

Decay and Reverence: Conceptions of Old Age in Ancient Greece and China

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Coming to terms with the inescapable process of aging is a timeless issue, evident even in ancient civilizations. The Greek conception of sad old age as a downward slope of decrepitude starkly contrasts with the systematic admiration and respect directed toward the elderly in ancient China. With the exception of Sparta, the people and *poleis* in the Greek world did not revere the elderly as intensely as the ancient Chinese. Because of the unavoidable nature of aging and its presence in everyday life, people in the ancient world contemplated this topic often, and allowed their conceptions of age to influence literature, laws, politics, and space. These conceptions of age also have deep roots in the religions and state organizations of each culture, with the basic relationship between young and old at the core of the difference in conceptions of order. As evidenced in literary, spatial, and legal spheres, the conception and treatment of the elderly in ancient Greece and China differ due to the fundamental structural differences between China's society of hierarchy and Greece's democracy.

Before examining differing conceptions of age, it is necessary to define old age and its starting point in each society. Estimates of average lifespan in pre-modern societies can be misleading due to high infant mortality. Before modern medicine, survival past childhood greatly increased chances of surviving into old age. Although the majority of the population died young, many did live into old age. Age statistics also favor men, because their lives were more likely than women's lives to be recorded on monuments or in documents.¹ Aristocrats were also more likely to live to an old age because of their superior diets and resources. Therefore, when speaking of conceptions of the elderly, it is mainly in reference to elderly aristocrats. Some examples of these aged men include Sophocles, who wrote *Oedipus at Colonus* at age ninety, and Euripides, who wrote the *Bacchae* at age eighty.² Old age was also defined differently in each culture. For instance, in ancient Greece, the elderly called *presbuteroi* (elders) somewhat arbitrarily fell between the ages of thirty and fifty-nine, and the *gerontes*, (literally old men) somewhere above sixty.³ In ancient China, however, old age was less defined by age categories, and more defined by relationships; for example, children respected their

¹ Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 32.

² Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 40.

³ Joseph Roisman, *The Rhetoric of Manhood: Masculinity in the Attic Orators* (London, England: University of California Press, 2005), 205.

parents because of their status as an older generation, whether or not they would have been considered elderly by today's standards of advanced years.⁴

The specific perceptions and definitions of age in ancient Greece and China were embedded into their rituals, religions, and beliefs. Hesiod outlined the history, genealogy, and cosmological order of the Greek world in the *Theogony* and in his *Works and Days*, both written around the eighth century B.C. The relationships in Hesiod's accounts of the mythical beginnings of the world lay the foundation for a broader Greek understanding of the world.⁵ Thus, the conception of "sorrowful old age" evident in these poems, forms the building blocks for the Greek impression of the topic.⁶ The birthright of Old Age (*Geras*) as the son of Night (*Nyx*) and grandson of Chaos defines aging as a dark and sinister subject at its origins.⁷ Also prominent is the underlying theme of elders dethroned by their children, which sets up this practice as an acceptable precedent.⁸ For example, Ouranos was castrated by his son Kronos, and the younger Olympian generation won in the fight between the Olympians and the Titans.⁹ In Hesiod's accounts of the world's mythical origins, the old gods are invariably wicked and rightfully vanquished. The Olympian gods as natural rulers were not only young; they were eternal and unable to age.¹⁰ Hesiod's story of Pandora unleashing evils including "illness and age" on the world summarizes the Greek view of the ugly and sad nature of age versus the ideal state of youth.¹¹

Just as myths and gods constructed Greek culture, ancestral worship was at the foundation of ancient Chinese religious beliefs. In the Zhou and Shang periods (1600-771 B.C.), it was customary for travelers to make sacrifices to local lords and the elderly in each state they visited.¹² Shang ancestor worship—which included the offering of valuable items such as meat and grain—"preserved the potency of ancestral beings."¹³ They believed that the ancestors were anthropomorphic beings with special powers that could be extracted through a ritual process. This system of ancestor worship ensured that a person could never escape authority and that his or her status as a respected elder or parent was carried over into ancestorhood.¹⁴

Understanding the cosmological order and hierarchy evidenced in ancestor worship was also important to Confucian beliefs. Like the elderly transferring their

⁴ Hong Lu, *China's Death Penalty: History, Law and Contemporary Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 69.

