

“THE CONSTRUCTION OF AGING DISCOURSES IN A THAI CONTEXT: A PRELIMINARY STUDY THROUGH A HISTORICAL LENS”

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ABSTRACT:

This qualitative research examines how aging discourses have been made by the state by utilizing Foucauldian discourse analysis as the main approach. It is argued that aging discourses have been socially and contextually constructed through the state's policies and actions in order to serve specific purposes in each period of time. As such, the constructed aging discourses are dynamic. This research surmises that ageism is not a natural process, but rather a socially constructed process. Therefore, it is revealed that there are four types of aging discourse: 1) the elderly are seen as a valuable asset to the nation in the context of the traditional bureaucratic system, 2) the elderly deserve proper care in the context of national modernization and the nation's image construction, 3) the elderly are seen as problematic and a burden on the nation in the context of the national economic and social development and global demographic change, and 4) the elderly are thought not to share the younger generation's desire for equality, democracy and universality as indicated by the ironic expression “Ma-nud Loong Ma-nud Pa”. It can be seen that the four discourses have been purposively used by groups of people who benefit by portraying aging people in such ways in Thai society.

Keywords:

Ageism, Aging, Discourse Analysis, History, Social Construction

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INTRODUCTION

During the outbreak of the Coronavirus, or COVID-19, aging people have been regarded as sensitive and easily infected with slow recovery rates, which leads to a high risk of fatality. Therefore, some countries with limited numbers of medical personnel and equipment require aged people on the one hand to stay at home, and on the other hand, to be hospitalized and left as the last group to be cured such as in Spain (Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2020) and Italy (de Leo and Trabucchi, 2020). These phenomena might be interpreted as age-based discrimination or unethical, and is perhaps a consequence of the so-called “discourse construction toward the aging”

In addition, in the age of globalization and the era of IoTs (Internet of Things), various social platforms are considered as tools to generate, disseminate and accelerate negative perceptions of aging people as, for example, useless, burdensome or boring (Suphawan and Kanchanakijisakul, 2014; Sutduean, Sutduean, & Jermstittiparsert, 2019; Usak, Kubiato, Shabbir, Dudnik,

Jermstittiparsert, & Rajabion, 2019; Vipaporn, Pakvichai, & Jermstittiparsert, 2019). Those aforementioned perceptions have gradually become stereotypes of aging people under the umbrella of “ageism”. Although Ayalon and Tesch-Römer noted that the meaning of the term “ageism” has changed periodically in relation to the dynamic social context and can be either positive or negative, it is greatly relevant to age discrimination and has a significant negative impact on older adults. (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer, 2018). Clearly, ageism is not a natural creation but is socially constructed.

Ageism has become more evident due to the increasing number of older adults. According to the World Health Organization, by 2050, the number of over 60-year-old people will be two billion, and 80 percent of them will live in low- and middle-income countries (World Health Organization, 2020). Moreover, the term “ageism” has been redefined to re-emphasize the negative consequences as follows;

“Ageism is the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people on the basis of their age. Ageism is widespread and an insidious practice which has harmful effects on the health of older adults. For older people, ageism is an everyday challenge. Overlooked for employment, restricted from social services and stereotyped in the media, ageism marginalizes and excludes older people in their communities.

Ageism is everywhere, yet it is the most socially “normalized” of any prejudice, and is not widely countered – like racism or sexism. These attitudes lead to the marginalisation of older people within our communities and have negative impacts on their health and well-being.” (World Health Organization, 2020).

