

Leisure and Rural Elders: China's Leisure Education Programmes Under the Rural Revitalization Strategy

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Abstract:

The World Leisure Organisation's *Charter for Leisure* outlines the right to adequate time for rest and for the pursuit of leisure activity. The right to leisure time and to participate in the cultural life of the community are significant for the wellbeing of a person. Leisure time refers to the remaining disposable time after completing various social responsibilities such as labour and professional activities, mainly used for entertainment, rest, and to meet spiritual and cultural needs. For older adults, mastering their leisure time is an important component of their lifestyle. However, the current situation is that doing household chores and helping the next generation take care of their children occupy a large part of their leisure time. Older adults' decline in leisure activity participation is related to occurrence of diseases such as Alzheimer's disease. Therefore, with the acceleration of the aging population in the world, monitoring the participation level of older adults in leisure activities and timely intervention has become an urgent task. China has an aging population, with the rural elderly population growing faster than the urban one. Data from the seventh national census in 2021 show that the proportion of people aged 60 and 65 and above in rural areas has reached 23.81 percent and 17.72 percent respectively, which are 7.99 and 6.61 percentage higher than the corresponding figure in urban areas. With the migration of young people to urban areas, rural older adults are left alone causing serious social concerns. Through the Healthy China initiative, many proactive policy initiatives are formulated for the older adults. Initiation of policies to improve the mental and physical well-being of older adults especially in the rural areas show the significance China attaches to solve the challenges faced by rural elders. Since leisure directly determines the happiness of the people, the Chinese government is increasingly attaching importance to leisure education for the people, and paying attention to adult leisure education in rural areas has become an important part of the rural revitalization strategy. Promoting rural adults' leisure is significant for creating an environment for them to live happily in their later years. This complements the rural revitalization strategy to construct a beautiful countryside. In this backdrop, this paper discusses the various aspects of aging and leisure of rural elders and how it is integrated into the rural revitalization strategy of China. Even though China has rightly identified the problem of rural elder adults' need for leisure activities, the paper argues that integrating rural elderly leisure with rural revitalization strategy has opened a new path of development for rural China.

Keywords: rural elders, leisure, health, rural revitalization strategy, China.

Introduction

The rise of rural revitalization as a national strategy is essentially an affirmation of rural values and a return to the spirit of rural China. The Rural Revitalization Strategy (2018-2022) proposed by the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China is of great significance in the development of China's three problems: agriculture, rural areas and farmers. On February 4, 2018, the *Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Implementing the Rural Revitalization Strategy* was officially released, proposing the overall requirements of rural revitalization strategy to be industrial prosperity, ecological liveability, civilized rural culture, effective governance, and a prosperous life. To solve the current imbalance in rural social development and alleviate the main contradictions in rural development, the revitalization strategy emphasised on building a scientific institutional mechanism and policy system to promote urban-rural integration and accelerate the process of agricultural and rural modernization. In February 2021, general secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that the revitalization of the countryside is a major task for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.¹ In the wake of the comprehensive victory of China's strategy of tackling poverty alleviation, the revitalization of the countryside focussing on agriculture, rural areas, and farmers has become a major task ahead for China.

Rural revitalization cannot be successful without addressing the basic issue of rural people. Elderly in rural areas are an important component of rural revitalization. According to the seventh national population census, the population aged 60 and above accounts for 18.70% of the total population in China, an increase of 5.44 percentage compared to 2010. Among them, the proportion of elderly people aged 60, 65 and above in rural areas is 23.81% and 17.72% respectively which are 7.99 and 6.61 percentage higher than those in urban areas.² The most severe aging problem in China is in rural areas because of large influx of many young people from rural areas to cities, resulting in an increasingly high degree of aging in these areas.

While China can be proud of the achievement in making its people's life longer, it must tackle the challenge of how to make the leisure life of aging population as an important part of their later year's life for both urban and rural people. With a rising aging population, China is experimenting many ways to improve the quality of life of elderly people in rural areas. Various policies related to leisure and education are significant for a healthy rural China and hence it has become a major part of the rural revitalization strategy of the country. Previous studies on leisure education programmes have focussed less on rural elderly people, and there have been very few studies based on the background of rural revitalization. In this backdrop, this paper will investigate aspects of aging and leisure of rural elders and discusses how it is integrated into the rural revitalization strategy of China.