⁵ Georges Minois, *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. Sarah Tenison (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 43.

⁶ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 70-100. Translated by Dorothea Wender.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 80-100.

⁸ Minois, "History of Old Age," 44.

⁹ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 29. (lines 140-150)

¹⁰ Minois, "History of Old Age," 44.

¹¹ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 69-82. Translated by Dorothea Wender.

¹² David Keightley, *These Bones Shall Rise Again: Selected Writings on Early China* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014), 78.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

position in life to a position of authority in death, Confucian thought asserted that all phenomena have an appointed role. Therefore, “superior” and “inferior” existed in a natural order, and those with higher abilities or experience were ranked superior.¹⁵ In essence, according to ancient Chinese spiritual beliefs, just as the living naturally become dead, those who were older were naturally superior. One passage from the *Shijing*, or *The Book of Songs*, illustrates the spiritual connection between the elderly and the ancestors:

May the spirit send down excellent blessing,
Causing extreme longevity without end.
May children and grandchildren
Be forever numerous.¹⁶

This excerpt demonstrates that the ancient Chinese prayed for longevity both for their familial lines and for their personal lives, wishing to survive and become a grandparent. In contrast to the Greeks, the ancient Chinese hoped for old age; this stage marked a new period in a person’s life as the keeper of legacy. Despite the clear themes that resound in these beliefs and customs, the obscure origins of the Greek myths and the constantly evolving understanding of ancestor worship in China, requires a look at other sources for evidence about the ancient conception of age.

One of the more abundant, yet questionable sources of information on ancient conceptions of old age comes from literature, namely Greek tragedies, comedies, and poetry, and Chinese classics. In general, leitmotifs in Greek tragedies included suffering, ugliness, and rejection by society. Sophocles used these leitmotifs in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Because he wrote this tragedy when he was ninety years old, Sophocles clearly demonstrated his opinion and negative experience of sad old age.¹⁷ In the play, Oedipus despairs on his wretched life, declaring that “long life and sorrow is written” upon him. Even when his daughter Ismene suggests that he may still have purpose, he declares that he would have “a poor return: youth lost and age rewarded.”¹⁸ Euripides also sung of the woes of age in his dramatic assertion that:

Youth is what we love. Age weights upon
our head like a burden heavier than the rocks
of Etna, drawing a curtain of darkness over
our eyes...age is miserable, tainted with
death; away with it!¹⁹

¹⁵ Geoffrey MacCormack, *The Spirit of Traditional Chinese Law* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 70-72.

¹⁶ K. E. Brashier, *Ancestral Memory in Early China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), 261.

¹⁷ Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 32.

¹⁸ Soph. OC. 1780. Translated by E.F. Watling.

¹⁹ Eur. Her. 639. Translated by K. McLeish.

Comedies as well depicted the elderly in a negative light; they often appeared as caricatures in physical and mental decay. Both old men and women were stock figures in classical comedy. Men were often shown in competition with their sons, while women were either supportive matronly figures or figures of ridicule.²⁰ As an illustration, in Aristophanes' *Clouds* a son criticizes his elderly father for his "fuddy duddy, old fashioned belief in the gods."²¹ This competition between the younger and older generations is an extension of the myths described by Hesiod and the struggle for power between the Olympians and Titans. Women were also often portrayed as physically disgusting. In *Ecclesiazusae*, or *Women in Power*, Aristophanes refers to the old women as "old crusts," "old prunes," "dirty old bags" and "vinegar dregs" among other colorful insults. A young man also asserts that "sex with [an old woman] is like having sex with death."²² Taken together, these examples of comedic elderly figures demonstrate the general disrespect and competition felt toward the elderly in ancient Greece.