Thailand is currently encountering changes in the population ratio, indicating an aging population. By 2040, the number of over 60-year-old people will be 32.1 percent of the total population in comparison with 13.2 percent in 2010 (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013). Moreover, negative attitudes and perceptions towards the aging group are significantly increasing, with aging people perceived to be querulous and complaining (52.5 percent), outdated (37.4 percent), burdensome to family (32.2 percent), boring (25.3 percent), and useless (14.3 percent) (National Statistical Office, 2011). Consequently, it can be proposed that the larger the number of aging people, the higher the level of ageism. Past studies have confirmed that negative attitudes which lead to ageism-related practices are embedded in youths’ mindsets (Sinthuprama, 1996, Chaisingkananont, 2001, Taweessit and Boonyakanond, 2010, and Eiamkanchanalai et.al., 2015). These attitudes have circulated faster than the previous century through popular social media platforms, and most users are getting younger in line with the development of information technology and cheaper accessibility. As a consequence, the online dissemination of such ideas results in more negative perceptions and influences actions against aging people.

This has become a sensitive issue for both younger and older people. The generation gap between these two groups is becoming wider and so are the misunderstandings and prejudices based on age. Therefore, it is necessary to scrutinize in what context and how these perceptions have been constructed, and what main discourse was constructed in each period of time. In other words, this research aims to reveal the socially-constructed discourse found in the state’s policies on a historical basis. Arribas-Ayllon, M. and Walkerdine, V. (2017) who employed the Foucauldian discourse analysis approach, stated that “the system of knowledge is governed by rules that determine the limits of thoughts and languages within a historical period” (p.114). Consequently, this approach can be employed to analyze the historical state documents to answer the two main research questions.

To achieve the aim of this research paper, the paper includes the following sections: introduction, literature review, the aging paradigm in Thailand, socially-constructed aging discourse, and conclusion, discussion and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

June 15 was designated as World Elder Abuse Awareness Day by the UN General Assembly in response to the impact of COVID-19 during which the abuse of older persons has been noted on a global scale. This indicates that elder persons have been negatively perceived and have become victims of societal age-based discrimination. This discourse on ageism is an example of discourses related to the pandemic. It is evident that previous socially-constructed aging discourse yielded unfavorable perceptions. Medical reports on a relationship between biological aging and the higher risk of getting infected with severe illness perhaps fuels society’s feelings towards the elderly, which is problematic and needs to be resolved.

Many previous academic studies on aging generally referred to the aging criteria of two international organizations. Aging as defined by

United Nations (UN) as senior citizens or older persons or elderly persons with an age of 60 years old or more. However, the World Health Organization (WHO) has no precise age for the beginning of aging because it varies according to cultural, social and body function markers (Prompak, 2013). Biologists, in an attempt to understand the process of aging, examined the demographic process of cessation in order to offer a new definition of aging (Flatt T 2012). Social scientists tend to scrutinize how aging is formed and implanted into people's mindset (Chris, 2013, Ayalon and Tesch-Römer, 2018). Libertini (2019) argued that aging could be illustrated by two ways: "age-related decline of biological functions" and "an age-related increase in mortality" (Libertini, 2019). These two ways align with previous arguments and are related. It can be said that the older you are, the weaker your body is likely to be.

The definitions of 'aging society', 'aged society' and 'super-aged society' offered by the UN increase concerns about the population structure and how to deal with this situation. It leads to an upside-down triangle population structure. This announcement re-affirms the problem of large numbers of older persons at the same time the birth rate is drastically decreasing. Consequently, many later studies focused on the state's aging society management and policies related to economic growth and the healthcare system such as in Japan (Muramatsu and Akiyama, 2011) and China (Zang, Gui and Zheng, 2012), or in the West during the 1970s when elder persons were seen to be a major obstacle for economic development (Chris, 2013; p. 42). It is evident that the policies, plans or programs to support older persons are the state's attempts to prevent and minimize the problems caused by biological declination and economic stagnation. Some academic works analyzed the construction of the image of aging through socialization processes. It presents the image of aging persons by physical appearance for groups of people who live in urban and suburban areas (Grey et.al., 2013). This

indicted that age is not related to what society perceives as aging and, thus, aging is socially-constructed (Taweessit, 2010; p. 5, and Chris, 2010; p. 39).

