three categories of engagement discussed above often intersect in practice. Across community, institutional, and cosmic dimensions, participants find opportunities to reshape their worldviews or adopt new perceptions of life. The tentative yet fluid

movement between the external world and the internal self represents a potential existential exploration, signaling a shift toward a new ontology of aging.

Toward More Equitable Elderscapes

While critical or humanist gerontology has shifted its focus from productivity-oriented norms toward the inner spirit, this spirituality must not be limited to religion or a detached inner life, as illustrated by the phenomena observed in Taiwan. For many older adults, meaning is not a philosophical abstraction but is deeply embedded in their tangible surroundings. As they navigate late-life transitions, they reconfigure their relationships with people, space, skills, and non-human existences. It is through this assemblage of materiality that new meanings are mediated, turning aging into an ongoing ontological exploration. Viewed through this lens, later life is not a period of withdrawal, but a vibrant time-space for reinventing the self.

Nevertheless, despite these encouraging prospects, certain issues warrant further examination. While the pursuit of a new ontological experience is an aspiration shared by many older adults, its actualization is not universally accessible. Such a fundamental shift in one's sense of being often necessitates a foundation of economic resources, cultural capital, and social networks. The following analysis focuses on three aspects—access, quality, and credentialism—to further discuss the challenges to a more equitable development of ontological exploration.

Access

Access is a dual concern involving both providers and recipients. If social policies and practices aim to promote successful aging primarily along socioeconomic lines, the equity of program design risks being compromised by the logic of the silver economy.

Generally, private initiatives follow market interests, while publicly funded programs are expected to uphold the ethos of non-profit service and equitable access. Once the latter shift toward prioritizing consumptive power, they warrant critical re-examination. A case in point is the U3A; although celebrated as a model for successful aging, research indicates it often exhibits class homogeneity and, by extension, an exclusionary design.[31]

Quality

The discussion of quality centers on the "returning to campus" phenomenon. While international literature on late-life learning has predominantly focused on general adult education, Taiwan offers a distinctive case in which older adults are integrated into formal undergraduate and graduate degree programs. This shift renders the quality of teaching and learning a critical concern for the entire student body, irrespective of age.[32]

Degree programs targeting older adults often utilize unconventional admission channels. This reorientation is framed as a response to both the enrollment crisis and the realities of a rapidly aging society, implying a departure from the traditional mission of higher education—the cultivation of academic talent. This shift raises crucial questions regarding the quality of instruction within the classroom. While I have not researched this issue systematically, specific interviews provide empirical glimpses into the realities on the ground. For instance, one interviewee admitted an inability to adhere to the rigorous requirements expected of traditional full-time students. He chose only those courses he found desirable and manageable within his schedule. The university permitted this flexibility and eventually granted him a diploma. This case demonstrates how conventional metrics of attendance and performance—usually central to academic rigor—are sidelined. Under these circumstances, the standards for assessing teaching and learning quality in higher

education may become increasingly inconsistent.

Concerns regarding these shifting academic standards are not new. Previous controversies surrounding the quality and ethics of non-traditional graduate programs—such as part-time, in-service, and Executive MBA (EMBA) programs, which have been established in Taiwan for over two decades—have already drawn significant public criticism. These long-standing issues may be further exacerbated if the trend of integrating older adults into regular academic tracks continues to accelerate.

Credentialism

Credentialism, a cultural trait prevalent across East Asia, merits particular scrutiny in this context. Even when aging is viewed as a personal journey of self-reinvention, the prestige of a diploma continues to exert a profound influence on both higher education policies and individual aspirations. Interviews indicate that older adults returning to campus have varied motivations; beyond self-fulfillment, some seek formal degrees to bridge earlier educational gaps—a motivation commonly observed among established business professionals. This interest is often reciprocal: universities actively recruit distinguished older learners into graduate programs to bolster enrollment and institutional visibility. This dynamic represents an exchange of symbolic capital between the privileged individual and the institution.