Poetry in ancient Greece tended to have a more bittersweet view of old age. It was less scathing and focused more on the poignancy of a lost youth that contained aesthetic and erotic power.²³ For example, Sappho—a female poet from the island of Lesbos who wrote around 612 BCE—had more sentimental views of aging. She implored readers to "tremble in pity for [her] state" in which "old age and wrinkles cover [her]."²⁴ The writer remembered fondly the old days of youth and lamented over her physical deterioration. She somberly resigned herself to the fact that "to be ageless is impossible" and reflected on death that "even in Hades I will love you."²⁵ Her poem "No Oblivion" demonstrated the preoccupation with heroism and remembrance in ancient Greece, adding yet another layer to considerations of age when she wrote that "someone, I tell you, will remember us."²⁶

In contrast to the sad and ugly view of age in Greece, ancient Chinese authors viewed age as an elegant and necessary stage in life. Confucius summed up this view of age when he said, "At the end of a man's life, his words are graceful."²⁷ The *Shijing* is the oldest collection of Chinese poetry, dating from the eleventh to the seventh centuries B.C. It was memorized by the educated and compiled by Confucius, thereby ensuring the widespread understanding of its words. One excerpt reads:

Our vow is beyond death and life,
I and you are together I always remembered.
I will hold your hand,
And together we grow old.²⁸

²⁰ Vervoorn Aat, *Men of the Cliffs and Caves: the Development of the Chinese Eremitic Tradition to the End of the Han Dynasty* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1990), 10.

²¹ Aristoph. Cl. 1054. Translated by M. Hadas.

²² Aristoph. Eccl. 617; 940-50. Translated by K. McLeish.

²³ Aat, "Men of the Cliffs," 12.

²⁴ Sappho, fr. 24a, 58. Translated by Willis Barnstone.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, fr. 21, 121.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, fr. 147.

²⁷ Keightley, *These Bones Shall Rise Again*, 30.

²⁸ *Shijing* 31, Translated by Arthur Waley.

There is nothing shameful about growing old in this passage. On the contrary, old age appears as a period of prosperity and respect to which honorable men and women could look forward. Romance in old age was still possible and encouraged in ancient China as is suggested in this passage. The Chinese expressed no outward concern for physical deterioration as in Greece. Another Chinese account of old age comes from the historian Sima Qian's *History of the Han Dynasty*. He recounts the story of the Four Greybeards, four elderly men who had withdrawn to the Chang Mountains in the Warring States era and lived as hermits. These men were wise, poor, humble, and retreated to the mountains in order to "keep their virtue intact."²⁹ This motif of the hermit was a common theme in Chinese literature. In contrast to the Greek character of the old man in mental decay, the Chinese emphasized the old hermit as the "Wise Rustic" and the "Paragon of Extraordinary Virtue."³⁰ Furthermore, one of the Five Confucian Classics, the *Da Dai liji*, or *Elder Dai's Book of Rites*, explains the necessity of the young learning and memorizing classical texts as to fulfill their duty to "instruct and admonish as an elder."³¹ The elderly thus had an active role in preserving and passing down the familial and state legacy. While an analysis of literary works from ancient Greece and China is useful in examining the roles of the elderly as seen through the eyes of contemporary authors—since each genre and each author depicted old age in a different manner—it is misleading to take their accounts wholly at face value.

Ancient Chinese and Greek laws shed more concrete light on the treatment of the elderly. While both cultures obliged children to take care of the elderly, the punishment for neglecting to fulfill this duty was more severe in the Chinese case. This is largely because the reverence for the elderly was written into the legal and political systems throughout ancient Chinese history. Most Chinese laws follow the Confucian tenets regarding the natural order of the world, thus resulting in a hierarchy in the law regarding age. For instance, a senior who committed an offense against a junior was punished less severely than a junior who had committed the same offense.³² Another major doctrine in ancient China was filial piety, or *xiao*. Filial piety required respectful care of elderly family members. For example, children were not permitted to take long journeys while their parents were still alive; they were also responsible for their parents' physical and mental well-being. Unfilial behavior included disrespecting an elderly family member in any way.³³ Although filial piety was important throughout Ancient Chinese society, it became especially important later in Chinese history during the Tang Period with the inauguration of the Tang Code. The new law established death as the penalty for murdering or beating the elderly, failure to support the elderly, or even

²⁹ Aat, *Men of the Cliffs and Caves*, 30.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

³¹ Brashier, *Ancestral Memory in Early China*, 251.

³² MacCormack, *The Spirit of Traditional Chinese Law*, 70.