Leisure and Ageing

What is leisure? Leisure is the time available to the individual when the disciplines of work, sleep and other basic needs been met (Rapport & Rapport:1974). Vera Toepoel (2013) studied the relation between leisure activities and social status of elderly of Dutch population. The study indicated that older

¹ Yang Xuyan, Gong Na. Study on the Sustainability of Rural Tourism under the Background of Rural Revitalization. E3S Web of Conferences 251, 02075 (2021) TEES 2021.

² 尹东昊、宋佳雨#、陈明燕、黄诗琴、贾溢. 乡村振兴视角下休闲方式对农村老年人幸福感的影响研究 —— 基于 CGSS 数据的实证分析. 安徽农学通报, 2022, 28 (10): 13.

people often feel lonely and lack many social contacts. The outcome of the research pointed to the need for leisure in increasing or maintaining social integration in the later life. Many public policy debates are concerned with the physical issues of aging, while social issues such as isolation tend to be ignored. Therefore, efforts are needed to reduce the social isolation which can help in improving the quality of life of older people thereby reducing the public expenditure on medical costs. A specific strategy to increase social integration for older people could be facilitating their connections with others via leisure activities. Leisure activities, as a primary aspect of the participation element of active aging, can help in preventing disease and functional decline, extend longevity and enhance the quality of life in older people. Nie Jianliang et al. argue that leisure can significantly improve the subjective well-being of rural elderly people, and at the same time, an increase in the categories and duration of leisure activities can be helpful in improving the happiness of rural elderly people.³

Wang Xin (2013) writes that as affluent farmers' income increase, their needs gradually shift from academic and vocational education to leisure education aimed at improving quality of life and to meet their spiritual needs.⁴ Sun Linye (2010) believes that improving the leisure taste of rural residents is an important guarantee for improving the quality of leisure life and satisfaction.⁵ Previous research has identified aging as a problem associated with the decline and loss of physical and psychological health in later life. The development of the concept of “successful aging” has inspired considerable interest in “healthy aging”, “active aging” and “productive aging” as strategies to overcome these problems.⁶ Several studies have noted that tourism positively affects elders' subjective well-being and level of social engagement by enhancing their self-esteem and confidence.

In China, an important symbol of the arrival of the leisure era is the increasing number of leisure policies issued by the country, and leisure education policies are the core of leisure policies. The *Guidelines for National Leisure Education* issued in 2014 pointed out that an institutionalized leisure education exchange mechanism should be established connecting the government, communities, families, social groups, volunteer groups, educational institutions, and the media.⁷ In her study on leisure and power in urban China, Unn Målfrid H. Rolandsen (2011) argues that leisure is a social field where power is exercised. She finds that the official discourse on leisure has little or no impact on the way people lead their everyday lives. The case of rural China is no different. The number of policies officially launched support the fact that state is interested in the leisure of rural people. State intervention in leisure of aging population in rural areas throws light at the seriousness of concerns like loneliness, mental health, reducing expenditure on medical costs etc. of aging population. The challenge in the case of rural elders for the state is how to educate them on the importance of leisure in their later lives. Since majority of rural population are older adults, the entire society should provide elder adults with diverse forms of healthy leisure opportunities and implement flexible and diverse leisure education programmes. On October 9, 2021, the China Tourism Research Institute released the *Annual Report on China's Leisure Development*. The report says that compared with 2019, urban residents' leisure time on weekdays, weekends, and

³ 聂建亮, 吴玉锋. 劳动幸福还是休闲幸福? ——“无休”状态对农村老人主观幸福感影响的实证分析 [J]. 江汉学术, 2021, 40 (05): 60-71

⁴ 王 昕. 农民对继续教育和学习需求的分析与思考 (J). 中国 职工教育, 2013, (10): 64.

⁵ 孙林叶. 我国农村居民休闲的现状与对策 (J). 北京理工大学 学报 (社会科学版), 2010, (2): 134-137.

⁶ Sara Marsillas (2017). Does Active Ageing Contribute to Life Satisfaction for Older People? Testing a New Model of Active Ageing, *Eur J. Ageing*, 14: 295.

