Rethinking Old Age

How Better Measures of Ageing Can Challenge Ageism

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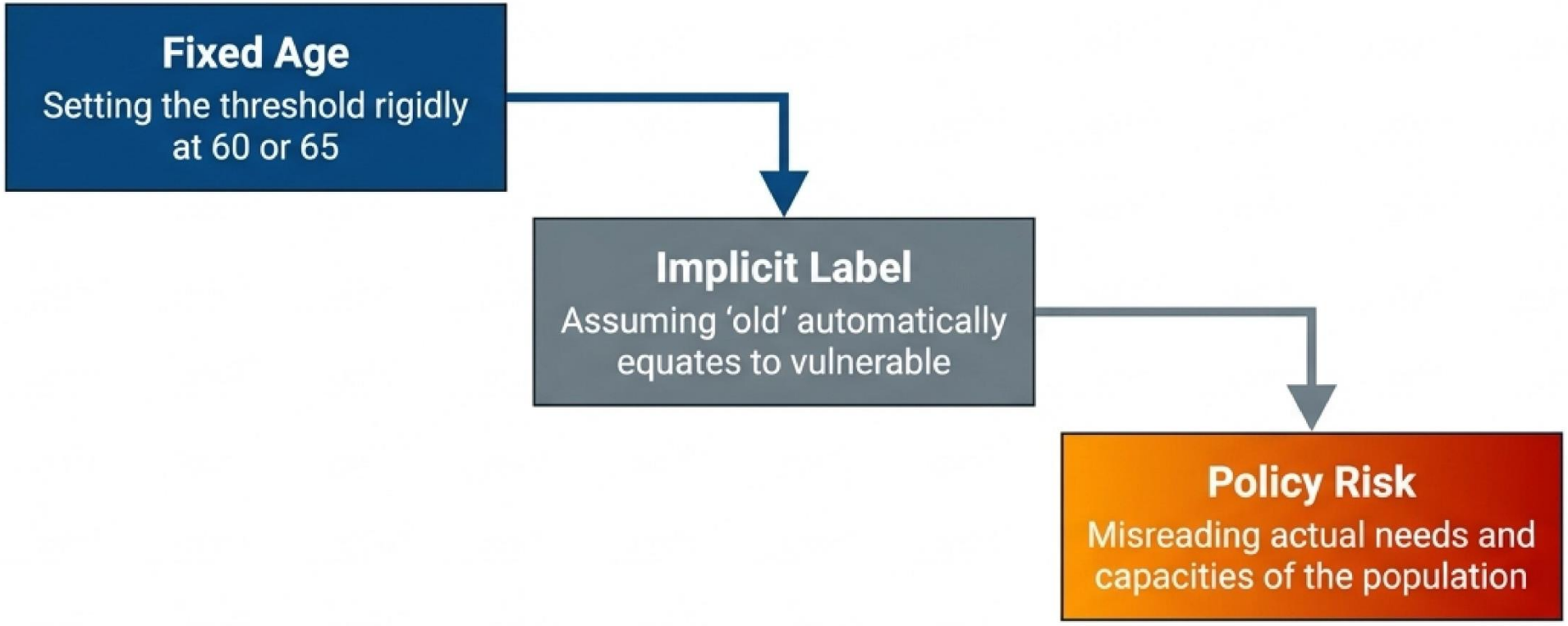
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Session D4: **Challenging Ageism – Building Inclusive and Age-Friendly Societies**

Hangzhou, China

When does measurement become ageist?

A useful **administrative threshold** becomes problematic when it is read as a universal statement about people.



People do not suddenly become dependent, incapable, or vulnerable on a particular birthday.

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The problem with fixed-age measures

The population changes, but the boundary does not.

Driver 1: Life expectancy changes over time and differs across countries.

Driver 2: Health, functioning, cognition, education, and activity also change.



Result: Groups defined only by chronological age become totally inconsistent in the characteristics that actually matter for ageing policy.

Core Implication: Old-age dependency ratios (OADRs) can be useful summaries, but they should not be interpreted as direct measures of dependency.