³³ Hong Lu, *China's Death Penalty: History, Law and Contemporary Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 30.

lodging accusations against the elderly.³⁴ The elderly also had economic and political privileges. A socio-economic ranking system for commoners and nobles that structurally favored the elderly began as a twenty rank system created by Shang Yang during the Qin Dynasty (221 to 206 B.C.) and continued to be used throughout the Han Period (206 B.C. to 220 C.E.). As commoners advanced in rank (up to a level of eight), they were granted better seats and food at banquets, could become exempt from labor service, and were punished less severely for certain crimes.³⁵ This system favored the elderly because a longer lifespan afforded a man more opportunities for advancement.

In contrast, Greek laws regarding the elderly were based on the idea that a man deserved respect because of his deeds instead of his age, and that an old man's position in society was always precarious. The care of elderly, or *geroboskia*, was a sacred duty. Because ancient Greece was a democratic state, citizens were required to take care of other citizens. As a result of this obligation, free meals were served to the old citizens in the Athenian Prytaneum.³⁶ Vitruvius also mentioned the House of Croesus in Sardis, which functioned as a home for the elderly.³⁷ Those who did not uphold their obligation to the elderly members of the community could have been thrown in prison, fined, or deprived of citizens' rights.³⁸ Solon's decree in the sixth century B.C. specified that neglecting parents could lead to disenfranchisement.³⁹ The fact that Athenian laws about the elderly were repeatedly renewed suggests that abuse of the elderly must have been a problem requiring constant awareness.

In a culture centered around heroes and great deeds, the elderly did not have a defined place because they fell short of masculine and communal ideas essential to the Greek *polis*.⁴⁰ Along with women, children, and the disabled, the elderly were exempt from military service in Athens, thus depriving them of the role of citizen as warrior.⁴¹ However, the elderly in Greek society still had an important political presence. For example, in the *Iliad*, Nestor, King of Pylos, was an old man in a world of young heroes, but he held a powerful position on the Council of Elders due to his heroic deeds.⁴² The oldest were also always the first to speak in general assemblies, and because the elderly were mostly aristocrats, they still held some power.⁴³ However, the elderly did not have a very active presence and were often outwardly snubbed and called "foolish" during political proceedings.⁴⁴ They were used as passive rhetorical devices to appeal to the

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁵ Sadao Nishijima, "The Economic and Social History of Former Han," in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 1: the Ch'in and Han Empires*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 50.

³⁶ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 45.

³⁷ Vit. 8.10. Translated by Morris Hicky Morgan.

³⁸ Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 20.

³⁹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 62.

⁴⁰ Roisman, *The Rhetoric of Manhood*, 206.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁴² Minois, *History of Old Age*, 45.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 46.

Athenian sense of justice, social responsibility, and piety.⁴⁵ In summation, the ancient Greeks privileged heroic deeds over age. The elderly had a restricted and passive political role, admired only if they had completed heroic deeds.

This pattern of elderly disrespect in the Greek world does not seem to have extended to Sparta. According to Herodotus, the Spartan custom required that “young men yield the road to their elders and get up from their seats when old men approach.”⁴⁶ They had a *gerousia* (council of elders) made up of the oldest Spartans that governed politics and foreign policy. The gerontocracy in Sparta only grew into the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. as the role of the old in Athens continued to dwindle.⁴⁷ However, the Spartan model did not differ as greatly from the Greek system as it outwardly seems. Old men in Sparta were probably rare since most would have died in battle at a younger age. Therefore, instead of being honored for age alone as in the Chinese system, the elderly Spartans were indeed being recognized for deeds over age like in Athens.

In order to understand how these different conceptions of old age and the elderly shown in literature, religion, and law evolved, it is essential to examine how the state organizations of ancient Greece and China were formed as a result of unique histories and circumstances. The nature of each state organization helped dictate the interactions and relationships between generations. The bureaucratic and hierarchical ruling system of ancient China developed first in the Western Zhou state as a complex and extensive administrative apparatus useful in establishing control in order to expand over a large and diverse area. This system was defined by binaries. For example, the distinction between the “hou” and the “bo” in bronze inscriptions from the Western Zhou period help us understand how political thought and organization in the Western Zhou was informed by the binary conception of east and west. Rulers of regional states in the east were often referred to as “hou,” or “Ruler,” while heads of aristocratic lineages in the west (Wei River valley) were often referred to as “bo”, or “Elder.”⁴⁸ These titles demonstrate the hierarchical structure of the Western Zhou bureaucracy. These bronze inscriptions also describe an expansive network of staff involved in running the bureaucratic administration, which were appointed and ranked hierarchically. For example, the three Supervisors in the Bureau of Ministry had a higher rank, whereas clerical roles were ranked lower. In addition, there were still differentiations of rank within clerical roles, such as scribes and secretaries.⁴⁹ The conception of the elderly continues along this vein of binaries and hierarchies. Thus the hierarchical structure of the Chinese bureaucracy not only reflects how the ancient Chinese structured and categorized the political sphere, but also how they structured and categorized the broader social sphere. There was a clear