⁷ 《 国 民 休 闲 教 育 导 引 2014》
<https://std.samr.gov.cn/gb/search/gbDetailed?id=71F772D7F428D3A7E05397BE0A0AB82A>

holidays has increased by varying degrees since 2021, with the largest increase being on weekends followed by holidays, with leisure time increase of 0.91 hours and 0.64 hours respectively. The average daily leisure time of rural residents has increased from 3.14 hours to 4.36 hours, an increase of 38.85%.⁸

Rural Elders and Sports

According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics based on 2012 China Health Statistics Yearbook, the chronic disease rate among elderly people aged 60 and above in China has reached 43.8%.⁹ The current status of health and disease prevention for the elderly are urgent issues that China needs to address. Sports can not only prevent diseases and promote health, but also can be an effective means to alleviate the psychological pressure of the elderly in an aging society. In 2015, the General Administration of Sport of the People's Republic of China issued the *Opinions on Further Strengthening the Sports Work for the Elderly in the New Situation* which emphasised the positive role of sports in responding to the aging process and outlined the promotion of comprehensive development of national fitness.¹⁰ In 2016, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the *Healthy China 2030 Plan* which aimed at national health while paying special attention to addressing health issues of key populations such as women, children and the elderly.¹¹ In September 2019, the General Office of the State Council issued the *Outline for Building a Strong Sports Country*, which again mentioned promoting the development of sports activities for key groups.¹² The outline called for to develop and implement physical health intervention plans for young people, the elderly, farmers, occupational groups, and people with disabilities. All these documents affirm the role of sports in the aging population.

A study by Cui Gaofeng, Cao Yao et.al (2022) analyses the current situation and obstacles of elderly people in rural areas of the Wanjiang urban belt participating in physical exercise. From 7 cities, including Hefei and Wuhu, researchers randomly selected the rural elderly with registered residence who are over 60 years old from 14 towns and villages for investigation. Research analysis found that 78.33% of the total survey population participated in physical exercise among elderly people in rural areas were mainly aged between 60-75.¹³ The participation rate of women is slightly higher than that of men. The main way of participation is to engage in physical exercise alone or with family and friends. The main goals cited were to achieve physical fitness, prevent disease, leisure, and entertainment. The favourite exercise programs for rural elderly people are brisk walking, jogging, and square dancing. The frequency of exercise is mainly 3-5 times a week, and the exercise time is mostly between 31 and 120 minutes. The study indicates that the overall level of sports participation among the elderly in Anhui province is relatively low, with physical exercise being the focus. It further adds that weak awareness of exercise, lack

⁸ 中华人民共和国文化和旅游部。 “《中国休闲发展年度报告（2021）》认为 我国居民休闲时间较疫情前有所增加”， https://www.mct.gov.cn/whzx/zsdw/zglyyyjy/202110/t20211011_928211.html

⁹ 崔高峰, 曹 垚, 周妩娜, 李际麟. 乡村振兴战略下农村老年人体育锻炼现状研究. 渭南师范学院学报. 2022 年 5 月 第 37 卷 第 5 期: 75.

¹⁰ 国家体育总局 《关于进一步加强新形势下老年人体育工作的意见》2015, <https://www.sport.gov.cn/n315/n20001395/c20049504/content.html>

¹¹ 中共中央 国务院印发《“健康中国 2030”规划纲要》2016, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2016-10/25/content_5124174.htm

¹² 国务院办公厅印发《体育强国建设纲要》2019, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-09/02/content_5426540.htm

¹³ 崔高峰, 曹 垚, 周妩娜, 李际麟. 乡村振兴战略下农村老年人体育锻炼现状研究. 渭南师范学院学报. 2022 年 5 月 第 37 卷 第 5 期: 75.

of scientific guidance and venue facilities are the main factors hindering the participation of rural elderly people in physical exercise.

With the continuous progress of agricultural economic development under the rural revitalization strategy, the living condition of elderly people in rural areas of the Wanjiang urban belt is constantly improving, and their awareness of participating in exercise also shows an increase. However, the data also shows that 21.67% of elderly people do not participate in sports activities, especially those who are lonely in rural areas who have little awareness and time to participate in physical exercise.¹⁴ Elderly people in rural areas have limited access to online information. They believe that work is just physical exercise. The common reason for elders to not participate in any sports activities is that they need to take care of their grandchildren and are busy doing household chores.

Rural Elderly Care Industry

Rural elderly care is a new type of elderly care model that has emerged in China in recent years. Although there are differences in the definitions of rural elderly care among scholars in China, they all believe that rural elderly care relies on the superior natural environment in rural areas to establish nursing homes with rural style. In addition to providing basic elderly care services, elderly people can also engage in simple agricultural activities to get close to nature to meet their spiritual needs. It is an elderly care model that integrates elderly care, leisure agriculture, medical care, and tourism.