It is clear that previous academic studies noted the current increases in the aging population and its major impact on national economic growth and public spending on older people. Age, as a baseline to distinguish older from younger groups for different management plans and policies, has become a core concept to describe the circumstances. However, it yields a generally negative image of elder persons as inactive members of society. This idea is disseminated to others through both online and offline platforms. It can be concluded that the study of the production of aging discourse in a Thai context through a historical lens has not yet been investigated. It is thus believed that unveiling the historical development of aging discourse would raise societal awareness of aging persons and the issues associated with it, and reduce ageist practices and ageism in society.

1. Aging Paradigm in Thailand in an Era of Modernization

As pointed out earlier, both ways of defining aging have been applied in contemporary Thai society from either the state or scholars. Taweessit (2010) noted that to erase the negative attitudes towards aging groups of people, it is necessary to remove all unfavorable aging representations (Taweessit, 2010; p.7). Accordingly, understanding what aging is in a Thai context is considered as the first step of analyzing socially-constructed aging discourses.

According to the pre-modern history of Thailand, one of the major factors that either strengthened or weakened the kingdom's sovereignty is demographic and includes population control and the amount of free labor (Lailert, 1972). In contrast, during the modernization periods of Thailand in the reign of King Rama 4 (1851-1868) and King Rama 5 (1868-1910), population control and the need for large number of workers are not key factors. From the state's point of view, aging

is not seen as problematic for the ruling class, as long as they are considered knowledgeable and useful to work in the bureaucratic system. Teeraeak's research on the limitation of English education in Thai society (2018) reveals that English speaking ability was restricted only to the ruling class as a way to acquire knowledge from outside. For the majority of the population in Thailand, called Phrai (commoners), aging is also not problematic as long as labor is needed by the state. The difference between the ruling and ruled classes is that Phrai would not work for the state after they turn 70 years of age while the elite would be in the bureaucratic system until the end of their lives. The average life expectancy of people between 1851-1856, was 49.8 years for men and 53.5 years for women (Leoprapai, 2017; p.7). Therefore, it is clear that both groups of people during this period of time often worked until the last day of their lives. Consequently, knowledge and the supply of labor were seen as greater concerns than aging.

Awareness about aging in terms of biological age is not evident, but can be observed by examining the list of aging noblemen who were given royal fabric and money on the occasion of King Rama 5's 42nd birthday in 1895. The youngest was 70 years of age and the eldest was 88. Similar results can be observed with the royal celebration of King Rama 5's 45th (National Achieves, 1896). While encountering the influence of western powers, the modernization of the state, including bureaucratic and administrative reformation, was urgently required (Bunnag, 1977). There were many policies reflecting the significance of 'age' and 'aging' namely, the first pension system in 1902 as compensation for officials who served the state and had no time to make provisions for retirement (Government Pension Fund, 2012), and the abolition of slavery and the reformation of the conscription system in 1905, which affected the traditional social structure of ruling and ruled classes. Noticeably, the aforementioned state policies constructed at least two discourses on aging. Firstly, elite elder persons were seen as

valuable assets for the bureaucratic and administrative system due to their knowledge and experience, and were devoted to working for the public sector for the good of society. Consequently, provision was needed for their retirement. Secondly, for the Phrai there was no such reward for their hard work, and they were deemed to be useless when they were no longer able to work when they become older. The second group of aging persons were not given pensions by the state but freedom from the traditional social structure.

The aging paradigm in a traditional Thai context has a thin relationship with age but a tight relationship with how long a person could be devoted to the state. It is argued that in this context, aging is a state-constructed discourse portraying aging people as valuable assets, so the state must repay them with proper care in the form of allowances and freedom to build a more modern national image.