In sum, the three tensions between consumerism and equity outlined above mirror widespread academic criticism of the successful or active aging models. While some scholars advocate for the complete abandonment of this framework, others suggest a more inclusive redefinition. Although I remain critical of its reductionist tendencies, I align with those who argue that successful aging remains a meaningful ideal for both individuals and society. Nevertheless, it requires a multidimensional perspective that transcends binary assessments of

"success" or "failure."[33] By foregrounding the ontological dimensions of aging alongside the dual challenges of structural inequality and academic integrity, I aim to illuminate the broader implications and nuances of these emerging phenomena in Taiwan.

Conclusion

Disparities in aging transcend mere material survival; they also hinder the pursuit of existential meaning in later life. This concluding section addresses the promises and pitfalls of Taiwan's emergent elderscapes from this reflexive perspective. In doing so, I emphasize both the subjective significance these phenomena hold for older adults and the structural forces required to shape a more equitable landscape of aging. Regarding commercialization, critical scholars often interrogate its inherent pitfalls. Framing ontological exploration as a lifestyle invites classical sociological critique: Max Weber, for instance, highlighted that status-based lifestyles are inextricably linked to economic conditions, while Pierre Bourdieu demonstrated that lifestyle choices manifest underlying privilege.[34] As Katz and Calasanti argue, the successful aging paradigm faces criticism for its overemphasis on individual agency.[35] This focus on volition aligns with a neoliberal and entrepreneurial ethos that increasingly dominates contemporary health and retirement politics. In other words, both the opportunities for and the expressions of such lifestyles remain inherently stratified.

On the other hand, commercialization also signals a growing societal recognition of the existential needs of older adults. Market innovation has the potential to democratize these services, transforming what were once elite luxuries into more accessible options. Nevertheless, as with any commodity, a stratified consumer market is an inevitable byproduct. The case of nature-based healing serves as an illustrative example: nature has shifted from a primary site of production to a commodified therapeutic landscape. For the middle class, engaging with nature-inspired products—ranging

from state-sponsored horticultural therapy and relatively costly yet attainable spiritual workshops to luxury green tourism—offers a potential pathway toward an ontological turn. Through these perceived "authentic" experiences mediated by various wellness activities, older adults seek to reclaim a sense of self and connectivity previously alienated by modern life and the aging process.

Regarding the "returning to campus" phenomenon, as universities increasingly target the "silver market," the potential relaxation of academic standards for older adults highlights a growing tension between institutional pragmatism and personal fulfillment. On one hand, such flexibility may facilitate a form of "existential closure," allowing older adults to reclaim deferred identities without the encumbrance of traditional meritocratic pressures. In this light, the diploma functions less as a certificate of formal academic attainment and more as a symbolic validation of a lifelong journey.

On the other hand, this shift raises critical questions concerning the commodification of both higher education and aging. If academic rigor is compromised for the sake of institutional revenue, how can the university maintain its claim to universal evaluative standards for all students? Furthermore, does the model of successful or active aging through degree-granting education foster a genuine ontological turn, or does it merely stage a performative self-actualization subordinated to the logic of the silver economy, hence remaining a pursuit primarily tailored for the privileged?

To conclude, the ontological turn toward self-reinvention among Taiwan's older adults offers valuable insights for aging societies worldwide. However, this pursuit remains entangled with persistent structural barriers stemming from the unequal distribution of economic and cultural capital. While certain grassroots practices currently resist a purely market-driven logic, their impact remains constrained by a dependence on precarious institutional support. Thus, moving forward, public initiatives responding to aging must evolve beyond mere service delivery to actively narrow the disparities

rooted in socioeconomic status.

The policy implications are clear: precisely because social stratification is a persistent reality, any pursuit of successful aging must involve continuous policy interventions to mitigate these inequalities. To serve as a truly meaningful goal for both individuals and society, the materialized framework of successful aging must transcend narrow functional metrics. This requires a multidimensional understanding of aging that also prioritizes ontological fulfillment, ensuring that the opportunity for self-reinvention is not a luxury of the privileged, but a fundamental right accessible to all.

Given these complexities, this study calls for a democratization of meaningful aging by foregrounding existential exploration as a critical component of late-life fulfillment. The Taiwan case offers a more inclusive, albeit challenging, vision for the global discourse on aging in the twenty-first century. By synthesizing ontological fulfillment with structural equity, we may transition into a super-aged era in which the experience of aging is no longer merely managed but meaningfully lived.

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