A different way to think about age

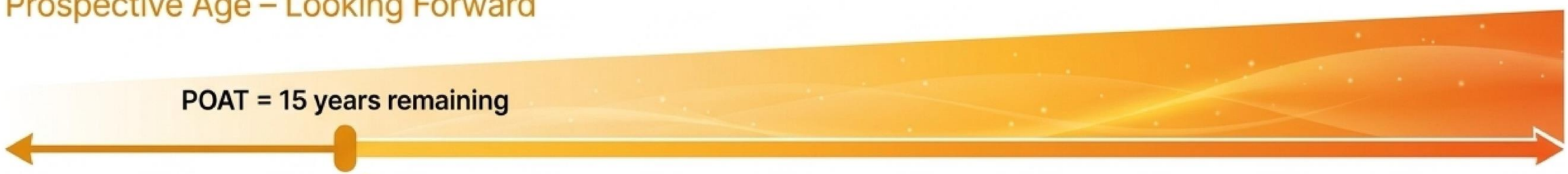
The Characteristics Approach: combining changing age structures with changing characteristic schedules.

Chronological Age – Looking Backward



Chronological age remains informative, but it is only one characteristic of people.
It stops treating age as a universal proxy for vulnerability.

Prospective Age – Looking Forward



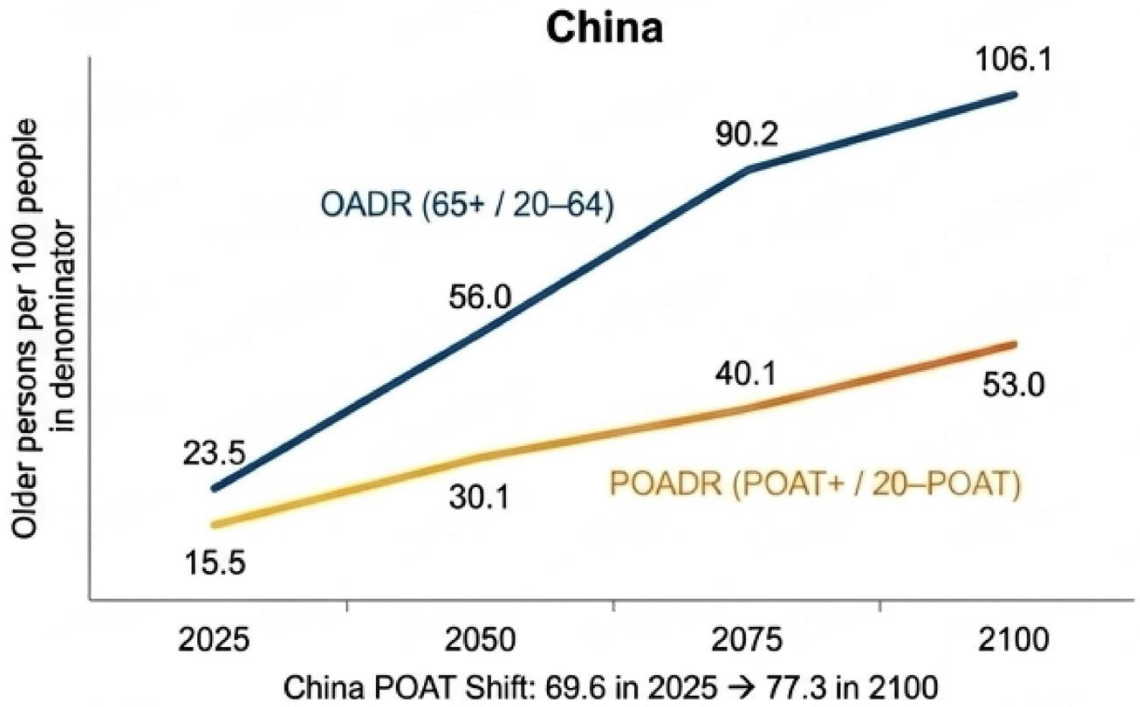
Insight: As longevity changes, the threshold naturally adapts.