The continuous rise in aging population has led to an increase in the demand for elderly care, making rural elderly care a new form of elderly care method. Rural areas have advantages such as abundant land resources, beautiful ecological environment, and low living costs, making them suitable for elderly care industry. Under rural revitalization, it is possible to gradually expand the scope of social security coordination and to improve rural medical facilities. It can also attract urban elderly people to rural elderly care, thereby reducing population pressure in big cities which can drive rural economic development and take the path of urban-rural integration development. Developing the rural elderly care industry in rural areas has become one of the effective means to achieve rural revitalization in the context of a new elderly care culture.

With the improvement of living standards, people's needs for a better life are increasingly. While looking forward to basic elderly care services such as having a sense of security for the elderly and having access to medical care for the elderly being met, leisure, health preservation, and enjoying life after retirement have become people's expectations and pursuits. Rural elderly care is a supplement to traditional elderly care methods such as home care and community elderly care. Whether it is long-term relocation elderly care or a short-term tourism elderly care, it can fully meet the needs of elderly people for tourism, leisure, and health thereby improving elders' quality of life, and enrich their retirement life.

Developing the leisure and elderly service industries in rural areas is of great significance for promoting rural development and building a beautiful countryside. Guangxi is a major agricultural province in China. According to the data of the seventh population census of Guangxi, the population of Guangxi aged 60 and above is 8.36 million, with an aging rate of 16.69%.¹⁵ It is expected that by 2030, the population aged 60 and above in the entire region will reach 9.5 million. At present, there are 1179 elderly care institutions in the entire Guangxi region, with 92000 beds for elderly care. There are over 700

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ 曾子峰, 刘丹丹. 乡村振兴与大健康产业背景下 广西田园式养老研究. 农村经济与科技 2022 年第 33 卷第 19 期 (总第 543 期):182.

urban community day care centres for the elderly, and nearly 10000 community mutual assistance elderly care facilities such as rural happiness homes.¹⁶ From the comparison between the number of elderly population and the number of elderly care beds, the current supply of elderly care services is still difficult to meet the large elderly population. With the passage of time, the proportion of the population aged 65 and above is about to reach its peak, and the self-care ability, physical and psychological health, and other issues of the elderly may become increasingly serious.

The traditional elderly care service industry pay more attention to the physical health issues of the elderly population, often neglecting the psychological and spiritual needs of the elderly. Therefore, it is particularly important to develop an elderly care model that can not only ensure the physiological health needs of the elderly, but also meet their spiritual needs. Relying on the unique ecological environment advantages and rich health care resources in Guangxi, an effective integration of tourism and health care industry is possible to push the efforts of rural revitalization. Guangxi is a province with many ethnic minorities in China, and different ethnic cultures have blended into a unique culture. It not only has a series of cultural arts such as folk songs, Guiju, but also many unique ethnic and folk festivals. For example, Binyang Paolong Festival, Yao King Pan Festival, etc.¹⁷ This series of folk culture can bring a special elderly care experience to the elderly, which not only enriches their elderly care life but also makes it no longer monotonous. It can satisfy the spiritual pursuits of the elderly, allowing them to feel the unique cultural charm of the place they live in.

Due to the unique nature of the elderly population, safety is also a necessary element to be considered for the development of elderly care in rural areas. A sound medical security system, convenient and accessible medical system, professional medical team, healthy and nutritious food, and sufficient and reassuring sleep during the travel process are all factors that affect the choices of the elderly population. Efforts should be made to avoid risks due to fire, unhygienic surroundings, and public security risks in rural elderly accommodations. The beautiful rural countryside, comprehensive elderly care services, and a warm and caring sense of community belonging provide the elderly with not only the structure and environment, but also a new way of life.

Conclusion

As China enters an aging society, exploring various leisure models for the elderly population has become an important matter of concern facing China at present. An analysis of the policy documents shows that China is attaching great importance to the issue of aging population. For a large population of rural elders, sports and elderly care model not only meets their leisure and health requirements, but also conforms to the national strategy of rural revitalization. The integration of rural revitalization and elderly care through culture and tourism is the new way ahead for the economic development of the countryside. It can revive the traditional villages and bring in more economic advantages to the overall development of the region. Rural areas with its cultural characteristics for leisure activities can provide a good quality of life for the elders. It can also open a new space for cultural and social interactions for rural elderly. A detailed case study of rural elders and their leisure education in a particular village might throw some light on the challenges faced by the rural elders. However, China with its immense regional variations make it

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ *Ibid*

difficult for any research to make a generalization possible. The idea of a rural community with a shared future and healthy living is something what China is striving for.

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