⁴⁵ Roisman, *The Rhetoric of Manhood*, 209.

⁴⁶ Hdt. 2.80. Translated by George Rawlinson.

⁴⁷ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 64.

⁴⁸ E.H. Robinson, “The Distinction Between State and Government,” *The Geography Compass* vol 7.8 (2013): 556.

⁴⁹ Feng Li, *Bureaucracy and the State in Early China: Governing the Western Zhou* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 6.

distinction between old and young, and the elderly were worthy of more respect than the younger generations.

The Greek *polis* emerged from a very different political and social climate. The *polis* as a politically independent city-state with an explicit concept of citizenship first appeared in the Greek Archaic Period (800 to 480 B.C.). In simplest terms, the *polis* was a social group defined by geography.⁵⁰ In the absence of a centrally organized leader, the state was organized around common ideologies. Unlike the Chinese bureaucracy, the *polis* emphasized communal activities. While Greeks had political terms such as *archai* (office holders), *hoi politeuomenoi* (politically active), and *ekklesia* (assembly), they did not have a structured or hierarchical administrative system.⁵¹ The *polis* was especially unique in its emphasis on participation. *Demokratia*, translated literally as “the power” (*kratos*) “of the people” (*demos*), had the meaning for the ancient Greeks of participatory democracy, not representative democracy. Citizenship was conceived of as both a communitarian and legal-political responsibility.⁵² In order to be an accepted member of the community, a Greek citizen had to perform his participatory political duties as well. Obligation, tradition, and belief in the community fueled the Greek political system. In their dealings with old age, the Greeks saw it as their obligation to take care of the elderly by providing them with homes and food; however, their elders were not hierarchically superior to any other citizen. In fact, the old were seen as lesser members of society because they could no longer contribute to the community as rigorously as in youth. While there was clearly a binary between sweet, beautiful, and heroic youth (*neotas*), and ugly and tragic old age (*geras*), there was no middle ground or third age, and there was no hierarchy.⁵³

Views of old age and the elderly are clearly shown in the myths, religious practices, literature, and laws of ancient Greece and China, and are reflected in the state organizations of each society. While the old were revered and ranked highly in ancient China due only to their age, the elderly were admired in ancient Greece for their deeds. In a world of heroes, the decrepit elderly occupied the precarious position in Athens of requiring the support of the community but no longer contributing to the community. Because contribution and participation was the basis of citizenship in the *polis*, the elderly could no longer operate fully in society and thus became objects of ridicule and a reminder of every man’s sad end. From the despairing elderly characters in Greek tragedy to the stock figures in comedy and decaying lovers in poetry, the Greek literary portrayal of old age was nothing less than abysmal. Whereas the Greek *polis* emphasized collective participation and equality, the Chinese system operated under the notion of hierarchy. According to laws of Confucianism, it was only natural that the Ancient Chinese viewed age as a binary and thus a hierarchy. The ancient Greeks saw the same binary without the

⁵⁰ Ibid, 45.

⁵¹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 48.

⁵² B. Strauss, “The Classical Greek Polis and Its Government,” in *A Companion to Ancient Greek Government*, ed Hans Beck (Malden, Mass.: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 23.

⁵³ Chris Gilleard, “Old Age in Ancient Greece: Narratives of Desire, Narratives of Disgust,” *Journal of Ageing Studies* vol. 21, no.1 (2007): 1.

superiority of one element over the other. The connection between the elderly, their past, and their soon eternal presence in the pantheon of ancestors made them figures of wisdom and paragons of virtue. Ancestor worship was, and continues to be, one of the most important tenets of Chinese religious beliefs, thus largely contributing to the respected nature of the elderly throughout ancient and Modern China.

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