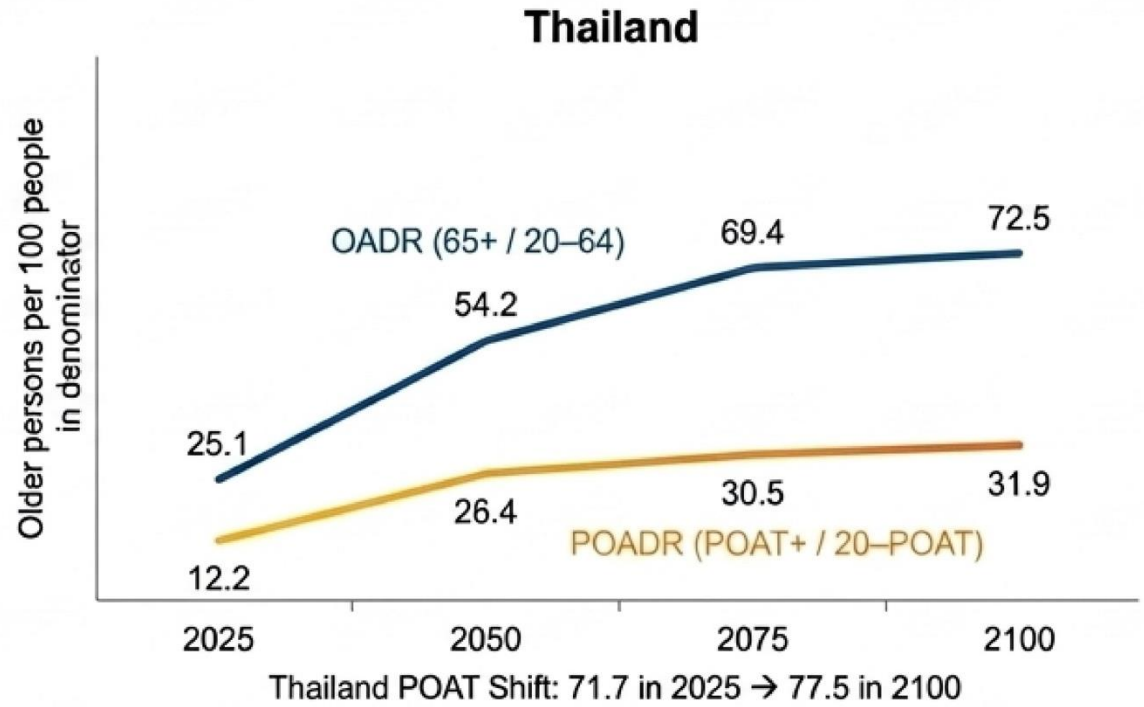
POAT = The exact age at which remaining life expectancy is exactly 15 years.

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China and Thailand: When the threshold moves

Same UN projection (WPP 2024 Medium Variant)—entirely different magnitude of ageing when "old" is defined by remaining life expectancy rather than a fixed birthday.





Ageing does not disappear, but its magnitude changes when "old" means comparable remaining life expectancy rather than a fixed birthday.

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Why this matters for policy and ageism

Keep age thresholds where they are needed—but do not let them define people.

Administrative Use (The Domain of Chronological Age)	Analytical & Policy Design (The Domain of Prospective Age)
Entitlements and programme eligibility.	Adding remaining life expectancy, health, functioning, and activity to the equation.
Legal clarity and statistical comparability.	Separating demographic ageing from assumed dependency.
Simple communication when precision is not required.	Designing age-inclusive policy around actual needs and capacities.

This is one concrete way demography can help challenge ageism: by avoiding statistics that silently turn age into destiny.

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A more realistic—and brighter—view of ageing



Population ageing is real.



Fixed chronological age is not a fixed condition.



Better measures support more age-inclusive policy.

When we measure changing people with changing characteristics, the future often looks less alarming—and vastly more useful for policy—than fixed-age measures suggest.

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Five Key Papers on Remeasuring Aging

Chronological order

2005	Sanderson, W. C., & Scherbov, S. **"Average remaining lifetimes can increase as human populations age"** *Nature 435: 811–813*
2008	Lutz, W., Sanderson, W. C., & Scherbov, S. **"The coming acceleration of global population ageing"** *Nature 451: 716–719*
2010	Sanderson, W. C., & Scherbov, S. **"Remeasuring Aging"** *Science 329: 1287–1288*
2013	Sanderson, W. C., & Scherbov, S. **"The Characteristics Approach to the Measurement of Population Aging"** *Population and Development Review 39(4): 673–685*
2015	Sanderson, W. C., & Scherbov, S. **"Are We Overly Dependent on Conventional Dependency Ratios?"** *Population and Development Review 41(4): 687–708*

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