The pension system in the reign of King Rama 7 became more age-related because it was involved with retirement, the national budget and the global economic crisis. It was clearly indicated in documents that 55 years of age was considered as aging and a reasonable age to retire, with the exception of 'valuable assets' i.e. public officials of higher rank. Moreover, the retirement age could be individually reduced to 50 or extended to 60 with the King's permission. (National Archives, 1928). Thus, people between 50 and 60 were officially declared as aging by this act due to the economic context as economic problems needed to be resolved. One way to control the national budget effectively was to eradicate unnecessary expenses, such as officials' salaries. However, it contradicted the previous practices of allowing people to work until the end of their life, and perhaps became one of many causes of the 'Siamese Revolution' in 1932, led by young and progressive groups of people who felt they were the victims of government policy while some older persons remained in the system (for more detail see Mektrirat, 1992).

It can be clearly seen that during times of economic recession, the criteria used to describe aging were established to tackle the fiscal situation. Although a pension was provided, it did not have the desired effect as the aging group of officials were portrayed as a financial burden to the state.

SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED AGING DISCOURSE IN A CONTEXT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The birth of democracy in Thailand after 1932 brought in new administrative ideas and concepts to the nation, including assistance from many developed countries. Decades later, one of the most significant policies aimed to stimulate economic growth in the very first national economic development plan in 1961. This has continued until today with the 12th national economic and social development plan and this has helped to boost the national economy. However, these plans can be interpreted as a form of aging-related discourse construction. Thus, this part will focus on these plans to indicate how aging is understood and how aging-related discourses have been constructed.

Awareness about the aging population began in the West and became a global issue during the 1980s when Thailand, while boosting its economic growth and increasing its population, started to consider the situation. The first national plans on the elderly was drafted in 1982 as a response to the World Assembly on Aging in 1982 in which Thailand participated. Although age was not essential to define the aging state, the assembly pointed out that “aging, and being an elderly person, were essentially social and cultural phenomena; they were a shared human experience notwithstanding variations in experience and tradition and differences between developing and developed countries” (United Nations, 1982; p 14.). Although the concern of the meeting was how to manage the aging phenomena on the basis of human rights, it could be interpreted that the existence of aging or elderly persons was

perceived as a problem and an obstacle for economic development, particularly in developing countries. In addition, the meeting also referred to improper management and negligence in taking care of the elderly.

A series of plans and policies were drafted in the 1st National Plan on the Elderly (1982-2002) serving as an “instrument in encouraging, supporting and developing guidelines of action on the elderly” (The Department of Older Persons, 2016; p. 14). However, Jitapunkul S. and Chatavan N (2001) argued that at the beginning, there was limited data on the number of aging persons and their situation (p.10). Referring to the UN’s declaration on the differences between aging and elder persons in developed and developing countries, the circumstances of aging in developing countries such as Thailand is perceived as problematic.

The aging population in Thailand became a social issue in the 7th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1992-1996) due to the very successful birthrate control in the 6th plan. As such, it is indicated that “the lower population growth rates have led to changes in the population structure. The share of the children’s age group (0-14) has tended to decline to 33 percent...leaving the elderly group (over 60 years) also with an increased share of 6.2 percent” (National Economic and Social Development Board, 1992). It reveals the concern of the Thai government towards the increasing number of the aging group, similar to the UN’s concern in 1982, but with a clearer criterion of 60 years of age.

In the 8th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997-2001) there were policies relevant to aging persons. It might seem to be consistent with the first national plan on the elderly, but in fact, those guidelines regarded the elderly as problematic which is why the government needed to improve it. Additionally, the guidelines reflected the reality of Thai society at that time. The guidelines for the development of isolated indigent elderly covered social welfare, social services, and healthcare and encouraged

family members to take care of the elderly (The National Economic and Social Development Board, 1997; p.31). The National Elderly Day was established on 13th of April which is Thai New Year's Day, and the Declaration of Thai Elders was established in 2000, the same year as the UN's Declaration of the International Elderly. The 2nd national plan on the elderly identified the aging population as a problem that required attention.

The guidelines suggested in the 8th plan were beneficial to elderly persons, but it re-emphasized how sensitive and problematic this group was. By providing social welfare, free healthcare service, allowances and free transportation, the state became responsible for all expenses, and emphasized the relationship within the family, which re-affirmed the result of the 6th plan, and the failure of government to alleviate poverty. The problem of having a higher rate of aging population was again indicated in the 11th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2012-2016). It clearly stated the risk of having a higher number of elderly persons including the shortage of labor, the financial burden on the family to take care of elderly family members and expenditure on public health (The Office of National Economic and Social Development Board, 2010; p. iii).

In short, the discourse on aging in Thailand after the Siamese Revolution has been influenced by the World's awareness of structural changes in population as much as the national concern for the consequences of such a phenomenon. The plans, policies and acts related to the elderly are considered as tools to deal with the outcomes in an era of economic development, but indirectly construct an aging discourse which portrays the aging as a burden to the state. However, there is a duty to take care of the elderly as a consequence of participating in the UN's initiatives in regard to human rights for the elderly.

Since the military junta overthrew the democratic government six years ago, there has been serious debate about both inside and outside Thailand

about the aging society. Moreover, the members of the military government are mostly over 60 years old, and portrayed by the younger generation and opposite party who cherish the democracy and equality as 'Ma-nud Loong, Ma-nud Pa' (literally translated as Human Uncle and Human Aunt) who are hopeless and possess outdated ideas as shown in the Pheu Thai party's poster (literally translated as For Thailand (Pheuthai Party Facebook Page, 2019). In addition, the terms 'Ma-nud Loong, Ma-nud Pa' refer to the elderly who act as if they are the center of the universe and do not care about other's rights. Furthermore, these two terms are widely used in social media to link improper behaviors with aging such as Facebook and Twitter or even websites targeting new graduates (Campus, 2019).

It is posited that the discourse of 'Ma-nud Loong Ma-nud Pa' is socially-constructed by younger persons who, in regard to the changes in population structure, will carry the financial burden to take care of the elderly.

It can be concluded that the construction of aging discourse is a social process, as presented in this paper, in each historical period and each discourse affect subsequent discourse. It is also a process of knowledge transfer. The current discourse of 'Ma-nud Loong, Mu-nud Pa' is a concrete example of the complicated societal perceptions towards aging. Today, previous aging discourses are purposively selected to enhance positive attitudes while others are intentionally used to discredit the elderly. Therefore, the ongoing discourse construction or re-construction is persistent and seems to be more serious in the world of social media, where such discourse is disseminated.

CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By applying Foucauldian discourse analysis to reveal the construction of aging discourse, four types of discourse have been revealed. Firstly, older people are seen as valuable assets by the state because of their knowledge and work in the

bureaucratic system. Secondly, the elderly, because of their devotion to the state, deserves proper care in the context of national modernization and the construction of the nation's image. Thirdly, the rising number of older people is seen as problematic and is a burden to the nation in the context of national social and economic development and global demographic change. Lastly, the terms "Ma-nud Loong Ma-nud Pa" are used sarcastically when referring to the elderly who do not subscribe to the younger generation's desire for equality, democracy and universality. In accordance with Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2017), this paper reveals how aging discourses have been created and embedded into social perceptions through the state's policies and actions. In other words, it shows the power relationship between the government as an agent to convey knowledge and the people in society as the receivers. The power of discourses indicating the value of the elderly is not convincing in the current Thai society and demonstrates the conflict between the state's and the younger generation's views, which is perhaps a product of the government portraying the elderly as problematic and burdensome. However, knowledge of the construction of aging discourse could help raise awareness in regard to the elderly as objectified by the state to present the image of the leaders and the country, and by society as a symbol of being outdated and regressive.

This research paper analyzed only the discourse construction in state policies, plans and acts through a historical lens. The research could be extended if citizens' perceptions are surveyed to confirm the power of the state's discourses that have been discussed in this research paper.

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